

**Value of dance**  
Actor Nora Fatehi says without dance, B-town would just be like another film industry

LEISURE | P2

**Russia rains missiles**  
Russia fires 31 ballistic and cruise missiles at Kyiv in the first attack on the Ukrainian capital in six weeks

INTERNATIONAL | P10

**Healthy biz activity**  
India's business activity ends this fiscal year on a high note, expanding at the fastest rate in eight months in March

BUSINESS | P11

**Captaincy reign over**  
MS Dhoni quits Chennai Super Kings' captaincy and hands over the duties to Rituraj Gaikwad ahead of IPL 2024 opener

SPORTS | P12



**WATER WOES:** A vendor sells clay pots in Bangalore amid the ongoing water crisis in Karnataka, Thursday. PTI PHOTO

## DOUBLE WHAMMY

In what is being viewed as a twin blow to the Union government, the Supreme Court Thursday stayed the March 20 notification of Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology for the setting up of a PIB-helmed Fact Check Unit to identify fake news about the Centre even as the Election Commission directed it to stop delivery and circulation of bulk WhatsApp messages to electorates on 'Viksit Bharat Sampark' that highlights achievements of the Narendra Modi government.



to grant an interim stay on setting up the FCU under the amended IT Rules to identify fake and false content on digital media about the Union government.

"We are of the considered view that questions before the HC deal with core questions on Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution," the bench said, adding the stay shall operate till the Bombay HC finally decides the challenge to the IT Amendment Rules, 2023.

The SC was hearing an appeal filed by stand-up comedian Kunal Kamra and the Editors Guild of India challenging the March 11 move of the Bombay HC.

At the outset, senior advocate Darius Khambata, appearing for Kamra, submitted that a fact-checking unit only for the Union government and not for others is arbitrary and it will mean that only the Central government's version will be allowed.

Khambata argued as the general elections are round the corner, the FCU would become a tool for the Union government

to control what information goes out to the voters.

### No 'Viksit Bharat Sampark' messages

The Election Commission (EC) Thursday directed the Centre to immediately stop delivering bulk WhatsApp messages to people under the 'Viksit Bharat Sampark' initiative to highlight the government's achievements.

The direction was issued to the MeitY Secretary after the EC received complaints about the matter.

"The move is a part of a series of decisions taken by the Commission to ensure a level-playing field," the EC said.

Asking the government to ensure there is 'no further delivery' of the bulk WhatsApp messages to people, the EC sought an 'immediate' compliance report on the matter from the ministry.

The ministry had informed the EC that the messages along with a letter from Prime Minister Narendra Modi were sent before the Model Code of Conduct came into force March 16 with the announcement of Lok Sabha poll schedule.

"... Due to system architecture and network limitations it is possible that some letters have a delayed delivery," the ministry said in a communication to the EC.

### SHORT TAKES

#### Damodar Rout 'critical'

**Bhubaneswar:** Veteran BJD leader and seven-time MLA Damodar Rout is undergoing treatment at a private hospital here and his condition is 'critical', a family member said, Thursday. Rout, 81, is almost in a 'brain dead' state, his son and MLA Sambit Routray said. Sambit said his father, a former minister, suffered a cardiac arrest March 18. Initially, the family members took him to Capital Hospital here around 3am, but later shifted him to a private hospital. Meanwhile, Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik said in a post on X, "Concerned over the health condition of Shree Damodar Rout. Wish his speedy recovery and long life."

#### Ban on western outfits

**Sambalpur:** The state government-run Veer Surendra Sai University of Technology (VSSUT) has instructed students to wear traditional attire and avoid western outfits during the Techno-Cultural Fest 2024 that kicks-off Friday. A notice, issued by the registrar on behalf of the vice-chancellor, prohibits students from wearing western outfits or short dresses within the university campus during the festival days. The institute is located in Burla, Sambalpur district.

#### IRREGULAR by MANJUL



It is not a yoga pose! Gurujii is preparing to appear before court

## DHENKANAL DM, TWO SPs SHUNTED

**New Delhi, March 21:** The Election Commission (EC) Thursday shunted out the district magistrate (DM) of Dhenkanal and superintendents of police (SPs) of Deogarh and Cuttack (Rural) districts, saying these posts are meant for IAS and IPS officers respectively. Apart from Odisha, DMs of Purba Medinipur, Jhargram, Purba Bardhaman and Birbhum of West Bengal, SPs of Chhota Udaipur and Ahmedabad Rural districts of Gujarat and SPs of Pathankot, Fazilka, Jalandhar Rural and Malerkotla districts of Punjab have also been transferred as part of EC's tough stance against posting of non-cadre officers at leadership positions. The EC said SP Sonitpur (Assam) and SSP Bathinda (Punjab) have been transferred in view of their kinship or familial association with the elected political representatives. While Sonitpur SP Sushanta Biswa Sarma is the brother of state CM Himanta Biswa Sarma, Bhatinda SSP Harnanbir Singh Gill is the brother of Congress MP from Khadoor Sahib Jasbir Singh Gill.

## ED arrests Kejriwal

**New Delhi, March 21:** Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) Thursday night in an Excise policy-linked money laundering case, officials said. The arrest, the first of a sitting CM, came hours after Delhi High Court refused to grant protection to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) national convenor from any coercive action by the agency.



The arrest, the first of a sitting CM, came hours after Delhi High Court refused to grant protection to Arvind Kejriwal from any coercive action by ED

The 55-year-old leader's arrest, amid campaigning for the Lok Sabha elections, drew angry reactions from his party, which said Kejriwal will continue as the CM of Delhi. If need be, he will run the government from jail. The BJP though demanded that Kejriwal step down as CM on moral grounds. In a day of fast-paced developments, a 10-member ED team led by an additional director reached his official residence on Flagstaff Road in Civil Lines in the national capital soon after the HC order and carried out searches. He was arrested more than two hours after the ED team arrived at his residence, officials said. Officials said the ED would produce the CM before a court here Friday and seek his custody for interrogation in the case. Kejriwal had skipped nine summonses issued by ED for questioning in the case. He has called these summonses 'illegal'. As the ED officials carried out their action inside, additional Delhi Police personnel, and Rapid Action Force (RAF) and CRPF teams were deployed around the CM's residence. The additional deployment was made as the ED sought extra security measures in anticipation of protests by AAP supporters, sources said. A large number of AAP workers and leaders gathered near the CM's residence and shouted slogans hailing Kejriwal and denouncing the ED action. The Delhi Police also stepped up security around the agency office on APJ Abdul Kalam Road in central Delhi. During the day, Kejriwal moved the Supreme Court against the HC's order denying him any relief in the matter. Later, AAP leader Atishi said they have moved the SC for quashing the arrest of Kejriwal and asked for an urgent hearing. In a post on X, Atishi said, "We have moved the Supreme Court for quashing the arrest of Delhi CM @ArvindKejriwal, by ED. We have asked for an urgent hearing by the Supreme Court tonight itself." The ED's action is virtually a replay of what transpired during the arrest last week of Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) leader K Kavitha, who is now in ED custody in the same case. The case pertains to alleged corruption and money laundering in formulating and executing the Delhi government's Excise policy for 2021-22, which was later scrapped. AAP leaders Manish Sisodia and Sanjay Singh are in judicial custody in the case. **MORE: P9**

## Garrick Club: Bastion of elite men

**New Delhi, March 21:** The Garrick Club is one of London's last remaining gentlemen's clubs, with members drawn from across the British establishment. The club in the West End is named after 18th-century actor David Garrick and is popular with thespians, writers and politicians. It was founded by Augustus Frederick, Duke of Sussex and brother of George IV, in 1831. There are around 1,500 members — including at least 160 senior legal professionals, at least 10 serving MPs, dozens of Lords, heads of public institutions, actors, artists and businessmen — who pay around £1,000 a year to get access to the club's dining rooms, luxury lounges and exclusive bedrooms. One of the oldest members' clubs in the world, the Garrick is regarded as one of the last men-only bastions in the club as the guest or spouse of a member. Even today, female guests are ushered through a side door of the club's headquarters and seated away from the dining room's main table. All guests - non-members who are only allowed in if they are with a member - are handed menus without prices and are not allowed to pay 'for anything whatsoever'. Tipping individual staff is also forbidden. The exclusive club recently hit the headlines after The Guardian leaked a list of some of the most prominent members, including Deputy Prime Minister Oliver Dowden, Levelling Up Secretary Michael Gove and former minister Jacob Rees-Mogg. King Charles is even said to be a member of the club. Numerous attempts to change its admission policy have been resisted by members who are determined to keep its selective traditions in place.

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# BUSINESS EMINENCE AWARDS

**23 March 2024**  
Bhubaneswar

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## DREW BARRYMORE NO LONGER FEELS ASHAMED OF DIVORCES

Hollywood star Drew Barrymore, who has three broken marriages, does not shy away from talking about her past. "I had so much shame around divorce and, for some reason, something happened, and I said, 'I'm no longer willing to feel this way.' And it just lifted from me," said Barrymore.

## LAWRENCE WISHES MARRIAGE CAME WITH A 'GUARANTEE' OF SUCCESS

American actor Joey Lawrence wishes marriage came with a 'guarantee' of success as he admits that he is a hopeless romantic at heart. The 47-year-old has tied knot thrice and has two kids from the marriages.



### FORTUNE FORECAST

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**ARIES**  
You are ever eager to socialise, and today especially, you may want to mix business with pleasure. You will be welcomed to join in group activities because you can work and play with equal enthusiasm. In fact, you may learn a lot from such a healthy exchange of ideas, says Ganesh.

**TAURUS**  
Light bulbs will flash relentlessly today, as you ideate in the fervour of a creative mood. Your business acumen will help you negotiate problems with ease. The reticent Taurus charm will ring out loud in your laughter, as you deal with your bosses and colleagues at the workplace, says Ganesh.

**GEMINI**  
Routine work bores you, and today you will go all out to break free from the shackles of boredom. The results, however, may not be as dramatic. You will have to depend on your children, if any, to rescue you from the tyranny of routine.

**CANCER**  
You may feel like flaunting your so-called superior social and financial status today. Chances are that all that gas about how successful you are may end up exploding in your face, and you may end up spending a lot more than you would have liked.

**LEO**  
If it's a fresh start that you are looking for, then this day promises to give you just that, predicts Ganesh. If you have chalked out plans for your future, today you may go ahead and implement some. Remember that rushing blindly into anything is not the solution; it is always the slow and steady who wins the race.

**VIRGO**  
Today, your power and finance will be greater than ever before, says Ganesh. You will also be inclined to make monetary provisions for any future economic instability that may arise. The people around you will stand up and take notice of the leader in you. A word of caution from Ganesh: there may be unprecedented fluctuations in financial transactions.

**LIBRA**  
Today promises to be a busy day that will keep you occupied. You may also engage in written correspondence to re-establish some old contacts. Ganesh doesn't rule out optimum use of the phone for this purpose. When it comes to the work front, Ganesh predicts you will be asked to bring order to the workplace.

**SCORPIO**  
You might find your spirit sagging as worries cloud your thinking. Small things might probably bother you in a big way. Do not let them bog you down as life is all about mind over matter. As the day progresses, things will begin to look up. Take a break from the rigmorole if stress begins to take a toll on you, advises Ganesh.

**SAGITTARIUS**  
Watch out for Cupid's arrow today, warns Ganesh. Love will strike and strike hard. Alternatively, you may also find yourself in an argument with a loved one that ought to have been avoided. An evening of romance beckons... keep the roses ready and the carpet rolled to heal any bruises you might have caused.

**CAPRICORN**  
You may be attentive, as much as an eagle is while chasing its prey, but you still need to be careful when signing any important legal documents, advises Ganesh. Brokers and dealers, especially, are likely to incur heavy losses unless they take necessary precautions to avert misfortune.

**AQUARIUS**  
Today, you're up against those who want to get back at you. But not for nothing are you the king! Ganesh says you needn't worry, as few can match your prowess. Amid all the hullabaloo, your spouse will be a supportive presence.

**PISCES**  
Within adversity, lie the lessons of success; avoid having to resort to that philosophy by implementing your plans, if they are well thought out, in a phased manner. This will help you achieve your targets, says Ganesh.

## Nora bats for dance community of B-town

**Mumbai:** Actress Nora Fatehi, known for her mesmerising dance performances in chart toppers such as *Dilbar* and *O Saki Saki*, recently discussed her appreciation for dance and the community in India on *Kiska Brand Bajega* hosted by Aditya Bhat.

B-town is a leading film industry globally, with one of the best dance integrations. She emphasised the importance of dance saying that "Bollywood is Bollywood because of dance. Without dance it would just be like another film industry."

Not only did Nora shine the spotlight on dance, but also the hardwork and dedication of the Indian dance community. "They truly give it their all," she said, recognising their hard work. Her comments clearly showcase the significance of dance in the Hindi film industry. Dance

adds an artistic and cultural flair to Indian cinema, adding to the storyline and makes films more interesting.

While the audience is mesmerised by Nora's dance moves, Nora revealed in a recent chat, "I was never a dancer; I was self-taught." Her passion for dance manifested during her teenage years, where she practiced with friends.

It may be noted that Nora's performance of *Light the Sky* at the 2022 FIFA World Cup further cemented her global recognition.



## Ankita ready to do films for free

**Mumbai:** Ankita Lokhande, who will next be seen in Randeep Hooda's epic drama *Swatantra* *Veer Savarkar*, recently opened up on remuneration for female actors and prioritising characters over money.

Ankita said that money isn't her primary goal and she doesn't give much importance to remuneration if she has faith in the project. She went on to add, "For me, money has always been secondary. The character I'm playing is the most important thing. I don't run after money. I always go after the project. I'm ready to do films and shows for free. Having said that, I believe that you need to ask for what you want. And women, particularly, should ask for what they deserve."

Furthermore, the actress said that she does not believe in rat-race

"I don't want to be seen everywhere. I want to exclusively be part of certain things. I want to do very different kinds of roles. I don't want to be part of a rat-race. I don't want to run. I do not have a problem with people who do that, but it's not meant for me," said the *Baaghi 3* actress.



## Nargis believes in power of storytelling

**Mumbai:** Nargis Fakhri's filmography boasts versatile characters and varied genres, ranging from drama to comedy to action, which she has explored in her career.

Recently, in an interaction, the actress revealed that there is an interesting thought process behind choosing the right kind of script for her.

She explained, "I believe in the power of storytelling. I look for stories that challenge me as an artiste and push me to explore new dimensions. I seek roles that allow me to contribute meaningfully to cinema. Each project should be a step forward in my artistic journey, resonating with audiences and leaving a legacy of impactful storytelling."

At the same time, Nargis also maintained that it's what she brings to the table to the character is important and not her time span on screen.

"I feel movies are not always about the length of your character, but the message and impact it carries and how the audience connect with the characters. Each character that I play is an opportunity for me to grow as a person and as an artiste," she added.

For the unversed, Nargis Fakhri made her debut in 2011 with the highly-appreciated Imtiaz Ali film *Rockstar*.



### NATAKA PARIKRAMA - DAY-II



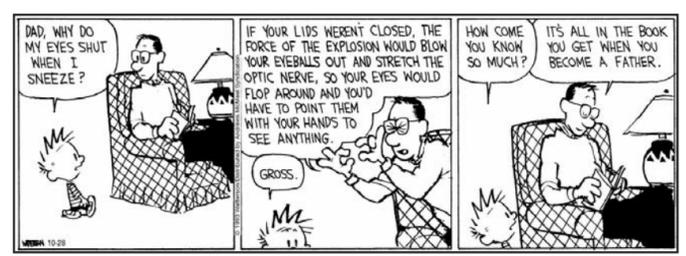
A scene from Odia play *Jaha Kahi Huena* staged at Rabindra Mandap, Bhubaneswar, Thursday. Written by Narayan Sahoo and directed by Prasanna Kumar Mishra, the drama was part of the annual theatre festival organised by Uttar Purush, one of the oldest theatre troupes of the City. Ramesh Mohanty received Uttar Purush Samman - 2024 during the show.

### FUN post

#### PEANUTS



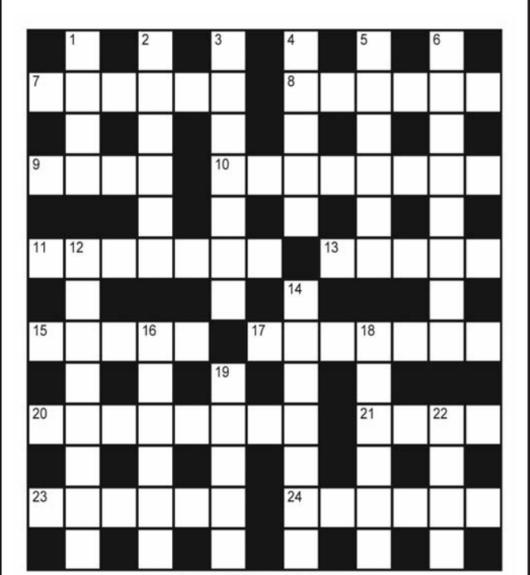
#### CALVIN AND HOBBS



#### BREVITY



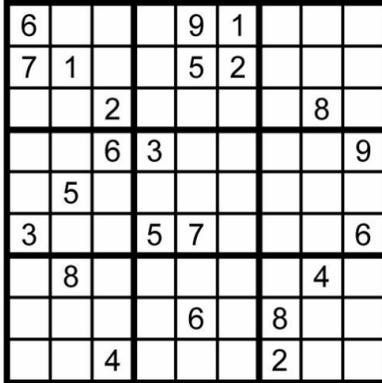
#### CROSSWORD



- Across**
- 7 Aromatic herb
  - 8 Protective covering
  - 9 Dagger handle
  - 10 Rehearse
  - 11 Violinist
  - 13 Rebuff
  - 15 Venomous snake
  - 17 To the point
  - 20 Cartridge clip
  - 21 Simple
  - 23 Gobble up
  - 24 Instructed
- Down**
- 1 Visored cap
  - 2 One way to stand
  - 3 Movie dolphin
  - 4 Test, as ore
  - 5 Circus tent (3,3)
  - 6 Posters
  - 12 Marooned
  - 14 Propriety
  - 16 Sanity
  - 18 Angel of the second order
  - 19 Queen topper
  - 22 London district

#### SUDOKU

To solve the Sudoku puzzle, fill in the boxes in such a manner that every row, column and 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9, without repeating any.

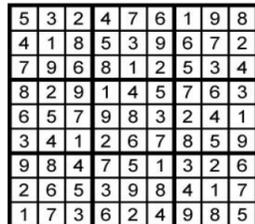


#### SOLUTIONS

##### CROSSWORD



##### SUDOKU



CHECK FOR SOLUTIONS OF THE PUZZLES TOMORROW

# downtown

## Pay attention to realities: Agrawal

Sidharth TV is a go-to place for fresh and new premium entertainment content for viewers in Odisha. It has a legacy of over 3-decades in entertaining the people of the state with innovative and new entertainment content, all the while - staying grounded to its cultural heritage and roots. Helmed by the creative and determined mind of **Sitaram Agrawal**, MD of Sidharth TV Network, the venture has scripted many success stories in Odisha's entertainment landscape. The channel offers a mixed platter of premium and exclusive contents - from mega serials, reality shows to infotainment. In a conversation with **Orissa POST**, Agrawal shares his entrepreneurial journey. Excerpts...



**■ Could you please shed some light on your early life?**

I was born in Puri and spent my school life there. At that time there was a beautiful atmosphere of music and drama in Puri. In addition, regular classical music, modern songs, Odissi songs and plays were also staged. I used to attend those programmes along with my father. Gradually, I developed an interest in music, which later became more intense.

**■ How did your professional life begin?**

I shifted to Cuttack to pursue my studies at Ravenshaw College and stayed with my father. Under the shade of blankets, I started my first studio in 1981 when I was in my first year of B.Com. Thereafter, with the blessings of my father Satyanarayan Agrawal, I set up JE Cassette Company in 1983. It was the success of this venture that took us forward. After that, many cassettes of traditional songs, dance music, folk dramas etc were released, giving JE Cassette the recognition and respect of a traditional cultural company.

**■ Can you tell us about your business journey?**

We started Sarthak Music in 1999 after the tremendous success of JE Company.

With the support of my singer-wife Namita Agrawal, we achieved one success after another. From 2010, we entered the world of television from a music company and started Sarthak TV. Cinema production and other projects are also going on.

**■ Why did you choose the world of entertainment instead of any other business?**

I have said from the beginning that my love for music, dance and drama began in Puri. When I decided to pursue a career in business, I chose entertainment instead of a job. One might say that I have an incredible weakness for music in particular. My life is music so I chose this profession.

**■ What are the challenges you faced so far?**

There is no life without challenges. One must always accept challenges in order to become successful. The

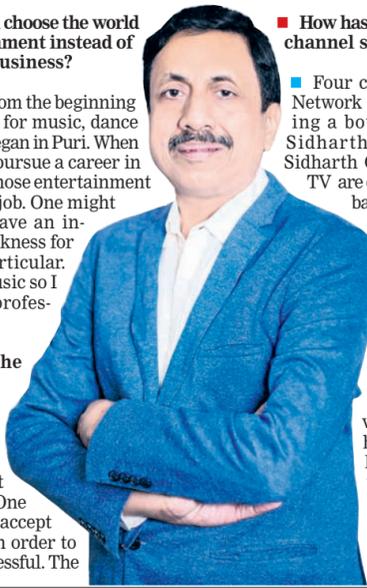
medium of entertainment is continuously evolving. In every 10 years, the taste of listeners and viewers are also changing, and we have come from the age of records and cassettes to YouTube at present. One has to accept change and prepare accordingly.

**■ How has been the journey of your channel so far?**

Four channels of Sidharth TV Network are currently broadcasting a bouquet of programmes. Sidharth TV, Sidharth Bhakti, Sidharth Gold and Jay Jagannath TV are completely entertainment-based channels, broadcasting mega serials, movies and competitive reality shows etc.

**■ What message would you like to give to budding entrepreneurs?**

The new generation is very talented. They also have a lot of enthusiasm. But they have to pay attention to the ground realities since passion and enthusiasm alone won't help to achieve the desired results.



### AT LORD'S ABODE

Ahead of Lok Sabha and Assembly elections, BJD leaders Arup Patnaik, Sanjay Das Burma, Pipli MLA Radra Pratap Maharathy and others visited the Srimandir in Puri, Thursday, to seek blessings of the holy Trinity



### ALLIANCE IN LIMBO

## Naveen, BJD leaders meet over 4 MP, 128 MLA seats

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Bhubaneswar, March 21:** As the process for a pre-poll alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is in limbo, Chief Minister and Biju Janata Dal (BJD) supremo Naveen Patnaik Thursday held discussions with his party leaders for selecting candidates for four Lok Sabha seats and their corresponding 28 Assembly segments.

He reviewed political situations in Aska, Berhampur, Bhubaneswar and Kandhamal Lok Sabha constituencies.

Of these four parliamentary seats, Aska, Berhampur and Kandhamal are now held by BJD while BJP won the Bhubaneswar Lok Sabha constituency in 2019 elections.

"The party is keen on securing the prestigious Bhubaneswar seat," a senior BJD leader said.

The party leaders discussed the selection of candidates and organisational activities during the meeting, he added.

Patnaik also held a meeting with BJD leaders Wednesday to select candidates for Koraput and Nabarangpur Lok Sabha constituencies and their corresponding Assembly segments.

Senior leaders, legislators, party functionaries and the district observers of both the Lok Sabha seats attended the meeting at Naveen Niwas here.



CM NAVEEN PATNAIK REVIEWED POLITICAL SITUATIONS IN ASKA, BERHAMPUR, BHUBANESWAR AND KANDHAMAL LOK SABHA CONSTITUENCIES

Congress won the Koraput Lok Sabha seat in 2019, while BJD secured the Nabarangpur constituency.

Both Koraput and Nabarangpur Lok Sabha seats are reserved for tribal candidates.

The BJD had Monday also discussed the selection of candidates in Puri and Kendrapara

Lok Sabha seats.

"We decided to prepare a list of candidates as there was no progress on the talks on the possible alliance with the BJP," another senior BJD leader said.

A BJP team from Odisha, however, has been camping in New Delhi, holding meetings with central leaders over seat sharing with BJD for the past four days.

Elections to Lok Sabha and Assembly in the state will be held in four phases May 13, 20, 25 and June 1.

## Reliance-linked firm gave ₹385 crore to BJP

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**New Delhi, March 21:** Qwik Supply Chain Private Ltd, a little-known company with a registered address at Navi Mumbai's Dhirubhai Ambani Knowledge City (DAKC) and having links to Reliance Industries, gave Rs 395 crore to the BJP and Rs 25 crore to the Shiv Sena, data uploaded by the Election Commission showed Thursday.

Qwik Supply, the third largest donor to political parties using electoral bonds, bought Rs 410 crore bonds between 2021-22 and 2023-24, and gave all but Rs 25 crore to BJP. The amount of Rs 25 crore was given to Shiv Sena in 2022.

The company, which is described as a manufacturer of warehouses and storage units, gave no money any other political party, the data uploaded by the Election Commission showed.

Electoral bond purchases and donated by Qwik Supply were behind Rs 1,368 crore of Future Gaming and Hotel Services - another little-known lottery company - and Rs 966 crore of Hyderabad-based Megha Engineering & Infra.

Honeywell Properties Private Ltd, another firm with a Reliance link, purchased bonds worth Rs 30 crore April 8, 2021 and gave all of them to the BJP.

When the Reliance connection first came to light last week, a Reliance Industries spokesperson had in response to a detailed questionnaire, said, "Qwik Supply Chain Pvt Ltd is not a subsidiary of any Reliance entity."

It, however, had not commented on its association with the firm.

Qwik Supply, an unlisted private company, was incorporated November 9, 2000, with an authorised share capital of Rs 130.99 crore. Its paid-up capital is Rs 129.99 crore.

The firm had a revenue of over Rs 500 crore in 2022-23 (April 2022 to March 2023) but profit numbers were not known.

It bought electoral bonds worth Rs 360 crore in 2021-22 to give away to political parties. In the same year, its net profit

was only Rs 21.72 crore. It bought another Rs 50 crore worth of bonds in 2023-24.

The company has three directors, and one reported key management personnel.

The longest-serving director currently on board is Tapas Mitra - who incidentally also sits on the board of 25 other companies - was appointed November 17, 2014.

Mitra is a director of partnership firms such as Reliance Eros Productions LLP and companies such as Jamnagar Kandla Pipeline Company Pvt Ltd.

Jamnagar Kandla Pipeline is registered in Ahmedabad at an address shared by some other Reliance companies, such as Reliance Paging Pvt Ltd, Jamnagar Ratlam Pipeline Pvt Ltd, Reliance Tankages Pvt Ltd and Petroleum Pvt Ltd.

Vipul Pranlal Mehta has been a director on the board of Qwik since December 10, 2019. He is also a director of eight other companies, including one called Red Icons and Traders Pvt Ltd.

Sridhar Titti is the most recently appointed director, joining the board November 27, 2023. One of two directors of Honewell Properties, Satyanarayanamurthy Veera Venkata Korlep, has been on the board of several Reliance group firms since 2005. The company also shares its registered address with several group firms.

Filings with the Registrar of Companies (RoC) showed Reliance Group Support, Reliance Fire Brigade and Reliance Hospital Management together owning 50.04 per cent of Qwik, which provides logistics and supply chain support to Reliance's retail unit.

Meanwhile, it was also revealed that Trinamool Congress got at least Rs 540 crore worth electoral bonds from Future Gaming, making it the biggest beneficiary of donations made by 'lottery king' Santiago Martin, who also donated to DMK, YSR Congress, BJP and Congress. Sikkim Krantikari Morcha and Sikkim Democratic Front also got some funds from the biggest purchaser of the electoral bonds.

Patil also mentioned that the eco-friendly booths will be primarily established in schools, preferably those equipped with solar panels.

## Eco-friendly poll booths for Ganjam, Kandhamal voters

PNN & AGENCIES

**Berhampur, March 21:** People in Ganjam and Kandhamal districts can have a novel experience when they go to the polling stations to cast their votes in the upcoming Lok Sabha and Assembly elections.

Apart from introducing all-women and persons with disabilities (PWD) managed booths, the district authorities of Ganjam and Kalahandi have decided to set up eco-friendly polling stations. This is being done to engage and educate voters on environmental sustainability.

"These green polling booths will be entirely plastic-free and adorned with fully biodegradable materials," officials said. The objective behind this initiative is to raise awareness about a plastic-free environment and attract voters to the polling booths," they added.

The idea of eco-friendly polling booths is, however, not new. Previous elections in Chhattisgarh's Bastar division, Goa, Meghalaya, Assam, and panchayat elections in Ernakulam district in Kerala have witnessed the setup of eco-friendly booths to engage voters and promote a plastic-free environment.

Ganjam district collector Dibyajyoti Parida said they have planned to set up 13 plastic-free booths with at least one in each Assembly constituency. The district has 13 Assembly constituencies with 3,077 polling booths. The booths will refrain from using plastic and instead utilise cloth and minimal paper. Natural colours, including green will be used to mark the booths, Parida said.

In Kandhamal district, around 25 green booths will be set up. These booths will be decorated with saplings and the waiting area and corridors of the polling stations will be covered with green sheds.

Earthen utensils like pots and mugs will be kept for drinking water, said Ashish Ishwar Patil, Kandhamal Collector.

Patil also mentioned that the eco-friendly booths will be primarily established in schools, preferably those equipped with solar panels.



ELECTORAL BONDS

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**PLAYFUL GESTURE:** Women celebrate Dola Yatra in Shampur, located on the outskirts of Bhubaneswar, Thursday

OP PHOTO

WORLD WATER DAY

# Odisha facing alarming situation like Bangalore

ARINDAM GANGULY, OP

**Bhubaneswar, March 21:** World Water Day 2024 will be celebrated on the theme, 'Water for Peace' Friday. The state government and various environment organisations will host special events to celebrate the day.

An acute drinking water crisis in Bangalore has been creating international headlines. Bangalore is facing a shortage of 500 million liters of water which is about a

fifth of the city's daily demand. Similar situation in the state of Odisha, is predicated from a study conducted last year by Civil Society Organisations Atmashakti Trust and its allies Odisha Shramajeebee Mancha and Mahila Shramajeebee.

Over 40 per cent households in at least 15 districts have no access to safe drinking water. The study conducted from January to mid-February last year in 9,866 villages under 866 gram panchayats of



89 blocks in 15 districts revealed that out of a total of 9,37,152 households, 40.55 percent lack

access to safe drinking water. The situation is quite alarming.

Ranjan Panda, environmentalist said water scarcity situation may likely occur in Odisha. Kalahandi, Bolangir and other southern parts of the state are regularly facing water scarcity. The dispute between Odisha and neighbouring states over water-sharing is also a big problem. A mutual agreement can be reached in water conservation policy and preventing water pollution.

# 9-day 'SAI Repertoire' held



ARINDAM GANGULY, OP

**Bhubaneswar, March 21:** SAI International Education Group organised SAI Repertoire, a nine-day integrated learning initiative from March 12 to March 20 here, Thursday. The programme brought together students from playground to class IX from a number of schools. The expert facilitators engaged students in Spanish language and cultural lessons to enhance their communication skills.

Students engaged in Skating and Squash to promote physical fitness and resilience. Bhutanese, Mexican, tribal art and craft

sessions encouraged creativity and critical thinking. Rhythmic tribal dances fostered cultural appreciation and collaboration skills. Workshops on AI (Artificial Intelligence) and machine learning provided insights into cutting-edge technologies.

The event focused on opportunities to expand horizons, develop new skills, and deepen understanding of language, culture, and scientific innovation among students. SAI International chairperson Silpi Sahoo said, "As exams drew to a close and students yearned for a breath of refreshment after the academic rigour."

# Commuters hit by glitch in traffic signal across City

DEBADURLLAV HARICHANDAN, OP

**Bhubaneswar, March 21:** After 48 hours of DCP Traffic's announcement of strict action against traffic violators, in adherence with the model code of conduct for the upcoming polls, the signals in major locations across the city exhibited glitches and flickered yellow lights, Wednesday.

The situation worsened in traffic junctions such as Kalinga Hospital Chowk and Infocity square around 10 pm, with many vehicles having a close shave with one another. Besides, CRPF square, Vani Vihar, Acharya Vihar and Jayadev Vihar too encountered the similar problem. In particular, the two-wheelers



had a difficult time on the road, while heavy carriers such as buses and trucks sped past across these signals.

A techie in a private firm, Piyush Rout who commutes from Infocity to Nayapalli, termed the traffic mismanagement as "man-made chaos".

Encountering the issue, Traffic DCP PK Rout said the glitch per-

sists from the last two days due to incessant rain, which affected the traffic signals. The matter has been noted, and a request has been sent to Bhubaneswar Smart City Limited (BSCL) for quick solution.

In response, however, the BSCL authorities distanced from the issue and clarified that no such matter has been intimated to them.

Meanwhile, Secretary Bhubaneswar Smart City Online Auto Dinabandhu Nayak said the decision is a clampdown against regular commuters. The authority must look into the condition of roads in the city, which causes frequent mishaps, before launching a drive against the traffic violators, he added.

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF FORESTS

# Community participation the way forward: Naveen

CM reiterates commitment to continue expanding forest and mangrove cover for a healthy future for mankind

ARINDAM GANGULY, OP

**Bhubaneswar, Mar 21:** Healthy forests function as lungs mitigating climate change and protecting soil. The efforts in this regard should be done through community participation, Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik said on the occasion of International Day of Forests, Thursday.

To mark the day, state Forest, Environment and Climate Change department and Orissa Environmental Society (OES) organised an event here.

Taking to social media, CM Naveen Patnaik said, "Healthy forests act as lungs of our planet, mitigate climate change, protect soil, cleanse water and air as well as sustain livelihood. On International Day of Forests, reiterate commitment to continue expanding our forest and mangrove cover through community participation for a healthy future for mankind. #GreenOdisha."

Orissa Environmental Society (OES) organised an event at Saraswati Sishu Vidya Mandir, Sijua, on this year's theme 'Forests and innovation: New solutions for a better world'.

Presiding over the event, OES president Sundara Narayana Patro said, "Forests are such precious gifts of nature that fulfill the human needs in long-term if managed sustainably".

## 40 field personnel felicitated



**BHUBANESWAR:** Odisha, a wealthiest state in natural resources, protection and preservation of forest and wild animals are important for future generation, Forest, Environment and Climate Change, Additional Chief Secretary Satyabrata Sahu said at state-level function here

Sahu emphasised on the role of officers and staff in maintaining a balance between development and nature. Notably, the state has gained 893 square-km of forest and tree between 2019 and 2021 as per the Forest Survey of India Report 2021.

Currently, Odisha boasts a forest cover spanning 61,204 square-kilometres, which constitutes 39.31 per cent of the state's total geographical area,

official sources said. PCCF & HoFF, Odisha Debidutta Biswal mentioned the department's efforts to eliminate polythene use in forests. PCCF (WL) Susanta Nanda and PCCF (P&SM) Prafulla Kumar Mallick stressed on treating nature as a global resource.

In recognition of exemplary services, State Forestry Awards 2024 were bestowed upon 40 field personnel, including forest guards, foresters, and forest rangers.

Additionally, a book titled 'Highlights of Odisha Forestry Sector-2024' was unveiled, accompanied by a photo exhibition showcasing state's wildlife, eco-tourism, and medicinal plants.

Former Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF) Bijay Ketan Patnaik emphasised on protecting the wildlife and the need for maintaining the balance of forest ecosystems.

"The forests as precious sources of innumerable goods and services and as being habitats for over two-thirds of ter-

restrial wild animals and plants bear great significance. However, increasing threats to the forests in the form of deforestation and depletion of their rich biodiversity not only deteriorates the overall health of our planet, but also puts question mark on the future survival of land-based organisms", he added.

# Dilip Ray seeks stay on conviction to contest polls

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

COAL SCAM CASE

**New Delhi, Mar 21:** Former Union minister Dilip Ray, who was sentenced to three-year jail term in a coal scam case pertaining to irregularities in the allocation of a Jharkhand block in 1999, Thursday urged the Delhi High Court to grant a stay on his conviction as he wishes to contest the upcoming Lok Sabha and Odisha Assembly elections.

Justice Swarna Kanta Sharma issued notice to the CBI and asked it to file a status report on the application of 71-year-old Ray, a Minister of State (coal) in the erstwhile Atal Bihari Vajpayee government.

The high court listed the matter for further hearing April 5. Senior advocate Mukul Rohatgi, representing Ray, sub-

mitted that the politician wishes to contest the upcoming elections and so was seeking a stay on his conviction.

The application said by virtue of Section 8(3) of the Representation of the People Act, Ray stands disqualified from contesting the forthcoming national or Odisha state Assembly elections or getting nominated to the Rajya Sabha, which irreparably and irreversibly causes grave prejudice to him, especially considering his age.

Senior advocate R S Cheema and lawyer Tarannum Cheema, appearing for the CBI, said they will file a response to the application for which they need some time.

# Vig nabs 3 officers on graft charges

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Bhubaneswar, Mar 21:** Odisha Vigilance has arrested three officers including a lady veterinary doctor during the past 24 hours on corruption charges, said an officer Thursday evening.

According to the Vigilance official, Susmita Sethi, block veterinary officer (BVO), Realmal of Deogarh district has been arrested while demanding and accepting a bribe of ₹5,000 from a poultry farmer (complainant). Sethi has demanded a bribe from the farmer to submit an asset verification report in his favour for releasing the pending subsidy bill for construction of a village poultry farm.

Similarly, Drona Kumar Tandi, a school headmaster of Kalahandi district has been apprehended by the Vigilance while accepting a bribe of ₹40,000 from a contractor for clearing his running bill. The accused has told the con-

tractor to give him the bank slip after depositing ₹40,000 in his bank account. After depositing the amount, the contractor handed over the counter foil of the deposit slip when the vigilance sleuths entered into his official chamber.

"Unable to hide the bank slip, he swallowed the paper slip", a vigilance release said, adding that on verification of his cell phone, a message was found to have been received in his cell phone regarding credit of ₹40,000 deposited in cash by the contractor. The Vigilance also arrested Rasananda Kar, block education officer (BEO) Daringbadi in Kandhamal district on Wednesday evening for misappropriation of government money of ₹20 lakh.

The Vigilance has registered three cases against the government servants and launched simultaneous searches at the properties of the three officials at different locations.

# 1 in 3 suffers pre-hypertension in India

More than 33 per cent of Indians suffer from pre-hypertension, a recent Indian Council of Medical Research study has said, raising concerns on the impact of the condition as it often progresses to full-blown hypertension.

In the study comprising 7,43,067 adults aged between 18 and 54 years, researchers from the ICMR's National Centre for Disease Informatics and Research (NCDIR) conducted a secondary analysis of data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) that covered 707 districts in 28 Indian states and eight Union territories.

"Higher odds of pre-hypertension were observed in individuals from wealthier households and those overweight or obese," the study published March 18 in the International Journal of Public Health said.

Interestingly, the study found that women, literate individuals,



alcohol consumers and individuals with elevated blood glucose levels had lower odds of being pre-hypertensive.

There was no statistically significant link between tobacco consumption and the prevalence of pre-hypertension, it also said.

"The burden of pre-hypertension, an intermediate state between normal blood pressure and hypertension, is equally concerning, as it often progresses to full-blown hypertension," the study said. Pre-hypertension prevalence varied widely across Indian

districts, with an overall rate of 33.7 per cent, ranging from 15.6 per cent to 63.4 per cent.

The southern region of the country has a lower average prevalence at 30.2 per cent. The prevalence in Puducherry was 27.7 per cent, Telangana 28.2 per cent, Tamil Nadu 29.7 per cent and Andhra Pradesh 29.8 per cent.

The northern region also performed well with an average rate of 39.4 per cent, with Himachal Pradesh at 35.3 per cent and Chandigarh at 28.6 per cent. Conversely, Jammu and

Kashmir showed a higher hypertension rate of 45.2 per cent, Ladakh 48.8 per cent, Rajasthan 43.5 per cent and Chhattisgarh 38.8 per cent, according to the study.

The 'India State-Level Disease Burden Initiative' highlighted that pre-hypertension contributed substantially to cardiovascular diseases, warranting urgent attention.

Multiple studies have reported the rising prevalence of pre-hypertension in various regions of the country.

The ICMR study also found that the prevalence of raised blood pressure in India was at 15.9 per cent, exhibiting considerable variation across districts.

The prevalence of 'ever-measured' blood pressure among individuals in India was at 66.7 per cent, revealing significant regional disparities ranging from 30.3 per cent to 98.5 per cent.

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# We compete with ourselves: Mahapatra

Manikstu Agro was started in 2015 with a vision to improve the much neglected Indian goat farming business. The objective was to double the income of goat farmers of Kalahandi district through different interventions which will make the sector more organised and lead to a 'red revolution'. Jayanti Mahapatra, CEO of Manikstu Agro Pvt Ltd, has received many accolades. Recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had shared her success story during his 'Mann Ki Baat' programme. Mahapatra, a former banker, quit her high-salaried job in Bangalore and came back to her native village to embark on her entrepreneurial journey. In a conversation with Orissa POST, Mahapatra shares her experience. Excerpts...



## How was your journey from the banking sector to goat farming?

With long years of experience in banking services and the hope of doing something new, I ventured into this business. I got ample opportunity to spend time with people from all walks of life under the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programme of the bank. During this time, I became aware of the people's needs and the market demand. Eventually, I invested into agribusiness as I was keen to start my own goat farming business.

## How do you see the growth in agribusiness sector?

Earlier, agriculture was the only means of living. But in the last few years, people who were staying away from agriculture sector due to various reasons are showing renewed interest in joining this sector. We can fulfill our needs and also change the financial conditions with the help of agriculture and agribusiness.

## How does this business fare in a competitive market?

Competitors exist in all fields but responding to competition depends on our behaviour, decisions and thoughts. We prefer to compete with ourselves rather than competing with anyone else. The harder we work, the more

we progress towards success.

## What would be your message to aspiring entrepreneurs?

Nowadays, people from all categories are finding their way into agribusiness. To succeed in this line, one should give priority to strong will, honesty and morale values.

## To what extent has government assistance been helpful to agribusiness?

Currently, the government is providing support and co-operation to all sectors. All levels of support will have value. Entrepreneurs need time, effort, public relations and developing the right product, especially when the government is supporting the enterprise. There is a need for integrity and partnership between government and private sector to grow the agribusiness sector.

## What is the role of partners in your business?

While every business has its medium, in our business the role of partners is significant. Especially when everything is done in faith, hope, honesty

and hard work, it can lead to business growth with benefits for all stakeholders. This business is sustained by building strong relationships with all partners.

## How are you managing the Goat Bank?

The Goat Bank came from my banking experience. Through this, all stakeholders have benefited, while consumers also get quality food from the domestic market. We even meet the needs and demands of the local market through the Goat Bank. In the early stages, people's thoughts were different, but now their mindset has completely changed.



# Illegal fishing poses serious threat to turtles

POST NEWS NETWORK

**Kendrapara, March 21:** Despite a ban on fishing, it is continuing unabated in the prohibited areas of the sea near Gahirmatha marine sanctuary in this district. This is posing serious threats to the life of the rare Olive Ridley turtles visiting the area for mass nesting, officials said here Thursday. The Odisha government has imposed a ban on fishing in the area since November 1, 2023. However, fishermen in trawlers continue to flout rules with impunity.

Such is the audacity of the fishermen that at times they use their trawlers to attack patrol boats. Recently, fishermen in more than 12 vessels (boats and trawlers) attacked a patrolling team. They used their trawlers in an effort to capsize the patrol boat. In another incident, fishermen surrounded Kanika-III, a patrol vessel with Forest department staff, to prevent them from carrying out surveillance work. Complaints have been lodged in both the cases, but fishermen continue to carry out their trade.

Sources said that 359 fishermen have been arrested and 36 boats and trawlers seized since



FILE PHOTO

the ban was imposed. However, that has not deterred others from fishing activities. Also easy availability of bail for those arrested is affecting the morale of the Forest department staff and the police, officials said.

Environmentalists claimed that the Gahirmatha marine sanctuary is not a safe place for the Olive Ridley turtles anymore. Nature lover Lakshmidhar Swain said the Forest department, Marine police and coast guard should implement tighter security measures to prevent illegal fishing near Gahirmatha.

Sources however pointed out that there is distinct lack of coordination between the three departments. This is the main reason for which forester

Shyam Singh lost his life in 2022 when he was attacked by people involved in illegal fishing, they added.

It should be stated here that hundreds of turtles die after being hit by trawlers and also after getting trapped in fishing nets. The Orissa High Court has directed authorities to install turtle excluder device (TED) in the boats but that is not being implemented, alleged an official.

Prakash Chandra Das, president of 'Samudrika Jeeva Surakshya Samiti' said that the nesting sites of the turtles are now in danger. Rapid coastal erosion in Babubali, Madali and Ekakula islands is adding to the problem. The turtles have already assembled and are expected to start laying eggs from next week.

When contacted, Gahirmatha ranger Pradosh Maharana said that three boats have been pressed into service to prevent illegal fishing and to protect the turtles. He, however, alleged that help has not been forthcoming from the coast guard and Marine police. Meanwhile, Talachua Marine police station IIC Sasmita Sahu said boats are available, but requisite fuel has not been provided for those.

## POLITICKLE BY MANJUL



## 2 GET 30 YRS IN JAIL FOR RAPING MINOR

**Keonjhar:** Additional District-cum-Special POCSO Court Judge Shubhashree Tripathi convicted two persons for raping a minor and sentenced each of them to 30 years of rigorous imprisonment here Thursday. The two convicts have been identified as Sk Shahzad Ali (53) and Amita Karua (46). Incidentally the latter is the step-grandmother of the victim. The court also imposed fines of ₹30,000 on Ali and ₹20,000 on Karua. Failure to pay the fines will lead to an additional three years in prison for Ali and two for Karua. According to information available, the victim was living with her grandparents when she was raped. Incidentally the victim's grandfather had married a second time and hence Karua became the step-grandmother of the victim. When the victim's grandfather was not present in the house June 22, 2018, Ali raped her and threatened her with dire consequences if she disclosed the matter. Karua helped him in committing the heinous act. Ali repeated the crime a number of times in the following months. However, the two were taken into custody when the victim lodged a complaint at the Joda police station October 27, 2018. Police arrested Ali and Karua and registered two separate cases against them.

## Forest care fosters community spirit



POST NEWS NETWORK

**Sundargarh, March 21:** In a concerted effort to safeguard the forests in Ujalpur range, 31 Van Surakshya Samities (VSSs) have launched a comprehensive awareness campaign under the leadership of dedicated officials and community leaders. Recognising the threat posed by forest fires that occur during summer, these grassroot initiatives aim to instill a deep sense of responsibility towards preserving invaluable natural resources.

The initiatives spearheaded by Sundargarh DFO Pradeep Mirase and Ujalpur forest range officer Devadatta Nanda, have seen a month-long series of activities meticulously designed to educate and engage local stake-

holders. From awareness meetings to vibrant rallies, from taking collective oaths to cultural programmes celebrating traditional rituals, every measure has been taken to ignite a spirit of guardianship among villagers.

This sort of campaign was necessary due to the devastation caused by forest fires, particularly during the onset of the Mahua flower season. Hundreds of hectares of pristine forest land, along with countless innocent wild animals, flora and fauna, fall victim to these infernos each year. Such calamities not only jeopardise the ecological balance but also imperil the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities.

Through relentless advocacy and community mobilisation,

the initiatives aim to reverse this destructive trend. Primary produce collectors, youth groups, women's associations and forest-dependent families were brought under the roof of the awareness drive. Officials pointed out that a collective effort is required to protect the forests.

During the awareness campaign which was organised in the villages of Nuadihi, Ujalpur, Sanpatrapali and Kinjirkela, one could feel the enthusiasm among the locals. Villagers volunteered for enrollment in each of the protection committees formed. It was clear that they are determined to protect the natural resources to achieve a better future, some officials pointed out. "They have realised that if forests are protected, communities will prosper," observed a forester.

"This collaborative endeavour stands as a testament to the power of grassroots actions in addressing pressing environmental challenges. As the lights of awareness continue to spread, the Ujalpur forest section is poised to emerge as a beacon of resilience and stewardship, ensuring the longevity of our shared natural heritage for generations to come," the official added.

## 5-day theatre bonanza in Rourkela

POST NEWS NETWORK

**Rourkela, March 21:** 'Sampark', a leading cultural organisation here, is going to celebrate the 'World Theatre Day' which is held every year March 27. To mark the occasion, 'Sampark' will be hosting four outstanding troupes and its members will also present a play. The festival will begin March 23 and will culminate March 27. It should be stated that 'Sampark' has been in the forefront for revival of theatre in this part of the state.

Bhaskar Mohapatra, president of 'Sampark', spoke in detail about the event. "This year the festival will be held over five days. "There will be four teams (three from outside the state and one from Bhubaneswar) participating and we will also present a play," Mohapatra said.

"Teachers from National School of Drama (NSD) will present *The Zoo Story*. Next day 'Sampark' will stage *Bhababinodia Kalathakur*, a play based on Jagannath culture, 'IFTA', one of the leading theatre groups from Kolkata will present *Krishna*, a play based on Mahabharat, March 25. 'KITE' from Mumbai will present *Ek Khoya Hua Admi*, March 26 and on the last day,



FILE PHOTO

'Ajit', a leading organisation from Bhubaneswar, will present *Eka*," Mohapatra added.

Some of the leading actors from the Hindi theatre industry and Odisha film fraternity will be performing during the festival, Mohapatra informed.

This time the festival instead of the 'Civic Centre', which is under renovation, will be staged at the 'Music Circle', an open-air auditorium. "We are providing flight tickets and remunerations to all the outstanding groups. We however, will not be getting any government help as the model code of conduct has already been implemented," informed Mohapatra.

The official said that there will be audience participation during the event. "They will be allowed to ask questions to the director and the artists. There will be an award for the best question of the day. Some leading writers and theatre artists will be awarded with the 'Sampark Samman' on the last day of the festival," Mohapatra said.

## 5-year-old critical; teacher detained

POST NEWS NETWORK

**Raigarh, March 21:** A five-year-old nursery student was rendered critical after being beaten up black and blue by his school teacher at Kanadihi village under Kundei police limits in Nabarangpur district, Thursday. The survivor was identified as Dhanraj Satnami, 5, son of Lagnu Satnami and a nursery student of Sahid Birsa Munda Public School at Hatabharandi near here in Nabarangpur district. Police detained the accused teacher Jayram Gond and launched an investigation over a complaint lodged by the boy's

### CORPORAL PUNISHMENT



family members, Kundei IIC Prasant Kumar Sethi said. A

case was also registered in this connection. Gond allegedly meted out corporal punishment to the five-year-old boy.

Sources said Gond beat the minor with a stick during the school hours. The boy sustained several bruises on his back and other parts of the body.

The matter came to the fore when the auto driver, while dropping off the boy at home at 1pm, informed his parents about the incident. The victim's father accompanied by a few villagers lodged a complaint in this regard with Kundei police. They have also launched a probe into the incident.

## 6 more poachers held from Kuldiha range

**Balasure:** Six poachers were arrested and several country-made guns seized from them in the Kuldiha forest range, PCCF-Wildlife, Susanta Nanda said Thursday on 'X'. They were apprehended during a joint combing operation conducted by the police, Dorest department and special task force (STF) personnel along the periphery of the Kuldiha sanctuary in this district. The poachers were arrested from Deunchakhala village in Nilgiri area Wednesday night, Nanda added. Police meanwhile said that six country-made rifles were seized from the possession of the arrested poachers. A total of nine people have been arrested as a result of the joint operation in the past three days, officials informed. Meanwhile Nanda said that the drive against poachers will continue in the Kuldiha sanctuary and areas around it. It should be added here that only a couple of days back, two poachers were arrested after they shot at and injured two Forest department staff.

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## Cops bust fake RTO office; two arrested

POST NEWS NETWORK

**Balasure, March 21:** Jaleswar Police busted Thursday a fake Regional Transport Office (RTO) and arrested two persons who had set up their workplace near Laxmannath toll plaza in this district and were posing as Transport department officials. The accused have been identified as Tushar Parida of Jaleswar and Sambhu Sahu of Jharkhand.

Balasure SP Sagarika Nath informed that the accused posing as fake RTO and MVI officials were issuing challans using forged stamps and documents pertaining to Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal and Odisha governments to vehicle owners.

"The accused used to provide documents to vehicles passing through the toll plaza. We have recovered 11 fake stamps, receipts of various check posts and integrated check posts with letterheads of the Telangana and West Bengal governments," Nath said.

The police official stated that the police had got intelligence inputs regarding such fake activities last month and subsequently, a trap was laid out to nab the miscreants.

**EAST COAST RAILWAY**

File No. DR/Engg/KUR/23-24/  
E-Tender/145 Dt.: 18.03.2024

(1) Tender No. e-Tender-CenTKUR-452-2023 Dt.: 12.03.2024

Description: MISCELLANEOUS P.WAY WORKS SUCH AS SHALLOW SCREENING, LIFTING OF TRACK, THROUGH PACKING, WELDING OF RAIL JOINTS, PRE AND POST TAMPING WORK, OVERHAULING OF LEVEL CROSSINGS, BOXING AND PROFILING OF BALLAST, CASUAL RENEWAL OF RAILS & SLEEPERS AND OTHER P.WAY RELATED WORKS AT VARIOUS LOCATIONS UNDER THE JURISDICTION OF SENIOR SECTION ENGINEER (P.WAY)/DHEKNAL OF KHURDA ROAD DIVISION.

Approx cost of the work ₹ 202.86 Lakhs, EMD: ₹ 2,51,400/-

(2) Tender No. e-Tender-estatekur-454-2023 Dt.: 12.03.2024

Description: PROPOSED CONSTRUCTION OF ONE (01) ADDITIONAL ROOM FOR EXTENSION OF T.Y.V. (DU P L E X) QUARTERS (I.E. FOR 12 UNITS) AT RAIL KUNJ COLONY, BHUBANESWAR.

Approx cost of the work ₹ 222.19 Lakhs, EMD: ₹ 2,61,100/-

(3) Tender No. e-Tender-estatekur-455-2023 Dt.: 12.03.2024

Description: PROVISION OF FIRE FIGHTING SYSTEM FOR HEAD QUARTER BUILDING (RAIL SADAN) OF EAST COAST RAILWAY AT BHUBANESWAR.

Approx cost of the work ₹ 166.70 Lakhs, EMD: ₹ 2,33,400/-

Completion period: 11 months (for Sl. No. 1) & 12 months (for Sl. No. 2 & 3).

Tender closing date & time : at 1500 hrs. of 03.04.2024 (for all tenders).

No manual offers sent by Post/Courier/Fax or in person shall be accepted against such e-tenders even if these are submitted on firm's letter head and received in time. All such manual offers shall be considered invalid and shall be rejected summarily without any consideration.

Complete information including e-tender documents of the above e-tender is available in website [www.reps.gov.in](http://www.reps.gov.in)

Note: The prospective tenderers are advised to visit the website 10 (Ten) days before the date of closing of tender to note any changes/corrigenda issued for this tender.

Divisional Railway Manager (Engg),  
PR-1194/O/23-24 Khurda Road

**EAST COAST RAILWAY**

File No. DR/Engg/KUR/23-24/  
E-Tender/144 Dt.: 18.03.2024

(1) Tender No. e-Tender-CenTKUR-452-2023 Dt.: 12.03.2024

Description: RENEWAL OF EXISTING DAMAGED PSC FAN SHAPED LAYOUTS AND GLUED JOINTS AT DIFFERENT LOCATIONS UNDER SENIOR DIVISIONAL ENGINEER (CENTRAL) OF KHURDA ROAD DIVISION.

Approx cost of the work ₹ 263.41 Lakhs, EMD: ₹ 2,24,700/-

(2) Tender No. e-Tender-CenTKUR-453-2023 Dt.: 12.03.2024

Description: RENEWAL OF EXISTING DAMAGED PSC FAN SHAPED LAYOUTS, CMS CROSSINGS AND GLUED JOINTS AT DIFFERENT LOCATIONS UNDER SENIOR DIVISIONAL ENGINEER (CENTRAL) OF KHURDA ROAD DIVISION.

Approx cost of the work ₹ 149.09 Lakhs, EMD: ₹ 2,24,600/-

(3) Tender No. e-Tender-CenTKUR-457-2023 Dt.: 12.03.2024

Description: RAG PICKING BETWEEN BARANG TO KHURDA ROAD STATION (EXCLUDING YARD PORTION I.E. FROM HOME SIGNAL TO HOME SIGNAL).

Approx cost of the work ₹ 22.72 Lakhs, EMD: ₹ 45,400/-

(4) Tender No. e-Tender-CenTKUR-458-2023 Dt.: 12.03.2024

Description: ALL REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE OF P.WAY ZONAL WORKS FOR A PERIOD UPTO 30/9/2024 FROM KM. 421.950 TO 450.201 ON MAIN LINE BETWEEN BHUBANESWAR NEW-KHURDA ROAD UNDER THE JURISDICTION OF SENIOR SECTION ENGINEER (P.WAY)/BHUBANESWAR OF KHURDA ROAD DIVISION.

Approx cost of the work ₹ 125.22 Lakhs, EMD: ₹ 2,12,600/-

Completion period: 12 months (for Sl. No. 1 & 2), 24 months (for Sl. No. 3) & 05 months (for Sl. No. 4).

Tender closing date & time : at 1500 hrs. of 03.04.2024 (for all tenders).

No manual offers sent by Post/Courier/Fax or in person shall be accepted against such e-tenders even if these are submitted on firm's letter head and received in time. All such manual offers shall be considered invalid and shall be rejected summarily without any consideration.

Complete information including e-tender documents of the above e-tender is available in website [www.reps.gov.in](http://www.reps.gov.in)

Note: The prospective tenderers are advised to visit the website 10 (Ten) days before the date of closing of tender to note any changes/corrigenda issued for this tender.

Divisional Railway Manager (Engg),  
PR-1192/O/23-24 Khurda Road

In order to see, you have to stop being in the middle of the picture.

SRI AUROBINDO



# Big Tech Shocks Utilities

If John D. Rockefeller were around today, he'd be screwing a Google Nest – the pioneering smart thermostat – into the wall of his home. The notoriously thrifty oil baron would have jumped at the chance to save on his monthly energy bill.

Traditional energy companies, from ExxonMobil (the direct descendant of Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company) to local utilities, have begun to embrace Big Tech, brimming with both hope and trepidation. Will companies like Google, Amazon, and Meta put the meter reader and his bosses out to pasture? Who wins if they do?

Big Tech has already shown a propensity to disrupt. Just 25 years ago, a "googol" – the inspiration for the search engine's name – was an unfathomably large number; a cloud was a billowing puff in the sky, and 5G was the row in which you parked your car at the garage. In the intervening decades, tech companies have upended industries both at the enterprise and retail levels.

Consider pharmacies, which relied on the patience of shoppers to wait days for a prescription and stand in queues to retrieve them. Now companies like Hims & Hers will confidentially deliver overnight drugs to calm your nerves, grow your hair, or put you in the mood. Meanwhile, One Medical, which Amazon purchased last year, offers 24-hour on-demand virtual care and same- and next-day appointments – quite a feat considering the average wait time to see a physician in major American cities is more than three weeks. No wonder the profit margins of brick-and-mortar drugstores have fallen, plunging Rite-Aid into bankruptcy.

Just as the world needs better access to medical care, it also needs more efficient and reliable power. Too many people are sitting in the dark too often, and for too long. Even in developed countries like the United States, the average duration of a blackout doubled between 2013 and 2021, from 3.5 hours to more than seven hours, while their frequency jumped by nearly 20%. Not surprisingly, Americans are taking a dimmer view of their local utilities, with 71% saying they would switch providers, while businesses complain that power outages cost them \$150 billion per year.

That doesn't mean utilities deserve all the blame. In the US, local and state politicians and regulators dictate profits and prices, while delaying capital upgrades. The US Department of Energy spends around five years assessing a new project before approval, leaving roughly 2,000 gigawatts of annual capacity waiting in the queue.

Fast-growing trillion-dollar tech companies cannot afford to lose power, so they are taking matters into their own hands. Amazon's clean-energy portfolio, which comprises solar and wind projects in more than 20 US states and 27 countries, is now big enough to power 7.2 million American homes each year. In Nevada's Blue Mountain geothermal field, Google is partnering with clean-energy start-up Fervo to power the tech behemoth's data centers by tapping the heat trapped below Jurassic rocks.

Unlike a utility saddled with old plants that need to be decommissioned, tech companies can start anew. The average age of an oil-burning steam-turbine plant in the Midwest is pushing 70 years. In fact, Whiting, Wisconsin, runs a hydropower facility built in 1891 – 40 years before actor Boris Karloff was hooked up to lightning-conducting electrodes in the original Frankenstein.

Although self-interest motivated tech companies to create new power supplies, they have their sights set on residential consumers. Fortunately, Big Tech is already welcome in the home. Amazon evolved from delivering brown boxes of books to answering questions with Alexa and recording doorbell activity with Ring cameras.

Google recently merged Nest Renew, its service to help users optimise their electricity usage, with the software business OhmConnect to align the energy consumption of households across the country. The new company, Renew Home, will pay people to lower their thermostats and turn off their lights during peak hours or even, when combined with artificial intelligence-enabled weather forecasting, before lightning storms strike.

Executives at traditional electric utilities should respond to these free-wheeling, free-spending technical wizards by rewatching The Godfather, Part II, and heeding mob boss Michael Corleone's advice: "keep your friends close, but your enemies closer." At the same time, they should focus on communicating better with their customers. Has your utility ever sent you a newsletter, a movie link, or a dozen roses? Or does it come to mind only when you have a complaint, whether about the lights going off or a meter reader skulking in the backyard?

Lastly, utilities should work with Big Tech to boost efficiency. A few weeks ago, Southern Company announced a deal with Samsung SmartThings to create an innovation laboratory aimed at prodding communication among smart refrigerators, dishwashers, and garage-door openers in an effort to save power. In San Diego, the utility company Sempra is partnering with Fermata Energy so that electric vehicles can sell their battery power back to the grid when demand peaks.

Ever since the age of Rockefeller and Thomas Edison, utilities were the Steady Eddie of investments, the clichéd favourite of dividend-seeking widows and other risk-averse investors. Whether or not the climate is getting warmer, the sector is getting hotter. And as Big Tech enters, sparks are beginning to fly.

Todd G. Buchholz is a former managing director of the Tiger hedge fund. Michael Mindlin is a venture-capital and growth-equity investor.

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Todd G. Buchholz & Michael Mindlin

Just as the world needs better access to medical care, it also needs more efficient and reliable power. Too many people are sitting in the dark too often, and for too long



Avilash Roul

COUNTRIES MUST SEIZE THE OPPORTUNITY TO COLLABORATE AND COOPERATE OVER SHARED WATER FOR PEACE AND PROSPERITY FOR ALL

# WATER FOR PEACE

FOCUS WORLD WATER DAY

Since 1993, on 22 March every year the UN has been celebrating World Water Day to highlight the importance of freshwater for all life forms. We are aware that freshwater is the elixir of life but it is finite. "Leveraging water for peace," the theme of this year, anchors in promoting cooperation of water users between and among countries, sectors and communities, integrating into climate actions and achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The UN will launch the World Water Development Report 2024 – "Water for Prosperity and Peace," to accelerate the cooperation among countries over shared watercourses.

Water for peace instantly compels us to limit our understanding in looking at the looming 'water war' hypothesis between or among countries over a shared water resource. Recent episodes on the Ravi River under the Indus River System between India and Pakistan have been construed by all in this framework of water conflict between two arch-rivals. Similar arguments of 'water conflict' and 'resource conflict' have been put forward by scholars for the strategically significant Central Asian region, which is fed by two historically important river systems - the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya. The 'water war' paradigm has been mooted from time to time by political leaders and strategic thinkers only to galvanise the importance of freshwater in statecraft. What we all know is that there was a documented war between two principalities in ancient Mesopotamia over shared water. Throughout history, water has triggered more cooperation than conflict. On the other hand, this complacency of the 'no water war' argument during a long span of world history can be a ludicrous proposition when we are facing unprecedented challenges of climate catastrophe.

Among 276 transboundary river basins shared by 148 riparian countries accounting for 60% of global freshwater flow



Approximately two billion people living in monsoonal and glacier-fed basins and deltas are highly vulnerable to the disruption of the water cycle

and home to half of the world's population, only one-third of transboundary rivers or 24 countries have been able to successfully forge cooperative arrangements in managing shared water. India, having a complex position of simultaneously being an upper, middle and lower riparian country, has successfully forged various degrees of cooperation among neighbouring countries over shared river water. Through water, more so in transboundary rivers, climate change by disrupting the water cycle is affecting societies, economies and ecosystems by aggravating competing demands that have threatened both the security of the state and livelihood of most vulnerable communities and the prosperity of all living beings. Approximately 2 billion people living in monsoonal and glacier-fed basins and deltas are highly vulnerable to the disruption of the water cycle.

Climate change is leading to more extreme weather. In the last 50 years, water-related hazards due to climate change accounted for more loss of lives in the world. Between 1970 and 2019, according to the Atlas of Mortality and Economic Losses from Weather, Climate and Water Extremes (WMO), there were more than 11 000 disasters attributed to weather, climate and water-related hazards, which accounted for over 2 million deaths and \$ 3.64 trillion in

losses. The most deadly climate-water-related hazards have been droughts (650,000 deaths), storms (577,232 deaths), floods (58,700 deaths) and extreme temperatures (55,736 deaths). While Asia and Africa lead the death toll lists, there is a lack of comprehensive data on the loss of property and lives in the most vulnerable and fragile transboundary river basins of the Central Asian region.

Inaccessible abundant freshwater sources of the cryosphere-glaciers, snowclad and celestial mountains, eventually the only source of all perennial transboundary river systems, as per IPCC Special Report on Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate, have been extremely affected by climate change. Within the transboundary Syr Darya and Amu Darya basins in Central Asia, the glacier melting has increased water-related disasters and put enormous but delicate challenges of management of different water usages.

Beyond state-centric securing of freshwater for present and future needs, access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene is the most basic human need for health and well-being that is being agreed upon under SDG-6. Despite progress with access to safely managed drinking water from 69% to 73%, there is still a large gap in ensuring behavioural changes in hygiene and hygiene education, investing in sustainable practices and

infrastructure and protection and restoration of water-related ecosystems. Otherwise, achieving universal access to Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) in 2030 will be a mirage.

Therefore, peace is not only the absence of war. Rather, peace is the absence of any short of violence or obstruction in fulfilling the aspirations of individuals and communities in accessing and securing water for well-being. Is Bangalore at peace with the present water crisis? Are providing access to safe water and protecting lives and property from water-related disasters, not with the ambit of peace?

Arguably, cooperation rather than competition over shared water provides benefits to all stakeholders for optimal usage and management of water requirements. If the number of water-related disasters has increased fivefold since 1971 due to climate change, the cooperative arrangement in terms of implementation of multi-hazard early warning system (MHEWS) and disaster management, improved timely sharing of information and confidence-building measures have reduced mortality by threefold. Among the cooperative arrangements over 24 shared river basins, 43% account for joint climate risk mitigation and adaptation measures.

Without cooperation over shared water against the backdrop of climate catastrophe we would be leading to unprecedented water governance challenges. Unilateral measures in managing transboundary water are insufficient, inefficient and ineffective. Transboundary river basins provide abundant scope for innovative pathways for cooperation in terms of, for example, the adoption of basin-wide climate mitigation and adaptation plans through transparent and equitable processes. Countries must seize the opportunity to collaborate and cooperate over shared water for peace and prosperity for all.

The writer is an international advisor on climate change risk and transboundary rivers.

## SPECTRUM GEOPOLITICS

# Putin's win & the world order

The victory of Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin in the presidential elections last Sunday with a historic margin has elicited reactions from across the world. It appears from the comments by world leaders that Russia's break with the West and tilt towards China is almost complete. In the current geopolitical order divided between the West and Russia-China axis, India is trying to remain non-aligned or in the new parlance, New Delhi is attempting multi-alignment. India says it will maintain the decades-long strategic ties with Russia whereas, at the same time, Prime Minister Modi has made new defence deals with the US and Europe.

The fifth consecutive victory of Putin which will keep him as President till 2030 will maintain the current world order marked by antagonism between Sino-Russian alliance and the Western powers, and the continuing deaths and devastation in Ukraine.

Putin got 87.8 per cent of the total votes which is the highest ever in post-Soviet electoral history. His opponent, the Communist candidate, Nikolai

Kharitanov secured just 4 per cent of the votes. This is by far the biggest victory any President has had. This will also enable Putin to overtake Stalin's term in office for 30 years.

As said before, reactions are clearly divided between Putin's critics and his allies and friends. The critics contend that elections were not fair or free. Substantial candidates did not have a chance to contest. The Election Commission of Russia did not give clearance to such candidates. For instance, Boziz Nadhezdin, an anti-war candidate was barred from running in the elections. International observers pointed at ballot stuffing and fraudulent counting. Elections in Russia have just been a ritual.

Many Russian Missions faced protests against the polls. In Germany, these were led by Yulia Navalnaya – the wife of the late critic of Putin, Alexi Navalny. They were complaining against mass censorship, persecution of genuine opposition leaders and manipulation of the electoral machinery. World leaders condemned the polling held in Russian-occupied Ukraine territories annexed during the war.

Let us scan the reactions; first, those which were congratulatory and supportive. Prime Minister Narendra Modi wrote in X, "Warm congratulations to HE Mr Vladimir Putin on his election as the President of the Russian Federation. Look forward to working together to further strengthen the time-tested special and privileged strategic partnership between India and Russia in the years to come." Likewise, Chinese President Xi Jinping said that Beijing would maintain close communication with Moscow to promote the 'no limits' partnership they agreed in 2022 just before Russia invaded Ukraine. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman offered his congratulation on Putin's decisive victory. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, accused by the West of supplying weapons to Russia, also congratulated Putin. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, who is also accused of sneaking arms to Russia, wished Putin on his victory.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a strongly worded message said, "Russian election has no legitimacy. It is clear to everyone in the world that this person (Putin), like many others

throughout history, has become sick for power and will stop at nothing to rule for forever."

White House Spokesperson Vedant Patel said, "Russian election was obviously not free, nor fair."

The contrasting reactions from global leaders actually exposed the geopolitical divide that has widened since the Ukrainian war. This has undoubtedly triggered the deepest crisis in power relations since the Cold War. India's position on Russia vis-à-vis the Ukrainian war is by now well known and somewhat grudgingly acknowledged by Western powers.

EAM Jaishankar has pointed out more than once that the West is pushing Russia to China, and may I add India to Russia. If the West took a hard line on revanchist and expansionist China, it would have been easier for India to persuade Moscow to distance from Beijing and accommodate the West. The challenge for diplomacy both for India and the West continues. The West must make a choice between China and Russia, whereas India tries to bring Russia closer to the West.

The writer is Secretary General, Association for Democratic Socialism.

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DK Giri

INDIA'S POSITION ON RUSSIA VIS-À-VIS THE UKRAINIAN WAR IS BY NOW WELL-KNOWN AND SOMEWHAT GRUDGINGLY ACKNOWLEDGED BY WESTERN POWERS

## Highway trauma

Sir, Notwithstanding innumerable first aid and safety signage, passengers struggle to come to terms with ghastly accidents on highways. The National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) in conjunction with a public sector unit of the Ministry of health is planning to strengthen the Incident Management System (IMS). The IMS strives to respond to unplanned events and service interruption by restoring the services and events to the originally planned state through a plethora of arms. A few crucial amenities like availability of ambulances will be spruced up so that the "golden hour" – one hour following the accident – is not gone. Also, the number of trauma centres on highways, if any, requires more additions. Passengers have heard about "toll free phone number" in exigencies but whether or not the exact number is known to them is anyone's guess. A very vital step undertaken by the NHAI is to train the toll plaza workers for instantaneous response to accidents.

Ganapathi Bhat, AKOLA

## Green transition

Sir, The recently announced Electric Vehicle (EV) policy marks a significant milestone in India's efforts to transition towards cleaner and more sustainable transportation. By offering a strategic blend of incentives and deliverables, the government aims to position India as an attractive production hub for global manufacturers, with a keen eye on enticing industry titan Elon Musk's Tesla into the fold. One of the policy's key focal points is the reduction of import duties, a move directly influenced by Tesla's insistence on duty alleviation before committing to domestic assembly. However, it's crucial to note that while the policy caters to Tesla's demands, it ensures a level playing field by not granting any company a free pass. This demonstrates the government's commitment to fostering a competitive market environment while simultaneously incentivising investments in the nascent EV sector. Despite India's robust automobile market, predominantly dominated by internal combustion engine technology, EVs currently represent a mere fraction, approximately 1%, of the passenger vehicle market. Even within the luxury segment where Tesla operates, EVs command a modest share of around 3-4%.

Amarjeet Kumar, HAZARIBAGH

## WISDOM CORNER

Work is love made visible. And if you cannot work with love but only with distaste, it is better that you should leave your work and sit at the gate of the temple and take alms of those who work with joy.

KAHLIL GIBRAN

The chief difference between words and deeds is that words are always intended for men for their approbation, but deeds can be done only for God.

LEO TOLSTOY

Even a happy life cannot be without a measure of darkness, and the word happy would lose its meaning if it were not balanced by sadness. It is far better take things as they come along with patience and equanimity.

CARL JUNG

## Letters

### TO THE EDITOR

Readers of Orissa POST are most welcome to contribute letters (200 words), articles and columns (between 750-1250 words). Contributors are requested to send their contact numbers and full postal address/email ID. They may also send in their valuable comments, opinion and suggestions, preferably by email, to: edit@orissapost.com

OrissaPOST

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# Chouhan hits campaign trail with train travel

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Bhopal, March 21:** Former Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister and the BJP candidate from the Vidisha Lok Sabha seat Shivraj Singh Chouhan Thursday hit the campaign trail by hopping onto a second-class coach of a train from Bhopal to Ganjbasoda, interacting with passengers.

Chouhan (65) has entered the Lok Sabha poll arena after two decades and will contest his sixth parliamentary election from Vidisha. This seat was earlier held by BJP leaders Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1991) and Sushma Swaraj (2009 and 2014).

"I have been travelling by train since I was an MP. My heart is full of happiness. I am going to Ganjbasoda, which is my 'karmabhoomi' (workplace). I have family relations with the people and I am going again there to meet all of them," Chouhan said on the train when asked that he was going to his constituency by rail after a long time.

Chouhan's home turf Budhni is part of Vidisha Lok Sabha seat, a BJP citadel which the Congress won only twice (1980 and 1984) since 1967. The Congress is yet to announce its candidate for the constituency. The ex-CM was accompanied by his wife Sadhana.

During the journey, he chatted with a child, who sat on the ex-CM's lap swinging one leg, before interacting with daily passengers. Chouhan also met party workers who had gathered in large numbers at Salamatpur, Sanchi, Vidisha, Gulabganj and Ganjbasoda stations.

CHOUHAN'S HOME TURF BUDHNI IS PART OF VIDISHA LOK SABHA SEAT, A BJP CITADEL WHICH THE CONGRESS WON ONLY TWICE (1980 AND 1984) SINCE 1967

THE CONGRESS IS YET TO ANNOUNCE ITS CANDIDATE FOR THE CONSTITUENCY. THE EX-CM WAS ACCOMPANIED BY HIS WIFE SADHANA



Asked if the contest would be tougher this time considering that two new areas - Khategaon and Ichhawar - are now linked with Vidisha Lok Sabha seat, while Kurwai and Shamsabad have been removed, Chouhan said he was confident of his victory.

"...I have a dilon ka rishta (connection from heart) with the people of the state. Even if new areas are associated (with Vidisha), it makes no difference as people's love and trust are

with me. My life is dedicated to them only. There is no challenge," asserted Chouhan.

He said that his role may have changed but people will not be left behind. "The MP too will stay here. We are missionary workers, which means the BJP's mission of redeveloping the nation, and we have decided to work for the party and the nation. The mission is set by the party and they are working accordingly, Chouhan said.

"Whatever the party had made me, from MLA to MP and chief minister for 18 years, I have worked for the people day

and night. Now, it has asked me to contest as an MP and I will do that to serve the people," Chouhan said while travelling as a 'commoner' in the sleeper class of Bhopal-Bilaspur Passenger.

He said that whenever he got an opportunity to work, he had worked for the empowerment of women and that's why schemes like 'Ladli Laxmi' and 'Ladli Behna' were implemented.

"I will continue to do so again under the leadership of Prime Minister (Narendra) Modi Ji," he said. Asked about the opposition INDIA bloc, he said its

partners are not together on the basis of heart, work and policies. They are bound by their common intention of shielding themselves from going to jail because of the corruption they committed, he said.

"These dynastic, corrupt people with common interests are afraid of Modi ji who has said that he will neither indulge in corruption nor allow others to do it. ('na khaunga, na khane dunga'). Therefore, the bloc has disintegrated before taking shape," he remarked.

On Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Nyatra that recently passed through Madhya Pradesh, Chouhan said the Congress was wiped out in the assembly elections in those areas in MP that were covered by his earlier march (Bharat Jodo Yatra).

When it crossed through the state this time, senior leaders like Suresh Pachouri (former Union minister and a close aide of the Gandhi family) joined the BJP, said Chouhan. "His yatra turned into a 'Congress Chhodo Yatra' (leave Congress yatra). I think his mental age is very low. He doesn't understand the country, its people, traditions and values. He doesn't know the politics of India and its people. That's why Congress is disintegrating," he said.

The BJP veteran said Rahul Gandhi is fulfilling the wish of the Father of the Nation Mahatma Gandhi that the Congress was a movement during the pre-Independence period and it should be dissolved.

## UKRAINE-RUSSIA CONFLICT

# 'Centre will bring back Kerala men'

According to the families of the three men, they were taken to Russia by a recruitment agency with the promise of a huge salary of ₹2.5 lakh and on reaching there, their passports and mobile phones were taken away



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Thiruvananthapuram, March 21:** Three young men from Kerala are stranded in war-torn Ukraine after being lured with promise of a lucrative job in the Russian army and then being allegedly forced to fight in the ongoing conflict there, with Minister of State for External Affairs V Muraleedharan saying all efforts are being made to bring them back.

According to the families of the three men, they were taken to Russia by a recruitment agency with the promise of a huge salary of ₹2.5 lakh and on reaching there, their passports and mobile phones were taken away.

Thereafter, they were made to fight for the Russian forces in Ukraine, they alleged. The mothers of the men said that they came to know what had happened when one of their sons got injured in the war there and managed to call back home. "We just want our sons to be brought back home safe as soon as possible," they said.

Reacting to the reports about the three men being stranded in Ukraine, Muraleedharan said the Indian government had been aware of the issue for some time and was in talks with Russia to make arrangements for the return of Indians who want to come back.

"We have been repeatedly and firmly making that demand during discussions at various levels," he added. The Union Minister also said that many of those who went to Russia did not do so through proper or official channels and were taken there by fake recruitment agencies.

Investigation by CBI and other probe agencies is going on against such establishments and action has also been taken in some cases," he said. Muraleedharan said according to information the Central government has received, four people from Kerala were stranded there and steps were being taken to bring them back.

# ASI survey of Bhojshala complex begins



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Dhar, March 21:** The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) will conduct a survey of the controversial Bhojshala/Kamal Maula Mosque complex situated in the tribal dominated Dhar district in Madhya Pradesh from Friday, officials said.

The Madhya Pradesh High Court, March 11, directed ASI to carry out within six weeks a "scientific survey" of the Bhojshala complex, a medieval-era monument that Hindus believe is a temple of Goddess Vagdevi (Saraswati) and the Muslim community calls Kamal Maula Mosque. In a letter to the Indore

divisional commissioner as well as the collector and superintendent of police of Dhar, ASI additional director general Alok Tripathi requested local authorities to provide safe access to the site in compliance with the order of the HC's Indore bench to conduct "archaeological survey/scientific investigation/excavation" of the site.

In the letter, the ASI also sought adequate security to its team during the stay and survey period, an official said. "We have received a letter from the ASI ADG informing us that a team is reaching Dhar to conduct survey of Bhojshala. There will be tight security measures during

the survey so that it gets completed without any problem," Dhar SP Manoj Kumar Singh said Thursday.

Singh said he and the district collector had visited Bhojshala and would also hold a meeting with the ASI team to ensure the survey goes off without a hitch.

Queried about the Friday namaz and Tuesday puja that was traditionally allowed, he said arrangements for the two on both days will continue as usual. As per an ASI order issued April 7, 2003, Hindus are allowed to worship inside the Bhojshala complex every Tuesday, while Muslims are allowed to offer namaz at the site on Fridays.

# Preparations in place in MP: CEO

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE

**Bhopal, March 21:** With a month to go before the commencement of Lok Sabha elections April 19, the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) of Madhya Pradesh, Anupam Rajan, has said that preparations are on course to conduct transparent and smooth polls in the state.

Madhya Pradesh will vote in four phases on April 19, April 26, May 7 and May 13. Briefing the media in Bhopal, Rajan said that all the sensitive polling booths in the state have been identified where extra security forces will be deployed to ensure smooth elections. He also informed that the Election Commission will set up 6,45,230 polling booths across the state, alongside 367 sub-booths.

"There are at least 367 polling booths where the number of voters is above 1,500, and therefore, we have decided to set up sub-booths for the smooth conduct of polls," he said. The CEO also informed that at least 50 per cent polling booths in the state will be monitored through live streaming, while 3,500 polling booths will be run by women employees.



Rajan said all the concerned officials have been given necessary directions and meetings are being held regularly in this matter. He said there are 2,84,503 licensed weapons in Madhya Pradesh, of which around 1.5 lakh have been taken into custody.

"Around 152 unauthorised weapons have been seized so far, and this number is likely to increase in the next few days. Madhya Pradesh has around

500 check-posts, and extensive checking operations are being carried out by the police," Rajan added.

Talking about the vote percentage in Madhya Pradesh, Rajan said the state had recorded 61.57 per cent polling in 2014 and 71.16 per cent in 2019, so it is expected that the voter turnout will increase by 10% this time as well.

In the first phase on April 19, voting will be held in six Lok

The Chief Electoral Officer of Madhya Pradesh, Anupam Rajan said all the concerned officials have been given necessary directions and meetings are being held regularly in this matter

Talking about the vote percentage in Madhya Pradesh, Rajan said the state had recorded 61.57 per cent polling in 2014 and 71.16 per cent in 2019, so it is expected that the voter turnout will increase by 10% this time as well

Sabha constituencies - Sidhi, Shahdol, Jabalpur, Mandla, Balaghat, and Chhindwara. In the second phase on April 26, Tikamgarh, Damoh, Khajuraho, Satna, Rewa, Hosangabad, and Betul will go to the polls.

The third phase of polling May 7 will cover eight Lok Sabha seats - Morena, Bhind, Gwalior, Guna, Sagar, Vidisha, Bhopal, and Rajgarh. The fourth and final phase of polling in Madhya Pradesh will cover eight seats - Devas, Ujjain, Indore, Mandasaur, Ratlam, Dhar, Khargone, and Khandwa. The counting votes will be taken up June 4.

# Kerala Health Department withdraws social media ban

In the latest order issued Thursday, the director of Health Services stated that the circular issued March 13 was being withdrawn retrospectively due to administrative reasons



government officials' social media usage and expressed concern regarding the possibility of financial gain through platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, which contradicted existing regulations.

Earlier, the KGMOA had condemned the circular, characterising the Health Department's restrictions on social media activity as an infringement upon the fundamental right to freedom of speech and expression enshrined in Article 19(1)(A) of the Constitution.

"It is highly objectionable that such an extremely reactionary order has been issued at a time when many health workers, including government employees, are making tireless efforts through social media to educate the public against false and unscientific propaganda in the field of health, to impart science-based knowledge and above all to protect public health," the KGMOA had said.

# Anti-incumbency could be the biggest campaign point

FOR THE 2019 POLLS, UDF WON WITH 47.48%, LEFT WITH 36.29% AND NDA HAD 15.64% VOTES

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE

**Thiruvananthapuram, March 21:** With just under six weeks left for the D-Day - April 26 when the Kerala electorate queues up to cast their vote - it could well be the anti-incumbency factor of the Pinarayi Vijayan government that could be the most discussed campaign point by the Congress-led UDF and the BJP-led NDA.

However, for the CPI-M-led Left, it could well be what they did in the past nearly eight years in office, that will be their highlight. Kerala has 20 seats and in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, Congress-led UDF won 19, CPI-M-led Left won just one seat, and BJP-led NDA only managed to finish in second place in one and a distant third in the remaining seats.



For the 2019 polls, UDF won with 47.48 per cent, Left with 36.29 per cent and NDA had 15.64 per cent votes. With the Left being the first to hit the campaign and announce their candidates first - UDF soon followed while NDA is yet to announce their candidates in four more constituencies - the biggest impediment is certainly going to be the sweltering heat, and according to CPI Secretary and Rajya Sabha member Binoy Viswam, the heat is such that

campaigning between 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. is a tough ask for those who are on the road.

Meanwhile, CPI-M Secretary M. V. Govindan and Viswam have already agreed that the key campaign point is the performance of the Vijayan government. And quick to latch on it has been the Congress President and Kannur Lok Sabha sitting member, K. Sudhakaran who is defending his seat. He said that the inept governance of Vijayan is going

to be their biggest advantage.

"The years of corrupt and inefficient rule of Vijayan is going to be discussed and we will educate voters on why there is a need for people to vote for the Congress-led UDF candidates. Moreover, by now, many have realised that all efforts have to be there to stop the Modi government from going forward," said Sudhakaran.

Even though the Left was the first to hit the campaign, a faux pas by its veteran former CPI-

M legislator and Convener of LDF, E. P. Jayarajan, who said the fight in the state is between the Left and BJP, has left them reeling and by now, all including Vijayan, Govindan and CPI have denied it. They say the fight is between the Left and UDF.

Though BJP doesn't even have a single legislator in the 140-member Kerala Assembly, they are banking on the upcoming visit of Modi and its star campaigners as they feel the lotus will bloom and have placed high hopes at Thiruvananthapuram, Thrissur and perhaps even at Palakkad. Senior BJP MP and in-charge of Kerala, Prakash Javadekar said that this time, they are going to make a difference in Kerala politics with this election.

"A big churning in the minds of Kerala voters is visible. In 2019, they were made to believe that Rahul Gandhi will become Prime Minister. This time, everybody including the Congress leaders are sure that he has no chance of becoming the PM and voters know that Narendra Modi will get third term," said Javadekar.



## BHANDARIPOKHARI ASSEMBLY SEGMENT

# Four in race for BJP ticket



POST NEWS NETWORK

**Bhandaripokhari, March 21:** Political temperature is soaring high in Bhandaripokhari Assembly constituency under Bhadrak Lok Sabha segment as all the three prominent political parties have geared up for the upcoming elections. However, the BJP is facing a problem of plenty despite the fact that ruling BJD has been on a winning streak since 2009, a report said.

Bhandaripokhari Assembly seat comprises of 259 booths which includes 23 panchayats of Bhandaripokhari block and 25 panchayats of Bant block in Bhadrak district.

As many as four aspirants are staking claim for BJP ticket from this constituency amid the mystery surrounding the formation of an alliance between BJD and BJP. Senior BJD leader and sitting MLA Prafulla Samal has won this seat thrice consecutively.

However, doubts are being raised whether the ruling party

will field Prafulla again from this seat after the raid by Enforcement Directorate (ED) at his residence and office. Chatters are abuzz about a suitable replacement for Prafulla, if the ruling party decides not to choose him or any of his family members this time.

In 2009, BJD shifted him from Bhadrak Assembly constituency and fielded him from Bhandaripokhari seat. Prafulla was new to Bhandaripokhari seat but with his astute political skills, he won election.

Prafulla again won this seat in 2019 election but Congress candidate and former PCC president Niranjani Patnaik gave him a tough fight. His victory margin came down to 8,000 votes in 2019 election. Prafulla pooled the highest 70,180 votes while his rival candidate of Congress

secured 61,321 votes. The saffron party came third by receiving 39,141 votes.

According to Zilla Parishad members Lakshmidhar Sahu, Utkal Keshari Mohanty and Badrinarayan Rout, Prafulla is the only candidate from BJD to contest this constituency and can give a befitting reply to rivals.

On the other hand, the BJP received 39,141 votes in 2019 election. Speculations are rife that the seat might go to BJP if BJD and BJP decide to forge an alliance. The saffron party has four aspirants for the party ticket. Among them are party leader

Badrinarayan Dhal, dramatist Sudhanshu Nayak, former general secretary Panchanan Rout and woman leader-cum-former block chairperson Sanghamitra Panda.

The saffron party's vote share is stated to have increased (to 39,141 votes) after Badrinarayan joined BJP and the party's base has strengthened after Sudhanshu defected from BJD to BJP. Some of his supporters and BJD party workers have also joined BJP along with him.

Political analysts claim that if Chandbali Assembly constituency goes to BJD, BJP state president Manmohan Samal might prefer Bhandaripokhari as his turf for the 2024 hustings. The saffron party might nominate any of the four aspirants, if Manmohan decides otherwise.

**THE VOTE SHARE OF BJP IS STATED TO HAVE INCREASED AFTER BADRINARAYAN DHAL JOINED BJP WHILE THE SAFFRON PARTY'S BASE HAS STRENGTHENED AFTER SUDHANSHU DEFECTED FROM BJD TO BJP.**



**MERGER MEETING:** Congress and other party workers from 17 families in Baliapal panchayat joined BJD at a merger meeting organised by the ruling party's Basta Assembly segment unit at Langaleswar in Balasore district, Thursday

# BJP for removal of BJD's hoardings, posters

PNN & AGENCIES

**Bhubaneswar, March 21:** The Odisha unit of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Thursday alleged a clear violation of the model code of conduct by the ruling Biju Janata Dal (BJD).

A BJP delegation led by party's vice president Lekhasree Samantasinghar met the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) and demanded the immediate removal of the posters, banners and hoardings of BJD and Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik.

The BJP delegation in the complaint alleged that although the Model Code of Conduct



(MCC) has already been enforced in the country by the Election Commission of India (ECI), the posters, banners and hoardings of BJD and those of the CM are yet to be removed from various places in the state capital and other

places in the state. BJP leader Lekhasree Samantasinghar said the concerned authorities are yet to remove the posters, banners and hoardings depicting the CM and various schemes implemented by the BJD government.

The BJP delegation also alleged that the authorities have cleverly removed the posters and hoardings of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP but taken no steps to remove the hoardings of Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik.

# Women await fair deal in Kendrapara politics

POST NEWS NETWORK

**Kendrapara, March 21:** Odisha has so far witnessed 16 Assembly elections and 17 of Lok Sabha. However, there is hardly any significant representation of women in Kendrapara district's politics so far as MP or MLAs are concerned. Over years, only six women from the district have made it to the Parliament or the state Assembly.

While women from the district has carved a niche in various fields like the country's freedom struggle, sports, folk culture, social service, music, acting and literature in and outside the country, they are yet to get a fair deal as far as political representation is concerned.

The first ever election in the state was held in 1952, wherein two women - Saraswati Devi and Ramraj Kumari - from this coastal district were elected as legislators (MLAs). They had played a crucial role in the strug-



gle for freedom. While Saraswati Devi, wife of Raghunath Mohanty who was an active participant in the Satyagraha, had won from Rajnagar Assembly segment, queen Ramraj Kumari, wife of Aul royal Chandra Bhanu Deb, was elected from Aul constituency.

Only three women had been elected in the first ever polls in state and two of them belonged to Kendrapara district. However, after the 1952 elections, women in the district were in for a decades-long political dry spell. Fast forward to the 90s, queen

consort Sushree Devi, wife of Aul royal Sarat Deb, represented the Aul Assembly constituency from 1990-95. Besides, she was also a BJD representative to the Rajya Sabha in 2002.

Woman leader Archana Nayak delved into electoral politics for the first time in 1995. Though she fought on a Congress ticket from Patkura seat in the district, she lost. However, after quitting Congress, she was elected as a Lok Sabha member from Kendrapara constituency on a BJD ticket in 2004.

Dr Sipra Mallick, daughter of

popular leader Prahallad Mallick, won the 2009 polls from Kendrapara reserved Assembly seat on a BJD ticket, and has been active in politics till date.

Finally, Sabitri Agrawalla, wife of late Bed Prakash Agrawalla, is only the sixth woman MLA from the district. Though Bed Prakash had filed nomination papers to contest from Patkura Assembly seat in 2019, after his demise ahead of the polls, his wife Sabitri was given the BJD ticket, and she won.

Male voters outnumber females in Kendrapara district

where 50 per cent seats have been reserved for women in three-tier panchayat and municipality elections. However, owing to absence of such quota in Lok Sabha and Assembly elections, women's representation in the polls has been minimal.

Nevertheless, the good news is there are a lot of woman aspirants hoping for candidature in both Lok Sabha and Assembly elections which are round the corner. Local intelligentsia are of the opinion that every political party should stress on women's representation in the district.

# Cong seeks action against 'Modi Parivaar' adverts

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**New Delhi, March 21:** Alleging misuse of state resources for the poll campaign of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Congress Thursday complained to the Election Commission (EC) against 'Modi Parivaar' and 'Modi ki Guarantee' advertisements and sought their immediate removal and action against its authors and publishers.

In another complaint, the Congress sought removal of 'Modi Parivaar' advertisement, alleging that it highlights how state resources are being misused for a veiled campaign advertisement.

"We have raised objections over advertisements on trains, petrol pumps, bus stands, etc. with PM Modi's picture as part of their (BJP's) election campaigning. They (Election Commission) have already started taking action against many other such issues," Congress leader Salman Khurshid said after the meeting with the poll panel.

and alleged that the party was pursuing a decade-old narrative that had been thoroughly discredited through a comprehensive judicial process. The party prayed for removal of the advertisement and action against its authors and publishers.

In another complaint, the Congress sought removal of 'Modi Parivaar' advertisement, alleging that it highlights how state resources are being misused for a veiled campaign advertisement.

"We have raised objections over advertisements on trains, petrol pumps, bus stands, etc. with PM Modi's picture as part of their (BJP's) election campaigning. They (Election Commission) have already started taking action against many other such issues," Congress leader Salman Khurshid said after the meeting with the poll panel.

# National parties count falls from 14 to 6 in seven decades

**THE SIX NATIONAL PARTIES ARE BJP, CONGRESS, BAHUJAN SAMAJ PARTY, CPI(M), NATIONAL PEOPLE'S PARTY AND AAP**

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**New Delhi, March 21:** The national party count has gone down to six from 14 in over seven decades with the total number of political parties now stands at over 2,500.

Contesting the general elections in May to elect the 18th Lok Sabha will be six national parties. The journey of political parties all these years has been an interesting ride from mergers to emergence of new players while some of them have ceased to exist.

A total of 53 political parties contested the first election in 1951, of which 14 were considered "national parties" while the rest were considered "state" parties.

According to the book 'Leap of Faith', published by Election Commission of India to document journey of elections in India, prior to the 1953 polls as many as 29 political parties had demanded the status of a national party.

"A decision was made to grant the status to only 14 of them. However, the election results proved sobering for most of them and only four of them were permitted to retain the national

status," the book reads.

The four national parties by 1953 were the Congress, the Praja Socialist Party (formed following the merger of the Socialist Party and the Kisan Mazdoor Party), the CPI, and the Jana Sangh.

The parties which lost their national tag were Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha (HMS), All India Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS), Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), All India Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF), All India Forward Bloc (Marxist group) (FBL-MG) and the All India Forward Bloc (Riukar group) (FBL-RG), Krishikar Lok Party (KLP), Bolshevik Party of India (BPI), and Revolutionary Communist Party of India (RCPI).

The Socialist Party and Kisan Mazdoor Party had contested the first elections separately and they later merged to form the Praja Socialist Party.

**Reduced to 15 in 1957 polls**

The number of political parties reduced to 15 in the second elections in 1957 when the four national parties remained in fray. However, the next elections in 1962 saw 27 parties contesting and the number of national parties rose to six with the Socialist (SOC) and Swatantra (SWA) parties contesting the polls.

The Congress' dominion persisted for a long time after the first general election, winning 11 of the 14 elections until 2014, when the tide turned in favour of the BJP.

**The rise of CPI & CPI(M)**

The CPI formed the principal opposition in the next two Lok Sabha elections after the 1951 polls. However, in 1964, the Soviet and Chinese com-



munist factions within the party split, giving rise to the CPI (Marxist). Thereafter, the new CPI(M) continued to secure more votes than the CPI in the country's general elections.

"The Socialist Party had its roots in the Congress Socialist Party, a left-wing faction within the Indian National Congress formed by Jayaprakash Narayan, Ram Manohar Lohiya and Acharya Narendra Dev which separated from the former shortly after independence," Pradeep Gupta, chairman of Axis India, told PTI.

"Despite Narayan's popularity on account of his role in India's freedom struggle, the Socialist Party's election haul was unimpressive and thus, after the election, it merged with JB Kripalani's Kisan Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP) to form the Praja Socialist Party (PSP)," he added.

Gupta explained that at the time,

Narayan, too, stepped back from the PSP and only re-entered national politics once again in the mid-70s when he led the movement against Indira Gandhi, whose government he alleged was corrupt and undemocratic. Narayan subsequently led the calls for Gandhi's disqualification prior to her declaration of the Emergency in 1975, for which he was arrested.

Upon being released from jail, Narayan and other PSP leaders joined hands with several other groups to form the Bharatiya Lok Dal which, following the Emergency in 1977, along with practically the entire opposition in the country, banded together to form the Janata Party to oppose the Gandhi-led Congress. Several parties including the BJP and the Samajwadi Party can trace their lineage back to the Janata Party.

**209 parties fought 1996 polls**

## CRITERIA FOR NATIONAL PARTY STATUS

As per the Election Commission's 'Political Parties and Election Symbols 2019' handbook, a political party would be considered a national party if

It has won at least 2% of the total seats in the Lok Sabha from not less than three states

Or if its candidates polled at least 6% of total valid votes in any four or more states in the last Lok Sabha or Assembly elections, and has at least four MPs in the last Lok Sabha polls

Or if it is recognised in four or more states

The least number of contesting parties till date were in 1992 Lok Sabha polls with seven national parties -- BJP, Congress, CPI, CPM, Janata Dal, Janata Party and Lok Dal. According to ECI reports, the 1996 general elections saw a participation of 209 political parties including eight with the national tag -- Congress (INC), All India Congress (Tiwari), BJP, CPI, CPM, Janata Dal, Janata Party and Samata Party.

**176 parties in 1998**

In 1998 polls, the participating political parties were 176 including seven national parties -- Congress, BJP, BSP, Janata Dal, CPI, CPM and Samata party.

**Number down to 160 in 1999**

In 1999, 160 political parties were in the poll fray including seven national parties -- BJP, Congress, BSP,

CPI, CPM, Janata Dal (Secular) and Janata Dal (United).

**464 parties in 2014**

In 2014, 464 political parties participated in the contest out of which six were national. The parties were -- BJP, Congress, CPI, CPI-M, NCP and BSP.

The All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), got elevated to the status of a national party in 2016, and contested the 2019 polls, with its newly acquired status.

**674 parties in 2019 hustings**

In 2019 elections, seven national parties contested the polls -- BJP, Congress, BSP, CPI, CPI (M), NCP and AITC. A total of 674 parties had contested.

However, the All India Trinamool Congress (TMC), Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and Communist Party of India (CPI), lost their national party status later.

Last year, the Election Commission (EC) recognised the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) as a national party, giving it a major boost before 2024, while the TMC, NCP and CPI lost their national party status.

"The EC's decision was based on a review of the parties' performances in the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha polls, and 21 state assembly polls since 2014. Besides other benefits, the status of a national party ensures that the party's symbol is reserved for its candidates across the country, and it gets land for an office in the national capital," he said.

The country now has six national parties -- BJP, Congress, Bahujan Samaj Party, CPI(M), National People's Party and AAP.

# national

## of the day quote

Vij is our senior leader. We have been getting his guidance from him and will continue to get it

**NAYAB SINGH SAINI**  
HARYANA CM

Two days ago, Rahul Gandhi said that there is a power in the Hindu religion, and we will fight against that. When it (Rahul Gandhi's remark) created chaos in the whole country, now he is talking about Asuri Shakti

**NALIN KOHLI** | BJP SPOKESPERSON

Electoral bonds have turned out to be the worst mega corruption scam in independent India

**SITARAM YECHURY**  
CPI-M LEADER

## SHORT TAKES

### Patanjali apologises to Supreme Court

**New Delhi:** Acharya Balkrishna of Patanjali Ayurved has tendered an unqualified apology to the Supreme Court for advertising the herbal products of the firm claiming their medicinal efficacy in treating several serious diseases and running down other systems of medicine. The top court had March 19 directed yoga guru Ramdev and Balkrishna to appear before it April 2, after taking exception to the company's failure to respond to notice issued in the contempt proceedings relating to advertisements of the firm's products and their medicinal efficacy. Patanjali Ayurved Ltd. Had assured the top court November 21, 2023 that it will not violate any law, especially the laws relating to advertising or branding of products manufactured and marketed by it.

### Senthil Balaji's remand extended

**Chennai:** A sessions here court Thursday extended former DMK Minister Senthil Balaji's remand till March 22. Balaji was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate in June last in a money laundering case. Principal sessions judge S AII, before whom Senthil Balaji was produced through video conferencing from Puzhal prison extended his judicial custody till March 22.

### 2 workers dead as building collapses

**New Delhi:** Two employees of a garment factory died and another was injured when the two-storey building it was housed in collapsed in the Welcome area of northeast Delhi early Thursday, police said. A call was received around 2.15 am about the collapse of the two-storey building, Deputy Commissioner of Police (northeast) Joy Tirkey said.

### India begins Operation Indravati

**New Delhi:** India has started Operation Indravati to evacuate its nationals from Haiti to the Dominican Republic, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar said Thursday and asserted that it was "fully committed" to the security and well-being of Indians abroad. The move comes days after India had said it was looking at evacuating up to 90 of its nationals from Haiti in view of the deteriorating security situation in the Caribbean nation. India begins Operation Indravati Various gangs have launched coordinated attacks on key installations in Haiti in an attempt to force the resignation of the country's embattled Prime Minister Ariel Henry.



All kinds of injustices are being done and Jammu and Kashmir has been turned into a jail. To suppress the voice of people here, Amit Shah broke the PDP. They took away legislators, ministers and members of parliament from the PDP so that they can finish off the voice of the party

**MEHBOOBA MUFTI**  
PDP PRESIDENT

## CENTRE CAUTIONS SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

Government Thursday cautioned all endorsers and social media influencers to refrain from promoting or advertising, including surrogate advertisements, of offshore online betting and gambling platforms. The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, in an advisory, said that these advertisements have significant financial and socio-economic implications of online betting and gambling on consumers, particularly the youth



# PM CRIPPLING CONG: SONIA

IN A RARE PRESS CONFERENCE ALONG WITH PARTY CHIEF MALLIKARJUN KHARGE AND RAHUL GANDHI, SONIA GANDHI SAID ELECTORAL BONDS HAVE, ON THE ONE HAND, BENEFITTED THE BJP HUGELY AND, ON THE OTHER, FINANCES OF THE PRINCIPAL OPPOSITION PARTY ARE UNDER "DETERMINED ASSAULT"

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**New Delhi, March 21:** Putting the spotlight on its precarious finances ahead of the Lok Sabha polls, the Congress' top brass Thursday demanded immediate access to its frozen bank accounts to ensure a level playing field as Sonia Gandhi accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of a "systematic effort" to cripple the party's finances.

The BJP, however, hit back alleging the accusation is a "desperate" attempt to create an alibi for its imminent defeat and charged the Gandhis with shaming Indian democracy globally with their irresponsible remarks. The move to freeze the party's accounts, the leaders said, had not just impacted the Congress but democracy in India.

The leaders claimed Rs 210 crore has been marked as lien in their frozen accounts for a notice for the year 2017-18 for Rs 14.49 crore received in cash, the party has received another Income Tax notice for its returns 30 years ago for 1994-95 too. Kharge said this is a 'dan-



gerous game' being played by the BJP which will have far-reaching consequences and urged the courts to see that the rule of law is made applicable. To save democracy, there should be a level playing field, he said, adding that if constitutional institutions want a free and fair election our party should be allowed to operate our bank accounts freely. "They do not want us to contest election and want a one-sided election. Our frozen accounts should be released immediately and a level playing field should be ensured to save democracy and the Constitution," Kharge said. "We can do no campaign work... Our ability to

work of the country, there are the courts, there is the Election Commission and nothing is happening. "We have already lost a month. We are unable to get slots for advertising, we are unable to put advertisements in news papers, so what sort of democracy is this," he said. "It has been orchestrated to cripple us in the elections. Even if our bank accounts are unfrozen today, a huge amount of damage has been done to Indian democracy," Rahul Gandhi claimed. Terming the freezing of accounts a "criminal action" against the Congress by the prime minister and Home Minister Amit Shah, he said, "There is no democracy in India today and the idea that India is the world's largest democracy is a complete lie." This is not the freezing of the Congress' bank accounts, this is freezing of the Indian democracy, he said, claiming that the party is unable to take any action, send its leaders anywhere or book advertisements.

# Top court refuses to stay appointment of new ECs

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**New Delhi, March 21:** The Supreme Court Thursday refused to stay the appointment of new election commissioners Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu, saying that doing so would lead to "chaos and uncertainty" as the Lok Sabha elections are round the corner.

Observing that the Election Commission is not under the "thumb of executive", the apex court also refused to grant an interim stay on the operation of the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Terms of Office) Act, 2023.

A bench of Justices Sanjiv Khanna and Dipankar Datta said, "At this stage, we cannot stay the legislation or put it under suspension by way of interim order. It would lead to uncertainty and chaos in case of stay."

The top court said it will examine the main petitions challenging the validity of the 2023 Act and asked the Centre to file its response within six weeks.

It posted the matter for resumed hearing August 5. "They



have been appointed and elections are round the corner. The balance of convenience is a very important factor. We have to see what the effect is if we do it, what are the consequences which will follow. One-member commission or three-member commission... Plus, there are no allegations against the new election commissioners per se," the bench told the petitioners who have challenged their appointment. The top court was hearing a batch of pleas, including those filed by Congress leader Jaya Thakur and NGO Association for Democratic Reforms, who sought a stay on the appointment of the new election commissioners and challenged the validity of the 2023 law which excluded the Chief Justice of India from the Selection Committee meant to pick the new ECs and the CEC.

## SNIPPETS

### Toll in Sangrur spurious liquor rises to 8

**Chandigarh:** The death toll due to the suspected consumption of spurious liquor in Punjab's Sangrur has risen to eight, with three more persons succumbing, officials said Thursday, as police made another arrest and recovered ethanol and raw material used for making alcohol. On Wednesday, police had said five men died after consuming spurious liquor and some were hospitalised. Three of those hospitalised at Rajindra hospital in Patiala succumbed during treatment, taking the toll to eight, officials said Thursday. They further said 12 more persons were undergoing treatment at a hospital. Meanwhile, Special Director General of Police Arpit Shukla said they have arrested a fourth person, identified as Patiala-resident Harmanpreet Singh, in connection with the incident. Three others -- Sukhwinder Singh, Manpreet Singh, and Gurlal Singh -- were already arrested in the case.

### Man dies by suicide fearing CAA

**Kolkata:** A 37-year-old man was found hanging in a house near Kolkata, with his father claiming that panic over the citizenship issue prompted the death by suicide. A Trinamool Congress delegation formed by party national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee visited the family of the deceased, Debasish Sengupta, Thursday evening. The delegation comprising party Rajya Sabha MP Nadimul Haque, minister Shashi Panja, party leader Kunal Ghosh, Jadavpur Lok Sabha seat candidate Saayoni Ghosh and local councillor Arup Chakraborty. Tapan Sengupta, the father of the deceased, Thursday evening filed a complaint at the Netaji Nagar police station here alleging that his son had been suffering from "tremendous mental trauma" since the announcement of the notification of CAA.

### BJP releases 3rd list of candidates

**Chennai:** The BJP Thursday naming its Tamil Nadu unit chief K Annamalai as its candidate for the Coimbatore Lok Sabha constituency and fielding Union Minister L Murugan from The Nilgiris was on expected lines. Also, the party has nominated former Telangana governor Tamilisai Soundararajan from Chennai South Lok Sabha seat and ex-union minister Pon Radhakrishnan from Kanniyakumari, which he represented in 2014.

### Budaun murder: Police arrest 2nd accused

**Budaun/Bareilly (UP):** The brother of the main accused in the chilling murder of a neighbour's two children in Budaun was arrested after he surrendered at a police post in Bareilly, police said Thursday. The postmortem report of the slain children has revealed that the assailant stabbed the elder brother 13 times and his sibling 11 times, officials said, adding injury marks have been found on the neck, chest and other parts of bodies of the two children. Javed, who had been absconding since the murders in Baba Colony Tuesday, surrendered at Satellite police outpost of Baradari police station in neighbouring Bareilly district, Budaun Senior Superintendent of Police Alok Priyadarshi said.

# BJP jittery ahead of polls: Parties

Opposition accuses the saffron party of indulging in vendetta politics

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**New Delhi, March 21:** Several political parties condemned Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's arrest by the ED Thursday, claiming that it shows how "jittery" the ruling BJP at the Centre is with less than a month to go for the Lok Sabha polls.

Reacting to the development, Communist Party of India (Marxist) general secretary Sitaram Yechury claimed that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi are in "panic" over their impending rejection by people in the Lok Sabha polls.

"Strongly condemn the arrest of Delhi CM, Shri Arvind Kejriwal by the ED. It's the second sitting CM of the INDIA bloc to be arrested," Yechury said in a post on X.

"All Opposition leaders who defected and joined the BJP are protected and patronised. They are the 'Satya Harishchandras'! These arrests will only cement people's desire to defeat BJP, defend democracy and Indian Constitution," he said.

CPI general secretary D Raja claimed that the BJP's "desperation" before the general election is on full display.

"They know the hollowness of their claims of 400 seats and that's why Opposition is being targeted by abusing central agencies. The arrest of Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal and the arrest of then Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren show how jittery the BJP is. This harassment is only intended to intimidate the



AAP supporters stage a protest outside the residence of Kejriwal

### KEJRIWAL'S ARREST

Opposition. The Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress (TMC) questioned the arrest at a time when the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) is in place. "The election process has begun. And now this! Chiefs of political parties, CMs, political leaders, election agents, workers, every opponent being harassed and arrested like this. What will be the fate of our precious democracy," the TMC's Parliamentary Party leader in the Rajya Sabha Derek O'Brien said in a post on X.

O'Brien condemned Kejriwal's arrest and said the Election Commission (EC) and the Supreme Court should take action in the matter.

"We vehemently condemn the arrest of Arvind Kejriwal, an elected CM, especially when EC is in charge and MCC is in place. Earlier his administrative powers were snatched through an illegal ordinance," he said.

Samajwadi Party (SP) president Akhilesh Yadav said Kejriwal's arrest "will give birth to a new people's revolution".

"Those who are themselves imprisoned in the fear of defeat, what will they achieve by imprisoning someone else? BJP knows that it will not come to power again and because of this fear, it wants to remove the Opposition leaders from the public by any means at the time of elections, arrest is just an excuse," the former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister said in a post on X.

People's Democratic Party (PDP) president Mehbooba Mufti said Kejriwal's arrest reeks of political vendetta and growing authoritarianism.

"The arbitrary arrest of yet another CM by ED reeks of political vendetta and growing authoritarianism," the former Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister said in a post on X.

# Fertility rate down from 6.2 to under 2 since 1950: Study

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**New Delhi, March 21:** India's fertility rate dropped from nearly 6.2 in 1950 to just under 2 in 2021, and is projected to fall further to 1.29 and 1.04 in 2050 and 2100, respectively, according to a new global research published in *The Lancet* journal.

These numbers were found to be in line with global trends, where the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) was over 4.8 children per woman in 1950 and fell to 2.2 children per woman in 2021. These figures have been projected to fall to 1.8 and 1.6 in 2050 and 2100, respectively.

The study found that there were 12.9 crore livebirths the world over in 2021 -- an increase from roughly 9.3 crore in 1950, but a decline from the peak of 14.2 crore in 2016. In India, there were more than 1.6 crore and over 2.2 crore livebirths in 1950 and 2021. The number is pro-

jected to fall to 1.3 crore in 2050. However, even as much of the planet contends with the challenges of low fertility, many low-income countries will still be facing high fertility issues during the 21st century, said the researchers from the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) 2021 Fertility and Forecasting Collaborators.

The high fertility in these low-income regions, particularly in some countries and territories in western and eastern sub-Saharan Africa, will result in a demographically divided world, they said.

The majority of children will be born in some of the poorest regions in the world, with low-income countries' share in the global livebirths almost doubling from 18 per cent to 35 per cent from 2021 to 2100, the researchers projected. Further, with the worsening climate change, many of these high-fertility low-income countries are expected to also



experience more frequent floods, droughts and extreme heat, all of which threaten food, water and resource security, along with dramatically raising the risk of heat-related illnesses and death, they said.

As population across the globe ages, the researchers' latest findings on fertility will have profound effects on economies, geopolitics, food security, health, and the

environment, with a "clear demographic divide" between the effects experienced by middle-to-high-income versus low-income regions, they said.

Unless governments identify unforeseen innovations or funds addressing the challenges of an ageing population, this demographic shift will increasingly stress the national health insurance, social security programmes, and health-care in-

■ The study found that there were 12.9 crore livebirths the world over in 2021 -- an increase from roughly 9.3 crore in 1950, but a decline from the peak of 14.2 crore in 2016

■ In India, there were more than 1.6 crore and over 2.2 crore livebirths in 1950 and 2021. The number is projected to fall to 1.3 crore in 2050

fructure, the team said. They also acknowledged that while a sustained decline in world population may present opportunities for environmental progress by lowering strain on resources and carbon emissions, an increasing consumption per

For limiting the concentration of livebirths in these high-fertility, low-income regions, the researchers suggested improving women's access to education and contraceptives -- the two main drivers of fertility, according to them. Even as fertility is declining globally, the researchers projected "considerably steeper fertility declines in the next several decades" in the sub-Saharan Africa through rapid scale-up of education and contraceptives access.

The GBD study is the largest and most comprehensive effort to quantify health loss across places and over time, according to the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME), University of Washington (UW), US, which coordinates it. Poonam Muttreja, Executive Director of Population Foundation of India (PFI), a non-profit organisation promoting gender sensitive population and health policymaking, said the findings have "profound implications" for India and includes challenges such as an aging population, labour force shortages, and potential social imbalances due to gender preferences.

# international



I would describe the US-India relationship as growing and stronger than it has ever been and absolutely essential to our vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific  
ELY S. RATNER | ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENCE FOR INDO-PACIFIC SECURITY AFFAIRS

## MIGRATION HITS RECORD HIGH

Australia will begin enforcing tougher visa rules for foreign students this week as official data showed migration hit another record high, which is likely to further exacerbate an already tight rental market



### of the day quote

Force is the last resort. We do not want to have an armed conflict with Afghanistan  
KHAWAJA ASIF | PAKISTAN'S DEFENCE MINISTER

It is crystal clear, as we are seeing from the Labour Party's opposition in this House, that while we are committed to stopping the boats, the Labour Party would keep them coming  
RISHI SUNAK | UK PM

What the Israeli government is doing is not war, it is genocide. Children and women are being murdered  
LUIZ INACIO LULA DA SILVA | PRESIDENT OF BRAZIL

### SHORT TAKES

#### Lanka detains 32 Indian fishermen

Colombo: At least 32 Indian fishermen were detained by the Sri Lankan Navy Wednesday off the coast of Talaimannar and near the islet of Delft in the northern province for allegedly fishing in the island nation's waters, an official statement said. Navy held two Indian trawlers along with 7 fishermen off Talaimannar, it said, adding that naval personnel also seized three more Indian trawlers and held 25 Indian fishermen off the Delft Island.

#### Two Indian fishermen missing

Islamabad: Two Indian fishermen were missing while one Pakistani sailor was killed Thursday in an incident at sea, according to Pakistan maritime authorities. The Pakistan Maritime Security Agency (PMSA) said one of its ships was patrolling Pakistan's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) when it encountered around eight Indian fishing vessels engaged in "illegal fishing activities" within Pakistani waters.

#### Sri Lanka Speaker survives trust vote

Colombo: Sri Lanka's Parliament Speaker Mahinda Yapa Abeywardena Thursday survived an opposition-sponsored no-trust motion, the first of its kind in the island nation's history. Abeywardena won with 117 against (the motion) and 75 for in the vote held in the 225-member Assembly. The main opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) moved the no-trust motion alleging him of government bias in addition to violation of the Constitution. The opposition charged that Abeywardena, a member of the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), failed to accommodate the highest court-recommended amendments to the controversial online safety bill adopted at the end of January.

#### Russian spacecraft launch cancelled

Moscow: Russia aborted the launch of three astronauts to the International Space Station moments before they were scheduled to lift off Thursday, but the crew was safe, officials said. The Russian Soyuz rocket was to carry NASA astronaut Tracy Dyson, Oleg Novitsky of Roscosmos and Marina Vasilievskaya of Belarus from the Russian-leased Baikonur launch facility in Kazakhstan. The launch was aborted by an automatic safety system about 20 seconds before the scheduled liftoff at 1321 GMT. No cause was immediately given, but NASA said the crew was safe and would be extracted quickly from their Soyuz capsule.

# Arunachal row escalates

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Washington/Beijing, March 21: The US recognises Arunachal Pradesh as Indian territory and strongly opposes any "unilateral attempts" by China to advance its territorial claims across the Line of Actual Control, a senior Biden administration official has said, days after the Chinese military reiterated its claim over the state following Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit there.

China, which claims Arunachal Pradesh as South Tibet, routinely objects to Indian leaders' visits to the state to highlight its claims. Beijing has also named the area Zangnan.

March 9, Prime Minister Modi dedicated to the nation the Sela Tunnel built at an altitude of over 13,000 feet in western Arunachal Pradesh that will provide all-weather connectivity to the strategically located Tawang district and is expected to ensure better movement of troops along the frontier region.

Speaking at his daily press conference in Washington on Wednesday, State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel said, "The United States recognises Arunachal Pradesh as Indian territory and we strongly oppose any unilateral attempts to advance territorial claims by incursions or encroachments, military or civilian, across the Line of Actual Control."

## US SUES APPLE

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Washington, March 21: The Justice Department Thursday announced a sweeping antitrust lawsuit against Apple, accusing the tech giant of engineering an illegal monopoly in smartphones that boxes out competitors, stifles innovation and keeps prices artificially high. The lawsuit, filed in federal court in New Jersey, alleges that Apple has monopoly power in the smartphone market and leverages control over the iPhone to "engage in a broad, sustained, and illegal course of conduct." "Apple has locked its consumers into the iPhone while locking its competitors out of the market," said Deputy Attorney General Lisa Monaco. Stalling the advancement of the very market it revolutionised, she said, it has "smothered an entire industry." Apple called the lawsuit "wrong on the facts and the law" and said it "will vigorously defend against it."

The sweeping action takes aim at how Apple molds its technology and business relationships to "extract more money from consumers, developers, content creators, artists, publishers, small businesses, and merchants, among others." That includes diminishing the functionality of non-Apple smartwatches, limiting access to contactless payment for third-party digital wallets and refusing to allow its iMessage app to exchange encrypted messaging with competing platforms. It specifically seeks to stop Apple from undermining technologies that compete with its own apps -- in areas including streaming, messaging and digital payments -- and prevent it from continuing to craft contracts with developers, accessory makers and consumers that let it "obtain, maintain, extend or entrench a monopoly."



"The China-India boundary has never been delimited. Zangnan is China's territory, a basic fact that is undeniable," spokesperson Lin Jian said Thursday  
India has repeatedly rejected China's territorial claims over Arunachal Pradesh, asserting that the state is an integral part of the country

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India has repeatedly rejected China's territorial claims over Arunachal Pradesh, asserting that the state is an integral part of the country.

New Delhi has also dismissed Beijing's move to assign "invented" names to the area, saying it did not alter the reality.

India's Ministry of External Affairs Tuesday said it has noted the latest comments made by the spokesperson of the Chinese Defence Ministry "advancing absurd claims" over the territory of Arunachal Pradesh and asserted that the

state "was, is and will always be" an integral and inalienable part of India.

Earlier this week, Chinese Defence Ministry spokesman Senior Colonel Zhang Xiaogang said that the southern part of Xizang (the Chinese name for Tibet) is an inherent part of China's territory, and Beijing "never acknowledges and firmly opposes" the "so-called Arunachal Pradesh illegally established by India".

In Beijing, in response to a question by a state-run media outlet on the US backing India on the issue of Arunachal Pradesh, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson said that China strongly deplors and firmly opposes this.

"The China-India boundary has never been delimited. Zangnan is China's territory, a basic fact that is undeniable," spokesperson Lin Jian said Thursday.

The China-India boundary question is a matter between the two countries and has nothing to do with the US side.

It is known to all that the US has consistently spared no efforts to provoke and take advantage of other countries' conflicts to serve its selfish geopolitical interests," he said.

# RUSSIA FIRES 31 MISSILES AT KYIV



Russian President Vladimir Putin had threatened Wednesday to 'respond in kind' to Ukrainian aerial attacks in recent days on Russia's Belgorod region near the border with Ukraine

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Kyiv, March 21: Russia fired 31 ballistic and cruise missiles at Kyiv before dawn Thursday in the first attack on the Ukrainian capital in six weeks, officials said. Air defenses shot down all the incoming missiles, though 13 people including a child were injured by falling wreckage, they said.

Residents of Kyiv were woken up by loud explosions around 5 am as the missiles arrived at roughly the same time from different directions, said Serhii Popko, head of the Kyiv City Administration.

Ukraine's air force said Russia launched two ballistic missiles and 29 cruise missiles against the capital.

Kyiv has better air defenses than most regions of the large country.

The missile interception rate is frequently high, rendering Russian attacks on the capital significantly less successful than during the early days of the war. Even so, Ukrainian officials warn that they need considerably more Western weapons if they are to prevail against Russia's invasion.

tion.

Russian President Vladimir Putin had threatened Wednesday to "respond in kind" to Ukrainian aerial attacks in recent days on Russia's Belgorod region near the border with Ukraine. At an event in the Kremlin, Putin said Russia "can respond in the same way regarding civilian infrastructure and all other objects of this kind that the enemy attacks. We have our own views on this matter and our own plans. We will follow what we have outlined."

An 11-year-old girl and a 38-year-old man were hospitalised in Kyiv, the city administration said.

Eight other people sustained light injuries, according to Mayor Vitali Klitschko. Ukraine's Emergency Service said around 80 people were evacuated from their homes.

Falling wreckage from the intercepted missiles set fire to at least one apartment building, burned parked cars and left craters in streets and a small park.

Some streets were littered with debris, including glass from shattered windows. Survivors, some of them in tears and visibly shaken as emergency workers treated them in the street, recounted narrow escapes. Raisa Kozenko, a 71-year-old whose apartment lost its doors and windows in the blast, said her son jumped out of bed just in time.

"He was covered in blood, in the rubble," she said, trembling from shock.



Protesters hold signs during a demonstration outside of an Nuclear Energy Summit at the Expo in Brussels, Thursday. Leaders of European Union countries and other organisations met for a one-day summit Thursday with the aim of highlighting the role of nuclear energy, reducing the use of fossil fuels, enhancing energy security and boosting economic development

# Shifa hospital a war zone as Blinken meets Sisi

REUTERS

Cairo, March 21: US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi in Cairo Thursday as part of talks with Arab officials to seek a ceasefire in Gaza, after Israel's prime minister told US Republicans there would be no let-up in the war against Hamas. In Gaza itself, Israel's offensive focused on the Al Shifa hospital, the only partially working medical facility in the north of the Strip, for a fourth day, and local residents said they had seen buildings inside the complex in flames. Five months of war have created critical food shortages among Gaza's 2.3 million Palestinians that in some

areas now exceed famine levels, according to the United Nations.

"We're pressing for an immediate ceasefire tied to the release of hostages," Blinken told the Arabic broadcaster Al Hadath. "That would bring immediate relief to so many people who are suffering in Gaza -- the children, the women, the men."

He said the U.S. had drafted a resolution at the United Nations to that effect. Ceasefire talks resumed this week in Qatar, centred on a truce of around six weeks that would allow the release of 40 Israeli hostages in return for hundreds of Palestinians detained in Israeli jails.

However, the main sticking



point remains that Hamas says it will release hostages only as part of an agreement that would end the war, while Israel says it will discuss only a temporary pause. "I think the gaps are narrowing, and I think an agreement is very much possible," Blinken told Al Hadath. "The Israeli team is present, has au-

thority to reach an agreement."

Blinken and Sisi together reviewed progress in the talks, Sisi's office and the US State Department said. Sisi stressed the need for a truce to address the escalating humanitarian crisis and warned of the dangers of a military operation in Rafah, the last zone of relative safety for

Cyprus meeting discusses ways to speed aid deliveries to Gaza

Sea corridor from Cyprus to Gaza opened last week

Cyprus foreign minister says deliveries need to be as efficient as possible, recognises limitations

Israel says it delivered food and water into Al Shifa complex

civilians where more than half the enclave's population is now sheltering, pressed against the Egyptian border.

As concern over starvation in Gaza mounts, officials from 36 countries and U.N. agencies gathered in Cyprus to discuss ways to expedite humanitarian deliveries.

# Somali pirates' return adds to crisis for global shipping companies

More than 20 attempted hijackings since November have driven up prices for armed security guards and insurance coverage and raised the spectre of possible ransom payments, according to five industry representatives

REUTERS

Mogadishu, March 21: As a speed boat carrying more than a dozen Somali pirates bore down on their position in the western Indian Ocean, the crew of a Bangladeshi-owned bulk carrier sent out a distress signal and called an emergency hotline.

No one reached them in time. The pirates clambered aboard the Abdullah, firing warning shots and taking the captain and second officer hostage, Chief

Officer Atiq Ullah Khan said in an audio message to the ship's owners. "By the grace of Allah no one has been harmed so far," Khan said in the message, recorded before the pirates took the crew's phones.

A week later, the Abdullah is anchored off the coast of Somalia, the latest victim of a resurgence of piracy that international navies thought they had brought under control. The raids are piling risks and costs onto shipping companies also contending with repeated drone



and missile strikes by Yemen's Houthi militia in the Red Sea and other nearby waters.

More than 20 attempted hijackings since November have driven up prices for armed security guards and insurance coverage and raised the spectre of possible ransom payments,

according to five industry representatives.

Two Somali gang members told Reuters they were taking advantage of the distraction provided by Houthi strikes several hundred nautical miles to the north to get back into piracy after lying dormant for nearly a decade.

"They took this chance because the international naval forces that operate off the coast of Somalia reduced their operations," said a pirate financier who goes by the alias Ismail Isse and said he helped fund the hijacking of another bulk carrier in December.

He spoke to Reuters by phone from Hul Anod, a coastal area in Somalia's semi-autonomous northeastern region of Puntland where the ship, the Ruen, was held for weeks. While the threat is not as serious as it was in 2008-2014, regional officials and industry sources are concerned the problem could escalate.

"If we do not stop it while it's still in its infancy, it can become the same as it was," Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud told Reuters last

month at his highly-fortified art deco palace, Villa Somalia.

Over the weekend, the Indian Navy intercepted and freed the Ruen, which was sailing under Malta's flag, after it ventured back out to sea. The European Union's anti-piracy mission, EU-NAVFOR Atalanta, said the pirates may have used the ship as a launchpad to attack the Abdullah.

The Indian Navy said all 35 pirates aboard surrendered, and the 17 hostages were rescued without injuries.

Cyrus Mody, deputy director of the International Chamber of Commerce's anti-crime arm, said the intervention of the Indian Navy, which has deployed at least a dozen warships east of the Red Sea, could have an important deterrent effect.

## of the day quote

The Indian economy, driven by technological advancements, presents tremendous growth opportunities for investors. We are excited to serve as a gateway for US-based investors to participate in India's future over the next few decades

**SURESH WASWANI** | CHAIRMAN, ALPHATRON CAPITAL

Robust regulatory frameworks are needed to protect customers from misuse and fraud resulting from rapid digitalisation in financial services and proliferation of fintech platforms

**SWAMINATHAN J** | DEPUTY GOVERNOR, RBI

Over the course of 10 years, we've witnessed a transformation from a few hundred startups to a vibrant ecosystem of over 100,000 startups, fostering a remarkable increase in incubators, unicorns, and a thriving digital economy

**ARVIND GUPTA** | HEAD AND CO-FOUNDER, DIGITAL INDIA FOUNDATION

## SHORT TAKES

### M&M, ATEL ink pact for EV infra

**New Delhi:** Mahindra & Mahindra Thursday said it has tied up with a unit of Adani Total Gas to establish electric vehicle charging infrastructure across the country. The auto major and Adani Total Energies E-Mobility Ltd (ATEL) have inked a memorandum of understanding (MoU) in this regard. The MoU sets a roadmap for the creation of an expansive EV charging infrastructure across the country, it added. Moreover, the partnership will also entail rolling out e-mobility solutions to provide seamless access to the charging network for the customers covering discovery, availability, navigation, and transactions, the Mumbai-based automaker said. With this association, electric vehicle XUV400 customers will now have access to more than 1,100 chargers, it added.

### Tata Sons offloads TCS shares

**New Delhi:** Tata Sons has offloaded shares worth around ₹9,300 crore in IT major Tata Consultancy Services through open market route, a regulatory filing said Thursday. According to the filing, Tata Sons has sold 234 lakh shares amounting to 0.65 per cent stake in TCS March 19. Calculated on the basis of the closing price of ₹3,777.55 March 19, the deal value comes to ₹9,307.46 crore. The block deal initiated by Tata Sons was aimed to offload up to 2.34 crore shares of TCS at a floor price of ₹4,001 per share.

### Coal import rises

**New Delhi:** The country registered a marginal rise of 1.65 per cent in coal imports to 212.24 Million Tonne (MT) in the April-January period of the ongoing fiscal, over the year-ago period. India's coal import was 208.78 MT in the corresponding period of the previous fiscal, according to data compiled by mjunction services ltd. Mjunction services ltd is a B2B e-commerce platform. During the April-January period of the current fiscal, the volume of non-cooking coal imports was 136.47 MT, slightly lower than 136.90 MT imported during the same period last financial year, according to the data. Coking coal import was at 47.32 MT during the April-January 2023-24, higher than 46.09 MT recorded in the April-January period of FY23. The coal import in January through the major and non-major ports also increased to 19.81 MT, over 16.97 MT in the corresponding month of the previous fiscal.



**Stopping illegal mining is a high priority for the government. We have taken stock and conducted surveys of closed and abandoned mines**  
**AMRIT LAL MEENA** | COAL SECRETARY

## YT GETS NEW LABEL FOR AI CONTENT

Google-owned online video platform YouTube has asked its creators to label synthetic and AI-generated content, in an effort towards supporting responsible AI innovation. Viewers increasingly want more transparency about whether the content they're seeing is altered or synthetic, YouTube said



# Biz activity ends fiscal year on strong note

Business activity expands at fastest rate in eight months in March

REUTERS

**Bangalore, March 21:** India's business activity ended this fiscal year on a high note, expanding at the fastest rate in eight months in March, according to a business survey, suggesting the country would remain the fastest growing major economy. HSBC's flash India Composite Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI), compiled by S&P Global, rose to 61.3 this month from February's final reading of 60.6.

That extended the streak of expanding activity to 32 months. The 50-mark separates expansion from contraction on a monthly basis. "Led by the strongest manufacturing output in nearly three-and-a-half years, the composite output index rose quickly," said Pranjul Bhandari, chief India economist at HSBC.

"New orders rose at a faster pace than in the previous month, and within that both domestic and export orders showed improved vigor." Growth was led by the manufacturing sector, which has been one of the primary economic drivers over the past few quarters. The index tracking



**New orders rose at a faster pace than in the previous month, and within that both domestic and export orders showed improved vigor**  
**PRANJUL BHANDARI** | CHIEF ECONOMIST, HSBC

factory activity rose to 59.2, its highest since February 2008, from 56.9 last month.

Demand in Asia's third-largest economy for factory goods remained strong with new orders recording the fastest expansion in over three years. Meanwhile, services activity also remained robust although the index eased slightly to 60.3 in March from 60.6 last month. Overall exports expanded at the fastest pace in seven months.

That solid demand alongside expectations that economic conditions will remain supportive of growth led business optimism for the coming year to increase this month. Companies also stepped up hiring at the strongest pace since September.

However, overall price pressures rose this month. Input costs at services firms rose at the quickest pace in seven months, while prices charged saw the sharpest rise since July 2017.

Although prices charged by manufacturers appreciated at the weakest pace in over a year in March, input costs rose faster this month than in February.

That indicates overall inflation could remain sticky, giving less incentive to the Reserve Bank of India to cut interest rates anytime soon.

## BIG-TICKET DEALS DRY UP

### PE, VC investments fall to \$2.2bn in Feb

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Mumbai, March 21:** Private equity and venture capital investments declined to \$2.2 billion in February, 39 per cent down when compared with the year-ago period's \$3.7 billion, a report said Thursday.

On a month-on-month basis PE, VC investments have witnessed a decline of 67 per cent. The number of deals was higher at 120 transactions in February, as compared to 86 deals in January and 57 in February 2023, the report by industry lobby group IVCA and consultancy firm EY said.

"This is the second lowest monthly total for PE/VC investments since February 2021. We remain cautiously optimistic as the election super cycle unfolds in India and globally, with many large economies going to the polls in 2024," the consultancy firm's partner Vivek Soni said.

In February, there were seven large deals of \$100 million or above aggregating to \$1 billion, which is 82 per cent lower than the \$5.7 billion in January 2024 and 66 per cent lower than the \$3 billion in the year-ago period, the report said.

In the overall activity of \$2.2 billion in February, buyouts alone accounted for \$750 million, the report said, adding startup investments were the second largest at \$554 million across 65 deals.

# Sebi lays guidelines for beta version of T+0 settlement cycle

The new framework will come into force with effect from March 28

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**New Delhi, March 21:** Capital markets regulator Sebi Thursday put in place a framework to introduce the beta version of the T+0 trade settlement cycle on an optional basis.

To begin with, this option will be available for a limited set of 25 scrips and with a limited number of brokers. This will be in addition to the existing T+1 settlement cycle in the equity cash market.

The new framework will come into force with effect from March 28, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) said.

"Pursuant to deliberations and approval of the Board, it has been decided to put in place a framework for the introduction of the Beta version of the T+0 settlement cycle on an optional basis in addition to the existing T+1 settlement cycle in the equity cash market, for a limited set of 25 scrips and with a limited number of brokers," Sebi said.

It further said that a shortened settlement cycle will bring cost and time efficiency, transparency in charges to investors and strengthen risk management at clearing corporations and the overall securities mar-



ket ecosystem. T+0 would mean settlements on the same day.

Sebi, in its effort to keep pace with the changing times and carry out its mandate of development of securities markets and investor protection, shortened the settlement cycle to T+3 from T+5 in 2002 and subsequently to T+2 in 2003.

With regards to eligibility, the regulator said that all investors will be eligible to participate in the T+0 settlement cycle if they are able to meet the timelines, process and risk requirements as prescribed by the market infrastructure institutions.

Trade timing will be between 9.15 am and 1.30 pm.

The price in the T+0 segment will operate with a price band of +100 basis points from the price in the regular T+1 market. This band will be re-calibrated after every 50 basis points movement in the underlying T+1 market.

The surveillance measures as applicable in the T+1 settlement cycle shall be applicable to scrips in the T+0 settlement cycle.

## Sreeleathers opens new store



POST NEWS NETWORK

**Bhubaneswar, March 21:** Sreeleathers, a trusted name in the Indian footwear industry with a legacy of 70 years, inaugurated a new showroom at Patrapada, Bhubaneswar. This is the ninth showroom of the brand in Odisha.

The showroom offers a unique and stylish assortment of world-class footwears, leather accessories, bags, travel bags, sports shoes, activewears etc at affordable prices.

Sreeleathers is the brain-child of freedom fighter, Late Suresh Chandra Dey, who established the enterprise in 1952 with an aim of offering comfortable footwear to his countrymen at a minimal price.

Following the success mantra of 'quality products and customer satisfaction', the brand has a considerably established market share with a diverse customer base. SL Premium is a

new category in comfort and stylish segment which has received very good feedback from retail as well as online consumers.

"Every new design or category of product is brought to our showrooms first. It is only after being convinced about its quality and customer acceptability that we distribute it to our franchisees," Shekhar Dey, Partner, Sreeleathers, said.

Sharing the brand's future growth plans, Sushanto Dey, Partner and a third-generation member of the family, commented, "Now we want to focus on performance-based sports shoes. We plan to introduce sports line separately so that we can come up with sports shoes for games like badminton, volleyball and basketball. The quality will be world-class and the price-line would be pocket friendly for the customer." The range of active wear and sports shoes are sold under the brand name of SL Sports.

## TIDBITS

### Kia to hike prices by up to 3%

**New Delhi:** Kia India Thursday said it will increase prices of its range of vehicles by up to 3 per cent from April 1, 2024. The decision is attributed to the escalation in commodity prices and supply chain-related inputs, the automaker, which sells models like Seltos, Sonet and Carens, said in a statement. It marks the first price adjustment by the company this year, Kia India said. Commenting on the development, Kia India National Head Sales and Marketing Hardeep Singh Brar said the company consistently strives to deliver premium and technologically advanced products to customers. "However, due to the continuous increase in commodity prices, adverse exchange rate and rising input cost, we are compelled to implement a partial price hike," he added. The company is absorbing a significant portion of the increase, allowing customers to continue driving their favourite Kia cars without a major dent in their pockets, Brar stated.

### SBI conducts TOLIC meet

**Berhampur:** The Second half-yearly meeting of the Town Official Language Implementation Committee (TOLIC), Berhampur, conducted under the Chairmanship of State Bank of India, Berhampur held at Administrative Office, State Bank of India, Berhampur. This meeting was held under the chairmanship of Sondeep Kumar Chowbey, Chairman and Deputy General Manager, SBI. CVR Murthy, General Manager (Head), IREL; Manish Kumar, Regional Manager, Indian Overseas Bank; Prakash Narayan Singh, Regional Provident Fund Commissioner, Employees' Provident Fund Organization; Pradeep Kumar Das, Dy Divisional Head, Punjab National Bank; Pawan Kumar Jha, Canara Bank; Aswini Kumar, Principal, Kendriya Vidyalaya Chatrapur and 25 office heads of central government, banks, undertakings, insurance companies along with their official language officers were present.

### Naveen Jindal takes charge as ISA Prez

**New Delhi:** Naveen Jindal, Chairman of Jindal Steel and Power Thursday assumed the charge as the President of Indian Steel Association with immediate effect. In a statement, the Indian Steel Association (ISA) said that Naveen Jindal assumed the role of President, succeeding Dilip Oommen, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of AMNS India, effective March 21. Naveen Jindal, Chairman, Jindal Steel and Power (JSP) has been unanimously elected as the President of the ISA by the Apex Committee, the governing body of ISA, according to the statement. Steel industry along with its upstream and downstream manufacturing value chains will have to grow in tandem for India to realise its development goals. ISA is the apex body of the domestic steel industry and works collectively to highlight the issues of the sector.

### Byju's to shut 200 tuition centres

**New Delhi:** Embattled edtech company Byju's is reportedly planning to shut down about 200 offline tuition centres out of its 300 centres across the country as part of its latest cost-cutting move. The company intends to leave the centres starting next month. This comes after the company closed 50 centres in February. The CapTable was the first to report the development. Byju's Tuition Centres, or BTCs, were seen as the primary growth engine for the company, which had been expanding the vertical until early 2023.

# Indian airlines to operate 24,275 weekly domestic flights

**INDIGO, AIR INDIA AND VISTARA WILL OPERATE MORE FLIGHTS WHILE SPICEJET WILL REDUCE DEPARTURES DURING THE 2024 SUMMER SCHEDULE THAT SPANS FROM MARCH 31 TO OCT 26**  
PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**New Delhi, March 21:** Indian airlines will operate a total of 24,275 weekly domestic flights during the summer schedule starting from March 31, a nearly 6 per cent increase compared to the year-ago period. The number of weekly departures is just 2.30 per cent higher as against 23,732 flights being operated by the scheduled carriers in the ongoing

winter schedule that ends March 30, according to aviation regulator DGCA.

In the summer schedule, Indian carriers will connect 37 countries, including the US, the UK, Uzbekistan, Maldives, Georgia and Azerbaijan. The international flights will be operated from 27 domestic airports.

Domestic carriers will be operating 1,922 weekly international flights, a rise of 5.1 per cent compared to the 2023 summer schedule. In comparison to the ongoing winter schedule where the count of international weekly flights is 1,892, the increase is only 1.6 per cent.

Akasa Air, which is set to commence its overseas operations March 28, is yet to file its schedule for international flights with the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA).

The regulator said there will be 24,275 domestic departures per week which have been finalised to/from 125 airports as per the summer schedule. "Out of these 125 airports,



**India's civil aviation market is one of the fastest growing in the world but there are supply chain and engine woes that have also resulted in the grounding of many aircraft**

Azamgarh, Aligarh, Chitrakoot, Gondia, Jalgaon, Moradabad

and Pithoragarh are the new airports proposed by the scheduled airlines," the watchdog said in a release Thursday.

The country's largest airline IndiGo will be operating 13.82 per cent more flights at 13,050 in the summer schedule, while Air India will increase its weekly departures by 4.59 per cent to 2,278.

Vistara will be operating 25.22 per cent more weekly flights at 2,324 while Akasa Air will in-

## Akasa Air bullish on int'l services

**New Delhi:** The nearly two-year-old Akasa Air plans to start flights to Kuwait, Riyadh and Jeddah by the end of October this year, after launching its maiden overseas services to Doha this month, as the airline is bullish on overseas expansion. "We are very excited about the potential of international flying... The potential that India offers," Akasa Air Founder and Chief Executive Officer Vinay Dube told PTI in an interview Thursday. The carrier, which has a fleet of 24 Boeing 737 Max aircraft, will be launching its international operations March 28 with a flight connecting Mumbai and Doha.

crease their weekly domestic departures by 14.30 per cent to 903. SpiceJet will be cutting down its weekly departures by 22.28 per cent to 1,657.

In terms of airports that will be operational during the summer schedule, Uttar Pradesh will have the maximum number at 14, followed by Maharashtra (11) and Gujarat (9).

In the international segment, Air India will operate 455 weekly flights, an increase of 5.1 per cent compared to the year-ago period.

IndiGo will have 13.5 per cent more international flights at 731 while Vistara will increase its weekly overseas departures

by 50.8 per cent to 184. Air India Express' departures will rise 20.8 per cent to 371 flights.

However, SpiceJet will be reducing its international flights by 12.6 per cent to 174. In the latest summer schedule, Go First was to operate 120 weekly overseas flights. The carrier stopped flying in May 2023.

Alliance Air will operate 7 weekly international departures in the latest summer schedule compared to 4 in the year-ago period.

Air India, Air India Express and Vistara are part of the Tata Group, and Vistara is in the process of getting merged with Air India.

# Dhoni hands over captaincy

# Super Kings eye strong start against Bengaluru

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Chennai, March 21:** The legendary MS Dhoni Thursday "handed" over the Chennai Super Kings captaincy to opener Ruturaj Gaikwad on the eve of the IPL opener here, a stunning decision that is bound to send speculation swirling on his playing future with the franchise.

In a post on X, the Indian Premier League made the announcement a day before CSK take on Royal Challengers Bengaluru. The five-time champions issued a brief statement soon after.

"MS Dhoni has handed over Chennai Super Kings' captaincy to Ruturaj Gaikwad ahead of the start of TATA IPL 2024. Ruturaj has been an integral part of Chennai Super Kings since 2019 and has played 52 matches in IPL during this period. The team looks forward to the upcoming season," said CSK.

There is speculation that Dhoni will retire at the end of the season and therefore the franchise felt the need for a smooth transition in the stalwart's presence as a player. Gaikwad, who has played six ODIs and 19 T20s for India, made his CSK debut in 2020 and has gone on to represent the team in 52 games.

"Whatever Dhoni does, it is in the best interest of the team. I got to know of the decision just before the captains' meeting. You have to respect his decision, it is his call," CSK CEO Kasi Viswanathan told PTI.

Gaikwad, a stylish opener, had a memorable run last year, aggregating 590 runs in 16 games at an impressive strike rate of 147.50. His breakout year was 2021 when he amassed 635 runs in 16 games.

The 27-year-old from Maharashtra is not new to captaincy, having led the Indian team to the gold medal in the Asian Games last year. He has also led his state side Maharashtra.

CSK and Dhoni share an unbreakable bond and the World Cup-winning captain is expected to keep a significant role in the franchise going forward, albeit not as a player.

CSK had attempted the leadership transition even in the 2022 edition but it did not work out with Ravindra Jadeja handing back the captaincy duties to Dhoni after eight games. "It did-

n't work out at that time, this is different," said Viswanathan.

Dhoni officially announced his retirement from international cricket August 15, 2020 but his engagement in IPL remained intact. The 42-year-old, who played with a dodgy knee last season, underwent a surgery after leading CSK to their fifth title. Dhoni has played as many as 250 IPL matches, scoring more than 5000 runs at a strike rate of 135.92.

**We weren't ready to move away from MS in 2022. Dhoni has a good sense of the game, but we want to develop the young players for the role. We are well prepared this time**

STEPHEN FLEMING | CSK COACH

Due to his knee issues, Dhoni pushed himself down to No.8 in the batting order last season but after regaining full fitness, he is expected to bat higher up this edition.

Former India pacer Irfan Pathan met Dhoni recently and claimed that the latter appears to be in good shape following the knee surgery.

"Last year, Dhoni said he was giving a gift to his fans with his cricket. I met with him a few days ago, he was playing pickleball for two hours non-stop. His knee was as fit as it ever was. It's an exciting time for fans; he now has his vintage old look. Will we get the vintage old Dhoni too?" Pathan asked on Star Sports.

"His role has changed in the past two years. He comes in lower-order, plays lesser deliveries but hits the big shots, the strike rate is high. It's a small innings but a memorable one. I think there won't be much of a change in that this year. He will continue to play that role," said Pathan.

Besides stellar success in the IPL, Dhoni led CSK to two titles in the defunct Champions League. CSK made as many as 10 finals under Dhoni's captaincy. If one includes his 14 games for Rising Pune Supergiant, that extends his IPL captaincy tenure to 226 IPL games with Rohit Sharma being a distant second (158 games).

With Dhoni expected to play the whole season, Gaikwad will have the luxury to lean on the charismatic cricketer in pressure situations.



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Chennai, March 21:** The high-stakes match between cross-city rivals Chennai Super Kings and Royal Challengers Bengaluru here Friday will not only usher in IPL 2024 but also a new dawn for the defending champions with iconic MS Dhoni handing over the captaincy to Ruturaj Gaikwad.

Dhoni is expected to retire at the end of this season and it seems the unanticipated move, just a day before the start of new season, has been taken for a smooth transition.

But beyond the emotional whirlpool that surrounds Dhoni handing over captaincy to Gaikwad, CSK and RCB will have to find some early answers to some deep questions as they attempt to enter a rarefied territory.

The Super Kings are five-time champions, and a sixth title will put them in a space where no team has entered so far, not even Mumbai Indians, who also have five IPL trophies.

On the other hand, the Royal Challengers, who recently grabbed their maiden title through Women's Premier League, will be eager to add a first IPL title to their shelf. However, they have their own challenges to master.

The Super Kings have been the torch-bearers of success in the IPL under Dhoni, whose IPL career has reached its final chapter. While his cricketing brain is still immune to advancing years, the passing summers have caught up with his reflexes as a batsman.

So, the younger names will have to step up. The CSK have placed enormous faith in new recruit Rachin Ravindra in the absence of Devon Conway, who will miss the initial part of IPL due to a thumb injury.



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

It will be interesting to see how Gaikwad manages the task of leading CSK, a legacy team that carries massive levels of expectations from fans every season. However, Gaikwad has a winning formula at his hand, laid out so successfully over the years by Dhoni.

It's the presence of a clutch of all-rounders and spinners who can use the abrasive Chidambaram Stadium pitch to the hilt. However, Sri Lankan slinger Matheesha Pathirana will miss initial matches after failing to recover from a hamstring injury he suffered during the recent T20I series against Bangladesh.

But those little scratches on the CSK machine do not make the task of RCB any easier. To understand it better, RCB have not beaten CSK at this venue since 2008.

Skipper Faf du Plessis and star batter Virat Kohli, who is returning to competitive cricket after a two-month break, will once again have to shoulder the batting responsibility.

They are set to open together, but this time the addition of Cameron Green might act as a protection plan if one of them or both of them fail to get going. Green can also chip in as a bowler.

Then there is always Glenn Maxwell, whose high-return outings in last year's World Cup might not have been forgotten. They have a mix of extreme pace and skills in the fast bowling unit.

**MATCHDAY**  
Indian Premier League  
**CSK vs RCB**  
Time: 8 PM  
Telecast: Sports18 Network  
Stream: Jio Cinema

# Murray beats Berrettini, advances at Miami Open



ASSOCIATED PRESS

**Miami Gardens (US), March 21:** Andy Murray won another lengthy match with Matteo Berrettini, who appeared weary and leaned on his racket to keep his balance during Murray's 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 victory at the Miami Open.

Playing his first match on the ATP Tour this season, Berrettini was serving with Murray leading 5-2 in the second set when he seemed to become dizzy, resting his racket on the court to hold himself up. He was visited by a medical attendant, who checked his blood pressure before play continued.

Berrettini left the court after dropping that set but was able to finish the match, which lasted 2 hours, 49 minutes. It was a rematch of Murray's 6-3, 6-3, 4-6, 6-7(7-9), 7-6(10-6) victory that lasted more than 4 1/2 hours in the first round of the 2023 Australian Open.

Plagued by injuries, Berrettini hadn't played a match on tour since being forced to retire during his match in the second round of last year's US Open. The 2021 Wimbledon runner-up returned last week and reached the final of a Challenger tour tournament in Phoenix.

The 36-year-old Murray has won the title twice in Miami and joined Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal as the only active players with 30 wins at the event. The three-time Grand Slam champion advanced to face No.29 seed Tomas Etcheverry in the second round.

Naomi Osaka, a two-time US Open champion, beat Luciano Darderi 6-3, 6-4 in her return to Miami. The runner-up to Iga Swiatek in her last appearance in 2022 advanced to face No.15 seed Elina Svitolina in the second round.

Elsewhere on the first full day of the tournament, Sloane Stephens celebrated her 31st birthday by beating Angelique Kerber 6-2, 6-3 in a matchup of past US Open women's champions. Also, Donna Vekic outlasted Karolina Pliskova 6-4, 2-6, 6-2; and Americans Danielle Collins and Shelby Rogers advanced with three-set victories.

Men's winners included Denis Shapovalov, who beat Luciano Darderi 6-3, 6-7(3-7), 6-4; and Martin Damm Jr, who outlasted China's Zhang Zhizhen 7-6(7-2), 7-6(7-3).

The 32 seeded players were given first-round byes. Aryna Sabalenka, the No.2 seed, is expected to play her opening match against Paula Badosa.

# MARY KOM APPOINTED CHEF DE MISSION FOR PARIS OLYMPICS, Sharath Kamal to be India's flag bearer

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**New Delhi, March 21:** Veteran table tennis player and reigning CWG champion Sharath Kamal will be India's flag bearer at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games while legendary boxer MC Mary Kom was Thursday appointed the chef de mission of the country's contingent.

The 41-year-old table tennis player symbolises "the unity and spirit of our contingent as they compete on the Olympic stage", the Indian Olympic Association (IOA) said in a statement while making the announcement.

"It has been an unbelievable three weeks. From not even sure of Olympic berth to playing the way I did in Singapore last week, jumping 54 spots in the rankings to being named India's flag bearer," Kamal told PTI.

"It is the biggest honour and fairytale stuff considering it is going to be my fifth and last Olympics. Also, not many TT players have got that honour,



globally. I just got a call from IOA and I could not believe it."

Kamal was India's flag bearer at the closing ceremony of 2022 Birmingham Commonwealth Games, where he won three gold medals.

Recently, the Indian men's and women's team had qualified for the team events of Olympics for the first time by the virtue of their rankings.

Six-time World Champion Mary Kom, bronze medallist at

the 2012 London Olympics, will be assisted by luger Shiva Keshavan, who has been appointed the deputy chef de mission.

"Mary Kom's unparalleled dedication to sports and inspiring journey makes her a natural choice to guide and mentor our athletes at the Olympics," IOA said. "Keshavan, a former Olympian in luge, brings a wealth of experience and knowledge to support the team's management

and coordination efforts."

Olympic bronze medallist in rifle shooting Gagan Narang will oversee India's operations at the shooting range, which is very far from the main venues.

India will be sending its largest-ever shooting contingent to Paris with 19 quotas already in pocket. "His (Narang's) meticulous approach and understanding of athletes' needs will ensure a conducive environment for our shooters," the statement added.

"These appointments represent a blend of experience, expertise, and leadership that will contribute significantly to the success of our athletes on the global stage, the statement added.

Commenting on the appointments, IOA president PT Usha, said, "We are delighted to have such a distinguished and capable team of officials leading our contingent for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. Their expertise, dedication and passion for sports will undoubtedly inspire our athletes to achieve their best and make the nation proud."

# Aansh 1st Indian to win in future category of PICF



PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Mumbai, March 21:** Eleven-year-old Aansh Nerurkar has become the first Indian to win in the future category of the Prague International Chess Festival alongside securing the best team award with GM R Praggnanandhaa.

Nerurkar scored eight points from nine rounds which included seven wins and two draws, earning 132 FIDE rating points and taking his tally to 1786. He remained undefeated while competing against Poland's Brzezina Pawel (FIDE 1914) and Andre Tomas from Slovakia (FIDE 1915).

Nerurkar also qualified to get the lifetime title of Candidate Master (CM) from FIDE in the upcoming months. He has a record of 163 wins, 47 draws and 68 losses in his journey so far, a release said.

The tournament was conducted by the Czech Chess Federation under the European Chess Federation, which is affiliated to FIDE. The future category featured 10 players from across the world and followed a round-robin format, with participants selected based on FIDE ratings and age criteria.

# Treesa-Gayatri marches on in Swiss Open

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

**Basel (Switzerland), March 21:** The Indian women's doubles pair of Treesa Jolly and Gayatri Gopichand progressed to the quarterfinals of the Swiss Open with a straight-game win over compatriots Priya Konjengbam and Shruti Mishra here Thursday.

The eighth seeded Commonwealth Games bronze medallists hardly broke any sweat as they brushed aside fellow Indians Priya and Shruti, ranked 75th in the world, 21-10, 21-12 in 36 minutes.

World No.26 Treesa and Gayatri, who are sharing the



14th place in the Olympic Games qualification ranking, will face Australia's Setyana Mapasa and Angela Yu in the next round.

Later, World No.20 Tanisha Crasto and Ashwini Ponnappa, who are 6,296 points ahead of

Treesa and Gayatri in the Paris qualification race at 12th spot, lost 17-21, 16-21 to Japan's World No.30 Rui Hirokami and Yuna Kato.

The race for Olympic qualification thus spiced up in women's doubles as only the highest-

ranked Indian pair inside top 16 by April end will make the cut for Paris.

Double Olympic medallist PV Sindhu, in-form Lakshya Sen, Kidambi Srikanth, Kiran George and Priyanshu Rajawat will be in action in the singles event.

The biggest face-off will be between Sindhu and 17-year-old Tomoka Miyazaki, who had claimed the gold medal at the 2022 world junior championships, and is coming into the tournament after winning her maiden Super 300 crown at Orleans Masters in France last week. Sen will take on Chia Hao Lee of Chinese Taipei, while Srikanth will face top seed Lee Zii Jia.