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IN TWIN FIRE TRAGEDIES IN RAJKOT AND DELHI, A COMMON THREAD: IRREGULARITIES

6 newborns die in Delhi hospital fire

Facility was running despite registration expiry, owner among 2 held

ANKITA UPADHYAY, ARNABJIT SUR & SAMAN HUSAIN
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

SIX NEWBORNS, aged between one day and 25 days, died early Sunday in a fire that broke out at a private neonatal care facility in East Delhi's Vivek Vihar. The fire is suspected to have been caused by short-circuit, according to the Delhi Fire Service.

Police said initial investigation revealed that Baby Care New Born Hospital, where the fire broke out around midnight, had been operating despite its registration with the Directorate General of Health Services expiring nearly two months ago. The hospital also did not have a qualified doctor on duty at the time of the incident neither did it have clearance from the fire department.

Additionally, the hospital was authorised to admit only five patients, but there were 12 newborns admitted there at the time of the fire. They were under the care of only two nurses and a doctor.

The owner of the facility, Dr Naveen Khichi (45), was arrested Sunday evening along with Dr Akash (26), who was on duty Saturday night.

Police booked Dr Khichi, an MD in paediatric medicine and resident of Pachim Vihar, under **CONTINUED ON PAGE 2**



Inside the Baby Care New Born Hospital in East Delhi's Vivek Vihar on Sunday. *Abhinav Saha*

Among the dead, a day-old baby born to couple who had lost two

ARNABJIT SUR
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

VINOD SHARMA sat on a stone slab outside the mortuary at the Guru Teg Bahadur (GTB) Hospital in Dilshad Garden, silent and expressionless. His baby son lay motionless in a bag inside the mortuary. It was only a day ago that Vinod and his family had celebrated his birth.

The newborn was the youngest among the babies who died in the fire at Baby Care New



Tags for infants at the hospital site. *Abhinav Saha*

FULL COVERAGE
PAGES 4, 6

Born Hospital in Vivek Vihar early Sunday.

For Vinod, 32, who runs a small online business, and his wife Jyoti, their baby was more precious than anything else in the world. He was born after two previous losses — one had died at birth and another was a miscarriage. "We were very happy because this time we were hopeful that the baby will live. He had a problem with breathing. The doctor had said that he will be fine in a few days," Vinod said.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



Firefighters at the site of the Rajkot fire, Sunday. *Nirmal Harindran*

TOLL RISES TO 28, 7 OF THEM MINORS

Rajkot blaze: CCTV shows welding work, piles of inflammable material stored below

RITU SHARMA
RAJKOT, MAY 26

THE RAJKOT gaming zone fire may have been set off by sparks from a welding machine that landed on "piles" of inflammable material, a senior official told *The Indian Express* citing preliminary investigations based on CCTV footage.

The late Saturday afternoon blaze at the TRP gaming zone and amusement park killed 28 people, including seven minors. The remains of all missing persons have been found except one.

Rajkot Collector Prabhav Joshi told *The Indian Express* that **CONTINUED ON PAGE 2**

EXPLAINED
E Not regulated

SEVERAL AMUSEMENT centres spring up in cities in Gujarat during vacations. Like Rajkot's TRP, many of them are unregulated and operate out of temporary installations. Ahmedabad alone has 16 of them. The state, which was in the process of bringing out amusement park regulations, is now carrying out a safety audit. The HC, too, has taken note.

We have numbers to form next govt... people will decide on Opp, says Shah

Says Cong behaviour changed after Rahul's entry, standards of politics fell



Union Home Minister Amit Shah in Bihar's Karakat on Sunday. *PTI*

NEERJA CHOWDHURY & RAJ KAMAL JHA
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

Maintaining that "we are in a comfortable position" and "already have the numbers" to form the next government, BJP leader and Union Home Minister Amit Shah has said while he agrees that a strong Opposition is good for democracy, "it's the janata (people) who will decide that" and it cannot be determined by the wishes of a section.

Shah made these remarks in an interview with *The Indian Express* Saturday at his residence in New Delhi, shortly after polling ended for the sixth phase of the elections — the seventh and last phase is on June 1.

Asked to comment on the

THE EXPRESS INTERVIEW
WITH **AMIT SHAH**
UNION HOME MINISTER
PAGE 7

growing bitterness between the ruling party and the Opposition, Shah laid the blame at Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's door, holding him responsible for the downslide in the country's political standards.

"In my opinion, it's after the **CONTINUED ON PAGE 2**

BUSINESS AS USUAL
By UNNY
The concern shifts briefly from double engine to fire engine.

THE CITY

WON'T QUIT, AAP DOES NOT BELONG TO 2-3 PEOPLE: MALI WAL P 5

IDEA EXCHANGE
'Democracy functions best if there's sufficient space for Opp'
D SUBBARAO
ECONOMIST AND FORMER RBI GOVERNOR
PAGE 18

In rare move, Govt extends Army chief Gen Pande's tenure by a month

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

IN AN unusual move, the government Sunday extended by a month the tenure of Army chief General Manoj Pande who was to retire on May 31.

An official statement said the Appointments Committee of Cabinet "approved the extension in service of Chief of the Army Staff (COAS) General Manoj C Pande, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, ADC



Army chief General Manoj Pande

for a period of one month, beyond his normal age of superannuation (May 31, 2024), i.e. up to June 30, 2024, under Rule 16 A (4) of the Army Rules 1954".

He was appointed as the COAS on April 30, 2022. He was

commissioned in December 1982 in the Corps of Engineers (The Bombay Sappers). He held the appointment of Vice Chief of the Army Staff before taking over as the COAS.

The extension in tenure indicates that a decision on the selection of the next Army chief will be open for the next government.

This rarely happens. In the 1970s, the term of Army chief General G G Bewoor was extended. Many believe this denied **CONTINUED ON PAGE 2**

In West Bengal, aspirations endure amid simmering communal debate

SHUBHAJIT ROY
PURULIA, ASANSOL, BARDHAMAN, MAY 26

DECISION 2024
SITTING IN a plush hotel in Purulia, Prosenjit Roy, the principal of a private school, says: "Purulia has changed in the last 10-12 years, with new hotels, shops, and restaurants. People have access to modern amenities **CONTINUED ON PAGE 2**



An restaurant inside an aeroplane chassis coming up along National Highway-18 in Purulia. *Shubhajit Roy*

KKR runaway winners against SRH as near-perfect script unfolds in IPL final

PAGE 1 ANCHOR

VENKATA KRISHNA B
CHENNAI, MAY 26

AT ONE stage in the Indian Premier League (IPL) final, when his bowlers were running through SunRisers Hyderabad, Kolkata Knight Riders' usually inexpressive mentor Gautam Gambhir was suddenly moved enough to clap.

All his trump cards had come



Kolkata Knight Riders players lift the IPL trophy after their win over SunRisers Hyderabad in Chennai on Sunday. *PTI*

off gloriously on the big night. The out-of-form Mitchell Starc he had backed through bad times, the uncapped Indian players like Vaibhav Arora and Harshit Rana in whom he had instilled self-belief, the big guns like Andre Russell whose pride he directed into the team's goals and the out-of-favour gem Sunil Narine whom he coaxed into self-rediscovery.

After 10 years, including a near miss in 2021, the IPL trophy is now headed to Kolkata as Shreyas Iyer's team downed **CONTINUED ON PAGE 2**

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Minister for Road Transport and Highways, Govt. of India

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Bangladesh MP killing: Dhaka police team arrives in Kolkata

Team says trying to trace accused businessman via Interpol

SWEETY KUMARI
KOLKATA, MAY 26



Bangladesh ruling party MP Anwarul Azim

A THREE-MEMBER team of Dhaka Metropolitan Police's Detective Branch arrived in Kolkata Sunday morning to investigate the death of Bangladesh MP Anwarul Azim. The team was led by the Detective Branch chief Mohammad Harun-or-Rashid.

The body of the MP, who is believed to have been killed at a rented flat in the city's New Town area on May 13, is yet to be found. The police said Mohammad Akhtaruzzaman, a childhood friend and business partner of Azim, is suspected to be the murder mastermind. A US citizen of Bangladesh origin, Akhtaruzzaman had allegedly taken the New Town flat on rent, and hired a woman, identified as Silasti Rehman, a butcher Jihad Hawaldar and two others to execute the plan.

While four arrests have been made in the case till now, Akhtaruzzaman and three other accused in the case are still at large, police said.

Talking to media persons at the Kolkata airport, Harun-or-Rashid, Dhaka Metropolitan Police additional commissioner, said: "We will seek help from the Interpol to bring back Akhtaruzzaman, the fugitive mastermind behind Jhenaidah-4 MP Anwarul Azim Anar's death... Akhtaruzzaman may have escaped from Kathmandu to the US via Dubai. We are trying to trace him through Interpol. We will go to the CID office and meet the officers. We will try to interrogate the ar-

rested accused so that we can get more information."

According to sources, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police officers will be interrogating Hawaldar, who allegedly skinned Azim's body, chopped it into pieces and packed them in polythene bags to be dumped at separate places within the city limits. On Sunday, the CID also conducted search operations to find the body parts by throwing nets in parts of the Bagjola canal near Jirengacha and Krishnamati Setu.

Sources said the weapon used to kill Azim is also yet to be found. There is a possibility that Azim fell out with Akhtaruzzaman over the proceeds of a gold business. It is learnt that Azim used to trade gold with Akhtaruzzaman, a source said.

A member of the ruling Awami League in Bangladesh, Azim arrived in India for medical treatment on May 12. He went missing the next day.

• KKR runaway winners against SRH

Hyderabad by eight wickets with 57 balls to spare — the league's shortest final ever. It was the perfect script, one that even KKR owner Shahrukh Khan would not have come across often.

When KKR brushed aside every opponent in the league stages to set up a finale with SRH, it promised a climax with many twists and turns. After all, there was little to choose from between these two teams. But on the biggest night of their summer, Kolkata stepped their game up to another level with an intimidating performance that froze Hyderabad.

Usually, they have done it with the bat. But this time it was their bowlers who blew away the opponents. Australian star Starc set up the victory. In December, as KKR splurged ₹24.75 crore to acquire his services, a question had popped up: Did they spend too much on a player who hadn't featured in the IPL since 2015?

Those questions grew louder when Starc posted figures of 0/47 and 0/53 in his first two matches. But on Sunday, by the time Starc had completed his spell of three overs, the trophy was in their bag.

From there on, Russell, Rana, Arora, Narine and Varun Chakravarty gift-wrapped the win before their batsmen sealed it on a hot and humid night. Just the delivery Starc sent down in his first over to cut Abhishek Sharma to size deserved every bit of his

salary cheque. It curved away viciously from the middle-stump, at pace, to knock out the off-stump, leaving the SRH batsmen in the dugout in dismay at what was to come.

Just like 2012 and 2014, standing at the forefront of KKR's title-winning campaign was the familiar face of Gambhir. Back then, as a captain, he combined with head coach Trevor Bayliss to put together a unit that had been under-performing since 2008. Since his exit in 2018, Kolkata had drifted away, making it to the play-offs only twice in the last five years.

Brought back into the fold ahead of this season as a mentor, Gambhir has combined with captain Iyer to take Kolkata back to its old heights.

Despite winning two titles as a captain, Gambhir should find this victory a lot sweeter — for, there hasn't ever been a more consistent team than Kolkata in the IPL. They have laid hands on the trophy having just lost three matches the whole season, just like the late Shane Warne's Rajasthan Royals in the inaugural edition.

This isn't a case of Gambhir coming with a magic wand and turning dust to gold. The core of the team has remained the same as last season. But with some shrewd planning, Gambhir and the rest of the support staff managed to fix the glaring holes that buried them last season.

After spending that much on

Starc, they had to budget their other buys. And they did so, buying lesser-known players such as Ramandeep Singh and Angrish Raghuvanshi at their base price and using tactical acumen to fill the other gaps. Narine went back to opening, just like he did when Gambhir was captain, and ended up scoring 482 runs — his highest ever in the IPL. And he also picked up 17 wickets.

As Narine returned to his best, so did Russell, an all-rounder who had been so underwhelming that Kolkata were thinking of trading him to another team. Those huge sixes that sent bowlers into hiding were back. In the final, he got three wickets, including that of the South African batting star Aiden Markram. No wonder Gambhir embraced him with a warm hug at the end of it all.

Like the last two times, any Kolkata triumph would be incomplete without a desi flavour. Apart from Shreyas Iyer, Rinku Singh, Venkatesh Iyer and Chakravarty — who all have played at the highest level — Kolkata found the ideal supporting cast in Arora and Rana, two paces India would do well to invest in. If Starc knocked out Sharma, it was Arora who took down Travis Head with a pearly.

Right through the tournament, KKR haven't depended on one man. That all of them left an imprint in the final was the icing on the cake.

FROM PAGE ONE 6 newborns die in Delhi hospital fire

FULL REPORTS ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

IPC sections 304a (causing death by negligence); 304 (culpable homicide not amounting to murder); 308 (culpable homicide not amounting to murder, with intent and knowledge); 336 (endangering human life); and 34 (common intention).

Initial investigations revealed that Dr Khichi was not present at the time of the incident. He used to leave the facility around 8 pm every day, police said.

According to police, Dr Akash had a Bachelor of Ayurveda Medicine and Surgery (BAMS) degree and was not qualified to deal with newborns requiring neonatal intensive care.

Although the initial death toll was reported to be seven — four male babies and three females — DCP (Shahdara) Surendra

Chaudhary clarified later in the evening that one of the male babies had died at 8.30 pm Saturday, hours before the fire broke out. "His parents were intimidated but they refused to take the newborn at that time and said they will come in the morning to take the body," he said.

DCP Choudhary also said there was no emergency exit in the building and not a single fire extinguisher had been installed at the facility.

In a statement, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) said the hospital has been operating since 2015, while the building was constructed in 2001-02 as per sanctioned building plans. "It is imperative to submit that the 'Other Activities' (which includes nursing/hospital activities) are allowed... as per Mixed

Use Regulations of Master Plan of Delhi, 2021," the MCD said.

In a report submitted to the Delhi Divisional Commissioner, Shahdara District Magistrate Rishita Gupta said a call regarding the fire was received at 11.58 pm Saturday. The fire was controlled at 1.19 am Sunday.

Of the 12 babies admitted, the report said, one died on the spot, while the rest were taken to the East Delhi Advance NICU-Child Specialist Hospital in Vivek Vihar. Six newborns were declared dead on arrival at the hospital while the remaining five are undergoing treatment, Gupta said in the preliminary report.

The Delhi Fire Service said a short circuit in the wiring at the hospital possibly led to the fire, which then spread to the oxygen cylinders kept near the re-

ception and on the front porch of the building. The cylinders burst, with at least two flying out of the premises and landing near an Industrial Training Institute nearby and a car showroom opposite the hospital.

Delhi Fire Service chief Atul Garg said the rescue operation took nearly an hour and the newborns were brought out of the hospital from the window at the back of the building.

A magisterial inquiry was ordered later in the evening.

Delhi Health Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj, meanwhile, alleged that his calls and messages to Health Secretary S B Deepak Kumar went unanswered. He then wrote to Chief Secretary Naresh Kumar, asking "speedy compensation" for the affected families and free treatment of the rescued children at

the "best private hospitals".

Expressing condolences to the affected families, Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a post on X said: "The fire tragedy at a hospital in Delhi is heart-rending. My thoughts are with the bereaved families in this incredibly difficult time. I pray that those injured recover at the earliest."

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal posted on X: "This incident of fire in a children's hospital is heartbreaking. We all stand with those who lost their innocent children in this accident. Government and administration officials are busy providing treatment to the injured at the spot. The causes of the incident are being investigated and whoever is responsible for this negligence will not be spared."

• We have numbers to form next govt... people will decide on Opp, says Shah

entry of Rahul Gandhi in the party that the Congress's behaviour has changed, the standards of politics have fallen after that." This, he said, had also influenced the attitude of those parties which had formed a "gathbandhan" with the Congress.

He was confident that at the end of the sixth phase of polling, the BJP was in a position to form the government. "We are somewhere between 300 and 310... this is minus the last phase... we are in a comfortable position," he said.

Ruling out the possibility of Narendra Modi retiring, as was being made out by his opponents, he said not only will Modi be

sworn in as Prime Minister again in June but "even in 2029, the Prime Minister will lead us".

There was neither "a rule" nor a provision in the party's constitution, he said, which laid down the retirement age at 75, either for the PM or for anyone else. "Certain decisions were made in a certain situation; when that situation doesn't exist, those rules aren't there," he said.

Asked about there being no Muslim BJP MP, in a mainline party which had broadbased itself from being just a Bania-Brahmin outfit and was now aiming for a third term in office, Shah said, "I don't believe in appeasement. None of our

schemes is based on religion, we haven't discriminated against anyone."

Looking ahead at the issue of delimitation due in 2026, which is exercising the southern states as they fear their numbers in Parliament (in relation to the northern states) will go down and diminish their clout, he said he wanted to assure the South that "no injustice" will be done.

"I have said that there won't be any anyway (injustice) with the South, that's the BJP's decision. How do we do it, we will sit down with everyone and discuss. We will not defer delimitation."

He also said Assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir will

take place in September this year — "I have said in Parliament that elections will be held."

Expressing immense satisfaction at the voter turnout in Kashmir in the ongoing Lok Sabha elections, he said it was a vindication of the BJP's policy of abrogating Article 370 of the Constitution.

Shah hit out at NCP leader Sharad Pawar when he was asked if he would do things differently in Maharashtra if it were possible to turn the clock back to 2019. "We were the ones at the receiving end. After the 2019 elections, when the Assembly elections happened, we got a majority. Sharad Pawar took our friend,

Uddhavji, away. He was our friend, we had fought elections as an alliance. Whoever started this will have to end it."

Asked if Uddhav Thackeray would be accepted back into the NDA fold — Assembly elections are due in Maharashtra later this year — he said, "We have an alliance and it's working well."

Referring to fears in certain quarters that the BJP with its "400 paar" slogan planned to change the Constitution, end reservation for Dalits, remove the word "secular" from the Preamble, Shah said, "For 10 years, we had the numbers to bring about these changes. There is no reason at all to suspect our intentions."

• Among the dead, a day-old baby born to couple who had lost two

"We didn't know that the hospital would kill him."

The compound of the GTB Hospital mortuary was crowded on Sunday. Two policemen spoke to a few men, recording their statements. They were fathers, uncles, grandfathers and even neighbours of the babies who were killed in the fire at the neonatal care facility, 2 km away.

The babies were only identified by the names of their mothers in the registry at the facility. Most of the mothers had not yet been told about the fire as their family members said "there are no words to tell".

"What would I tell my wife? She won't be able to bear the pain. When I heard about the fire, I rushed to the hospital," Vinod said. "No one told us (about the fire). I saw the news about the fire

on television in the morning and panicked." His baby, Vinod said, was born at Lokpriya Hospital in Vivek Vihar and was referred to the private neonatal care facility. "The baby was born on Friday. We brought him to (the neonatal facility) in Vivek Vihar early Saturday. He was admitted around 5 am," he said.

Vinod and his wife live along with his parents and older brother, Amit, 37, in Jwala Nagar.

Amit said as he and Vinod left their home for the neonatal hospital in the morning, they made phone calls. They learnt that the babies had been shifted to the GTB Hospital. "We were hoping that our baby was alive," Amit said. "Once we reached the (GTB) hospital, they told us to go to the mortuary."

Amit said the neonatal hos-

pital did not allow anybody from the family to stay back overnight and attend to the babies. "They would allow us to visit the baby only between 1 pm and 4 pm. They told us that the hospital staff will take good care," he said.

"We didn't know anything about this hospital. We had trusted the doctor who referred us to it."

The family had planned a puja once the baby was discharged. "We were planning to distribute sweets. We were very happy," said Vinod. "The fire in the hospital has taken away everything from us. Who will bring our baby back. Perhaps a child is not in our naseeb (fate)."

Later, a group of women from Vinod's family arrived at the hospital. "We want a DNA test. This baby may not be ours," a woman family member shouted. "No

one from the hospital informed us about the fire. We don't know whether the baby in the mortuary is ours or not."

Shahnaz Khaton, 62, too arrived from Bhajanpura in North East Delhi. Her grandson was five days old. She had part of her face covered with a white dupatta, her eyes swollen with tears. "If we knew our child would be killed by that hospital, we would have never gone there. We were expecting him to be discharged in two days. We didn't know we would take his body home," she said. Khaton was accompanied by her son Masih Aalam, whose baby died in the fire. He did not want to talk.

Hritik Choudhary, the uncle of another newborn who lost his life, was also waiting outside the mortuary. "My father visited the

Baby Care New Born Hospital in the afternoon yesterday (Saturday). Once he returned, he told us that it was better for us to leave the baby on a railway platform. It had nothing to call itself a hospital," Choudhary alleged.

Pawan Kasana, 35, a constable with Uttar Pradesh Police, said his baby was his firstborn. "The doctor told us she has a stomach infection and needs care for a few days," said Kasana, who lives in Baghat. "She was in the hospital for the past six days." He said that when he took his newborn there, the doctor told him everything will be fine.

"My child was first admitted in a private hospital in Rajendra Nagar in Ghaziabad. There was no ventilator there so they referred us to the Vivek Vihar hospital," he said.

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OPTIONAL SUBJECTS

Mathematics By Priyanka Godara	Chemistry By Dr. Keshav Kumar
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History By Dr. Bijendra Jha	Public Adm. By Kanhaiya Jha
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• Army chief Gen Pande

Lt General PS Bhagat the opportunity to become the new Army chief. General Bewoor was succeeded by General TN Raina.

As per the norm, the most senior Army commander or the Army vice chief is made the Army chief when the serving COAS retires. But it remains the government's discretion to appoint a service chief. Currently, Vice Chief of Army Staff Lt General Upendra Dwivedi and Southern Army Commander Lt General A K Singh are the most senior officers in the Army. Both are course mates (1984 batch), but Lt Gen Dwivedi, the former Northern Army Commander, is senior of the two.

The Army chief retires on completion of three years in the appointment or on attaining the age of 62, whichever is earlier. General Pande turned 62 on May 6 and was due to retire on May 31. He has been the Army chief for over two years.

• Rajkot blaze: CCTV shows welding work, piles of inflammable material stored below

CCTV footage revealed welding work that was underway on the gaming zone's first floor, below which piles of inflammable material were stored.

"Piles of foam sheets, plastic mattresses and thermocol were stored along with other material used in such types of temporary structures. So it appears that some flame from the welding work fell on the material that led to the fire," Joshi said.

On Saturday, the official had said that the fire appeared to have been caused by a short-circuit due to the load on the wiring from several air-conditioners.

The gaming zone, set up under a shed, was operational for nearly three years with no permission or clearance, authorities have said. Police have booked six people for culpable homicide not amounting to murder, including owner Yuvraj Singh Solanki, who was arrested Sunday morning. The facility's manager Nitin Jain was also arrested, said Rajkot Police Commissioner Raju Bhargava.

Joshi said highly inflammable liquids like petrol and diesel, for go-karts and generators, may have been stored on the site. "That is one of the theories that can not be ruled out since

there might be a buffer stock for go-karting. But since we could not find any proof of containers in which these might have been stored, we cannot be certain."

Deputy Chief Fire Officer Bhikhabhai Theba, who was one of the first rescuers to reach the spot, said the fire was so swift and severe that the victims could not escape. "The fire spread so quickly that several people did not get any chance to run out. Their bodies were badly charred," Theba told The Indian Express.

The Collector said the government has decided to send samples from the bodies to the

Forensic Science Laboratory in Gandhinagar for DNA testing due to the nature of the burn injuries.

An air ambulance carrying the DNA samples landed at Gandhinagar at around 4 am on Sunday. Officials have also collected samples from family members.

"Despite some identification evidence on the bodies, like rings and bangles, the government decided on DNA analysis for scientific identification so that there is no mistake in handing over the bodies," said the Rajkot Collector. Some of the hard tissue samples are esti-

mated to take around 36-48 hours to be identified.

A special investigation team has been set up to look into the fire and submit a preliminary report by Tuesday. The Gujarat government has directed officials to carry out inspections at all gaming zones, which have been shut following the incident and will remain closed until corrective action, if necessary, is taken.

The incident came at a time the Gujarat government is in the process of regulating amusement parks. It is expected to come out with policy decisions in the near future.

• In Bengal, aspirations endure as communal debate simmers

and luxury. The standard of living and cost of living have become better." A sleepy mofussil town town till at least 12 years ago, Purulia has transformed into a bustling town. The town, earlier known for its Sainik School and the 1994 arms drop case, is now a gateway for tourists looking to get to

"Ajodhya Pahar" — the Ayodhya hills located about 50 km from Purulia town. Once a hotbed of Maoists, the picturesque Ajodhya Pahar now boasts of resorts and hotels with swimming pools and modern amenities. A room in the plush Kushal Palli resort can go for Rs 40,000 a night during peak season, with bookings hard to come by.

About 90 km away in Asansol, Harshwardhan Gupta, a second-generation businessman in the first and only air-conditioned market in the town, flags "Hindu-Muslim tension" as one of the major election issues in West Bengal. But, he frames it differently. While there is tension between the two communities at the political level, he says there is a strong sense of community at the local level. "My father is in the hospital, and we need blood right now. In the morning, when I asked for two units of blood, two people who came forward were Muslims," he says.

The story of West Bengal's poli-

tics is a complex narrative of glitzy development in many parts and communal disharmony in some, with both visible and top of the mind for many. And both dominate mind space in an increasingly aspirational and contested political landscape.

As The Indian Express travelled through Bankura, Purulia, Asansol, Durgapur, and Bardhaman, a landscape dotted with roads and highways and buildings under construction came into view. The roads connecting Purulia, Asansol, Durgapur, and Bardhaman have improved in the last decade or so, with national highways smoothing bumpy rides. Even state highways have improved, with pitched roads in West Bengal that were not there about 12 years ago.

One of the common words heard across rural areas is the pride with which residents talk about "pitch" roads — metal roads that have connected parts of West Bengal. "There are not big show-piece expressways like in other states like UP, but Bengal has paved roads connecting many villages and rural areas that benefits the local people immensely," says Biswajit Halder, a West Bengal Police official.

When it comes to rural roads, the BJP claims that the Modi govern-

ment constructed over 21,000 km of rural roads in West Bengal. West Bengal has seen substantial improvements in its highway network. Since 2014, the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) has constructed over 1,200 km of roads in the state, with an additional 2,171 km upgraded and improved in the past ten years, BJP has said in its campaign.

The Trinamool Congress (TMC) also claims credit for improving state highways and rural roads. "After Mamata Banerjee came to power, we invested in developing roads and the four-laning of highways. That has generated economic activity, with goods being transported. A chain reaction started and now you have malls, cineplexes, hotels, and tourist resorts in the state, especially in Purulia," says Tanmoy Ghosh, the TMC state general secretary in charge of Purulia.

But, moving away from the highways and into people's drawing rooms, the conversation almost always veers into Hindu-Muslim issues apart from the lack of development in the state. And the language used by many is often coarse and toxic as many talk about the TMC's "Muslim appeasement" and the BJP's fuelling of a more muscular response from Hindus. In local con-

versations, it has been framed as TMC's appeasement politics versus BJP's empowering of Hindus. Across this region of the state, apart from the TMC flags, the flags of Ram Mandir and Hanuman are also seen fluttering from lamp posts.

"Minority appeasement" is a common talking point in rural and urban households. Prabhat Mahato, a panchayat official in Purulia's Jhalda block, says that Hindu-Muslim tension has emerged as a major issue at the local level. And the narrative of the TMC giving preferential treatment to Muslims seems to have taken hold in many people's minds. The Sandeshkhali case in which TMC strongman Sheikh Shahjahan is the primary accused and Mamata Banerjee's response have cast a shadow on the ruling party's reputation.

The language too is toxic and has permeated in people's conversations. A central government employee in Asansol alleges Muslims receive preferential treatment from the local police at the behest of the TMC. Abeer Dutta, a businessman in Durgapur who has a factory that produces iron sheets, talks about the "Miya vote". Another bank professional in Bardhaman talks about the "Mullah vote".

West Bengal, a state with about

27% Muslims, is witnessing a political churn and the TMC-BJP contest for influence is pivoted on the tensions between the two communities. Both parties are jockeying for influence and votes from the two communities. "Why is there always talk about Muslim appeasement?" asks Rehana Noor, a bank professional in Durgapur. "Muslims in the state are the backbone of the economy and are in almost every trade. They are contributing as AC mechanics and carpenters to professionals in banks and big companies. So they have a fair share in the society. Why is any outreach seen as a dole to the community, while not a dole for the others?"

Shamshuddin Ahmed, a government school teacher in Bardhaman, says there has been a sense of amity between the two communities and points to the dog whistle by BJP leaders in the election campaign. At an election rally in Rajasthan's Banswara last month, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that the Congress, if voted to power, could distribute the nation's wealth among "infiltrators" and "those who have more children".

But Pradip Kumar (name changed on request), a public prosecutor for the state government who shuttles between his home in Asansol and the courts in Purulia,

points to Mamata Banerjee's comments at an election rally in Hooghly district where she targeted a monk of Hindu religious order Bharat Sevashram Sangha, Kartick Maharaj. The CM accused him of involvement in the Beldanga riots in Murshidabad during a Ram Navami procession last month. This has ranked many in the state.

In Purulia, TMC's candidate Santiram Mahato doesn't talk about the development of his constituency. He is countering the BJP on the issue of religious polarisation. "The BJP is raising the issue of Hindus and Muslims. That has become their main agenda. We are countering that by saying religion is not the job of the government."

Down the Purulia-Dhanbad-Jamshedpur National Highway-18, away from this debate, locals proudly show off an aeroplane standing along the highway in Imondia, Purulia. They say that a restaurant is being built inside the aircraft. "A restaurant like this was not possible earlier, people now have some money in their hands and they want to live a better life even in smaller towns," says Surendranath Tudu, an English teacher at a West Bengal government-run school who is from the local tribal community.



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4 HOSPITAL BLAZE

COMPENSATION ORDERED; LACK OF FIRE-MITIGATION MEASURES TO BE PROBED

Deaths of newborns spark another political tussle

Health department officials did not inform me about the incident, says minister Bharadwaj; L-G directs Chief Secretary to institute an inquiry into the incident

MALLICA JOSHI
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

THE TUSSELE between the bureaucracy and the elected AAP government was on display again on Sunday as news of six children dying in a fire in a neonatal hospital in the city broke out. Delhi Health Minister Saurabh Bharadwaj Sunday said that he tried to contact the secretary SB Deepak Kumar through the day but did not receive a response.

He also alleged that even though the incident took place at 11.30 pm Saturday, health department officials did not inform him. "After finding out about the fire through media updates in the morning, I tried calling the secretary and sent him several messages and an email as well but I did not get a response. I finally visited the incident spot alone," he said.

"In cases of such an emergency, where lives of many newborn babies were at stake, this negligence is unpardonable. In any other state of India, this would have invited strong disciplinary proceedings against the officers concerned," he added.

calls or messages despite repeated attempts. Speaking to *The Indian Express*, Bharadwaj said that the problem was not new.

"There is no accountability. If the officers know they do not have to follow the orders of the minister, they will not feel the need to respond. This is the problem that the new system in Delhi has created. This is not the first time that something like this has happened. In the past, I have asked for files and those requests have been ignored or notes sent by me have not been received.

Divisional Commissioner Ashwani Kumar, meanwhile, ordered a magisterial inquiry into the incident. He also directed the district Magistrate (Shahdara)/Chairman, District Disaster Management Authority to ascertain the circumstances that led to the fire tragedy, assign responsibility on those involved, and recommend measures to prevent such incidents in the future.

Bharadwaj, meanwhile, ordered that compensation be granted to the kin of the victims soon and that the health department ensure best treatment to the injured newborns in the best of private hospitals under the

Farishtey Scheme. Earlier in the day, Lieutenant Governor (L-G) V K Saxena also directed Chief Secretary Naresh Kumar to "institute inquiry" into the incident.

Sources in the health department said that problems are faced regularly when it comes to establishments running with old buildings, especially where only residential use was allowed earlier, as they are not built for commercial activity.

"These small clinics or even restaurants run out of old residential buildings, which have only one entry and exit point and where the staircases are narrow. These are all fire hazards but as part of the Master Plan some establishments like clinics are allowed in residential areas. There are mandates but they are not followed," an official said.

Bharadwaj said that the lack of any fire-mitigation measures will be investigated.

"Some people have complained that oxygen cylinders were being refilled and sold from the ground floor. This allegation will also be looked into. There should have been measures like smoke detectors and sprinklers in facilities such as these," he said.



Oxygen cylinders kept in the building's ground floor, where the fire started. *Abhinav Saha*

CONDOLENCES POUR IN FROM PRESIDENT, PRIME MINISTER & OTHER LEADERS

"The news of the death of many children due to a fire in a hospital in Vivek Vihar, Delhi, is heart-rending. May God give strength to the bereaved parents and relatives to bear this shock. I pray for the speedy recovery of other children injured in this incident."

DROUPADI MURMU
PRESIDENT

"The fire tragedy at a hospital in Delhi is heart-rending. My thoughts are with the bereaved families in this incredibly difficult time. I pray that those injured recover at the earliest!"

NARENDRA MODI
PRIME MINISTER

"This incident of fire in a children's hospital is heartbreaking. We all stand with those who lost their innocent children in this accident. Government and administration officials are busy providing treatment to the injured at the spot. The causes of the incident are being investigated and whoever is responsible for this negligence will not be spared."

ARVIND KEJRIWAL
DELHI CM

"The news of the death of many newborn babies due to a fire in a Baby Care Hospital in Delhi is extremely heart-breaking. My deepest condolences to all the grieving parents and relatives. I hope that the injured children recover and get well as soon as possible."

RAHUL GANDHI
CONGRESS LEADER

Have asked Chief Secy to institute an inquiry into the tragic incidents of fire in children's hospital in Delhi. Also instructed CP to ensure all that is needed. My heartfelt condolences to bereaved families. I assure all relief & will ensure that guilty are brought to book.

VINAI KUMAR SAXENA
DELHI LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

"Very unfortunate incident reported. I have asked Secretary (Health) to update about the current situation. Culprits will not be spared. Strictest punishment will be ensured for those found negligent or involved in any wrong doing.

SAURABH BHARADWAJ
DELHI HEALTH MINISTER

"There have been continuous incidents of major fires in Delhi, but it is unfortunate that the functioning of the fire department remains uncontrolled... the fire department has also become a centre of criminal negligence and corruption."

VIRENDRRA SACHDEVA
DELHI BJP CHIEF

Neighbours had warned of safety hazard; issue raised in MCD meets

SAMAN HUSAIN
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

A "CHILDREN hospital" on the first floor of a building in a residential area with oxygen cylinders stored on the ground floor: Several residents of the locality in Vivek Vihar where a fire claimed the lives of six newborns admitted at a neonatal unit said it was a disaster waiting to happen, adding they had raised several complaints in the past, including with the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), but no action was taken.

The fire at the neonatal clinic had spread to an optical clinic situated next door, causing huge losses to the premises. Portions of a boutique and a bank situated in the same line were also damaged, while the glass wall of the car showroom situated right opposite was shattered due to the impact of the explosion.

The facility was located on a road where, according to the MCD, mixed-land use is permitted, allowing non-residential activities on residential premises.

"My brother's optical shop and our residence on the second floor have been charred... The cylinders started burning, blasting, and flying in different directions. Multiple complaints had been made because they used to load and unload cylinders all day and night. Sometimes, they would line the cylinders in front of our house too," said Gayathri Kaushik, sister of Ashwini Kaushik, whose residence shares a wall with the hospital.

"Residents from all the floors in our building had complained, even the neighbors next to our house had complained, but no ac-



A packet of diapers seen among the debris at the site of blaze. *Abhinav Saha*

tion was taken. We complained so much that it even led to public fights with the hospital authorities. The oxygen trucks used to come daily to refill the cylinders, sometimes lining them up in front of our shop," said Faiyaj Alam, who works at the optical shop.

"We have complained to the MCD and the area councilors multiple times, but no action was taken. We were aware that the constant loading and unloading of cylinders was a safety hazard. They used to load and unload cylinders all the time. A year ago, some people in our neighborhood even moved out of their rented houses due to the constant noise," said Vidhi, a resident of the neighborhood.

Gunjan Gupta, an ex-Municipal Councilor from Anand Vihar ward and a resident of the area, said, "Complaints have been made by the RWAs and the residents of the area, but no action has ever been taken. Infants with breathing difficulties were kept

here... If they needed such large amounts of oxygen, should a nursery like this have been allowed to function in a residential area?"

Pankaj Luthra, the MCD councillor under whose jurisdiction the area falls, said, "I had complained to the MCD about the refilling of oxygen cylinders. The officials even visited the hospital to check its premises, but they said they didn't find anything amiss and the hospital had a proper Delhi government licence. If they had not received the licence, this wouldn't have happened."

Preeti, the Dilshad Colony councillor from AAP, who previously oversaw the ward, said, "I had raised the issue right after the hospital opened (in 2015). I raised the issue in the zonal MCD meeting too. The hospital should not have been opened. I told them that they were keeping infants under observation on the first floor and filling oxygen cylinders on the ground floor in a small, congested building, but no action was taken."

SIX LIVES LOST

The fire broke out on Saturday night at the hospital. Two doctors, including the owner of the hospital, have been arrested

LOCATION

Baby Care New Born Hospital, Vivek Vihar, East Delhi

6 DEAD
all newborns

5 INFANTS
rescued, undergoing treatment at another hospital

11.30 PM
Saturday: When the fire broke out

16 FIRE TENDERS
involved in a half-an-hour operation

120 SQ YDS PLOT
2-storey structure (ground and first floor, with a makeshift canteen on the terrace)

WHAT TRANSPIRED

- 1 Suspected short circuit in reception area on the ground floor sparked the blaze. Oxygen cylinders stored there exploded
- 2 Fire spread rapidly to the first floor, where the infants were admitted
- 3 Local residents climbed from the back side of the building and evacuated children one by one
- 4 Firemen arrived, rushed to bring out the infants through windows
- 5 Two boutiques next door, a portion of IndusInd Bank, a shop, an ambulance and a scooter were also damaged

Text: Saman Husain; Illustration: Suvajit Dey

Calls to fire office, neighbours pitching in: What transpired on night of the blaze

ARNABJIT SUR
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

AT 11.58 PM on Saturday night, the headquarters of the Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) received a call about a fire at a hospital in Vivek Vihar.

By the time the Delhi Fire Services was called by a neighbour, it was already 12.32 am.

Fire tenders from the nearby fire station were rushed out and by 12:45, 16 fire tenders were at the spot. According to fire officials, the fire had spread in the vicinity and fire fighters climbed up to the nearby building and jumped to the hospital's terrace from there, after which they entered its first floor through a

staircase attached on the front of the building.

Meanwhile, several neighbours had already arrived at the rear end of the building, trying to rescue the newborn babies kept on the first floor after fire-fighters broke the window at the back of the building. Neighbours had also placed ladders on the rear window, rescuing out the newborns.

Delhi Fire Services Chief Atul Garg said that along with 16 fire tenders, neighbours also joined in the rescue operation to save the newborn babies. Said Garg, "The fire was controlled within an hour and the children were taken to the NICU Hospital in East Delhi."

Prima facie, officers said that the cause of fire is suspected to be a short circuit in

the wiring inside the hospital.

Said a police officer, "The short circuit then spread to the oxygen cylinders which were kept on the front porch and in the reception which eventually burst and went in different directions". An electricity pole placed near the building was also burnt in the inferno.

Two nurses were present inside the hospital during the incident, both of whom helped in the rescue operation of saving the babies. While the first floor has neo-natal care equipments, the terrace or top floor was a canteen for the hospital staff.

An ambulance and a scooter of a neighbour also got burnt in the incident, apart from portions of a bank situated nearby along with an optical shop.



Garg said that no firefighting equipment were present inside the building, including either an extinguisher or a sprinkler.

Seven children were taken to the East Delhi NICU Hospital where they were declared dead and taken to GTB Mortuary. One of them, a male newborn, had died on Saturday evening, hours before the incident, according to police, of an heart ailment, and his kin were supposed to collect his body in the morning.

Neighbours gather outside the building that housed the neonatal unit, in Vivek Vihar on Sunday. *Abhinav Saha*

Swati Maliwal speaks: Won't resign from party, AAP does not belong to 2-3 people

AAP's Rajya Sabha MP, who has accused Arvind Kejriwal's aide Bibhav Kumar of assaulting her, says had the Chief Minister called her, she would have been sure he was not involved in the case

MALLICA JOSHI & RAHUL SABHWAL
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

AAM AADMI Party Rajya Sabha MP Swati Maliwal will not resign from the party in the wake of an acrimonious fallout after she accused Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's aide Bibhav Kumar of assaulting her, she told *The Indian Express*, adding that there is no possibility of a rapprochement with the party leadership.

Maliwal had alleged that on May 13, she was assaulted by Kumar when she went to meet Kejriwal at his residence. Kumar has been booked by the police and is currently in judicial custody.

In an interview to *The Indian Express*, she said, "If I was not speaking the truth, maybe (relations between her and the party could have been mended)... Despite being beaten up so badly, I tried to compose myself because there was a larger election underway and I knew this issue would be politicised. I understand it. I tried to control myself, but no way... They have harmed the entire women's movement by victimising me. I will stay in the party because it does not belong to two or three people. I have given it my sweat and blood too."

She said that after the alleged incident, and before she submit-



Swati Maliwal outside the CM residence last week. Anil Sharma

ted a formal complaint three days later, she was told by AAP leaders "a number of times that I will be portrayed as a BJP agent and... no one will stand with you".

Asked if anyone from the BJP had reached out to her, she said, "No. Only the Lt Governor did but he is on a Constitutional post. He asked me what had happened and asked if I was facing any problems in dealings with the police."

Asked if Kejriwal had reached out to her, and whether things

could have been handled differently if he had, she said the CM had not called her so far. "They (the situation) would have been different to the extent that at least to my mind, I would have been sure that he was not involved. I would have still filed a (police) complaint. That relationship would have remained intact and I would have liked to know what he

thinks. Today I am not giving anyone a clean chit." She added that even if he does call and apologise now, "I will not

withdraw my complaint".

Asked why she had gone to meet the CM that day, Maliwal, who the party chose as its Rajya Sabha MP in January, said, "All the leaders were going and meeting him and I went to greet him and extend support because I have been working with him since 2006. The idea was to talk about the trauma he faced in jail and also talk about what more I can do to support the party at this stage. It was not like only I was doing it. In fact, it would be very questionable if I didn't do it. I also went outside Tihar jail when he was released but there were so many people there that there was no chance to have an interaction with him."

She also addressed speculation that her trip to the US in March had soured relations with the party since the CM was arrested when she was away. "Before leaving, I had a discussion with our party supremo... There was a go ahead... I never felt that he was not okay with me going... It could be that he felt this way and he did not communicate it to me," she said.

"One theory is that they did this because they wanted my Rajya Sabha seat back. You could have asked me nicely. If you wanted it back, for whatever reason, just ask for it," she said.

Asked if she knew the reason behind the alleged assault, she

said she has a few "theories" but would only talk to the police on this aspect. "Something this brazen cannot happen until other people have planned it or something has been festering against someone," she said.

She also said that while she has known Kumar "casually", they "never really worked together". "He was always working as Manish Sisodia's PA, I always worked with Arvind Kejriwal," she said, claiming that within the party, it was known that if you angered Kumar, you would "lose access" to the CM.

Asked how she knew the CM was at home at the time, she said his security would not have escorted her inside had he not been there.

"It has happened in his house, I can't give Arvind a clean chit... I was screaming and shouting and he could not hear? When the police came, would you not come out and ask why a woman MP was being escorted out of your house? The way my character has been assassinated and how I have been victimised, that is so below the belt and it cannot happen without directions from the top. It is an orchestrated campaign... The accused was roaming around with him (Kejriwal)... he protested in favour of the accused on the streets of Delhi," she said.

WAS OUT TO BUY MILK IN NOIDA

64-yr-old man dies after being hit by speeding car

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NOIDA, MAY 26

EARLY ON Sunday morning, Janak Dev Shah, 64, left home to buy milk from a shop situated right across his street in Noida's Sector-53. Within a few seconds, a speeding unidentified white car hit him, throwing him up in the air before he crashed on the ground. He died on the spot, said police.

While his family members claimed Shah was hit by an Audi car, police said that they are yet to verify this, adding multiple CCTV footage are being checked.

Shah, a resident of Gijhor village in Sector-53, was a retired employee from Akashwani.

Officials said the incident took place around 6:30 am at a junction near Kanchenjunga market.

The incident comes a week after another luxury car, a Porsche, driven by a 17-year-old boy hit two engineers in Pune resulting in their death.

CCTV footage of the Noida in-



A videograb of the incident.

cident also went viral on social media, which showed a car hitting an elderly person in white clothes before speeding away.

Officials said an FIR under IPC section 304-A (causing death by negligence) has been registered on the basis of the complaint of the family.

Sandeep, the son of the deceased, said his father had a daily routine of going out on morning walks and bringing milk for the family. "We got to know from the neighbours that such an accident has taken place near

Kanchenjunga market. We rushed to the spot and later to the hospital and found that my father is no more. It is clearly visible in CCTV footage that the vehicle was an Audi car. But police are yet to identify it," said Shah.

"We have not been able to identify the vehicle so far. The registration number of the car is not visible in any CCTV camera we scanned till the evening. Multiple teams have been deployed and efforts are being made to arrest the accused as soon as possible," said an official.

Businessman, 26, killed as SUV crashes into divider on Noida Expressway

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NOIDA, MAY 26

A 26-YEAR-OLD man died while two others were severely injured after the SUV they were travelling in collided with a divider and turned turtle near Sector 126 on Noida-Greater Noida Expressway. The incident took place early Sunday morning, said police.

The deceased, Vijay alias Bablu, was a resident of Phase 2 in Jaitpur, South Delhi. The injured are 24-year-old Ashish Thakur and 24-year-old Aryan Kumar alias Bobby, both residents of Connaught Place in Delhi. It is yet to be ascertained who was driving the car at the time of the incident, said police.

"The deceased was a businessman. This incident happened around 1 am. Vijay and his friends Ashish and Aryan were returning home from Greater Noida when his XUV 500 rammmed into a divider," said a police officer.

He further said the impact was such that the car flipped several times, went over the service road, and fell in the green belt area. During the incident, one of the car's occupants was thrown out.

Officials said another friend of the deceased was in a different car, which was moving ahead of the SUV when it collided with the divider. "They saw the incident in their rearview mirror. They stopped the car and rushed to help. Vijay was taken to a hospital by policemen where doctors declared him dead on arrival. The two injured men were later referred to another hospital in Delhi," said an officer.

Hussain moves HC over order quashing his appointment as Jamia officiating V-C

New Delhi: Professor Eqbal Hussain has approached the Delhi High Court challenging a single judge's order quashing his appointment as the Pro Vice Chancellor (VC) and subsequently as Officiating VC of Jamia, holding that the appointments were not made in conformity with the relevant statute.

Hussain's appeal is listed for hearing on Monday before a division bench of Justices Rekha

Palli and Saurabh Banerjee. The single judge of the HC had on May 22 quashed the appointment of Hussain as the Pro Vice Chancellor (VC) and subsequently as Officiating VC of Jamia, holding that the appointments were not made in conformity with the relevant statute.

It had, however, directed to ensure that the academic and-

ministrative machinery of the university does not suffer or come to a complete halt and that fresh appointment to the post of officiating VC be made within one week.

The court had also asked the 'Visitor', who is the President of India, to order initiation of the process of appointing a regular VC in the meantime. PTI

A month after man strangled to death in Khirki, 1 arrested

New Delhi: Police arrested a man for allegedly strangling another in a fit of rage during a party in Khirki Extension area a month ago, police said on Sunday.

Virender, a Sonapat resident, was arrested over a month after the killing on April 11, they said.

According to police, there was animosity between the two men over some issue but they had reconciled their differences

and became friends, police said.

The victim had allegedly invited Virender, 33, to a party at his flat where he insulted him, police said. Virender strangled him and fled, they said.

"To arrest the accused, raids were conducted across various locations, including Dehradun, Haridwar, Delhi, and Gurgaon..." said DCP (Crime) Rakesh Pawariya. PTI

BRIC RGCB
RAJIV GANDHI CENTRE FOR BIOTECHNOLOGY
An Autonomous National Institute of the Department of Biotechnology (DBT), Government of India
Thycaud PO, Poojappura, Thiruvananthapuram 695 014, Kerala
Phone: 0471 2529400, www.rgcb.res.in

Advt No: BRIC-RGCB/PhD/2024-2 May 22, 2024

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Sd/-,
Director

BRIC RGCB
RAJIV GANDHI CENTRE FOR BIOTECHNOLOGY
An Autonomous National Institute of the Department of Biotechnology (DBT), Government of India
Thycaud PO, Poojappura, Thiruvananthapuram 695 014, Kerala
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ELIGIBILITY:

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- Final selection of the students will be based on the GAT-B rank and the Cut-off score/rank fixed by RGCB for each category.
- Students must have 60% aggregate marks (or an equivalent grade point average) in Bachelor's degree in any branch of Science, Engineering, Medicine or related subjects as per the UGC guidelines.

Last Date to receive the filled application: **June 26, 2024**

Complete information, application format and other details are available on the RGCB website (www.rgcb.res.in/m-sc-adm).

Sd/-,
Director

EXPRESS explained.Live

THE WEST ASIA CRISIS: WAY FORWARD IN A CRUCIAL REGION

In conversation with

Navtej Sarna
Former Ambassador of India to US, UK and Israel

Shubhajt Roy
Diplomatic Editor, The Indian Express

The Hamas attack on Israel triggered merciless retaliation. Gaza is on the brink of famine, and Israel's leader could face an arrest warrant for war crimes. Israel-Iran tensions have risen dramatically; Israel-US relations have seen unusual dissonance.

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Name of the institution and address: **FLAME University**
Gat No. 1270, Taluka Mulshi, Village Lavale, Vadzai, Dist. Pune - 412115

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Time table for admission procedure of Jain Minority Educational Institution:

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2. Date of Publication of Merit List	July 15, 2024
3. Date of Admission	August 09, 2024

Application for admission will be available online after payment of Rs. 2,000/- by Cash / DD / Credit Card / Debit Card.
Website: www.flame.edu.in, Email: admission@flame.edu.in
Tel No.: 1-800-209-4567 Registrar, FLAME University

FLAME University has been established as a state private university vide the FLAME University Act 2014 (Maharashtra Act No. 11 of 2015), now Maharashtra Private Universities (Establishment and Regulation) Act, 2023 (Mah. Act No. VIII of 2024) of the Government of Maharashtra, India. FLAME University is recognized by the University Grants Commission (UGC) of India under Section 2(f), and degrees awarded by the FLAME University are recognized under Section 22 of the UGC Act, 1956.

Reliance
Industrial Infrastructure Limited

Regd. Office: NKM International House, 5th Floor, 178 Backbay Reclamation, Behind LIC Yogakshema Building, Babubhai Chinal Road, Mumbai - 400 020
Phone: +91-22-7967 9053 • E-mail: investor_relations@riil.in
CIN: L60300MH1988PLC049019

NOTICE
(for the attention of Equity Shareholders of the Company)

Sub: Transfer of Equity Shares of the Company to Investor Education and Protection Fund Authority

This notice is published pursuant to the provisions of the Investor Education and Protection Fund Authority (Accounting, Audit, Transfer and Refund) Rules, 2016, as amended ("the Rules").

The Rules, amongst other matters, contain provisions for transfer of all shares, in respect of which dividend has not been paid or claimed for seven consecutive years or more, in the name of the Investor Education and Protection Fund ("IEPF") Authority.

Adhering to the various requirements set out in the Rules, the Company has, so far, transferred to IEPF Authority, on respective due dates, all shares in respect of which dividend(s) for the financial year 2015-16 or before had remained unpaid or unclaimed for a period of seven consecutive years or more. The Company has, vide its letter dated May 25, 2024, communicated individually, the concerned shareholders whose shares are liable to be transferred to IEPF Authority during the financial year 2024-25 for taking appropriate action.

The Company has uploaded full details of such shareholders and shares due for transfer to IEPF Authority on its website at www.riil.in. Shareholders are requested to refer to the web-link https://www.riil.in/transfer_suspend_accountiepf.html to verify the details of uncashed dividends and the shares liable to be transferred to IEPF Authority.

Shareholders may note that both the unclaimed dividend and the shares transferred to IEPF Authority including all benefits accruing on such shares, if any, can be claimed back by them from IEPF Authority after following the procedure prescribed under the Rules.

The concerned shareholders, holding shares in physical form and whose shares are liable to be transferred to IEPF Authority, may note that the Company would be issuing new share certificate(s) in lieu of the original share certificate(s) held by them for the purpose of dematerialisation and transfer of shares to IEPF Authority as per the Rules and upon such issue, the original certificate(s) which stands registered in their name will stand automatically cancelled and be deemed non-negotiable. The shareholders may further note that the details uploaded by the Company on its website shall be deemed to be adequate notice in respect of issue of new certificate(s) by the Company for the purpose of transfer of shares to IEPF Authority pursuant to the Rules.

In case the Company does not receive any communication (claiming the unclaimed / uncashed dividend) from the concerned shareholders on or before September 3, 2024, the Company shall with a view to complying requirements set out in the Rules, dematerialise and transfer the shares to IEPF Authority by way of corporate action as per procedure stipulated in the Rules.

In case the shareholders have any queries on the subject matter and the Rules, they may contact Shri V. Balakrishnan, Vice President, **KFIN Technologies Limited**, Company's Share Transfer Agent at Selenium Tower B, Plot 31-32, Gachibowli, Financial District, Nanakramguda, Hyderabad - 500 032; Toll Free No.: 1800-309-4001 (From 9:00 a.m. (IST) to 6:00 p.m. (IST) on all working days); Email: riilnm@kfintech.com; Website: www.kfintech.com.

For Reliance Industrial Infrastructure Limited
Sd/-
Amitkumar Mundhe
Company Secretary and Compliance Officer

Place : Mumbai
Date : May 27, 2024
www.riil.in

6 HOSPITAL BLAZE



PAWAN KASANA (35)
UP POLICE CONSTABLE, FROM BAGHPAT

HE AND HIS WIFE LOST THEIR DAUGHTER
His brother Yogesh said no one cared to inform them and it was through news channels that they got to know about the fire incident. "The child's face was burnt from the side," he added.



RITIK GUPTA (22)
FARMER FROM BULANDSHAHR

HE AND HIS WIFE NIKITA LOST THEIR SON
"My son was just nine days old... he was my first born... We were here for the last 12 days and were told that the child can be taken back home on Monday. I did not know I would lose him."



ANJAR CHAUDHARY (40)
EMBROIDERY ARTIST FROM DELHI'S KARAWAL NAGAR

HE AND HIS WIFE LOST THEIR DAUGHTER
"On Saturday, I went to the hospital to see my daughter and saw her lying on a small bed. She was lying happily..." he said. His wife doesn't know of the death



RAJ KUMAR (27)
GARDENER FROM UP'S GHAZIABAD (HIS SISTER VINEETA IN PIC ABOVE)

HE AND HIS WIFE LOST THEIR GIRL
It was Raj Kumar's sister Vineeta who got his 17-day-old baby Ruhi admitted to Vivek Vihar hospital two days ago after she was born at Radha Kunj Hospital in Ghaziabad. On Sunday morning, he reached the hospital and found it charred. "I was shocked and started looking for my daughter and the doctors. I called them but their phones were not working," he said.



MD. MASI ALAM (32)
LABOURER FROM DELHI'S KARAWAL NAGAR

HE AND HIS WIFE LOST THEIR SON
"I was thinking my family is complete and was waiting to take my son out of the hospital but I couldn't take him back," he said.



VINOD KUMAR (32)
RUNS AN ONLINE BUSINESS AND LIVES IN JWALA NAGAR, SHAHDARA

HE AND HIS WIFE LOST THEIR SON
His brother, Amit, said, "They would only allow us to visit the baby between 1 pm to 4 pm. They told us that the hospital staff will take good care."

SIX NEWBORNS KILLED IN LATE NIGHT FIRE

'Our happiness wasn't even a day old... they took it away'

All six families have a single question: 'Why did no one, neither the hospital nor the doctor, tell us of the incident?'

ANKITA UPADHYAY
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

IN THE space of a day, the lives of six newborns were snuffed out when a fire raged through the Baby Care New Born hospital in Vivek Vihar where they were admitted for various illnesses. Many of them were first-born, some were miracles born after their parents lost their children earlier. They all had a single question — Why did no one inform us of the incident? The Indian Express spoke to the families:



Family members outside GTB hospital's mortuary, Sunday.

VINOD AND JYOTI

A resident of Jwala Nagar in Shahdara, Jyoti had given birth to her son on Saturday at 5 am at Meerut's Lokpriya Hospital. At 10.30 am, the child was brought to Delhi and admitted to the hospital — he had a high fever. Just over 12 hours later, a deadly fire broke out at the hospital and their child was among 12 to be rescued and admitted to another facility. By Sunday morning, however, he was dead.

The couple's relatives said they refuse to accept the deceased child as their own. "We want a DNA test," they demanded. No one from the hospital informed us about the fire — neither the doctor nor anyone from the centre, alleged another relative. "How can they not call us?" Jyoti is still at the Meerut hospital recovering after the delivery — she had a caesarean. "Last year too, she lost a baby. Now this is happening again."

"Our happiness was not even a day old and they took it away," **ANJAR CHAUDHARY** Anjar's daughter was born 11 days ago in Gupta Nursing Home, Shahdara, and was directly referred to the hospital. "We were told she required ICU/ventilator care after she inhaled the first feces, or stool, of the newborn during childbirth."

What he was referring to is a condition called Meconium aspiration syndrome, a leading cause of severe illness and death in newborns which occurs in about 5-10% of births. The child remained in the ICU for 12 days. On Saturday, he went to the hospital to see his daughter. "She was lying happily on that bed," said Anjar. He said he was unaware of the fire until Sunday morning — he only found out after a friend saw the news and called him.

Anjar earns Rs 10,000 a month. He has two other kids. For the delivery of his third child, he had spent around Rs 90,000; for the ICU services, he spent around Rs 1 lakh in the last 12 days. "We were spending around Rs 15,000 per day at the hospital," said Anjar. His wife doesn't know about their child's death, he added. **MD MASI ALAM** His son was born on May 22, his second child. On Saturday, Alam said the doctor had called him and said his son could breathe on his own and would soon be removed from the ventilator. On Sunday morning when he switched on his TV, he saw the news about the fire. Fearing the worst, he rushed to the hospital. "I was thinking my family was complete and was waiting to take my son out of the hospital... but I couldn't take him back," he cried.

A resident of Karawal Nagar, Masi is a labourer and paints houses in East Delhi. His son was born in Dilshad Garden's Mangalam Hospital and was referred to the Vivek Vihar Hospital by doctors due to an infection. The family paid Rs 17,000 for a normal delivery. At the NICU centre, he was spending Rs 15,000 — his father, brothers, and workplace had helped contribute to the expense. **RAJ KUMAR** It was Kumar's sister Vineeta who got his 17-day-old baby, Ruhi, admitted at the Vivek Vihar hospital two days ago, as she developed a fever, after she was born at Radha Kunj Hospital in Ghaziabad. A gardener, Kumar works in residential colonies in Ghaziabad.

On Sunday morning, he had an uneasy feeling that made him head to the hospital to see his daughter once. When he reached,

all he saw was a burnt black building with parts of oxygen cylinders lying in the area. "I was shocked and started frantically looking for my daughter and doctors. I called them but their phones were not reachable," he said.

PAWAN KASANA A teary-eyed Pawan was unable to speak as he sat outside the mortuary. He had lost his first child a year after his marriage. On Sunday, he lost his second — a girl — in the fire. From Baghpat, Pawan is a constable in the UP Police and was on election duty till Saturday. His brother, Yogesh, an advocate, said since Pawan was busy, he got the child admitted to the hospital. "She was born on May 19 at Navjeevan Mother and Child Care Centre in Rajendra Nagar in Ghaziabad," Yogesh said.

The delivery was normal but she had developed Meconium aspiration syndrome. As her condition deteriorated and she required a ventilator, the family moved her to the Vivek Vihar facility the same day. Yogesh said no one cared to inform them and they found out through the news. **RITIK AND NIKITA** Ritik (22) and Nikita's son too was admitted at the hospital. "He was just nine days old... he was my firstborn," said Ritik. The child was born in Bulandshahr's Gulaothi town in Savita Tevatia Hospital but developed a very high fever the same day. The doctors then referred him to Bulandshahr's Sirohi Hospital. Ritik got him to the Vivek Vihar facility after hearing good reviews about it from a relative. "We were here for the last 12 days and were told our son can be taken back home on Monday... I did not know I would lose him," he said.



A document found at the site of the burnt-down hospital. Photos: Abhinav Saha

Hospital director had previous run-in with law

ANKITA UPADHYAY
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

DR NAVEEN Khichi, the Director of Baby Care New Born Hospital which caught fire Saturday resulting in the death of six newborns, is not new to controversies with questions being raised regarding his work practices earlier too.

According to Dr Girish Tyagi, Secretary, Delhi Medical Council (DMC), there was a complaint related to administrative issues against Khichi, which the DMC had referred to the DGHS for further investigation. In 2021, one of the nurses working at Dr Khichi's another hospital — CARE — New Born & Child Hospital, also at Vivek Vihar — was accused of beating up a child admitted at the hospital.

"CCTV footage collected by the investigating officer of the case, court records say, shows the nurse 'assaulting' the infant by 'tossing him in the air in the midst of the

night". The family of the child, who belonged to Hathras, had alleged that when they approached Khichi with a complaint against the nurse, he threatened them with dire consequences if they lodged a police complaint. Once the child was discharged from the hospital, his family admitted him at Hedgewar Hospital before lodging a complaint with the police," said Dr Tyagi. Dr Khichi had moved anticipatory bail in the case.

During the course of the court proceedings, a status report was filed by the state government that Khichi's CARE - New Born & Child Hospital was not registered under Delhi Nursing Home Registration Act. Court documents reveal Dr Khichi told the court he had paid the fine for running a nursing home without requisite registration under Delhi Nursing Home Registration Act or The Clinical Establishments (Registration and Regulation) Act-2010.

2 nurses, 5 neighbours: Meet the people who risked their lives to rescue the newborns

ARNABJIT SUR
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

ALONGSIDE THE firefighters, it was a small group — two nurses and five neighbours — who braved the flames and risked their lives to pull out five newborns after a deadly blaze broke out at the Baby Care New Born hospital in East Delhi's Vivek Vihar on Saturday night.

It was half an hour before midnight when the neighbourhood was shaken by sudden blasts. Vinay Narang, who heads the C Block RWA, was driving back home when he got a call from a neighbour. "Vinay ji, there's been a blast inside the small hospital on the main road," the caller told him. He rushed back, parked his car and ran to the spot.

"I saw two nurses carrying a baby each, wrapped in bed-sheets, in their hands. They were shouting for help," he recalled. A neighbour, Arunima Sharma, who runs a school, rushed down immediately on hearing the screams, he added.

"I took one of the newborns from the nurses while Arunima carried the other. We rushed to my Ford Endeavour, which I had parked near my house, and I turned the AC on. We kept the babies inside, hoping the AC would help them," he said.

Sharma, 35, said she would never forget the faces of the two babies. "Their tiny faces had turned black because of the soot."

The nurses told Narang and Sharma there were more newborns inside the burning hospital. "A couple on their scooter too

FIRE OPS	
16 tenders	70 firefighters

EQUIPMENT USED: Hose attached to tenders
CHALLENGES: There was only a single floor, and the fire raged at the front entrance, making entry difficult. Firefighters had to climb onto the neighbouring building's terrace and jump onto the burning building's terrace. They then used the spiral staircase to climb down to the first floor, extinguishing the fire on the way

saw the scene and stopped to help," Narang said. "We rushed back."

This is when, he recalled, the fire tenders started to arrive. Another neighbour had already made a call to the Police Control Room. Someone else had called the fire department at 11.32 pm.

By then, another neighbour, Inderdeep Singh, had joined them. These five people headed back with the two nurses to the rear entrance. Singh borrowed a ladder from a neighbour and used it to climb up to the window on the first floor.

"The window glass had already been broken... it opened right inside the neonatal room... The babies were right there in those small enclosures, wrapped in white cloth. The ventilators were shut. There was so much smoke inside that I couldn't breathe... Some of them (babies) were crying. I picked them up

one by one and handed them to the nurses and other neighbours standing next to the ladder." Singh told *The Indian Express*.

"We put these babies inside the car too," Narang added. "Arunima and I then drove to a nearby nursing home in the area... but they refused to admit the babies. We pleaded for some time before rushing to the Advanced NICU hospital in Vivek Vihar. They took the babies," Narang said.

It was around 11.45 pm that the fire tenders arrived. "We saw massive flames coming out from every side of the two-floor building. It was sandwiched between two bigger four-storey residential buildings. One team was immediately deployed to extinguish the fire while another team simultaneously tried to enter the building," a firefighter said on condition of anonymity.

"The scale of the fire was such that it had started to engulf the neighbouring buildings and an electricity pole. Once we extinguished the flames, we entered from the front," said the man.

Everything was charred inside. "There were half-burnt documents. The oxygen cylinders were lying burnt. The CCTV cameras too had been burnt. The walls were blackened by the fire... (medical) devices had burnt into a pile of charcoal," he said.

"The staircase leading to the first floor was very narrow. We took the babies and shifted them out. The neighbours helping us had also taken out some babies". He said they didn't know if the babies were alive or not. It was only later that they learnt six of them didn't make it.

2 of family among 3 killed in East Delhi fire

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

A 66-YEAR-OLD woman, a 39-year-old afflicted with polio, and her teenage son: Three people were killed and 12 others rescued after a four-storey residential building in East Delhi's Krishna Nagar caught fire on the intervening night of Saturday and Sunday.

The fire broke out in the still parking of the building, with flames engulfing the first floor and fumes reaching up to the fourth floor, said officials.

The charred body of Pramila Sadh, 66, was found on the first floor while Keshav Sharma (18) and his mother Anju, who were



A four-storey residential building in Krishna Nagar caught fire. Abhinav Saha

rescued from the fourth floor of the building, were declared dead at GTB Hospital.

Anju's husband was referred to Max hospital in a serious con-

dition. According to Delhi Fire Service (DFS) officials, 11 two-wheelers in the still parking were charred in the fire.

According to Ashwini Sharma, Keshav's uncle: "The person who owns those vehicles had put them to charge at night and it seems like a short-circuit in one of the scooters caused the fire."

DFS chief Atul Garg said a call regarding the blaze was received at 2.35 am. "The flames were doused by 7.20 am and it was found that the fire began in two-wheelers in the still parking," he added.

Police and firefighters rescued Sonam Sadh (24) from the first floor. Karan Raj Bhalla (56), Seema Bhalla (54), Rahul Bhalla (33), Rohit Bhalla (30), and Manish Bhalla (25) were rescued from the second floor. Third floor of the building was vacant," a senior police officer said.

"Some of the occupants were rescued from the back portion of the building. Devender Sharma (45), Gaurav Sharma (41), Ruchika Sharma (38) and six-year-old Divyansh were rescued from the fourth floor," the officer added.

Police have booked the owner of the building on charges of negligent conduct with respect to fire and death by negligence, among other sections.

Ashwini said his nephew Keshav wanted to join the Delhi Police. Sachin Sharma, another brother of Anju — Keshav's mother — said his sister had polio in one of her legs, which could be a reason she could not escape. (WITH PTI INPUTS)

7 EXPRESS INTERVIEW AMIT SHAH

‘The most important explanation of Mandate 2024 will be the people’s belief that the road the country is on is the right one’

Hours after Phase 6 of the polls closed Saturday, Union Home Minister AMIT SHAH spoke to NEERJA CHOWDHURY and RAJ KAMAL JHA at his Krishna Menon Marg residence. Edited excerpts:

The sixth phase, 90% is over, you need the 7th phase for the numbers?
To form the government, we already have the numbers from the first five phases.

Above 272?
We are somewhere between 300 and 310... this is minus the last phase... We are in a comfortable position. This time, we went to the people with 10 years of track record and 25 years of a powerfully positive agenda.

In the beginning, there was a consensus that this is a boring election, a done deal. Over the last month, it seems there is a hawa from Opposition's side too...
We will know about that once the verdict comes in.

How is the Amit Shah campaign in 2024 different from that in 2019?
I have travelled across India. Barring Ladakh, I have been in every state, every UT... In 2019, there was a feeling in the people that the nation had benefited from a decisive government, a decisive leader, and the fact that what Modi was doing was good – all these three. In 2024, the feeling is that this is the route to take towards making India a great nation. A self-confidence has taken hold. For any nation, its public's *samoochik atmavishwas* (collective self-confidence) is the reason behind the nation's development. There is also the *samoochik sankalp* (collective determination) of 130 crore people. And Modiji has tapped into both by framing them as Amrit Mahotsav... All children who will grow up over the next 30 years have this determination and confidence that India can do it. I think this is a huge achievement for the nation. You will look for countless reasons to explain the mandate but the most important one will be the people's belief that the road the country is on is the right one.

But there has been a certain uncertainty of late. We saw some of it reflected in the markets that got rattled, and then rose after the RBI declared a record Rs 2 lakh crore dividend. There were many voices saying that BJP's numbers may not add up.
I don't respond to rumours, you will see the results. If there is a result that's better than the first two phases, it will be our result of Phase 4. Our best results will be in Phase 1 and Phase 2.

So why this uncertainty?
I think a big section of the media still doesn't accept us, the BJP... the ecosystem which you are also a part of. There should be no political leader without an ideology and there should be no journalist with an ideology. Just the opposite has happened. Journalists are the ones with ideology and leaders are the ones without ideology.

Who are the parties or leaders today without any ideology?
It's your job to find out, ask them about their ideology. Our ideology is in the open. These (the Congress) are the same people who ran a stable government for years, and now they talk of *mili-juli sarkar*. Is a stable government not Constitutionally mandated? A stable government strengthens the nation, it raises India's reach and prestige in the world.

Across the country, we heard voices raising concerns on unemployment.
Unfortunately, people have linked *rozgar* to a government job, not just a job but a government job. This 130 crore population, it's impossible for any government to give everyone a job. Unfortunately, some are spreading this *bhram* (illusion)... 1.17 lakh start-ups have been launched, take an average of five people per start-up, doesn't this generate jobs? 47 crore people have got Mudra loans for self-employment – this is not a big amount, up to Rs 20 lakh – but for Rs 20 lakh, you can generate decent self-employment. These are new loans. As many as 85 lakh street vendors have got Swaidhni loans, their guarantor is Modi. The Mudra loans add up to about Rs 27.75 lakh crore. Don't these generate jobs? I checked NPAs of these, and 99.5% don't have any. In 2016-17, unemployment rate was 6.1%, in 2023, it's 3.3%. Then, several avenues have opened up.

Mamohan Singh left an infrastructure budget of Rs 4 lakh crore, Modi ramped it up to Rs 11.80 lakh crore. With that kind of expenditure, jobs will be generated. The 75 airports are up to 150, doesn't that generate jobs? But no one counts these. Our speed in making roads has increased manifold, same with Railways. We have laid down 22,000 km of transmission lines in the first seven years – I haven't counted the last three – doesn't that generate jobs?
Rahulji talks about this government being a government of five billionaires, actually it was like that during his (the Congress's) time. During his time, there were 2.22 crore demat accounts, these are accounts where benefits of industrial development accrue; today, we

have 15 crore demat accounts. These 13 crore (additional) people will be earning something, no? During his time, market cap was Rs 85 lakh crore, today it is Rs 500 lakh crore, the gains from here have been distributed into demat accounts.

But in parallel, we also have lakhs of men and women sitting for entrance exam tests for a very small number of seats for government jobs. How will that change?
This will change as we move ahead on the road we have taken... take the 13 crore who have come to the market, many of them may not need to take the exam. Someone gets a job in a solar company, he or she doesn't need to take the exam. This will take time.

We hear this in many villages. People say we have PM Awas, Ayushman, now we need naukri... In same family or colony, we hear elders saying we will vote for BJP but we aren't sure of young. And when asked why, they say unemployment.
The BJP will get the highest vote share among the young, take it from me. I have come back after contesting an election.

But even in the middle class, there is a concern that degrees are not equipping graduates with employable skills.
Don't link education with employment. When we talk of *swarozgar* (self-employment), then any kind of education helps develop critical skills that you need.

Can't there be an initiative cutting across party lines to address this?
Let's not get into that right now. *Aaj desh mein aisa vatavaran nahin hai* (Today, the atmosphere isn't conducive for this). There is an absence of discussion in Parliament. On all controversial legislation or issues, be it Article 370, CAA, I have replied to every question raised, joined debates, but I feel pained that there's no discussion, that Parliament is treated in so cavalier a manner.

Why this bitterness between the Treasury benches and the Opposition?
In my opinion, it's after the entry of Rahul Gandhi in the party that the Congress's behaviour has changed, the standards of politics have fallen after that.

Can you elaborate?
Just look up the reasons for boycotting Parliament over the last 20 years. They find excuses to exit Parliament. Earlier, there were events that triggered boycotts and even that boycott was for a few days... I have never seen the PM replying to the President's address and you continuously disrupting him for an hour-and-a-half. He is the PM because the people of the country have given him that mandate, you are disrespecting not Narendra Modi but the Constitutional system.

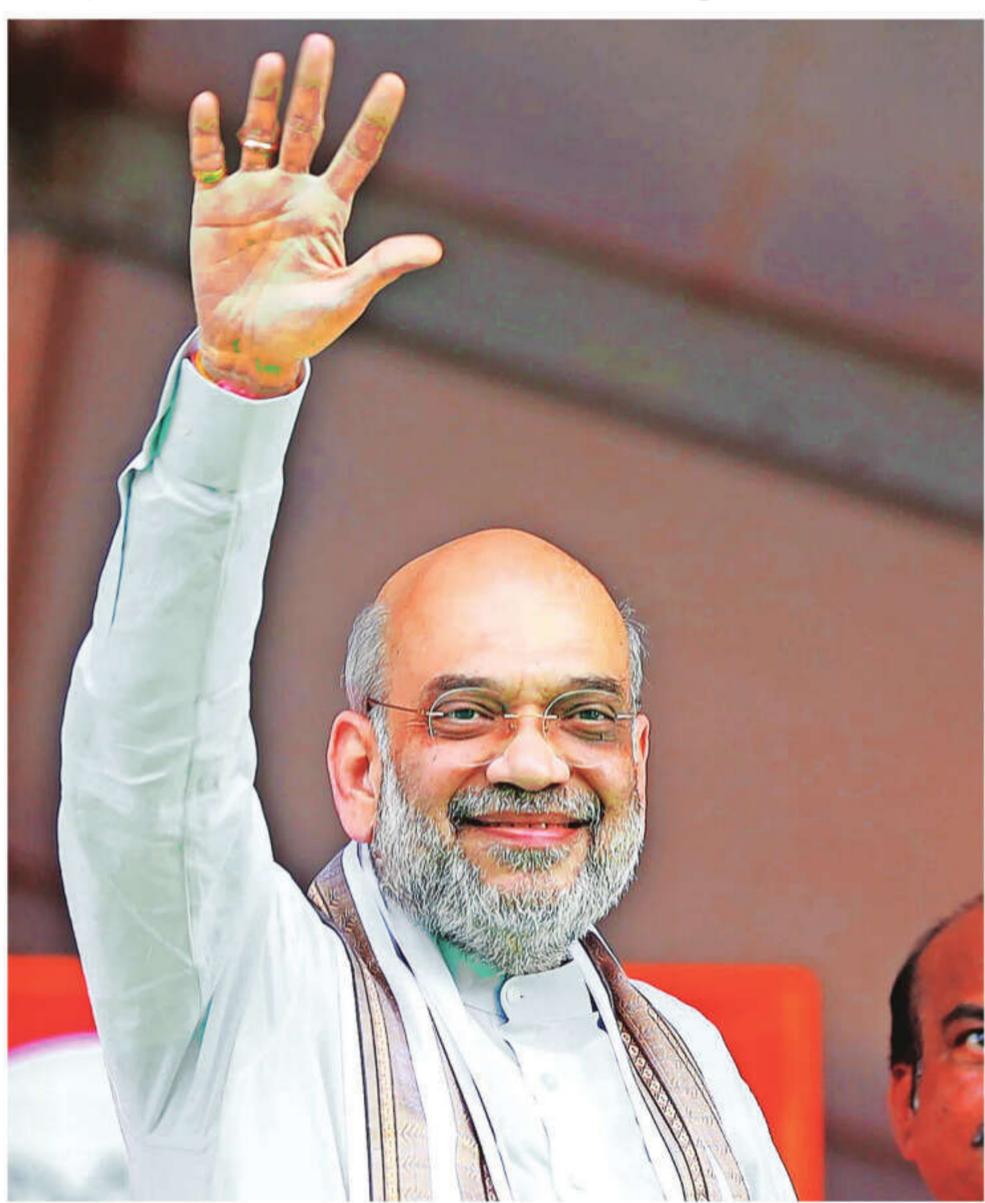
You referred to Rahul Gandhi. At one time, there was a perception among a section that he was a lightweight. We tracked his yatras, talked to people along the way. There is a distinct shift in public perception about his image... How do you view this?
My view is of no significance in this. I believe that anyone who is thoughtful, thinks with seriousness, is worthy of being welcomed by the nation.

Discussion in Parliament is crucial but Opposition leaders are suspended from the House; Rahul Gandhi is disqualified from Parliament over a campaign speech.
The (suspension) happened because they didn't let Parliament function... The disqualification was a court process. If the court punishes him, should he get special treatment? The day the court stayed that, he was back in Parliament the very next day. This is the law, the law that they brought in, not us.

You have said that the people will decide what kind of an Opposition they need...
This is natural, the people of the country will decide on who and how many will be in the Opposition, that's what Constitution says.

Of the 542, if BJP gets the seats you estimate, 300 plus, does this mean that the people don't want an Opposition?

Yes, I accept that (a strong Opposition is good for the country), but it's the janata (people) who will decide. We cannot create it. It cannot happen because you wish it to happen



Union Home Minister Amit Shah on the campaign trail. Express

But you cannot decide on the Opposition, the people have to decide that.

Publicly, you have referred to a Congress-mukt Bharat. Is that good for country?
Whenever I say Congress-mukt Bharat, I say that in terms of ideology. But even that (ideology) isn't there (in the Congress) now.

You do accept that a strong Opposition is good for the country?
Yes, I accept that, but it's the *janata* (people) who will decide. We cannot create it. It cannot happen because you wish it to happen.

Another refrain in some sections of voters – this includes those who say they will vote for the BJP – is that 'Uss taraf kaun hai?'. The TINA (There is no alternative) factor. That the lack of a counter to Modi is also a reason why the BJP gets votes.

The Opposition's weakness has nothing to do with the PM's sense of mission for the nation. There are countless reasons why he is so popular. From raising the standard of living of 60 crore people in 10 years; empowering them with a house, toilet, water, a Rs-5 lakh insurance scheme, 5-kg foodgrains, gas cylinder... Modiji has helped build self-confidence and self-determination. The day Corona was identified, PM Modi decided on the vaccine mission, used technology to protect 132 crore people. Elsewhere, even in advanced nations, the fight against Corona sputtered because there the government fought while here the government and the people fought together.

On the economy, look at the parameters: From PSU balance sheets to controlling inflation and deficit; the rising stock market to building India as a manufacturing hub; our initiatives in green hydrogen and EVs, batteries, solar, ethanol, green fuel, we are pushing at the frontiers. Take space, electronics, defence manufacturing – all these help generate jobs too.

There is a perception of concentration of power in the way the BJP government functions as it bids for a third term.

The Constitution has a provision for a Cabinet, why is that? It's there for a purpose, otherwise we could discuss everything among 542 people. Can a country run on this principle? Cabinet, PM, all these institutions have been imagined and are there, not because of us, but the Constituent Assembly. They have lost and that's why they don't like any of this now. Wasn't there concentration of power under Indiraji and Nehruji? At that time, they became party presidents too. The

party president would chant 'Indira is India, and India is Indira' and no one flagged it then.

It was, indeed, strongly criticised.
Very few people criticised it. All this criticism has gathered pace since 2014.

The J&K turnouts, almost five years after the abrogation of Article 370, have been very impressive...
I had anticipated this and said this in Parliament; now no one remembers the 'J&K Constitution', the 'J&K flag'.

Should the BJP have contested elections in Kashmir this time?
For the BJP, contesting elections in Kashmir is not of any great significance.

Why is that?
For 70 years, because of wrong policies, a demand was sustained to declare a big section of India independent of India. That ended, that is of significance to us; for you, the significant question may be why did the BJP not contest. For 70 years, because of wrong policies, such a large section of India was wracked by terror and violence. Look at the result of the strong PM and the government. There were calls for *azadi* here, now these calls are there (in Pakistan); there was stoning here, now it's happening there. You have to accept that, even those who thought that those policies were right.

How confident are you of Assembly elections in J&K then?
It's not a question of confidence, I have said in Parliament that elections will be held.

In September, that's what the CEC also said... So elections will be held in September?
Yes, yes.

Caste has entered the election discourse. There is a fear voiced by sections of Dalits that the Constitution will be changed, that their reservations may go. How did this become an issue?

A few of you and Rahul Gandhi think this is an issue, no one else. This is common sense. We have been in power for 10 years and we had the numbers. If we had to do it, we would have done it. We used our absolute majority to remove Article 370, 35 A, to remove terrorism, to end Naxalism, to build the Ram Temple and to bring about a change in the lives of 60 crore people. That's how we have used our absolute majority. The Congress got an absolute major-

People have linked rozgar to a government job, not just a job but a government job. This 130 crore population, it's impossible for any government to give everyone a job. Unfortunately, some are spreading this bhram (illusion)

ity during Indiraji's time, she used it to bring the Emergency and put 1.30 lakh people in jail, decide what editorials would be run in the newspapers. This is not our party's history, this is the history of Rahul Gandhi's party. Who are they to lecture us?

Removing Dalit reservations may be a stretch, but there are genuine concerns about other aspects of changes in the Constitution: the Preamble, for example; the word secular; basic structure...
For 10 years, we had the numbers to bring about these changes. There is no reason at all to suspect our intentions.

Judicial and police reforms have been on hold for the last 10 years... The National Judicial Appointments Commission Bill, 2014, (that gave the government a virtual veto in judicial appointments) was struck down by Supreme Court in 2015. Are you looking at a new version of the NJAC Bill?
We haven't had any structured deliberations on this. But if any challenge comes up, the government takes an initiative responding to that.

The BJP has evolved, from Brahmin-Bania party it once was seen to be, to including a sweeping range of sections of the society. So why still no outreach to the Muslims? There isn't a single Muslim BJP member...
I don't believe in appeasement. None of our schemes is based on religion, we haven't discriminated against anyone.

But there is a sense of insecurity in the community, of feeling unwanted. Is there an outreach?
What we are doing is right, we are touching everyone with our anti-poverty schemes. We are already reaching out... not 'reach' as per your definition. There will be no appease-

ment, no injustice with anyone.

You talked of the significant movement forward in J&K. What about Manipur?
Manipur's violence is neither terrorism nor communal, it's ethnic violence. To end this, the road is a long one because to restore trust between the two communities – that has been eroded because of some events – is a time-taking process. Because of elections, there are statements from both sides, Kukis and Meiteis, that derail this process. So, we will get to this after the elections.

You visited Manipur and spent four days there. You think the PM should have gone? Why didn't he? Was it because the Opposition kept underlining this?
I am a representative of the PM and what's happening there comes under my Ministry.

You don't think the PM's visit, his speech would have been a healing touch?
The Prime Minister is continuously and closely monitoring it.

You mentioned success against Naxalism?
Today, it's confined to three districts; the fight slowed down during five years of Congress rule in Chhattisgarh. In the five months since we have been there, 125 Naxalites have been killed, 350 have surrendered, 250 have been arrested. Naxalism won't live for more than two years.

You clarified on the 75-age issue, that it doesn't apply to the Prime Minister. It doesn't apply to others in the party, too?
First, there are no rules like this. Certain decisions were made in a certain situation, when that situation doesn't exist, those rules aren't there. I will make it clear that, even in 2029, the PM will lead us.

By most accounts, your vote share is going to increase in the South. If you get a third term, what's expected on delimitation?
We have already said that there will be no injustice with the South after delimitation. We have to discover ways. I have made a statement in Parliament.

You won't defer it like Atal Bihari Vajpayee did for 20 years?
No, I have said that there won't be any *anyay* (injustice) with the South, that is the BJP's decision. How we do it, we will sit down with everyone and discuss. We will not defer delimitation.

Maharashtra, what happened in 2019, if you could turn the clock back, would you do things differently?

But we were the ones at the receiving end. After the 2019 elections, when the Assembly elections happened, we got a majority. Sharad Pawar took our friend, Uddhavji (Thackeray), away. He was our friend, we had fought elections as an alliance. Whoever started this will have to end it. No moral questions, issues of ethics were raised at that time, you have double standards as a journalist community.

Can you take Uddhav back?
We have an alliance and it's working well.

There are unending stand-offs between non-BJP CMs and Governors: Pinarayi Vijayan and Arif Mohd Khan in Kerala; Mamata Banerjee and CV Ananda Bose in West Bengal; L-GVK Saxena and Arvind Kejriwal in Delhi. This daily tu-tu mein-mein, how do you see this playing out?

On the CM-Governor issue, wherever there is a problem, we have intervened. If you enact legislation that's against the Constitution and you say that the Governor is not clearing it, that can't happen. The UGC issued a circular making Governors Vice Chancellors, you pass a law that Governors can't be V-Cs... you won't let them go to the university.

You have commented on the role of Central agencies when it comes to going easy on politicians who have joined the BJP. In the Ajit Pawar case, for example, the Economic Offences Wing files a closure report, then takes it back, depending on which party he is aligned to.

I have studied this particular case. When a case is registered, there are four-five cases, one is corruption; one is misuse of power; one is on administrative loopholes; one is with tampering of proof. When the main case is chargesheeted, all these four cases are weaved in. No one talks of the main chargesheet but raises the issue of four cases being wound up.
(The Indian Express reported that Mumbai EOW filed two closure reports in the case over the years. It has never chargesheeted Ajit Pawar. The ED filed three chargesheets and Ajit Pawar is not listed as an accused in any.)

So you are saying that the case of each of those who have joined the BJP will follow due process?
Each case will follow due process.

If there is a third term, which Ministry will you head?
Narendra bhai will decide, it's not in my hands. I will do whatever the party asks of me.

8 DECISION 2024



How can PM send Tejashwi to jail?: RS MP Kapil Sibal



Rajya Sabha MP Kapil Sibal.

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

RAJYA SABHA MP Kapil Sibal on Sunday hit out at Prime Minister Narendra Modi over his 'jail' swipe at RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav, claiming this was a "confession" that investigation agencies were acting at the PM's behest.

Recalling that the PM has given the guarantee that when polls finish, Tejashwi will be sent to jail, Sibal said, "How can he (PM) send Tejashwi to jail? There is a legal process. This means that law is working on his direction. How does he know? I have been saying probe agencies are working at his behest. This is a confession. To what kind of level our democratic processes have fallen?" Sibal said at a press conference.

Sibal further slammed Modi for his 'mujra' remark for Opposition and said that even though this was a violation of the model code of conduct but no one, including the Election Commission, will act as they all were "hand in glove".

"He (PM) is sitting in a high office that has its own dignity. If you reduce the dignity of the PM's post to such a level, look at what is being said on social media. When you speak about 'mujra', that is an insult to women also," Sibal said, adding, "What do you want to say? You are insulting women, you are insulting opposition leaders. You use such words which are not supposed to be used by any leader, leave Prime Minister, not even councilors should also not speak such things. If you will give that message from the top, the same will happen downwards. So you want to create a culture of hate," Rajya Sabha MP said.

I HEREBY DECLARE



BAJYANT PANDA, 60, BJP vice president, Kendrapara sitting MP, contesting again

TOTAL ASSETS

₹148.09 CR (2024)
₹57.44 CR (2019)

Movable assets	₹121.6 cr
Immovable assets	₹26.49 cr
Liabilities	₹98.51 lakh
Pending	8 FIRs for criminal cases
Education	B.Tech, Michigan Technological University, US

IMAGE OF THE DAY



A polling team returning from the Hill Kaka polling station in J&K's Poonch district on Sunday after the sixth phase of voting. PTI

In Mann's ancestral village, a tale of sluggish progress and wish for more

RAAKHI JAGGA
SATOJ (SANGRUR), MAY 26

THE SCENE in Satoj is like any other. The road to the village awaits repair, a self-help group's building is under construction, the local pond is bone dry, the tree guards around the pond have no trees. Only as a posse of police personnel guarding a house come into sight does one realise it is not a village but the home of Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann.

"Photography is not allowed. You need to get permission from the higher-ups," says a guard posted outside the house.

Satoj falls under the Sunam Assembly segment of Sangrur Lok Sabha seat, which will see Aam Aadmi Party's (AAP) Barnala MLA and minister Gurmeet Singh Meht Hayer take on Congress's Bholath MLA Sukhpal Singh Khaira and Iqbal Singh Jhundani of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD). All 13 seats of the state go to the polls in the final phase on June 1.

The walls of the village are adorned predominantly with Khaira's posters, with a few of Hayer's. "Khaira needs to show his face and make his presence felt but Hayer does not need to do so as the village will vote for broom (AAP's poll symbol) even if the party does not campaign here," says 55-year-old Karamjit Singh.

The Congress, on the other hand, alleges AAP leaders have been threatening rickshaw drivers against displaying Khaira's ads. "This is happening especially in Sunam. But the people of Punjab do not buckle under pressure," says a member of Khaira's team.

Khaira is confident of a victory, saying "silent" voters fed up with



Satoj in the Sangrur Lok Sabha seat is CM Bhagwant Mann's ancestral village. Gurmeet Singh

the AAP will vote for him. "Many of them are not coming out in the open but they will give the AAP a fitting reply," he says.

On a bench in the village park, 55-year-old Amrik Singh says Mann has visited the village only thrice after assuming office and not yet for campaigning. "Many works in the village are progressing at a slow pace but at least they are being done. We do not have anything against Mann and his government," he says.

A little ahead of Mann's ancestral home is an under-construction panchayat office, with heaps of garbage lying in front of it. The road leading up to it also needs repairs. The state of the village draws a comparison to former Punjab CM Parkash Singh Badal's native village of Badal in Muktsar district. "This village is not as well developed as Badal but we feel the skyline of Satoj will change over the years. We have water for irrigation and do not have to pay electricity

VOTE SHARE (%) IN SANGRUR

Party	2014	2019
AAP	48.50	37.40
Cong	16.50	27.43
SAD	29.24	23.83

Source: Election Commission

bills even as many villagers have secured government jobs. We are being patient and hoping the village will get more facilities," says 65-year-old Parkash Chand.

In response, the AAP says Mann treats the entire state as his own and not just his village and hence development is seen across Punjab. "People compare Satoj with Badal village but Badal was CM for five terms while it has only been two years since Mann assumed office," AAP spokesperson Neel Garg said.

The village, which has 2,700 voters, has an Aam Aadmi Clinic. Since Mann was first elected as Sangrur MP in 2014, the AAP has been polling no less than 1,700 votes from the village.

Among some farmers, there is a sense of resentment. "Villagers here cultivate wheat and paddy. The CM tried to convince us to diversify our crop but other crops do not fetch us income even close to wheat and paddy," says 60-year-old Dalip Singh.

Summing up the situation, Parkash, a vegetable vendor, says, "Leaders have started coming to our village in small gatherings, unlike the Badal's village where leaders are seen thronging, doing roadshows and big rallies."

AAP's Hayer says, "Our government fulfilled most of the guarantees. No promised work will remain pending by the end of the government's tenure." The election in Sangrur, he adds, is between locals and "outsiders".

HIMACHAL POLL DISPATCH

In poll debut, Anand Sharma flags Agniveer, counters 'outsider' tag

Congress fielded ex-Union minister and four-time RS MP after 'first choice' backed out

SAURABH PARASHAR
GANGATH (KANGRA), MAY 26

HAVING ALREADY visited all Assembly segments in the Kangra Lok Sabha constituency in Himachal Pradesh twice as part of his campaign, Congress candidate Anand Sharma, 71, is busy visiting them once again, but in areas not covered during his earlier trips.

Last Tuesday, Sharma was at Gangath — known as Pandian Wala Sahar for the locally-made brass utensils for which it is famous — to step up his canvassing. Kangra is the most populous among Himachal's four Lok Sabha seats, which are going to polls in the seventh phase on June 1.

In the 2022 state Assembly polls clinched by the Congress, the party had won 12 of 17 Assembly seats that fall in the Kangra parliamentary constituency.

But one of its MLAs, Sudhir Sharma from Dharamsala, revolted early this year and cross-voted against the party's Rajya Sabha poll candidate Abhishek Manu Singhvi, who lost to the BJP's Harsh Mahajan. Later, Sharma, along with five other rebel Congress MLAs, was disqualified for disobeying the party whip. All of them joined the BJP, which also gave them tickets for the by-elections in their seats, also set to take place on June 1.

Gangath, which is also famous for hosting an annual wrestling fair, falls under the Indora Assembly segment, from where the Congress's Malender Rajan was elected in 2022.

Former Union minister and four-time Rajya Sabha MP, Sharma is making his Lok Sabha poll debut, with his campaign centred on the Congress's plank against "threat to the Constitution", unemployment, Agniveer and the BJP's "failure" in creating 2 crore jobs every year. He touches upon each topic during his address to a gathering of around 200 people. In 1982, Sharma had lost Assembly elections from Shimla to BJP candidate Dault Ram Chauhan. Later, he challenged Chauhan's victory in the Supreme Court, which ruled in his favour.

Dressed in white kurta-pajama with a Congress flag wrapped around his neck,



Anand Sharma at a campaign event in the Kangra seat. Express

VOTE SHARE (%) IN KANGRA

Party	2014	2019
BJP	57.06	72.02
Cong	35.79	24.59

Source: Election Commission

Sharma, who was born and brought up in Shimla, evokes his personal connection with Kangra to debunk the charge that he is an "outsider". He recalls his days as a student leader among the founders of the National Student Union of India (NSUI), when he would roam the district and neighbouring Chamba as head of the Himachal Youth Congress, to launch local units of the Congress's student wing.

Sharma recounts his efforts to establish the passport offices in Himachal back in 2006-7, the establishment of a National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) in Kangra, among other things. A member of the Congress dissidents' group dubbed G-23, Sharma had also opposed the party's aggressive campaign for a national caste census. "G-23 was a group of reformists not of dissidents," a Congress leader close to Anand Sharma said.

"I have been visiting this region for almost 45 years. I was a founding member of the NSUI and was involved in the founding of every NSUI unit here in the early 1970s. In every election I criss-crossed Kangra and Chamba. Of course, I had responsibilities in Delhi, but that doesn't mean I lost connection with my birthplace. My opponent's ('outsider' sug-

gestion (against me) has no merit. I believe even he has now realised it and stopped raking up this issue," he tells *The Indian Express*, as his SUV races towards Rehan Stadium to catch a chopper for Annandale in Shimla after the rally at Gangath.

Countering the allegation that his campaign focuses solely on national issues, he says, "I regularly mention the Agniveer scheme, promising to wind it up once we form the government. Kangra is known for its soldiers. There is a need for holistic development of the entire region. Another big issue is of Pong Dam outstee. I vow to take up all these matters aggressively in Parliament."

Kangra has been a BJP bastion, having elected BJP MPs in the last three elections. The BJP has fielded senior leader Rajeev Bhardwaj this time, replacing incumbent MP Kisan Kapoor, who belongs to the ST (shepherd) community. Kapoor is said to be suffering from various health issues.

The Congress high command picked Sharma, who is considered close to the Gandhi family, after its "first choice", the young Nagrota MLA Raghbir Singh Bali, a Brahmin, indicated his unwillingness to contest, sources said. Sharma dove into his campaign the day he was nominated, beginning with a visit to the Kali Bari temple in Shimla.

He says, "Since May 3, I have visited all 17 Assembly segments twice. I address 5-6 rallies every day, some big, some small."

"Winds of change are here. Divisive forces will definitely lose this time," Sharma says in reply to a question about the Opposition alliance's prospects in the polls.

At Indora, a local resident Surinder Rana says, "Anand Sharma's campaigning is gathering pace."

But back in Gangath, brass utensils seller Madan Lal asks, "Does the Congress have any PM face? Who else is here but Narendra Modi?"

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ANALYSIS: IN CRUCIAL FINAL PHASES, HOW BJP HAS PUT ITS THAKUR HEADACHE BEHIND IN UTTAR PRADESH'S CENTRAL AND EASTERN REGIONS

KEY PLAYERS

'From zero to new Left': Amid CPM churn, young faces rise in LS fray

RAVIK BHATTACHARYA & ATRI MITRA
JADAVPUR, DIAMOND HARBOUR, SERAMPORE, MAY 26

FINISHING HIS morning campaign in West Bengal's Diamond Harbour, 34-year-old Pratikur Rehman, Srijan Bhattacharya and Dipsita Dhar, who were earlier elevated from their national leadership positions in the party's student wing SFI to candidates in the 2021 Assembly elections.

"If college campuses can produce good doctors, lawyers and teachers, why not good politicians? Our aim is to change the system," says Rehman.

When asked how difficult the turnaround would be considering the Congress and Left had failed to win a seat in the 2021 polls, Rehman says, "Zero is relative. Leftists believe it's the beginning. We're motivated by the fact that it's a fresh start, to build a structure on which people can stand up

Similar scenes have been witnessed in several Lok Sabha constituencies of South Bengal. Aiming for its revival, the Bengal CPI(M) has fielded several youth leaders, including Pratikur Rehman, Srijan Bhattacharya and Dipsita Dhar, who were earlier elevated from their national leadership positions in the party's student wing SFI to candidates in the 2021 Assembly elections.

After its decimation in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the CPI(M) had initiated a process of pitchforking its youth faces from the lower rungs of the organisation into the electoral arena.

Although the party also drew a blank in the Assembly elections, with merely 7% of the total vote share, its young candidates made their mark.

Salim says, "For Bengal's resurgence, we need a rejuvenated Left. That is not possible without re-vamping the CPI(M), which is only

— a new Left, a new CPI(M)."

On the road, Rehman can be seen greeting and reaching out to people, stopping at crossings to be garlanded by small groups of CPI(M) workers. That's the easy part. The difficult part is taking on the Trinamool Congress (TMC) Number 2 and sitting MP Abhishek Banerjee in the Diamond Harbour seat.

possible with the youth."

The CPI(M)'s youth policy began to pay small dividends in the 2022 municipal and 2023 panchayat elections. In many districts, the party increased its vote share from 7% to over 20%, encouraging it to continue with the policy in this year's Lok Sabha polls, alongside senior leaders and former MPs.



(From left) Young CPI(M) leaders Pratikur Rehman, Dipsita Dhar and Srijan Bhattacharya. Facebook

Srijan Bhattacharya

About 20 km away, in a house in Kolkata's southern neighbourhood of Naktala, Srijan Bhattacharya, the CPI(M) candidate in Jadavpur, is sitting down to eat lunch.

"Our party is undergoing a revival. (Md Salim) had mentioned somewhere the 'Left's resurrection'... that's the key word. The

conscious decision to connect with the youth is part of this revival. Because the youth represent the bulk of the population. To do that, the party decided to bring forth young members as communicators," says Srijan.

Srijan is pitted against the TMC's Sayoni Ghosh and the BJP's Anirban Ganguly.

"The 34 years of Left rule was built upon years of struggle that created a positive perception. By allowing the youth to again lead from the front has helped us communicate better," he claims.

On what he would say in Parliament in the event of his win, he says, "On the first day, I'll say that it took us 60 years to make education a fundamental right, 14 years ago. After 77 years of the Republic, it is now time to make employment a fundamental right. On the second day, I'll say if we increase corporate wealth tax by 1-

2%, we can prevent 8,000 schools in Bengal alone from being shut down. One can spend more on education and health sectors," the CPI(M)'s candidate says.

Dipsita Dhar

Around 100 km from Jadavpur, Dipsita Dhar is holding a rally at Serampore. At 9 am near the Dankuni railway station, the CPI(M) area committee office is packed with CPI(M) workers, the narrow bylane outside blocked by a few e-rickshaws decorated with red flags and banners, waiting for the 30-year-old candidate with a PhD in geography from the JNU.

Sitting in a small room at the party office, Dipsita says, "It is true that since 2019, we did not win any seats, but our vote percentage has begun to increase. After 34 years of Left rule, an anti-incumbency had built up. Mamata Banerjee's narrative has long

failed, but meanwhile, after Narendra Modi's win in 2014, a religious polarisation emerged in West Bengal that continued till 2021. Since then, the process of breaking that binary began, and I strongly believe that in 2024, it will be further broken."

She also says, "It is true we are at zero, it's demoralising. But our party is not poll-centric. We are building people's movements."

Dipsita is taking on the TMC veteran and incumbent MP Kalyan Banerjee and the BJP's Kabir Shankar Bose.

On why she is in the CPI(M), she says, "The turning point was the Left's 2011 loss. We realised that to save Leftist ideology, we need ideologically rooted people. Being the daughter of a 'refugee family' — my grandfather arrived from East Bengal with nothing — the red flag gave us land, employment. We are grateful for that."

9 DECISION 2024



More women vote in most Jharkhand seats as migration keeps men away



Voters queue up outside a polling booth in Ranchi. PTI

ABHISHEK ANGAD
DHANBAD, MAY 26

IN ALL seven seats in Jharkhand that had voted till May 20, the turnout among women outnumbered the men in each. Of the 39 Assembly segments that fall within the seven LS seats — half of Jharkhand's total 14 — only in three was the polling participation of men higher.

As per EC data released last week, it was only in fifth phase (May 20) the turnout of women voters across the country surpassed that of men in LS elections. In overall turnout of 62.2% in this phase, 63% of the women electors and 61.48% of the men voted.

The gap was particularly stark in Bihar and Jharkhand; with as many as 61.58% of women voting compared to 52.42% of the men in Bihar, with the figures for Jharkhand, respectively, 68.65% and 58.08%. Both poll officials and parties in Jharkhand said one reason for this was the high migration of men from these areas for work.

Jharkhand had its first phase of voting on May 13, when the gap between turnout for women and men was 3.84%. On May 20, this rose to 6.29%.

Kodarma, apart from Chatra and Hazaribagh LS seats, saw the biggest gap across their 16 Assembly segments — which was seen in the 2019 LS polls as well. However, Kodarma particularly stood out with difference between female and male turnout as high as 15.85% (70% to 54.15%). In 2019, the gap was 9.97%.

In Bagodara Assembly seat under Kodarma, the gap was as high as 21.26%, with 74.49% turnout among women, compared to 53.23% among men.

Incidentally, Kalpana Soren, the wife of jailed former Jharkhand CM Hemant Soren, is contesting a bypoll from the Gandey Assembly seat under Kodarma. Seeking votes in the

name of her husband, Kalpana has been drawing huge crowds, especially of women, for JMM.

Vinod Singh, who is the CPI(M-L) Liberation candidate from Kodarma LS seat, said, "Most men here are working outside the state. While I was campaigning in Bagodara, we got to know just one particular village had 16 men who were migrants. Such is the condition."

Vinod told *The Indian Express*: "One of the biggest problems in the area is death of migrant labourers in other states and countries. India does not have any robust mechanism to look after their labourers in other countries. If elected, I will fight for them."

An EC official in the state said, "Migrant male workers, either outside the state or within who are working in a different districts, fear losing wages if they come home to vote," the official said.

Some of the LS seats in Jharkhand, such as Khunti, Singhbhum, and Lohardaga, also have a higher number of women voters compared to men.

The highest women turnout so far has been in Khunti, at 70.5% with men at 69.35%. Singhbhum saw 69.95% female turnout as against 68.89% male; Lohardaga saw 68.63% female turnout, against 64.22% for men; and Palamu, 67.94% female turnout, compared to 64.10% for men.

In the case of Chatra, Kodama and Hazaribagh, the numbers stood at 68.06% for women and 59.50% for men; 70% for women and 54.15% for men; and 67.63% for women and 61.34% for men, respectively. Of these LS seats, only Singhbhum had higher male turnout than female (69.41% to 68.95%) in 2019. In Khunti, the figures were 68.02% and 70.09% for women and men; in Lohardaga, 63.94% and 68.04%; in Palamu, 61.63% and 66.99%; in Chatra, 61.75% and 68.02%; in Hazaribagh, 62.27% and 67.5%; in Koderma, 61.91% and 71.88%, respectively.

Arrah battle pits BJP's 'labharthi' politics against Opp's jobs pitch, caste manoeuvres

Left leader Sudama Prasad hopes to erode BJP's traditional OBC vote base

SANTOSH SINGH
ARRAH (BIHAR), MAY 26

THE JAGDISHPUR Fort in Bihar's Arrah Lok Sabha constituency bears markers of the freedom struggle and its local icon Veer Kunwar Singh, the ruler of the erstwhile Jagdishpur principality who led the 1857 rebellion against the British East India Company. His journey, from his seven victories against the Company to when he cut off his right hand and threw it in the Ganga after being shot by the British, is narrated through paintings in museum housed in the fort.

Of late, Jagdishpur has often been invoked by parties and politicians for its symbolism. While the state government has developed the fort and its surrounding areas over the last two decades, some have attempted to reduce Singh to a Rajput icon

despite his role in the rebellion. But the deserted house adjoining the fort tells the story of a "forgotten" hero. Until last year it was home to Pushpa Singh, a sixth-generation descendant of Kunwar Singh whose son Bablu died in police custody. Unable to live alone there, Pushpa moved to Patna. She criticises the ruling NDA's "neglect" of Kunwar Singh's descendants, calling it an insult to the freedom fighter.

Pushpa is disillusioned with all parties. "We have been used as a political symbol over the years. But I have not yet recovered from the shock of my son's death," she told *The Indian Express*.

BJP MP and Union minister R K Singh, seeking a third-straight term, is facing anti-incumbency. He is up against CPI(M-L) Liberation's Sudama Prasad. While Singh is an upper-caste Rajput, Prasad belongs to the OBC Bania community. By field-



A statue of Veer Kunwar Singh at a museum housed in Jagdishpur Fort in Arrah Lok Sabha seat. Ashutosh Kumar Pandey

ing Prasad, the INDIA bloc is hoping to split the NDA's traditional Bania voter base and add to its core base of Muslims and Yadavs, and sections of Dalits and Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs). While there are an estimated 2-2.25 lakh Bania voters in Arrah and almost 2.5 lakh Rajputs, Yadavs are the largest group at 4 lakh, followed by 1.25-1.5 lakh OBC Kushwahas and

1.25 lakh Brahmins. Muslims account for about 2 lakh of the constituency's 21 lakh total voters.

Inside the fort's complex, large parts of which have been developed like a park, locals often congregate for political discussions. The clash between the Centre's free ration scheme and local caste dynamics — as is the case in several other constituencies — is evident here.



LAST ROUND: CM Mamata Banerjee with party's Jadavpur Lok Sabha candidate Saayoni Ghosh in Jadavpur, Sunday. Express

Defeat Modi to save India, he's trying to do what Putin, Hasina did: Kejriwal

RAAKHI JAGGA
LUDHIANA, MAY 26

AAP SUPREMO Arvind Kejriwal Sunday launched an attack on PM Narendra Modi by comparing him with Russia's Vladimir Putin and Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina — both, he said, won massive elections after putting opposition leaders in jail.

Kejriwal, who started his five-day Punjab tour with a meeting with traders and industrialists in Ferozepur, said, "I want to appeal to you all to save the country. The code of conduct was imposed on March 16 and I was put behind bars on March 21. Our leaders Sanjay Singh, Satyendar Jain and Manish Sisodia have also been put behind bars in false cases. After putting our four big leaders in jail, Modiji said 'aao chunav ladte hain (let's contest the polls)'. They divided NCP and Shiv Sena into two parts, snatched away their party symbols and said 'let's contest polls'."



Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal in Bathinda, Sunday. PTI

"Pakistan put Imran Khan behind bars, organised elections and Khan's party went out of power. Hasina in Bangladesh put all opposition leaders behind bars and won... Putin did the same as Hasina and won with a massive majority," he said. "If we do not defeat Narendra Modi this time, we will not be able to save the country's democracy. This country is heading towards dictatorship... I have come here not for myself but

for the sake of the democracy of the country," he said.

Kejriwal also accused the BJP of "audacity and arrogance". "They are saying 'jo ram ko laye hain, hum unko layenge'. Are they bigger than God?... Their arrogance needs to be broken," he said.

Talking about AAP's performance in Punjab, Kejriwal said, "Eighty-three per cent domestic consumers are getting zero power bills and the state is pro-

gressing. We have controlled corruption and that money is being used to give free power to consumers. Good schools are being made and mohalla clinics are being made and much more."

Kejriwal's wife Sunita Kejriwal had campaigned for Mann in the 2022 Assembly polls in Dhuri, where she addressed a women's rally with her daughter. On Sunday, however, she was seated in the audience when the AAP chief addressed the meeting.

In Bathinda, Kejriwal urged the people to press the 'jharoo' (broom) button and vote for Gurmeet Singh Khuddian, emphasizing the importance of electing a candidate who would be present and active in their community during a roadshow here on Sunday.

He referred to the 2020 farmers' movement, criticising Modi for not allowing Punjab farmers into Delhi. He urged voters to "press a button" to remove Modi from power in Delhi and avenge the farmers' agitation.

Hearing first time about work from jail: Rajnath takes dig at Kejriwal

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
CHANDIGARH, MAY 26

DEFENCE MINISTER Rajnath Singh Sunday took a dig at Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal, saying he had heard about "work from home" but it is the first time that he is hearing of "work from jail".

In Punjab's Khanna, Singh said, "Here, AAP is the ruling party... There is also an AAP government in Delhi. But the AAP leader was jailed in the liquor scam." Singh was referring to Kejriwal's arrest in a money-laundering case linked to the alleged excise policy scam.

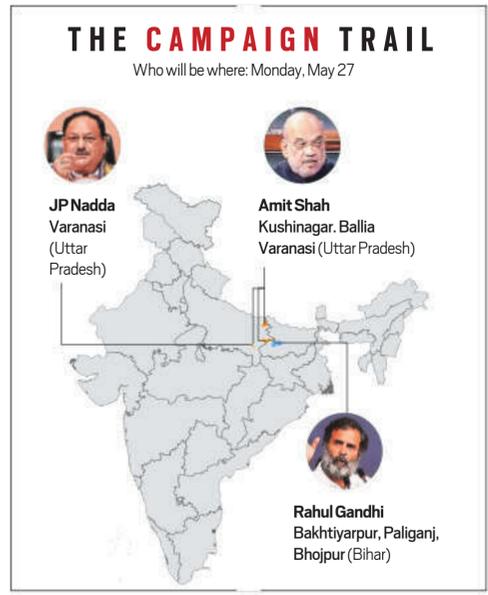
Singh said he thinks every leader should have the moral courage to resign from their post if they face any allegation until being cleared of the charges.

At another rally in Bathinda,

he launched a fierce attack on both the AAP and the Congress in his rallies. "AAP leader Kejriwal was jailed in the liquor scam. Even after that, he says he will continue to occupy the CM's post. He says he will work from jail," Singh said.

"We know about work from office, I have heard about work from home but this is the first time I am hearing about work from jail," Singh said in a dig at Kejriwal. "I never criticise any PM... I believe PM is not an individual, but an institution. So, his public criticism should not be made," he said.

He then said, "You will ask me has everything happened after Modiji came to power." Singh said that he does not want to say previous PMs did not do anything, but the pace of progress that took place during PM Modi's rule was never seen before.



Of devs, devniti in Himachal: How age-old traditions enter campaign

ADITIRAY
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

MAINTAINING A distance from the media during campaigning, Kangana Ranaut, the first Bollywood celebrity to contest Lok Sabha elections from Himachal Pradesh, has, however, followed a simple strategy to shed her "outsider tag" — interacting with locals in their dialects, obliging to their selfie requests and daily temple visits.

Her opponent and the scion of the erstwhile Rampur estate, Vikramaditya Singh, has less to prove to the locals, who consider him as one of them.

In Mandi LS seat, BJP's 'Queen' and Congress' 'King' are pitted against each other, but share a common thing — they are trying to stick to the age-old practice of 'Devniti' followed in the hill state.

While 'Devniti' could be loosely translated to the rule of the 'Devta' and is often juxtaposed with 'rajneeti' (rule of the king), the contenders have not shied from taking the help of gods to ensure their victory.

Amid the mudslinging in Mandi seat, Vikramaditya has touched the sensitive religious chord of the people by alleging that temples where Kangana is visiting need to be purified owing to her food habits.

In Takoli, Vikramaditya said, "What she eats is against our culture. 'Mandiro ki safai honi chahiye' (Temples she has visited need to be purified). People of Devbhoomi are hurt over this."

Kangana says her typical campaign day starts with paying obeisance at temples of local deities while videos of her dancing with local women and sweeping temple premises have gone viral.



BJP's Kangana Ranaut and Congress's Vikramaditya Singh. File

The temple run also owes significance as defying his party's stance on the Ram Temple event, the son of former CM Virbhadra Singh, Vikramaditya also attended the temple consecration ceremony in Ayodhya.

For the people of Himachal, their beliefs are often guided by the local gods whom leaders invoke before elections. Congress leader from Jwalamukhi Sanjay

Rattan recently courted controversy by seeking votes in the name of the local Jwala devi. Following this, the BJP filed a complaint with the EC.

In April, Congress MLA from Kullu was accused of seeking votes in favour of the party's candidate by swearing on the valley's presiding deity Raghunath. However, he said his statement was distorted.

A former MLA of Lahaul-Spiti also accused the state Agriculture Minister Ram Lal Markanda of making people swear to vote for him by chanting a rosary. Markanda called the allegation baseless.

The matter reached the EC and Himachal Pradesh CEO Devesh Kumar said that it is still under investigation. When asked, Kumar said, "If someone uses traditions to seek vote, it is considered a violation of the code of conduct."

What Rattan and the others practised is commonly called 'Lunn lota', reported in different forms in different areas of Himachal. Prof Ramesh Chauhan of Political Science department of Himachal Pradesh University, says while making a person take an oath, lunn (salt) is put in a water pot and it is said if you break the oath, then as the salt dissolves in water, you will also perish.

The practice is prevalent among people in Sirmaur, Chamba, Mandi, Kullu and Lahaul-Spiti, who have never seen a city, says Chauhan. People in Himachal follow 'Dev Sanskriti' and many villages have their own ancient temples with their own areas of influence, adds Chauhan.

Chauhan says people of villages in Himachal have deep faith in their village or clan deities. "They believe these deities still listen to them and speak to them through their guru and in some cases village heads. For many people, the deities are like the head of family... However, politicians do take advantage of their beliefs," says Chauhan, who is from Shimla's Rohru area and has seen 'Lunn Lota' being practised.

"The rural society in Himachal has an informal structure based on caste. The village chief heads an informal meeting

in which it is decided which party to vote for. To make sure votes are not wasted, the chief makes a decision and the villagers give assurance. Mostly, the fear factor in people's minds are harped on," he says, adding that even though the practice is still in place but without solid proof, it is difficult to prove.

Around 26% of the Himachal population comprises SCs, STs and other denotified sections. "They are a major vote bank of Congress. Traditionally, the trading and business class votes for the BJP. In such scenarios, when the grassroots-level party workers preach 'Lunn Lota', it can shift votes," he says.

A lot also depends on the candidate picked by a particular party, says a prominent hotelier from Mandi. "It has been a trend here from the times of the Dhumal government (2009) that if people choose Congress in the state, they

prefer to send BJP MPs to the Lok Sabha and vice-versa to maintain a balance. However, Kangana's candidature didn't go down well with party seniors vying for ticket. For the people too, Kangana's nature of name-calling is against the ethos of the Dev Samaj. So even though people really wanted to vote for BJP in LS elections, they are confused and taking help of age-old practices," he says.

However, with youths actively taking part in politics, Chauhan believes things are changing on ground. "The elderly still follow traditions. What they do is against the spirit of democracy. But for them it's like taking an oath on Gita, which they say is accepted then why not this? And in front of that, even an educated person remains mum," he says, adding that owing to a lot of factors, Congress has an edge in Shimla and Mandi this time.



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

What North thinks today

Will Hindi belt continue to be enchanted by Hindutva despite economic issues and possible fatigue?



SUHAS PALSHIKAR

THE HINDI BELT or the Hindi heartland is a central factor in the shaping of political power in India. In part, this is due to numerical strength — the north accounts for a massive 245 seats to the Lok Sabha and, barring Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir, the Hindi belt has 226 seats. But more than mere strength, it is important because of an underlying uniformity in its approach to socio-cultural matters and in its political behaviour. Historically, the churnings in the Hindi belt have signalled momentous political shifts.

In 1967, the entire Hindi belt registered its disenchantment with the Congress. This shook the Congress system, but more than that, it marked the beginning of a new politics both within Congress and outside it. In 1977, the Hindi belt contributed to the rout of Indira Gandhi's party and facilitated a reconfiguration of political forces. In both these moments, the deeper churning in the Hindi belt had an undercurrent of social realignments — the unrest of intermediate and backward castes against the continued dominance of upper/forward castes. The realignment politically manifested itself as a protest against the Congress. That logic was further extended in 1989 when Congress was thrown out yet again — more decisively. At all these three points in time, the Hindi belt behaved more or less uniformly.

A fourth moment was the mid-Nineties, when in quick succession, in three elections, the BJP gained handsomely in this region. That marked the entrenchment of Hindutva politics in the Hindi belt. This was not merely a case of the BJP replacing Congress in the region; it was also a case of pre-existing socio-cultural sensibilities transforming themselves with more militant articulation and the politics of Hindutva smoothly taking over the region. The rise of the BJP in the 1990s and its resurgence in 2014 owe much to the party's impressive performance here: The BJP won 178 seats in the Hindi belt in 2019.

Without underestimating the party's respectable showing elsewhere, like in Gujarat, one can therefore pinpoint the Hindi belt as the BJP's core constituency. The Ram Janmabhoomi agitation consolidated the politics of Hindutva in the Hindi belt but histori-

cally, Hindutva politics has had more traction in this belt than elsewhere even before the BJP spearheaded the Ayodhya agitation. Throughout the nationalist movement and subsequently in the post-Independence period, Congress in the Hindi belt struggled to accommodate the more articulate Hindu sensibilities that sought public expression of religious identity. The Hindu sensibility in this belt could easily be converted into a politics of Hindu assertion to be weaponised against Muslims — irrespective of the fact that in states like Rajasthan or MP, like in Gujarat, the Muslim presence is far too weak to be competitive or a challenge to the so-called Hindu ethos. Hindutva was being shaped in the region despite the weakness of the party of Hindutva, and post-1989, it converted its subterranean existence into the electoral strength of the BJP.

Thus, there is a long term link of Hindutva with region-specific Hindu sensibilities. Today, what are the possible limitations that might unsettle the BJP's electoral hold over this region? Three things need to be borne in mind. First, except Bihar, where the BJP had a state-level partner, the BJP's vote share in all the remaining states in the Hindi belt was between 50 and 60-plus per cent in 2019. This translates into a huge Hindu vote since available data suggest that Muslims might not have voted for the BJP in any sizeable proportion. In other words, the Hindu consolidation that the BJP aims at has almost completely occurred in this belt. This is often understood as the strength of the BJP but it also means that the party reaches a point where it cannot further add to its support.

Secondly, the party has won nearly all the seats in many of these states. In UP, though, it still came up short — with 60-plus seats out of 80. In other states of the region, even if the BJP were to repeat its 2019 performance, that would not help the party add to its strength. Thus, for the BJP to improve on its 2019 performance, it is absolutely essential to win more seats in UP. It cannot win many more seats in Bihar given that it is again in alliance with state-level parties and thus has to share seats with them.

Thirdly, while the popularity of Modi and

the attraction of Hindutva may still hold, a decade-long incumbency coupled with exaggerated promises put the BJP in a tough corner. In this decade and overall, Hindutva has offered its followers symbolic excitement mostly unrelated to life conditions — the systematic marginalisation of the imagined enemy, construction of the Ram temple and limited accommodation of backward castes. The promises of national reconstruction and material advancement as corollaries of Hindu domination have remained distant dreams. Lokniti's pre-election survey in late March found that in this region, 60 per cent voters mentioned price rise and unemployment as issues that will determine their vote. This proportion was higher than in the south or east.

This brings us to the question: Will the Hindi belt continue to be enchanted by Hindutva despite economic issues and despite the Hindutva rhetoric reaching a crescendo? Many have commented on "Modi fatigue" but is it possible that there will also be a "Hindutva fatigue"? This is not to say that the Hindi belt will suddenly turn away from Hindutva. But the question we must ponder is: Will the voters, in spite of their love affair with Hindutva, begin to exercise agency, make assessment of factors like performance and explore alternatives?

That process, if it begins, will not be confined to any one state from the Hindi belt. As pointed out above, despite state specificities, the region tends to manifest a somewhat uniform trend. Therein lies the challenge for the BJP. If there is Hindutva fatigue, it will manifest in varying degrees, across the region. If the BJP sheds its excess weight gained since 2014 in the region, that could result in the doors of electoral competition being pushed ajar.

When the campaign began, the competition appeared to be favouring the incumbent. As it closes, the central question that has arisen is whether the north, that periodically distances itself from dominant power holders, will unsettle the BJP, will begin to put it on notice or continue to latch on to the emotive appeal of Hindutva for the time being.

The writer, based in Pune, taught political science

CRIMINAL ABDICATION

Fire outbreaks in Delhi and Rajkot point to neglect of rules, larger failures. Lessons must be learnt urgently

TWO DEVASTATING FIRE incidents in less than 12 hours, which have snuffed out lives, many of them children, including, most heartbreakingly, newborns at a pediatric hospital in Delhi, are reminders of the shockingly low priority accorded to basic safety measures in Indian cities. Fire preparedness is a well-developed discipline in most parts of the world. Yet outbreak after outbreak in the last three decades has highlighted the failure to learn from it and bring it into the design of public spaces, housing apartments, hospitals, commercial and office complexes. The emerging details of Saturday's fire at a Rajkot indoor gaming centre evoke a terrible déjà vu. The centre did not have a no-objection certificate from fire safety authorities, it had only one route for entry and exit and welding work was underway during business hours. The Gujarat High Court has taken suo motu cognisance of the tragedy and asked the state government as well as the Rajkot, Surat and Ahmedabad municipalities to submit a report on the functioning of gaming centres in these cities. A Delhi government investigation into the cause of the fire that claimed at least seven lives in the early hours of Sunday is also underway. Justice must be served in the two cases but it's time that larger failures that lead to avoidable fatalities are addressed. Buildings in the country continue to be tinder boxes despite the all too similar conclusions of past investigations — be it the Uphaar Cinema tragedy in Delhi in 1997 or the Bengaluru residential complex blaze of 2010, the Kamala Mills inferno of 2017, Kolkata's AMRI hospital fire in 2011 or outbreaks in hospitals during the Covid pandemic.

Part four of the National Building Code, which runs into more than 80 pages, has detailed directions on how to prevent fire hazards. Many states, including Delhi and Gujarat, also have their own fire safety rules. But fire safety operations fall under municipalities, a tier of governance whose weaknesses have multiplied in recent times. Inspections are weak and, at best, once-in-a-few-years exercises. This means that very often it requires a tragedy to uncover flagrant violations. In 2021, for instance, after a blaze killed 10 babies in a hospital 60 km from Nagpur, a Maharashtra public health department audit of 484 hospitals in the state found that more than 80 per cent did not have a fire safety clearance. In late March this year, after it was evident that large parts of the country were staring at a heatwave, the Union Health Ministry and the National Disaster Management Authority issued fire safety guidelines that gave particular emphasis to healthcare facilities. It called for comprehensive inspections of all hospitals — significant because healthcare facilities use chemicals and many patient care items, like oxygen cylinders, are either inflammable or can escalate flames. These guidelines have not received their due attention.

A FICCI-Pinkerton study of 2018 flagged that urban India has less than 40 per cent of the fire stations it needs. Two years later, the 15th Finance Commission underlined the need to modernise the country's firefighting infrastructure. A rapidly urbanising country, with closely packed population clusters, cannot continue to pay short shrift to fire safety.

ON THE FOOD FRONT

Global climate models indicate El Niño transitioning to 'neutral' in coming month, but policy must step in

THE RESERVE BANK OF INDIA'S (RBI) record Rs 2,10,874 crore "surplus" transfer to the Centre has brought down the benchmark 10-year government bond yields to below 7 per cent, for the first time in almost a year. The move has, thus, lowered interest rates even without any cut in the central bank's policy lending (repo) rate. The latter action is, of course, predicated upon the trajectory of inflation. For the RBI, the primary concern would be food inflation. At 8.7 per cent year-on-year in April, it was way above the 4.8 per cent overall consumer price inflation. Food inflation is interestingly poised, like the national elections, but the uncertainty in its case will extend beyond June 4 and depend on the southwest monsoon. Adequate and well-distributed rainfall during the season (June-September) is something the RBI, and the government taking charge, would desperately want.

To be sure, 2023-24 wasn't great for agriculture. El Niño's impact can be seen in pulses. Chana (chickpea) and arhar (pigeon pea) dal are retailing at an average of Rs 85 and Rs 160 per kg, as against their corresponding year-ago prices of Rs 70 and Rs 120 respectively. A poor crop and market rates ruling higher than the official minimum support price have meant that government agencies have hardly procured this time; they had bought over 2.1 million tonnes (mt) of chana alone both in 2023 and 2022. It isn't just pulses. The all-India modal retail prices of potato, onion and tomato have risen from Rs 20 to Rs 30/kg between last year and now. El Niño resulted in not only subnormal rain, but also high temperatures and delayed onset of winter, affecting all these crops. Even wheat grown in central India wasn't spared. Proof of that is government procurement: Out of the total 26.3 mt purchased, 19.5 mt or nearly three-fourths has come from Punjab and Haryana. Others, including MP, haven't contributed much.

Global climate models indicate El Niño transitioning to "neutral" in the coming month and developing into La Niña — associated with good rainfall activity in the subcontinent — by July-August. But the government cannot take chances; nor can the RBI cut rates without a softening of food inflation. The government should allow duty-free imports of all pulses till March 31, 2025. The 40 per cent import duty on wheat, too, must go. The 26.3 mt grain procured this season comes on top of 16-year-low opening stocks of 7.5 mt. While sufficient to meet the public distribution system's requirement, the country needs more wheat to feed the open market. That gap can only be filled by imports.

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



PRABHASH RANJAN AND AMAN KUMAR

THE ICC'S CHALLENGE

Its application of warrants against Israeli, Hamas leaders will test its credibility

IN A NOTEWORTHY international development, the International Criminal Court (ICC)'s prosecutor, Karim Khan, has requested the court to issue arrest warrants against leaders of Israel — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Defence Minister Yoav Gallant — and leaders of Hamas — Yahya Sinwar, Mohammed Diab Ibrahim Al-Masri (Deif) and Ismail Haniyeh. The arrest warrants are sought on the charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity over the October 7 attack on Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza. The ICC, in recent times, has come under scathing criticism for targeting leaders of the third world, and not Western powers and their allies. The application to issue arrest warrants against the leaders of Israel, thus, is a first and quite significant one. It can be argued that by charging both the Hamas leadership and the Israeli leaders, the prosecutor is seemingly giving an impression of being balanced and even-handed.

Under international law, heads of state are immune from criminal proceedings at any foreign or international court. At the ICC, however, no head of state can claim immunity. ICC statute says that "official capacity as a head of state or government, a member of a government or parliament, an elected representative or a government official shall in no case exempt a person from criminal responsibility". The same was ruled in 2019 by the court in the Jordan Referral re Al-Bashir Appeal judgment.

It is because of this provision that the court, in 2023, was able to issue an arrest warrant against Russian President Vladimir Putin for his role in Russia's war with Ukraine.

Like Russia, Israel, too, isn't a member of the ICC. Thus, some are questioning if the ICC can issue arrest warrants for Israeli leaders. The basis of ICC's jurisdiction in this case is that Palestine is a state party to the court. Thus, the ICC can exercise what is known as territorial jurisdiction. This means that if a crime is committed on the territory of a state party to the ICC, the Court can exercise jurisdiction on that crime, even if it is committed by people belonging to a state that isn't its member. Hence, the crimes committed by Israeli soldiers in Gaza fall within the Court's jurisdiction. Similarly, Hamas' conduct in Israel falls within the Court's jurisdiction even though Israel isn't a member of the ICC.

There is generally a long road from requesting an arrest warrant to actual prosecution. The ICC's track record is not quite encouraging, especially regarding heads of states. Take the example of Omar al-Bashir, former Sudanese President. ICC issued an arrest warrant against him way back in 2009. At the time, he was the president of Sudan. In 2019, he was ousted from office in a military coup. However, he has still not surrendered to the court. On the other side of the spectrum are the cases of William Ruto, the incumbent President of Kenya, and his predecessor, Uhuru Kenyatta.

Both were accused of committing crimes against humanity, but the court finally dropped the charges and abandoned the prosecution. Similarly, an arrest warrant was issued against Simone Gbagbo, the former first lady of the Ivory Coast, but the ICC subsequently dropped the charges. Likewise, while the arrest warrant against Putin has undoubtedly limited his international travels, his surrender to the ICC seems unlikely.

Notwithstanding this somewhat dismaying history of the ICC, the application for arrest warrants against the Israeli leaders is momentous for three reasons. First, if the court issues the warrant in the coming months, it would be a big legal and diplomatic blow to Israel, which is already battling several other international cases. Second, it would severely curtail Netanyahu's travels to countries that are parties to the ICC because these countries would be under a legal obligation to arrest him. Third, and most importantly, it sends a robust signal that international law is not a hapless weapon that miserably fails to hold the powerful accountable. This case can prove to be the litmus test for the ICC's credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the world at large.

Ranjan is a Humboldt Fellow and professor, Jindal Global Law School. Kumar is a PhD candidate, Australian National University. Views are personal

MAY 27, 1984, FORTY YEARS AGO

4 DEAD IN PUNJAB

FOUR PERSONS WERE killed in Punjab in the last 24 hours. While three of them — a BSF constable, a Hindu Suraksha Samiti leader and a headmaster — were shot dead by terrorists, a Punjab Armed Police jawan was killed when attacked by a mob in Amritsar. Terrorists lobbed a bomb at a BSF vehicle at Gurdaspur seriously injuring a jawan, Kuldeep Raj, who succumbed to his injuries in the hospital.

CENTRE-STATE SCUFFLE

OPPOSITION PARTIES DENOUNCED the dismissal by the central government of the Bhandari government in Sikkim followed by

the dissolution of the state assembly and imposition of the President's rule in the state. In a statement, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) said the two actions show that the central government "has forged one more link in the chain of arbitrary dismissals of elected governments and bringing states under central rule."

FIVE-YEAR PLAN'S FOCUS

THREE ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES are being suggested by the Planning Commission for the reduction of poverty during the Seventh Five-Year Plan. These will be considered in a meeting of the Commission on June 4 presided on by Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi. Poverty-reduction will form the ma-

major strategy of the next plan. The alternatives that are being proposed are its reduction by 15 to 17 per cent in one case and 20 to 23 per cent in another by the end of 1989-90.

LIGHTNING KILLS 22

THE TOLL IN the current flood in Magura in south-west Bangladesh, caused by heavy rains in the catchment areas and other natural calamities rose to 175 with reports of 22 more people killed, according to unofficial estimates. Lightning struck a tin-roofed house as a marketplace in Magura during heavy rains accompanied by a storm killing 22 and injuring 40 others, the victims took shelter in the house during the rain.



THE IDEAS PAGE

A to-do list for inflation

Trade policy, especially import liberalisation, has to be well integrated with MSP to regulate prices and help farmers



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH
BY ASHOK GULATI AND RITIKA JUNEJA

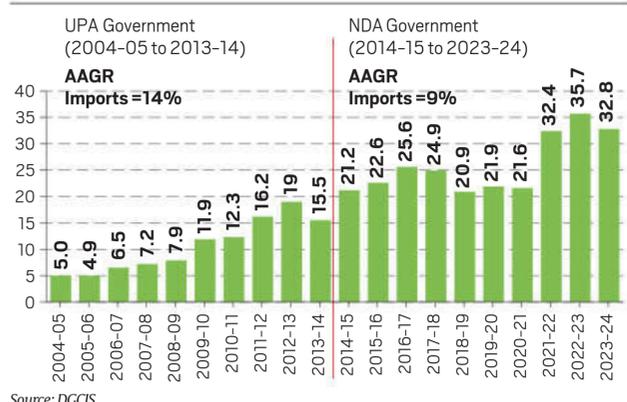
THE RESERVE BANK of India needs to be complimented for broadly containing the consumer price inflation within its mandated range of 4+/- 2 per cent. It also needs to be commended for providing overall financial stability, while generating unprecedented surpluses and giving a pleasant gift of Rs 2.11 trillion to the central government. RBI has been working very closely with the government, especially the Ministry of Finance, to ensure that India achieves high GDP growth (above 7 per cent) while containing inflation within prescribed limits. While RBI uses monetary policy to control prices, it also suggests that the government take various measures, such as through trade policy and open market operations, especially with respect to food inflation, which still hovers around 8 per cent. The government had gone on an overdrive with export controls of wheat, rice, sugar, and even onions. Although such restrictive export policies help the consumers, they hurt farmers' interest adversely. In our last piece ('Make it farmer friendly', IE, May 13), we spelt out various dimensions of agri-exports and policies associated with it. Here we focus on agri-imports.

India's agri-imports in 2023-24 have registered a notable decline of 8 per cent, dropping from \$35.7 billion in 2022-23 to \$32.8 billion in 2023-24. Interestingly, the average annual growth rate (AAGR) observed in agricultural imports during the 10 years of the Narendra Modi government appears to have slowed down — from 14 per cent during the UPA government (2004-05 to 2013-14) to 9 per cent during 2014-15 to 2023-24 (see the infographics, Figure 1). Does it indicate India becoming more *atmanirbhar* (self-reliant) in agriculture? To address this, let us analyse India's changing agricultural import basket and the factors influencing it.

It is noteworthy that the decline in the value of agricultural imports in 2023-24 was primarily due to edible oils, plummeting by 28.5 per cent, from \$20.8 billion to \$14.9 billion in a single year. However, in terms of quantity, it remained relatively stable, hovering around 15-16 million metric tonnes (MT) during both 2022-23 and 2023-24. India imports roughly 55 to 60 per cent of its edible oil consumption. Within the spectrum of edible oils, palm oil accounts for over 50 per cent, followed by soybean and sunflower. The principal factor contributing to the decline in import values is the decrease in palm oil prices in international markets. The FAO's vegetable oil sub-index averaged 168.5 points in 2022-23, dropping to 123.4 points in 2023-24, indicating reduced global prices, consequently lowering India's vegetable oil import bill in 2023-24.

Next to edible oil, it is pulses, fresh fruits and vegetables (F&V), sugar, spices, cashew,

FIGURE 1
AGRICULTURAL IMPORTS IN INDIA (USD BILLION)



Source: DGCIIS

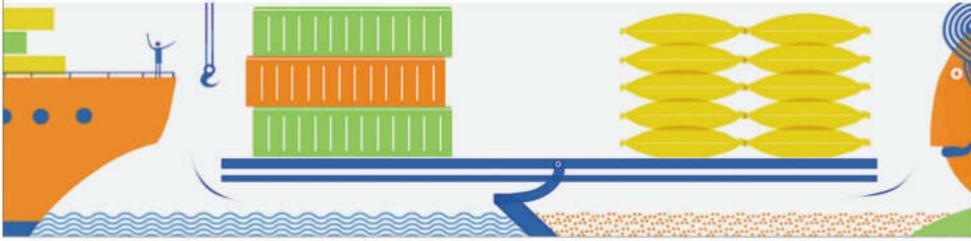
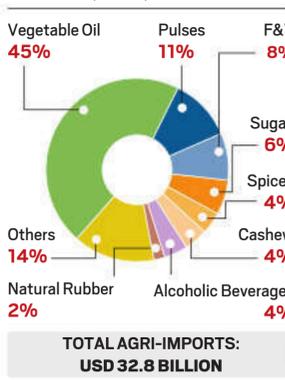


FIGURE 2
COMPOSITION OF AGRICULTURAL IMPORTS (FY24)



and various other items that comprise India's agri-imports (see figure 2). The import of pulses, which had declined from its peak of \$4.2 billion in 2016-17 (a record 6.6 MT) to \$1.9 billion in 2022-23 (2.5 MT), suddenly doubled to \$3.7 billion in 2023-24 (4.7 MT). In 2016-17, pulses production at home had suddenly increased by about 6 MT, while imports also hovered around the same quantity. This led to a glut and domestic prices of many pulses went below minimum support prices (MSP). Gol had to impose a 30 per cent import tariff on lentils, pigeon pea/tur, and chickpea, followed by quantity restrictions. Later, the import tariff on chickpea increased to 40 and then to 60 per cent by March 2018. For yellow/white peas, a 50 per cent duty was combined with a minimum price of Rs 200/kg, implemented in December 2019, effectively prohibiting imports below this threshold. This was to give high protection to domestic production of pulses.

However, since then, the increase in pulse production has been sluggish, hovering around 25-27 MMT. Import restrictions, coupled with somewhat sluggish growth in domestic production, are leading to high inflation in pulses. Even in April 2024, pulses group registered an inflation of 17 per cent, while tur showed an inflation of 31 per cent. This is worrying the government and no wonder, they are liberalising the imports of pulses at zero import duty, which will remain in place until the end of 2024-25. This is likely to hit the farmers, though it will help in taming pulses prices for consumers. Again a sign of consumer bias.

What could be rational trade policy that dovetails well with domestic MSP policy?

What could be rational trade policy that dovetails well with domestic MSP policy? First, instead of a sudden drop to zero import duty, it could have been more calibrated. Second, it must ensure that the landed price is not below the MSP of major pulses. Third, if domestic prices go below MSP, then NAFED should undertake large scale procurement at MSP to build its buffer stocks. Else, we are afraid, pulses farmers will lose heavily and their enthusiasm to produce more pulses may wane soon.

First, instead of a sudden drop to zero import duty, it could have been more calibrated. Second, it must ensure that the landed price is not below the MSP of major pulses. Third, if domestic prices go below MSP, then NAFED should undertake large scale procurement at MSP to build its buffer stocks. Else, we are afraid, pulses farmers will lose heavily and their enthusiasm to produce more pulses may wane soon.

A similar policy has to be adopted in case of edible oils/oilseeds, that is, ensuring that landed price of edible oils should not be below the domestic MSP of oilseeds converted to oil. Else, the vision of the Prime Minister to achieve relative self-reliance in edible oils through the National Edible Oil Mission-Oil Palm (NEOM-OP) will wash away. Having said this, Indian policymakers must recognise that achieving self-sufficiency in edible oils through traditional oilseeds like mustard, groundnuts, and soybeans would necessitate an additional area under oilseeds to the tune of 35 to 40 million hectares, which is not feasible. Only way is to promote palm oil at home on about 2 million hectares that is identified as a suitable area for this crop. This is the only crop that can give almost 4 tonnes of oil/ha.

In conclusion, the key lesson is that trade policy, especially import liberalisation, has to be well integrated with MSP policy at home. This is important for pulses and oilseeds, which demand less water and less fertilisers. Thus, farmers' and the planet's interests must go hand in hand.

Gulati is Distinguished Professor and Juneja is a Research Fellow at ICRIER. Views are personal

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"OIC and Arab League, as well as friends of Palestine in Europe, Latin America, Africa and Asia must come together to enforce such a blockade against Israel if they are serious about ending the Gaza nightmare... finely worded legal treatise, and eloquently drafted resolutions will do little to save Palestinians." — DAWN, PAKISTAN

Letting our scholars down

Changes in PhD programme don't do justice to the country's institutions and its diversity



KRISHNA MENON AND TANUJA KOTHIYAL

INDIA'S EDUCATION SPECTRUM, ranging from school education to research, has been the focus of many far-reaching changes in recent years. Educational institutions in India are characterised by immense diversity ranging from those located in the heart of India's capital to those in mofussil towns.

Our underfunded and ill-equipped public institutions are tasked with providing education to large sections of citizens who are battling adverse life circumstances, while also trying to match global standards of knowledge production and dissemination. The size and diversity constitute a challenge. They are also sites for building a society based on equality and dignity. However, rather than imagining education as a mode of developing values of critical citizenship, recent changes suggest a penchant for techno-managerial solutions. The new guidelines for direct admission to PhD programmes upon completion of the four-year undergraduate degree is one such example.

This is a time of sweeping and somewhat reckless changes, often selectively adopted from starkly different contexts, adding to the woes of higher education in India. The guiding principles are lofty and aim to make India an intellectual storehouse. However, the chosen pathway needs serious rethinking, keeping in mind questions of access and diversity.

Skilling for employment and the pursuit of doctoral research require equally rigorous, but very different approaches. Sadly, the current model fails to satisfy either. The hasty introduction of too many changes, the absence of adequate physical infrastructure, shortage of trained faculty, lack of funds, relentless homogenisation and increased dependency on technological solutions to what are essentially epistemological and pedagogical challenges are some of the reasons.

The four-year undergraduate programme (FYUP) with its focus on skill education, and a substantially shrunk discipline-specific learning, is an interesting experiment provided our educational institutions, especially our public institutions, have the funds, infrastructure and faculty expertise to turn these ideas into reality. Colleges are scrambling for resources, classrooms, teachers and in the process, many aspects of the FYUP are being reduced to a formality, while compromising heavily on domain specialisation.

The research component in the touted four-year undergraduate programme is expected to prepare students for doctoral research. This is based on the assumption that all undergraduate programmes across all institutions in India would be able to equip their students with rigorous training in research tools and methods. While the structure offers multiple exit options to the stu-

dent, it remains to be seen how many students are actually able to stay on till the fourth year, given the imperatives to earn a livelihood and shoulder domestic responsibilities. On the other hand, there is also little clarity on employment possibilities for those who do exit midway.

Further, the idea of a research intensive fourth year leading to direct admission to PhD seems to rest on the assumption that research is only a skill-based enterprise. If appropriately skilled in research methods, a scholar can arrive at "findings and conclusions" in the minimum possible time. This approach fails to consider research a reflective and deeply deliberative exercise. If a PhD is only about solving a specific problem within a stipulated period of time, how can it justifiably be described as a Doctorate in Philosophy?

While the PhD programme is sometimes seen as a lonely furrow where some chosen people engage in esoteric intellectual puzzles, it is in practice a socially located pursuit of knowledge. Along with well-known skills such as writing, communication, problem-solving and troubleshooting, a PhD programme should instil critical, creative and calibrated thinking — skills needed for consolidating our democracy and robust citizenship. A PhD programme hopefully creates in the researcher the ability to question and re-imagine rather than accept whatever is presented as a fact. It also inculcates a commitment to integrate the individual pursuit of knowledge with the larger community's needs.

The new guidelines for PhD issued by the University Grants Commission seek to flatten institutional and student diversities and create a uniform admissions process. But such streamlined mechanisms are neither attuned to the diverse needs of students nor that of institutions. A techno-managerial approach that seeks control and regulate sees this diversity as a problem that needs fixing and what better tool than supposedly neutral technology-assisted solutions?

This has resulted in the conduct of computer-based tests that contain multiple choice questions (MCQs), not in keeping with the idea of research that requires, at the very least, the ability of critical thinking and questioning. Often, there is a mismatch between the expectations of the programmes of study, especially interdisciplinary ones and the entrance examination. Unfortunately, the total dependence on a single MCQ-based exam has, in a very short span of time, resulted in the mushrooming of cram schools and guidebooks.

The challenge of diversity of institutions, faculty, and students within higher education can be seen either as a problem or as an asset. We must not lose sight of the specificities of our social needs and in our rush to become the "teacher to the world" create students who are unable to make meaningful interventions in the contexts that they work and live in.

Greater patience and caution while bringing in such sweeping changes would help us retrace our steps, in case it is required. Not doing so belies a hubris that is unbecoming of decision makers in the field of higher education.

Menon and Kothiyal are professors of Gender Studies and History, respectively, at Ambedkar University, Delhi

An exercise in strategy

Putin's Beijing visit served to strengthen informal alliance between China and Russia



RAJAN KUMAR

VLADIMIR PUTIN'S VISIT to Beijing was a strategic exercise to secure sustained support from China amid its ongoing conflict with Ukraine. China's backing is critical to Putin's goals of keeping the Russian economy afloat, saving Russia from political isolation and projecting a joint front against the West. Putin returned home reassured that his bosom friend Xi Jinping would remain steadfast and offer unwavering support to Moscow.

At a macro level, the Moscow-Beijing partnership has become a decisive factor in international politics, whose implications are neither entirely understood or appreciated. It is moving towards a formidable alignment to shield itself from the looming Western menace, to challenge the overbearing dominance of the US, and to expand its influence worldwide. The relationship spans from extensive commercial exchanges to strong defence ties and intimate collaboration in multilateral institutions. In the hierarchical structure of the international order, this partnership has emerged as the second most powerful entity, positioned just below the Western alliances. Its influence is burgeoning swiftly in the Global South as countries seek an alternative to the traditional dominion of the West. The Joe Biden administration's short-sighted strategy of provoking both Russia and China simultaneously has contributed directly to an "alignment of the aggrieved".

President Putin and President Xi accord high priority to this partnership. The absence of leadership change on either side ensured a consistent and stable relationship — a privilege typically reserved for authoritarian regimes. Xi and Putin have met more than 40 times in the last two decades and often chose

each other's country as their first destination abroad after re-election. Xi Jinping's first foreign visit after assuming the highest office in China was to Moscow in 2012. Again, after his re-election in March 2023, he visited Russia on his first trip abroad. Similarly, Putin visited Beijing in May 2024 on his first trip abroad after assuming office for his fifth term. These gestures might appear symbolic but they are not devoid of substance.

China became a lifeline for Russia in the wake of Western sanctions following the Ukraine crisis. Russia's economy would have collapsed had China backed out and joined the sanctions. Russia's biggest trade partner for the last 13 years has been China. It accounted for roughly 30 per cent of its total global trade in 2023, a sharp rise from merely 11 per cent in 2013. In an unprecedented growth, their trade reached \$240 billion in 2023, overshooting the target of \$200 billion set for 2024. According to some estimates, Beijing supplies 70 per cent of Russia's semi-conductors and other critical technology. Therefore, the economic dependence of Russia on China can hardly be overstated.

A growing asymmetry in their economies has led some Western analysts to contend that the power equation has inverted and Russia has become a "junior partner". They argue that Russia's economy is one-tenth the size of China's. It was \$1.8 trillion in 2021-2022, while the Chinese economy was approximately \$18 trillion. However, calling Russia "junior partner" would be a premature assessment. Moscow is conscious of its great-power past, and its elites resent the idea of subordination. West's policy to subordinate Russia in the 1990s failed miserably. The war in Ukraine

would not have happened had Russia consented to becoming a junior partner of the West. Therefore, Russia will not readily submit to a secondary status to an Asian power.

In this context, one is reminded of what Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote in 1876, "in Europe, we were hangers-on and slaves, while in Asia we shall be the masters. In Europe we were Tatars, while in Asia we too are Europeans". Russia invariably turns to the East when the West spurns it. Gone are the days of Russia being "masters" in Asia, but Putin can certainly expect equality and solidarity from many Asian states.

Besides commercial ties, Russia and China have solid military cooperation. It began with confidence-building measures in the 1990s, and their most significant achievement was resolving the 4,300-km border dispute. There is supreme cooperation in the field of aircraft engines and anti-aircraft missiles. Over time, they have signed several joint projects concerning space, shipbuilding, rocket engines, military helicopters, production of aircraft, and the S-400 missile defence system. Russia's arms exports to China reduced drastically after 2007, but the latter still relies on the former for critical weapons such as the S-400 and the fifth-generation aircraft.

Further, joint military exercises have become a regular feature of their defence cooperation. The Joint Sea Exercise of 2015 in the Mediterranean raised concerns at the NATO headquarters. They participated in Zapad exercises in 2021, conducted a joint bomber patrol and used each other's airfields in 2022, did Vostok exercises with all three military branches in 2022, and executed joint air and sea drills in the Sea of Japan in 2023. Regular exercises mean some degree of interoperabil-

ity and the possibility of integrated command if required. However, they have not become a formal "military alliance" yet. In fact, China is not even supplying weapons to Russia during its war in Ukraine.

Moscow and Beijing are taking pre-emptive measures to safeguard their interests without becoming alliance partners. A formal alliance is cumbersome, and states refrain from being part of an alliance. It entails what is referred to as the "fear of entrapment" in other's conflict and the "fear of abandonment" when needed. Beijing would not like to get entrapped in Russia's conflict with the West, and likewise, Moscow is wary of China's conflict in Taiwan. Russia is also conscious that a formal alliance with China may alienate its Asian partners, such as India, Vietnam, and Indonesia. Therefore, they will continue to work closely without signing a formal alliance treaty. Moreover, many informal agreements have worked better than formal ones. Some Western analysts argue that the Moscow-Beijing alignment is far more effective than the much-touted Quad coalition in the Indo-Pacific.

New Delhi is wary of the growing ties between Beijing and Moscow. However, its strategy of cultivating robust ties with Washington while maintaining a balanced relationship with Moscow has proved exceptionally effective in managing China. New Delhi's strong ties with Russia situate it favourably in continental geopolitics. However, the balancing act will get more challenging as the tension between Russia and the West intensifies.

The writer teaches at the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

CHINA-TAIWAN TIES

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Power play in the sea' (IE, May 25). The presence of a democratic Taiwan that has better socio-economic markers than mainland China has always been a threat to the CPC. It is only militarily that mainland China is superior to Taiwan. The latest power projection by China is aimed at not only the newly elected President but also to reassure the pro-mainland Taiwanese population and the domestic lobby that still believes in the wolf warrior style of diplomacy. However, in the long term, the Chinese will try to incrementally restrain Taiwan rather than attempt a direct military takeover. China knows that Taiwan represents a redline for the USA and it does not have an army to take on the might of the US.

Shubhada H, via email

A CONVENIENT CLAIM

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The kite-flying about RSS' (IE, May 25). RSS, which has expressed strong reservations against the final draft of the Constitution of India, and was unhappy with the choice of colour of the national flag, still claims that it is not active in politics. This is the reason for skepticism against RSS despite calling itself an organisation for social unity and nation-building.

Nonetheless, creating such an image has advantages. For instance, it hoodwinks other parties to underestimate RSS's political significance and engages with people as a cultural organisation. Today, they are entrenched in all institutions like the media, bureaucracy, universities, judiciary, etc. But the writer surprisingly opted to debunk that hinting at souring relations between RSS and BJP.

LR Murmu, New Delhi

IN BAD TASTE

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'Target on her back' (IE, May 25). It's heartening that the Election Commission of India (ECI) has pulled up former Calcutta High Court judge and BJP candidate Abhijit Gangopadhyay for his derogatory remarks against West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and debarred him from campaigning for 24 hours. It does not behoove someone of his professional background to stoop so low. The poll panel has asked the BJP to issue an advisory to all party candidates and campaigners to ensure that such lapses do not recur during the campaign period. Also, the ECI has rightly reminded political leaders that their criticism of other parties should avoid "all aspects of private life not connected with the public activities of the leaders or workers".

Khokan Das, Kolkata

12 EXPRESS NETWORK

PM ADDRESSES RALLIES IN PURVANCHAL

Need a damdaar PM, jihadis across border are supporting SP, Cong: Modi

MAULSHREE SETH
LUCKNOW, MAY 26

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi said on Sunday that the country needed a "damdaar pradhan mantri" (strong PM) and that "jihadis" from across the border were supporting the INDIA bloc partners Samajwadi Party and the Congress.

Addressing a rally in the Ghosi Lok Sabha constituency in Uttar Pradesh while campaigning in the last phase of the Lok Sabha elections, Modi claimed that the INDIA bloc, if voted to power, will have a new prime minister every year, while trying to underline that "too many masons can spoil an under-construction house".

Apart from Ghosi, he also addressed rallies in the Deoria and Mirzapur seats of Purvanchal (eastern Uttar Pradesh).

"The alliance of Opposition parties wants to turn the country's majority community into 'second-class citizens'. The SP



Prime Minister Narendra Modi, UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, Deputy Chief Minister Keshav Prasad Maurya and other leaders during a rally in Mirzapur on Sunday. PTI

and Congress are indulging in vote jihad," he claimed.

Reminding the people of Purvanchal that they had been electing the country's prime minister for the past 10 years, Modi asked, "How can a PM, who is worried about his own chair, provide a strong leadership to the nation? The SP-Congress INDIA alliance says they will

have five prime ministers in five years. One does not even hire so many masons to build a house. They want to have five PMs since they want to share their earnings."

The PM listed what he termed as three "big conspiracies" of the Opposition bloc and said, "First, the people of INDIA alliance will change the

Constitution and write in it afresh that reservation should be given on the basis of religion in India. Second, these INDI people will end the reservation given to SC, ST, OBC. Third, they will give the entire reservation to Muslims on the basis of religion," Modi said.

Modi claimed the "INDI jamaat" has been abusing him for

his opposition to reservation on the basis of religion.

"This (INDIA bloc) group is saying that if they come to power, they will reimpose Article 370 in Kashmir. They will repeal the CAA (Citizenship Amendment) Act which gives citizenship to the victims of Partition. Whose agenda is this... this is what these anti-India forces want?" he asked.

Alleging that the Samajwadi Party brought a bad name to Purvanchal, particularly Mirzapur, during its regime in UP, the PM praised Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath for "cleansing the state of the mafia" and taking forward his "cleanliness drive".

"During the SP regime, the mafia was seen as a vote bank. At that time, people used to shiver in fear. But now, it's the mafia that shivers in fear," he claimed.

Ghazipur MP Afzal Ansari, the brother of gangster-turned politician late Mukhtar Ansari, is contesting on SP ticket from the Ghosi seat.

Modi waived loans of rich, but did not give disaster relief to Himachal: Rahul

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
SHIMLA, MAY 26

CONGRESS LEADER Rahul Gandhi on Sunday said Prime Minister Narendra Modi has only worked for the benefit of 22 millionaires, "waiving off their Rs 16 trillion debt over the past ten years", while neglecting farmers' debts.

He also criticised the media for allegedly not addressing farmers' issues and instead showcasing (Anant) Ambani's wedding. He accused the BJP government of destroying small businesses through demonetisation and faulty implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). Campaigning for Congress's Shimla candidate Vinod Sultanpuri at Nahan in Himachal Pradesh's Sirmour district, Rahul urged voters to support all four Congress candidates in the state. Voting will be held on June 1 in all four Lok Sabha seats — Mandi, Shimla (reserved), Hamirpur, and Kangra — and the six Assembly seats going to by-polls — Dharamshala, Kutlehar, Badsar, Gagret, Lahaul-Spiti, and Sujapur.

Rahul said he and his sister, Priyanka Gandhi, are foot soldiers of the people who would amplify their voices in Delhi. He accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of not assisting when a natural disaster struck Himachal Pradesh, affecting 22,000 families, and alleged that the central government was yet to provide several crores of rupees in disaster relief. Continuing his attack on the PM for alleged



Rahul Gandhi, Himachal Pradesh CM Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu and other Congress leaders at Nahan, Sunday. PTI

favouritism towards businessman Gautam Adani, Rahul said apple growers in Himachal are not getting their dues because of this "partnership".

Rahul alleged that all apple storage facilities have been given to one person (Adani), who controls the prices and stated that the prime minister is working for the benefit of "20-25" individuals. He also accused PM Modi of giving Adani control over seven airports and the arms manufacturing industry. "As long as Modi is in power, Adani's company will continue to profit", he added.

Rahul promised that Congress would aim to create millions of millionaires. "If Congress comes to power, each poor woman will receive Rs 100,000 annually in her account. Farmers will be guaranteed a minimum support price by law. Additionally, the Congress promises to provide 3 million government jobs and increase MGNREGA wages to Rs 400 per day," he said.

PM does not respect farmers one bit: Priyanka

Patiala, Khanna: Kickstarting her Punjab campaign, Congress general secretary Priyanka Gandhi on Sunday launched a scathing attack on PM Narendra Modi over his agriculture policy. She also asked women in Punjab "to be united, understand the power within, stand up to falsehood and make sure Lok Sabha elections in 2024 are fought on real issues".

Addressing a 'Nyay Sankalp rally' in Khanna's new grain market, Priyanka said the PM "simply failed to understand Punjab's jazbaa (spirit) and never respected farmers who made the country self-sufficient with their blood and sweat." "The truth is Modi doesn't respect you...not one bit... Satta ke liye kuch bhi kar daalenge Modi ji (Modi can do anything to be in power)," she said. **ENS**

DELHI CONFIDENTIAL



EARLY VOTE

AMONG DELHIITES who turned up very early to vote during the sixth phase of Lok Sabha polls on May 25 were some Union Ministers. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar was the first male voter at his booth in New Delhi constituency. Housing and Urban Affairs Minister Hardeep Puri reached his booth at 6.45am, 15 minutes before the polling began. He ended up being among the first few voters who exercised their franchise, after stopping to give bytes to the media outside.

PRIME SEGMENT

AS THE date of polling for Varanasi seat is coming closer, some of the top leaders of the BJP have increased their movement in PM Narendra Modi's constituency. Home Minister Amit Shah will be in Varanasi district on Monday, however, he will address a rally in the adjoining Chandauli constituency. BJP president JP Nadda has two programmes lined up in Varanasi constituency. Union minister Giriraj Singh will address a rally, while UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath will take part in two programmes. On Sunday, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar took part in a number of events in Varanasi. Madhya Pradesh CM Mohan Yadav, too, addressed a party. Party's Mahila Morcha president Vanathi Srinivasan interacted with weavers and artisans, and also attended other events.

DIGITAL LIGHTHOUSE

AFTER TAKING a lead in the digital health space during the G20 summit last year, India will again take centre stage at the upcoming World Health Assembly in Geneva. In one of the side events, India will showcase its digital public goods such as the vaccine management platform on the lines of Co-WIN that was used during Covid-19 vaccination drive and digital health accounts. As digital health grows in importance across the world, India has been referred to as the lighthouse country in this space. In fact, the push for digital health was one of the most successful outcomes of India's G20 presidency, with the platform proposed by India already having been launched by WHO even before its annual World Health Assembly meeting.

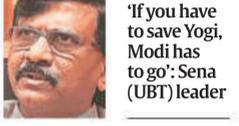
No response from Centre on Prajwal passport, says Karnataka Home Minister

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
MUMBAI, MAY 26

SHIV SENA (UBT) leader Sanjay Raut has alleged that PM Narendra Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Maharashtra Deputy CM Devendra Fadnavis tried to defeat Union Minister Nitin Gadkari in Nagpur in Lok Sabha elections.

"Gadkari yancha Nagpurat parabhav vhaava yasathi Modi, Shah, Fadnavis ekatra ale, prayatna kele (To ensure Gadkari's defeat in Nagpur, Modi, Shah and Fadnavis came together and made attempts)," the MP wrote in his weekly column in the Sena-owned newspaper, Saamana.

Raut further wrote that Fadnavis campaigned for Gadkari only when it became apparent that the Union minister was not going to be defeated. "Parabhav hoot nahi yachi khatri patlyawar Fadnavis hey nailajani Nagpurat pracharala utar... (When it became evident



'If you have to save Yogi, Modi has to go': Sena (UBT) leader

Gadkari was not going to get defeated, Fadnavis had no option but to campaign for him".

Raut, who is the executive editor of Saamana, has also alleged that "if Amit Shah is in power again, he will finish UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath". He wrote, "Yogi ko bachana hain toh Modi ko jana hain (If you have to save Yogi, Modi has to go)".

The Shiv Sena (UBT) leader's claims have invited strong reactions from the state BJP, which has rubbished them as absurd.

State BJP president Chandrashekhar Bawankule said, "Sanjay Raut is known for making statements which are never based on facts. This time he has crossed all limits of decency..."

Bundelkhand varsity VC, 3 others booked over student's death in '23

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
LUCKNOW, MAY 26

AN FIR has been registered against the Vice Chancellor, the head of a department (HoD), a senior warden and a hostel matron of Bundelkhand University in Jhansi in connection with the death of a B.Tech final-year student allegedly by suicide last year, police said.

The accused are V-C Prof Mukesh Pandey; Prof Zakir Ali, the head of the Department of Electronics and Communication; senior warden Dr Shipra Gupta and hostel matron Suman.

No arrest has been made in the case so far and the investigation is going on, said Atul Kumar, in-charge of the Navabad police station where the case was registered on court documents.

Jai Prakash Rai, the father of Srishti Rai (21), a resident of Gorakhpur, has alleged that Srishti took her life after mental harassment by those named in the FIR lodged under Section 306 (abetment of suicide) of IPC. The body of Srishti, who was in the fifth semester of B.Tech, was found hanging in a hostel room.

Rai alleged that since his daughter got admission to the hostel, Dr Shipra and Suman used

LVM3 commercialisation is a big step forward, at right time for India, say experts

ANONNA DUTT
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

ISRO'S RECENT invitation to private firms to build India's heaviest rocket is a long-awaited step to ensure greater participation of the private sector in the country's space programme. And it will help India emerge stronger in the international space market amid a rapidly-increasing demand for satellite launches, according to experts *The Indian Express* spoke to.

Earlier this month, ISRO's commercial arm, New Space India Limited (NSIL), invited applications from private firms for "end-to-end" manufacturing of Launch Vehicle Mark-III or LVM3, the rocket that was used in the Chandrayaan-2 and Chandrayaan-3 lunar missions.

Previously called GSLV-MkIII, the LVM3 is ISRO's most powerful rocket so far. It can carry up to 4-tonne satellites into the geostationary orbit and up to 8-tonne satellites into the lower earth orbits.

According to the offer, ISRO's plan is to have a 14-year collaboration with the selected private entity. The first two years would be the "development phase" for transfer of technology and know-how and then, over the



LVM3 is ISRO's most powerful rocket so far. File

next 12 years, it is envisaged that the private partner would be able to build four to six LVM3 rockets each year.

"With the commercialisation of LVM3, Indian companies will now have a wider array of launch vehicles to offer in the global market. It will increase the country's share in the global market," Lieutenant General Anil Kumar Bhatt (ret'd), director general, Indian Space Association, told *The Indian Express*.

And, Lt Gen Bhatt added, it will allow ISRO to focus on the NGLV (Next Generation Launch Vehicle), a much bigger launch vehicle being developed as part of India's vision to set up its own space station and send an Indian

to the Moon.

Akshat Johri, assistant general manager of IIFCL, a government-owned project advisory company which has assisted NSIL in finalising the commercialisation procedures, said the decision to allow private manufacturing of LVM3 has come at a "very opportune moment".

"As of now, Falcon 9 of SpaceX is the only significant launch vehicle taking heavy payloads to space. Chinese launch vehicles are busy with their country's own missions and Russian vehicles like Soyuz are not being used by many due to war-related sanctions. The Ariane Group (of Europe) is still testing its new Ariane 6 rocket, after having retired Ariane 5 in July last year, and JAXA of Japan has just finished testing its H3 rocket.

"This is a very opportune moment for India to grab some space for LVM3. There is a growing market for satellites in the lower earth orbits as well," he said.

Besides the LVM3, ISRO has also given private players a chance to make the recently developed Small Satellite Launch Vehicle (SSLV) and its main workhorse, PSLV. The first privately manufactured PSLV is likely to take flight in August this year. **FULL REPORT**
www.indianexpress.com

NDA curriculum revamp in pipeline, in line with evolving nature of war

SUSHANT KULKARNI
PUNE, MAY 26

A THOROUGH revamp of the curriculum of the National Defence Academy (NDA) is in the pipeline to incorporate key subjects in line with the changing nature of warfare. The syllabus overhaul is expected to add advanced studies in network centric warfare, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning as well as warfare in the domains of cyber, space and information. The changes are being incorporated after recommendations from the Inter Services Study Group, officials said.

The NDA, the premier tri-services training institute of India, admits both male and female cadets in the age group of 16.5 to 19 years. These cadets, who undergo a three-year-long

training at the academy, also undertake academic courses while completing a plethora of service subjects.

Since 1973, the NDA cadets receive degrees from the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi. Cadets can choose between Bachelor's degrees including BA with History, Political Science Economics and Geography, BSc with Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics and BSc Computer Science with Computer Science, Physics and Mathematics as subjects. The Air Force and Navy cadets can also opt for B.Tech degrees where they complete three years at the academy and the last year at their respective service academies.

Besides their stream subjects, cadets also study English, Hindi, foreign languages, basic engineering and cross-streams subjects, making the academic syl-

labus of the NDA as demanding as the military curriculum.

The Academy was established as the Inter Services Wing (ISW) of the armed forces on January 1 in 1949 at Clement Town in Dehradun. It was later renamed as Joint Services Wing (JSW). While the first course had commenced on January 9, 1949, the academy was shifted to the present Khadakwasla campus in Pune in 1954. Since its raising, the NDA has undergone major revamps of the curriculum for the cadets at regular intervals in line with the strategic paradigms of the time. Significant among these being one after the recommendation of the Mahajani Committee in 1969 and another by the Committee for the Review of the Training of Officers of the three Services (CORTOS) in 1986. The present syllabus of NDA is the result of periodic reviews by



Cadets undergo a 3-year training at the NDA in Pune. File

two committees, namely, the Inter-Services Study Group (ISSG) constituted by the Chiefs of Staff Committee in 2004, 2013 and 2017 as well as the Academic Study Groups (ASG) that were constituted along with each ISSG. Addressing the passing out

cadets of the 146th course of the NDA on Friday, Chief of the Army Staff, General Manoj Pande said, "The character of warfare is undergoing a profound change. Disruptive technologies, advancements in space, cyber and information domains and progression

in the capabilities of conventional means of war are making the battle space more complex, contested and lethal. In order to operate in the battlefield of tomorrow, you need to enhance your technical competency thresholds."

While delivering the academic report of the 146th term during its convocation ceremony on Thursday, NDA principal Prof Om Prakash Shukla said, "The hallmark of academic training at the NDA is its continual review and realignment with emerging requirements of the services as well as changing scenarios in the academic world. During the bygone term several vital issues of academic curriculum have been deliberated as part of the ISSG leading to enhancement of academic threshold through various proposals. This includes a thorough revamping of academic syllabi through the forthcoming ASG."

Officials said that the proposed updated curriculum is currently being reviewed by the Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff.

Shukla further said, "In line with the Chiefs of Staff Committee directives of developing the academic mindset and the spirit of inquisitiveness among cadets, which are indispensable for future military leaders, an innovative instruction methodology is being evolved that would lay emphasis on these aspects. Besides, benchmarking of academic performance has been institutionalised during this term that envisages an increased number of cadets in the high performing brackets. I am delighted to share that the result of this term has been much above the benchmark adopted for the academic training, with around 32 per cent of

the cadets in the bracket of 75 per cent marks and above."

Officials said that the revamp of the syllabus would include strategically crucial subjects like Network Central Warfare, which denotes effective use of information technology and computer networking tools to form networks of various force elements in play on the battlefield.

Other key additions include AI and machine learning with their applications in autonomous systems, predictive analytics, image recognition, tactical decision support, simulation and strategic planning.

The revamp also includes subjects related to warfare in the domains of cyber, space and information equip cadets to effectively navigate and counter emerging threats in modern conflict scenarios with strategic proficiency, officials said.

Private bus rams shanties, kills 4 migrant workers in Goa

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
PANAJI, MAY 26

A PRIVATE BUS, carrying workers of a private company, rammied hutments at Verna Industrial Estate in South Goa Saturday night, killing 4 migrant labourers from Bihar, who were sleeping, and injuring four others, said police.

According to police, the incident was reported around 11.30 pm. The bus driver, Bharat Govakar (52), a resident of Cortalim, failed to negotiate a turn on the left from a slope and rammied the hutments on the roadside. The deceased labourers were involved in pavement and road construction work, said police.

SP South Goa, Sunita Sawant said, "Four workers succumbed to injuries, while four others are undergoing treatment at the sub-district hospital in Margao. At the time of the accident, when the police questioned the accused bus driver, he was smelling of alcohol."

"The bus driver also suffered injuries and is undergoing treatment at the sub-district hospital," SP Sawant added. Police said the driver would be taken into custody after his discharge.

The deceased have been identified as Vinod Singh, Anil Mahato, Ramesh Mahato and Rajendra Mahato while the injured are Dinesh Kumar Singh, Karma Mahato, Rajesh Kumar Mandal and Naresh Singh.

Goa CM Pramod Sawant said on X, "Procedure has been started to prosecute the driver of the bus who drove under the influence of alcohol, along with contractor & subcontractors... All accused are being charged for causing injuries & death. Govt shall also blacklist contractors & subcontractors..."

Rupendra Kumar, whose uncle was among the victims, said he survived since he had stepped out of his shanty for a phone call. "Instead of taking the turn, the bus directly rammied the hutments. The driver was drunk. After the collision, he sat near the pavement and continued drinking and threatened us," said Kumar.

PM REVIEWS SITUATION, MAMATA SAYS 'THIS STORM SHALL PASS TOO'

Cyclone Remal hits coast: Air, train ops suspended, heavy rain in south Bengal

Wind speed of up to 120 kmph, high wave alert issued

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
KOLKATA, BENGALURU, MAY 26

CYCLONE REMAL, this year's first cyclone in the Bay of Bengal which triggered suspension of rail and air services in West Bengal, hit the Indian coastline late Sunday night in an area between Sagar Islands and Khepupara in neighbouring Bangladesh.

The cyclone touched the coastline after 9 pm on Sunday, and the 'landfall' continued for about four hours, the IMD said. Remal had wind speeds, ranging between 110 and 120 km per hour, when it hit the coast. The Indian coastline along northern Andhra Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal, as also the adjoining areas of Bangladesh, routinely receive much stronger cyclones every year.

Through most of Sunday, the southern districts of West Bengal and adjoining areas of Bangladesh received moderate intensity rainfall, accompanied by gusts. Digha recorded about 45 mm rainfall and areas in South Parganas district received between 25 and 35 mm rainfall on Sunday.

The Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services (INCOIS) warned of high waves measuring 3.5 to 7.2 metres till Monday night along the coastline between Digha and Bakkhali in West Bengal. Rainfall is expected to continue in most areas of southern Bengal Monday as well, particularly in the districts of North and South Parganas, Purba Medinipur, Howrah and Hooghly, the IMD said.

As a precautionary measure, the authorities suspended flight operations at the NSCBI Airport in Kolkata for 21 hours. Officials



In Kolkata on Sunday. State government has set up a 24x7 control room at Nabanna to monitor the situation. Partha Paul

said 349 flights – both domestic and international – were suspended on Sunday and regular air traffic is expected to resume at 9 am Monday.

The disruption left many passengers stranded, with some taking shelter outside the airports. Passengers also complained that they weren't informed about the suspended flights on time.

Meanwhile, Eastern Railway officials said the cyclone impacted train schedules for both Sunday and Monday. Over 40 trains were cancelled and five trains were rescheduled in the Sealdah division of the Eastern Railway.

"We are in touch with meteorological authorities and as a precautionary measure have installed camps of officers and staff at different places to take immediate action as required. Pumping stations are open. Standby vehicles

are also ready. Hoardings have been removed as a precautionary measure. A few trains have been cancelled," said Kaushik Mitra, Chief PRO, Eastern Railway.

In New Delhi, Prime Minister Narendra Modi chaired a meeting to review the preparedness for cyclone Remal at his 7, Lok Kalyan Marg residence, which was attended by Principal Secretary to PM, Cabinet Secretary, Home Secretary, DG (NDRF), DG (IMD), and Member Secretary (NDMA).

In a statement, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) said, "The Prime Minister was briefed that the National Crisis Management Committee is in regular touch with the Government of West Bengal... The PM said that the Centre has extended full support to the state government and must continue to do so. He said that the Ministry of Home Affairs should

monitor the situation and take a review after the landfall of the cyclone in order to extend necessary assistance for restoration. The Prime Minister has instructed that apart from 12 NDRF teams that have already been deployed in West Bengal and one in Odisha, more teams be kept on standby which can move within one hour. The Indian Coast Guard to deploy its assets for any emergency."

In West Bengal, the state government set up a 24x7 control room at Nabanna, its secretariat, to monitor the situation in coastal districts and other areas. A control room was also set up in Sundarban to monitor the cyclone's movement.

"The control room will collaborate with the police, disaster management teams, Kolkata Municipal Corporation, and emergency response forces like the

National Disaster Response Force (NDRF), State Disaster Response Force (SDRF), the Indian Coast Guard and the civil defence," the state government said.

While CM Mamata Banerjee urged people to stay safe, saying "this storm shall pass too", Union Home Minister Amit Shah said that adequate deployment of NDRF has been made in all the areas where cyclone may have an impact. Earlier in the day, the IMD issued a warning about potential flooding and significant damage to various structures, power and communication lines, roads, crops, and orchards in the South 24 and North 24 Parganas districts.

The authorities have also set up flood relief camps for about 1.10 lakh people displaced by the storm.

WITH ENDS, NEW DELHI

GRP ex-chief gave nod to hoarding that collapsed after his transfer: SIT officer

MOHAMED THAYER
MUMBAI, MAY 26

FORMER COMMISSIONER of the Government Railway Police (GRP), Quaiser Khalid, gave permission for the hoarding that collapsed on a petrol pump in Ghatkopar on May 13, killing 17, three days after his transfer order was issued, without inviting tenders, said an officer with the SIT formed to probe the incident.

It was on December 19, 2022 – his last working day, that Khalid signed the file approving the application made by Ego Media Pvt Ltd, the SIT official said. He said that while Khalid's transfer order was issued on December 16, 2022, he vacated office on December 19, when he gave the permission.

"Officers generally take a few days to move to the new posting after their transfer. However, during this period, they are not supposed to take monetary or policy decisions... In this case, taking a monetary decision on his last working day was not correct," the officer said.

Police sources said while permissions for 3 other hoardings at the spot were given to the same agency after tendering process, in the case of the hoarding that collapsed, even the tendering process was not carried out. "This is in gross violation of administrative norms and propriety. We will record the statements of GRP officials and take a decision on further action," the official said.

When contacted, Khalid declined to comment, however, a source close to him said, "It is true that he signed the approval after his transfer order was issued and on the last day of his duty, but the negotiations were on for a month. I don't understand what wrong did he commit and which rule did he break."

On giving approval for the col-

lapsed hoarding without tendering process, the person said, "Earlier, for three hoardings, Ego Media had emerged the winner and so for the fourth hoarding (the one that collapsed) it was decided to offer to same company on the same terms and conditions, without the formal tendering process."

Khalid is a 1997-batch ADG rank officer and is currently with the Protection of Civil Rights. The advertising agency owner, Bhavesh Bhande, has been arrested for installing the hoarding without proper approvals.

The SIT had also written to the Railways to get clarity on whether the land belonged to them. Earlier, the accused had claimed he didn't take BMC permission as he was informed by GRP the land belonged to the Railways and thus was not in BMC jurisdiction. "The Indian Railways clarified through a letter Sunday that the land did not belong to them. This means permission should have been taken from the BMC. It was not done," the source said.

The *Indian Express* had earlier reported that in 2023, a team from the BMC had inspected the hoarding site and raised objections. The same was communicated to Ego Media Pvt Ltd. However, when the company said they had the permission from GRP, the BMC raised it with the GRP.

The GRP responded to their communication saying the BMC cannot take action against any structure on a GRP property. As the matter was taken to court by the BMC, and was ruled in favour of Railways in the HC, the matter around jurisdiction, is currently in the SC. The SIT is likely to summon BMC officials to find how such a large hoarding was allowed to come up without them taking action. "Depending on the statements, the SIT will decide if the civics officials too are legally culpable," an official said.

Man accused of killing 4 guards in their sleep in MP gets life term

ANAND MOHAN J
BHOPAL, MAY 26

A SESSIONS court in Madhya Pradesh's Sagar district sentenced Shiv Prakash Dhurve, accused of murdering four on-duty security guards while they were sleeping, to life imprisonment.

The serial killings took place in a span of a week in 2022. It began on August 28, when 57-year-old Kalyan Lodhi, who was posted as a security guard at a factory, was found dead with his head smashed in. The next day, Shambhu Saran Dubey, 60, who was on duty at a college, was found murdered in the same way. The third murder was reported on August 30, when 45-year-old Mangal Ahirwar was killed with a plougher. After this, another security guard, Uttam Rajak, was killed at an under-construction railway bridge in May.

The killings had sent a wave

of panic in Bhopal, following which a task force was formed to arrest the culprit. After his arrest, Dhurve was sent to an isolation cell in Bhopal central jail, because other inmates feared for their lives as he was accused of killing people in their sleep, officials said.

He has since been convicted for the murder of Dubey, and Additional Sessions Judge Prashant Kumar sentenced him to life imprisonment, saying that "the accused deserves severe punishment to send the right message to society, but not the death penalty".

The conviction was based on evidence such as the mobile phone of the deceased being recovered from the accused, and the deceased's blood being found on the accused's blood-stained clothes.

The judgment said the DNA match on the blood from the accused's clothes "proves beyond reasonable doubt that there is a

complete chain of direct, circumstantial and scientific evidence" to establish that Dhurve had committed the murder by "intentionally striking him with a stone on his head".

Assistant district prosecution officer Saurabh Dimha told the court that on the night of August 29, Dubey was found by his colleague, Jagdish Raikwar, "lying on the ground with blood oozing from his head" at the newly constructed building of the Arts and Commerce College in Sagar.

Dimha told *The Indian Express* that the accused, Dhurve, is "not a psychopath but had a criminal mindset".

"We had conducted his mental health checkup and found that he was not mentally unwell. He committed the murders for money, among other issues," he said.

Dhurve had worked as a waiter in Goa and Pune, and returned to Sagar in 2022 after he lost his job.

On way to Uttarakhand, 3 children among 12 killed as truck overturns on their bus

PRESSTrust OF INDIA
SHAHJAHANPUR, MAY 26

TWELVE PEOPLE, including six women and three children, headed to the Purnagiri temple in Uttarakhand were killed when a gravel-loaded dumper truck overturned on their bus in this district, police said Sunday.

Nine other pilgrims were injured in the Saturday night incident and admitted to the Government Medical College here, a senior official said. Purnagiri temple in Uttarakhand's Tanakpur is about 180 km from Shahjahanpur.

Shahjahanpur SP Ashok Kumar Meena told *PTI* the accident took place at Hajiyapur village under the Khutar police station area when the privately owned bus carrying 59 passengers from Sitapur had halted at a roadside eatery on its way to the temple. While some of the devotees had alighted for dinner,



Rescue underway after the accident in Shahjahanpur. PTI

others waited inside the bus. Suddenly, the dumper truck carrying gravel lost control, overturned and fell onto their bus, unloading the content on the waiting pilgrims, the SP said.

According to Meena, 10 passengers identified as Sudhanshu (7), Aditya (8), Ajit (15), Rohini (20), Pramod (30), Seema (30), Suman Devi (36), Ramgopal (48),

Shiv Shankar (48), and Chutki (50) died on the spot, while Sonavati (45) and Bindra (50) succumbed during treatment.

Police said that the victims – all residents of Kamlapur in Sitapur district, had started about 6 pm Saturday. The incident took place around 11 pm, they said.

According to eyewitnesses, there was no way left from where

victims could be taken outside. The rescue work was done using mobile phone torches and vehicle lights, Ghanashyam Gupta, an eyewitness, said.

The SP and DM Umesh Pratap Singh reached the spot. The driver of the dumper fled and police are looking for him.

According to police, when SP Meena entered the bus, he heard the faint sound of someone yelling and when he removed the gravel, he saw a 12-year-old child, Yashraj, who could be rescued after two hours of struggle.

Chief Medical Superintendent at Government Medical College, Nepal Singh, said that post-mortem have been done.

President Droupadi Murmu Sunday in a post in Hindi on X said, "... I express my condolences to the bereaved families and pray for the speedy recovery of those injured." CM Yogi Adityanath directed the administration to ensure injured are given proper treatment.

Six killed as car hits truck in Karnataka

Bengaluru: Six persons died on the spot after the car they were travelling in jumped the median and hit a container truck heading in the opposite direction.

The incident took place around 5.45 am Sunday when the family members were returning from Mangaluru to Bengaluru. The deceased are Sunand (40), Narayanaswamy (50), Nethra (25), Ravi Kumar (30), Chethan (7), Gunashekar (28), all residents of Devanahalli, Bengaluru rural district.

According to sources, the family had hired a car to go to Mangaluru for treatment. Gunashekar was driving. A police officer said they suspect Gunashekar's drowsiness might have caused accident on busy NH 75.

The bodies were shifted to Hassan Institute Of Medical Sciences. ADG (traffic and road safety) Alok Kumar said on X, "in last 24 hrs 51 lives lost in road accidents in Karnataka, one of the highest toll in recent past." **ENS**

From run-ins at FTII to the Grand Prix at Cannes: The long journey of Payal Kapadia

RAVINA WARKAD
PUNE, MAY 26

THE BUZZ at the sleepy campus of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) in Pune hasn't died down ever since its alumna Payal Kapadia won the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival for her film *All We Imagine As Light* on Saturday. Her films are being screened on campus and conversations steer invariably to her work.

"The feeling is of course great. Students here have rejoiced the big win of Payal's film at Cannes. It's an enormous win not just for them but for the FTII student community too in someway," said Barsha Dasgupta, a cinematography student.

"We are celebrating and planning to invite her for the screening of the film on the campus once she returns," said Atharv Karvekar, a member of FTII Students' Body. The institute is thrilled at the

unprecedented wins by its alumni and students – Chidananda Naik's *Sunflowers Were The First Ones To Know* winning the La Cinef Award for best short film and Maisam Ali's *In Retreat* screened at the ACID side bar programme at Cannes.

"It's a moment of pride for FTII as its alumni create history at Cannes... FTII cherishes the glorious achievements of its alumni at this mega international stage of cinema," FTII posted on X.

In his post on X, R Madhavan, the present chairman of FTII's Governing Council wrote, "Big Big Congratulations to all the winners from India at Cannes... Spectacular year for India and so much to cheer about especially the big WIN by the students of FTII."

Cinematographer Mayank Khurana, Kapadia's batchmate who shot her short film *Afternoon Clouds* (2017), remembers their association. "Filmmaking in itself is a very emotional process and Payal is a very emotional film-



Kapadia after the Cannes award ceremony. AP

maker. The stories she tells are about love and empathy and friendship. They drain you emotionally too. At the same time, being part of the protests was also an emotionally draining experience. It was a duty call from both sides: a passion project of a film and a fight for the FTII community, the institute, the country. So

there were times when we kept our film project on the back burner. But it was a part of the curriculum, so we did complete it and then it went to Cannes."

Afternoon Clouds was shot in the midst of the students' protest of 2015 against the appointment of TV actor Gajendra Chauhan as the Governing Council chairman of FTII. The protests lasted 139 days but were followed by a crackdown by the administration.

This period is captured in *A Night Of Knowing Nothing* made in 2021. Himanshu Prajapati, also an FTII alumni and co-writer for the documentary, recalls just how difficult it was to make the film. "We had a lot of material from the interviews shot during the protests. When we discussed the structure, it felt impossible to show all the interviews. So we decided to build characters who would portray the accumulation of the feelings that students were going through." *A Night Of Knowing Nothing* was screened at Cannes too.

Foreign exchange programme, scholarship withheld

In December 2016, Kapadia – then a final year film direction student – was among six students who qualified for the institute's foreign exchange programme. She was among eight students who had qualified to receive a scholarship of ₹22,000.

Kapadia, however, couldn't avail of both these opportunities. The institute administration "disqualified" her and several others owing to "disciplinary issues", especially due to their alleged involvement in the August 2015 incident of "forcible prolonged detention" of the then institute director Prashant Pathrabe, in the midst of the students' strike against Chauhan's appointment. Kapadia is among 35 students named by Pune Police in a complaint by Pathrabe. The case is still pending before a Pune court.

NIKHILA HENRY
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

ON THE Cannes red carpet, director Payal Kapadia and her three talented actors – Kani Kusruti, Chhaya Kadam and Divya Prabha – throbbed with a different spirit. Instead of just posing for the cameras, they danced. Why?

In an interview with *The Indian Express*, Prabha, who played one of the women leads in the Grand Prix winning *All We Imagine As Light*, said: "We danced without any inhibitions to capture that moment..."

On May 25, Kapadia became the first Indian filmmaker to win the Grand Prix, the second-most prestigious award at the Cannes Film Festival after the Palme d'Or.

"The dance can be interpreted as a triumph of womanhood, of the struggles we had gone through to achieve what we achieved," Prabha said. This, however, was not the only mode of expression from the film's



The film's cast on the Cannes red carpet. Reuters

cast. Another lead actor, Kusruti, held a bag resembling a watermelon slice – an act of solidarity with the war-ravaged Gaza.

For Prabha, however, the role was what mattered the most. It was unlike anything she had done in her decade-long film career.

Kapadia's team had rehearsed for months, Prabha said. "The shoot was for about 40 days. But I was associated with the film for about eight months and had rehearsed the role for two," she reminisced while on a train to Italy.

The role needed the time she

spent on it. She explained why: "I am a 33-year-old who got to play the role of a 25-year-old. So, I had to get into the character – walk and talk the way she would and spontaneous the way she was."

While happy that *All We Imagine As Light* won the Grand Prix, Prabha is not sure if this could be a career-altering moment. "After every major role I did, I felt a break was in sight. But it was not to be. This (win) can be a break if I get good opportunities in the future," she said. **FULL REPORT ON**

www.indianexpress.com

Classifieds PERSONAL I, Siddhant Singh, S/o-Harsh Kumar, R/o H.No.53/B, Roop Bhawan, Near Telephone Exchange, Dilshad Garden, Shahdara, Delhi-110095, inform that Siddhant Singh & Siddhant Singh Sawalia both are one & the same person. 0040730481-2

I, Japman Singh Sethi, S/O-Harsh Sethi, R/O-C-5/121-B, Keshav Puram, Delhi-110035, inform that Japman Sethi and Japman Singh Sethi both names are same person. 0040730396-8

I, Harsh Kumar, R/O-H.No. 53/B, Roop Bhawan, Near Telephone Exchange, Dilshad Garden, Shahdara, East Delhi, Delhi-110095, inform that Harsh Kumar & Harsh Kumar Sawalia both are the same person. 0040730481-1

I, HITHERTO KNOWN AS VIKRAM CHAUHAN alias VIKRAMA CHAUHAN, S/O-ACHHAIBER CHAUHAN, R/O-H.No.-848, GTB-NAGAR, DDA-QTRS GTB-ENCLAVE, MANDOLI, NORTH EAST-DELHI, DELHI-110093, HAVE CHANGED MY NAME AND SHALL HEREAFTER BE KNOWN AS VIKRAMA CHAUHAN. 0040730481-5

I, GAURAV KUMAR, S/O-AJAY KUMAR TOMAR, R/O C-3-1408, Supertech Ecovillage-2, Greater-Noida West, Gautambudh Nagar (UP)-201306, have changed my name to GAURAV. 040730481-4

I, CHAVI SAXENA, W/O-DEEPAK SAXENA, R/O 857, AKSHARDHAM APARTMENTS, POCKET-3, SECTOR-19, DWARKA, DELHI-110075, HAVE CHANGED MY NAME TO CHAVI BHATTNAGAR, FOR ALL FUTURE PURPOSE. 0040730481-3

I, Arvind Nasker S/o Thakur Das Nasker R/o 181 Pawsara Road, Aurangabad, Bulandshahr have changed my name to Arvind Kumar Nasker. 0070904842-1

I, Amar Kumar Singh S/o Kamal Kishore Singh, R/o B-36, Gujranwala Apt. Vikaspuri, J-Block, Tilak Nagar, West Delhi, New Delhi - 110018, inform that Amar Kumar Singh & Amar Singh both are one & the same person. 0040730474-1

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उ. प्र. प्रदूषण नियंत्रण बोर्ड क्षेत्रीय कार्यालय: 1219/1, ई-ब्लॉक राजेंद्र नगर, बरेली-243122 - प्रेस विज्ञापित - पर्यावरणीय स्वीकृति हेतु लोक सुनवाई के लिये आम सूचना

BANGALORE WATER SUPPLY AND SEWERAGE BOARD INVITATION FOR TENDER (Only through kpp portal) BWSSB invites tenders in Two cover system from eligible tenderers for the following works.

WESTERN RAILWAY-AHMEDABAD DIVISION COMPREHENSIVE AMC OF EOT CRANE Tender Notice (NIT): E-Tender is invited from eligible contractors for the following work: Name of the Work: Comprehensive AMC of EOT Crane 15/6 Ton (4 Nos.) & EOT Crane 25/5 Ton (1 Nos.) installed at GIM (Gandhidham) C&W ROH & Sick line depot with material for a period of 03 years in Ahmedabad Division of WR; Tender No: Re-M/478/C&W/EOT-Crane; Estimate Cost of work: ₹ 1,10,55,467.88/-

NORTH CENTRAL RAILWAY E-Procurement Tender Notice No.-E.T.D./C.N.B./2024-25/06 Date: 22.05.2024 E-PROCUREMENT TENDER NOTICE On behalf of the President of India, The Senior Materials Manager, E.T.D./Kanpur invites the following e-procurement tender.

NOTICE FOR LOSS OF SHARE CERTIFICATES Notice is hereby given that the following share certificate(s) issued by the Company namely: ICICI Bank Limited (CIN-L65190GJ1994PLC021012) are stated to have been lost or misplaced and the registered shareholder(s) thereof have applied for issue of duplicate share certificate(s).

DAY AFTER 28 PEOPLE KILLED IN FIRE TRAGEDY

No fire clearance: Rajkot game zone kept flying under radar for 3 years

THE GAME zone in Rajkot, where a massive fire left at least 28 people dead on Saturday evening, kept flying under the radar of the fire department of the Rajkot Municipal Corporation (RMC) for three years. The indoor gaming zone was developed in a temporary structure and even had police approval, The Indian Express has learnt.



Debris at the game zone site where a major fire broke out on Saturday evening. Express

Rajkot Police Commissioner Raju Bhargava on Sunday said that the TRP Game Zone began operating in 2021, expanded in 2023 and further expansion was ongoing. Officials earlier confirmed on Saturday that the facility did not have a fire clearance.

Meanwhile, Bhargava said that the proprietors of the gaming zone applied for booking licenses for ticketed entry to their facility twice. Two of the six partners - Dhaval Thakkar and Yuvrajsinh Solanki - submitted separate applications to Rajkot Police for seeking booking licenses. "One licence was sought by Thakkar for part of the game zone in 2021 and the second part was sought by Solanki in November 2023, essentially for go-karts."

'Man-made disaster': HC takes suo motu cognizance

Ahmedabad: A day after at least 27 people, including children, were killed in a massive fire that broke out at a private amusement park/gaming zone in Rajkot, the Gujarat High Court Sunday took suo motu cognizance of the incident.

Terminating it a "man-made disaster", a special bench of Justices Biren Vaishnav and Devan Desai on Sunday sought a report from the state government and municipal corporations on the provisions under which such gaming zones were allowed to run.

The bench also took note of reports that indicate that Rajkot gaming zone "appears to have taken advantage of the loopholes in the Gujarat Comprehensive General Development Control Regulations that paved the way for creating illegal recreational activities".

"...we take notice of the fact that such gaming zones have come up in... Ahmedabad on Sindhu Bhavan Road and SP Ring Road which pose a significant threat to public safety." Directing the Registry to file a suo motu cognizance taken by the bench as a public interest litigation, the bench posted the matter for further hearing Monday. ENS

Pune crash victim's brother seeks trial in fast-track court

Pune: Samarpreet Koshta, brother of late Ashwini Koshta, demanded the Pune Porsche crash case be tried in a fast-track court so that she gets speedy justice. He has also sought the juvenile be tried as an adult, saying he might otherwise repeat the crime. "...we saw how the builder tried to blame the driver. That's why we want the case to be tried in a fast-track court," he said. ENS

CROSSWORD 5374

ACROSS 1 Poor gecko is starting scratching; reports unfit for duty (4,4) 5 Most of the people in the service (4) 9 Return an act of respect for a man of substance (5) 10 Monks and nuns may dwell this way (7) 11 It pushes up the water rate as well in redevelopment (8,4) 13 Foreign affairs? (6) 14 Cause for sanity (6) 17 Where to find data on unmarried people of one rank? (2,6,4) 20 Paint I'm mixing in drums (7) 21 I buy and sell to perfection (5) 22 About a thousand sheets of paper (4) 23 Really look on exams as trials of ability (8)

Solutions Crossword 5373 Across: 1 Incessant, 8 Osier, 9 Several, 10 Spasms, 11 Denied, 12 Improved, 15 In flight, 18 In tact, 20 Echoes, 21 Initial, 22 Dense, 23 Somewhere Down; 2 Niece, 3 Emetic, 4 Standing, 5 Torpor, 6 Missive, 7 President, 11 Dividends, 13 Patience, 14 Offhand, 16 Ibbexes, 17 Stitch, 19 Chair

OVER THE HEDGE by Michael Fry & T Lewis



DAY TODAY BY PETER VIDAL



CALVIN & HOBBS by Bill Watterson



MARVIN by Tom Armstrong



JUMBLED WORDS

Given below are four jumbled words. Solve the jumbles to make proper words and move them to the respective squares below. Select the letters in the shaded squares and jumble them to get the answer for the given clue. He who knows when he... fight and when he... will be victorious. - Sun Tzu (3,.,6)

MRAAO AGRYNN ACHNT EHLNCC

SUDOKU 5573 Difficulty Level 1s Instructions To solve a Sudoku puzzle, every digit from 1 to 9 must appear in each of the nine vertical columns, in each of the nine horizontal rows and in each of the nine boxes.

SOLUTION SUDOKU 5572

VIRGO (Aug 24 - Sep 23) Expect an increasingly easy ride at work. What is so pleasant is that you are the last person to expect that circumstances should be so favourable. In fact, you'll be in the powerful position of deciding whether ordinary mortals get a look-in or not.

15 ECONOMY

DISPOSING A PATENT TAKES 58 MONTHS IN INDIA, 20 MONTHS IN CHINA, 23 MONTHS IN US

With high withdrawals, patent process still under stress; approvals up, says govt

RAVIDUTTA MISHRA
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

A LITTLE over two days after Proctor and Gamble (P&G) received a request for clarification on its patent application on October 5, 2018 for a detergent composition, the patent office rejected its application on October 8 without giving the company the prescribed six months to deal with the issue. Following a legal challenge, the Delhi High Court in an order on December 8, 2023 pulled up the patent office saying that the manner of dealing with the application filed by the American multinational company was "extremely arbitrary and whimsical".

In March 2023, the Delhi High Court pulled up the patent office for passing "mechanical, cut-paste order" while rejecting Blackberry Ltd's invention application saying that the patent office "must bear in mind that the question of grant and rejection of a patent is a serious matter". Not only did the court order the application to be decided by another officer, it suggested the Controller General of Patents, Designs and Trademarks (CG-PDTM) take "necessary administrative action".

In 2018, the anti-corruption branch of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) booked SP Subramanian, Deputy Controller and branch head in the office of Controller-General of Patents, Designs and Trademarks for demanding a bribe of Rs 10 lakh for releasing a patent. The patent applicant in this case had first applied for the patent in 2010 and was allegedly made to wait for five years to get a patent.

Arbitrary refusals and procedural inconsistencies have marred the track record of India's patent office, pushing the share of patent applications withdrawn in the country to one of the highest in the world at a time when countries such as the US, Japan, South Korea and China are using

INDIA'S PATENT DELAYS & WITHDRAWALS

	Total application processed	Granted	Rejected	Withdrawn or abandoned	Number of examiners (FTE)	First office action (months)	Final office decision (months)
2022	51,052	30,490	5,198	15,337	597	4	51
2021	42,525	30,721	5,720	6,084	600	6	50
2020	50,341	26,361	4,994	18,986	615	18	42
2019	62,757	23,578	5,157	34,022	616	27	48
2018	48,755	14,130	2,325	32,300	521	36	52

FTE: Full time equivalent

Source: World Intellectual Property Indicators (WIPO)

their patent processing systems to foster scientific research and technological innovation.

While admitting to key shortcomings such as shortage of manpower in the patent office, government officials contend that they have begun addressing these issues and started conducting open house sessions to address grievances, which have improved the process of granting patents over the last 12 months.

Allegation of corruption filed with CVC

Amid multiple cases raising question marks over the operations of Controller General of Patents Designs and Trademarks (CGPDTM), which is responsible for administering Intellectual Property Laws in India, a new complaint regarding mismanagement has been filed with the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) which looks into corruption in administration and public services. Citing a whistleblower, the leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha and Congress Member of Parliament (MP) Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, in a letter to Vigilance Commissioner Praveen Kumar Srivastava earlier this year, sought an inquiry over allegations that intellectual property (IP) cases are handled by "compromised officials" for monetary gains. A government official, seeking anonymity, said that the patent department has given show cause notices to officers for adopting incorrect practices or passing incorrect orders.

"I am not saying that officers don't make deliberate mistakes. In a recent Delhi High Court case involving a patent officer, the court asked a patent officer to file an affidavit as he did not give a reason to reject a patent, which was wrong as per law. After the court asked the officer to file an affidavit, the officer agreed to review the case because filing an affidavit could have resulted in him potentially losing his job," a government official seeking anonymity told *The Indian Express*. In legal parlance, an affidavit is a written statement sworn before a person having the authority to administer an oath.

'Patent office has taken action'

The fresh corruption allegation comes at a time when India is witnessing record patent filings. India reported a sharp 44.6 per cent growth in international patent filing in 2023 compared to 2022, as per the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). The growth rates in 2022 stood at 31.6 in 2022 compared to 2021. WIPO ranked India third in terms of trademark registrations in force in 2022 at nearly 2.9 million, after China at 42.7 million and the US at 3.1 million.

Chowdhury, in his missive, has stated that the arbitrary engagement of contractual manpower through the Quality Council of India (QCI) and the arbitrary manner of processing applications have had a "disruptive effect" on the ecosystem of

granting intellectual property (IP) rights. He also alleged the misutilisation and misappropriation of government funds in violation of statutorily laid-down rules and norms.

"The department has taken action against officials in cases where complaints have been received. People don't give evidence of alleged corruption, which is the biggest problem. Wherever the department feels an officer has done something wrong... we change the workstation of the officer during routine transfers. The department has seen 400 promotions or transfers in the last one year," the government official quoted earlier said.

'Over 1 lakh patents granted'

"There used to be a lot of corruption related concerns in the patent office 10 years back. Prior to 2014, patents being granted annually used to be 6,500 but this year 2023-24, the patent office has granted about 1 lakh patents. Everyday about 250 patents are issued and the patent office receives patent applications every six minutes online. Everyday, an open house is conducted which has brought ease in the patent ecosystem," Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal had said.

In 2023-24, 98 new GIs (geographical indicators) have been registered, and another 62 will be registered by March 31 this year. Similarly, so far this fiscal year, copyright and design registrations totalled at 36,378 and 27,819 respectively, the Commerce and

EXPLAINED Intellectual property rights ecosystem

A COUNTRY'S IP rights ecosystem involves granting patents, trademarks, and copyright to incentivise research and inventions across industries. Typically, developed nations have a much higher number of patents and trademarks, which helps businesses gain market share.

Industry Ministry said. "Every 6 minutes one technology is seeking IP protection in India. In 2023, an all-time high of 90,300 patent applications were received. The patent office granted over one lakh patents in the last one year (15-Mar-2023 to 14-Mar-2024). Every working day, 250 patents were granted," the ministry further added.

Responding to a query on whether the Commerce and Industry Ministry has received a communication from the CVC over the issue, a ministry spokesperson said: "The ministry is not in receipt of any such complaint from CVC. No such correspondence has been received in the CVC in this matter".

On patent dismissals, the spokesperson said: "The Patent Dismissals are Judicial Proceedings, the ministry is not involved directly in patent dismissals cases, which are handled by various courts across the country. The said information is not maintained by the ministry".

Query mailed to the CVC remained unanswered till press time.

A Economic Advisory Council to PM (EAC-PM) report in August 2022 said that in India, it takes about 58 months on average to dispose of a patent application as compared to about 20 months in China and 23 months in the US.

FULL REPORT ON www.indianexpress.com

MARKET WATCH

MCAP OF 9 MOST VALUED FIRMS JUMP

Nine of the top-10 most-valued firms together added Rs 1,85,320.49 crore in market valuation last week, with Reliance Industries and HDFC Bank stealing the show with maximum gains, in line with rally in equities. Last week, the BSE benchmark zoomed 1,404.45 points, or 1.89 per cent. **PTI**

'Battery storage costs need to drop to ₹1/unit for mainstream adoption'



THE EXPRESS

INTERVIEW

WITH **DEVANSH JAIN**
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
INOXGFL GROUP

The wind energy sector has witnessed significant setbacks over the last few years. Where does Inox Wind stand today?

The wind industry went through a very rough phase over the past 5-6 years, owing to abrupt transition in regulatory policies from preferential tariffs to reverse auctions. The pain in the sector was exacerbated by the Covid pandemic. This period ended with most original equipment manufacturers (OEMs), be it Indian or international players, either going bankrupt or shutting down their operations.

Inox Wind not only survived this phase but also took several strategic initiatives to strengthen itself for the immense opportunities that lie ahead. Significant capital infusion by its promoters has helped the company to substantially de-leverage and strengthen its balance sheet. With this, the company is now on course towards its objective of becoming net debt-free by the first half of FY25.

We also increased our operational capacity and ensured that our supply chain was ready to support gigawatt-scale annual execution. On the product front, the supplies of our 3.3 MW turbines are in full swing. This turbine has been designed for Indian conditions and offers one of the lowest levelised cost of energy for any turbine in its class. Further, we are working towards launching a 4.X MW platform next year, which will secure us on the technological front for the next decade.

Are offshore wind projects economically viable for Indian developers?

I don't believe in offshore wind. It's a very good, forward-looking move. But from an Indian context, the cost of offshore is two and a half times the cost of onshore wind. So barring demonstration projects, you won't see much of that. For the next 10 years, nothing's going to happen. Moreover, onshore potential in India ranges from 300 GW to 1,100 GW, depending on which study you pick. We're at 43 GW right now. So even if we do 15 GW/year — and we're too far from that — for the next 20 years, we don't need to worry.

To solve for renewable energy intermittency, wind-solar hybrid is being pushed as a suitable solution. Battery energy storage systems (BESS) are also gaining traction. How do you see these developments?

With hybrid, you are basically optimising the use of the grid. Wind is early morning and when it rains, and solar is during the day hours. When you combine them

into the grid, you're basically allowing for a much better utilisation of the grid. And if our target is 500 GW by 2030, we can't be building a grid for 1500 GW. Someone is still paying for the cost of the grid — it's too expensive.

Hybrid essentially abates the excess wastage of the common infrastructure that is developed. So in that sense, hybrid, firm and dispatchable renewable energy (FDRE), and round-the-clock (RTC) supply is the way forward for the country — the 30 per cent utilisation of renewable capacity goes up to 50-70 per cent with these.

Also, battery storage is too expensive today. You'll have demonstration projects, you'll have a 5 MWh battery. But in terms of mainstream, large-scale usage, it's too expensive for India till battery costs don't drop to at least Rs 1 per unit. I think post-2030 is when you're going to see significant battery storage coming into play. And yes, when more and more battery storage comes into play, you'll have more wind and solar coming into play because then you'll replace the entire thermal capacity which is out there. But that delta needs to drop to about Rs 1 per unit. We're too far away right now — I see from 2030 onwards costs will gradually keep going down until it reaches a pivot point. But gradually — it's not going to go down from Rs 6 to 7 per unit to Rs 1 per unit today or in 5 years.

On the manufacturing side, is Inox looking at exporting equipment to other countries?

Our manufacturing capacity is already about 2.5 GW. We've also fully transitioned to our 3 MW turbine now. I don't think we are focused on exports right now for two reasons. We would rather focus on the unprecedented opportunity we have in India and that's our clear goal. There are some export opportunities but some of our eastern counterparts are passing lines our Indian banks don't provide globally. While we can compete on quality and cost, we can't give \$500 million lines, so that's one drawback. Also with the opportunities here, we want to be fully focused on the Indian market.

BRIEFLY

CCI extends bidding deadline for AI study

New Delhi: The Competition Commission of India (CCI) has issued clarifications on the bidding for conducting a study on artificial intelligence and its impact on competition, and has extended the deadline for submission of bids till June 18. Earlier, the deadline for the bids was June 3. In a set of clarifications, the fair trade regulator said bids cannot be submitted through a consortium or a joint venture. **PTI**

BharatPe, PhonePe settle trademark issues

New Delhi: Fintech unicorns BharatPe Group and PhonePe Group have amicably settled all long-standing legal disputes pertaining to the use of the trademark with the suffix 'Pe', both companies said in a joint statement. BharatPe and PhonePe had been involved in long-drawn legal disputes across multiple courts, over the course of the last five years. The settlement will put an end to all open judicial proceedings, the statement said. **PTI**

GAIL's 10 MW green hydrogen plant in MP

New Delhi: State-owned GAIL (India) Ltd's maiden green hydrogen plant at Vijaiapur in Madhya Pradesh has been commissioned, making a major step for the nation's largest natural gas transmission and distribution firm's foray into new and alternate energy, the company said. **PTI**

'Supply of homes priced up to ₹60 lakh drops 38% in Jan-Mar'

New supply of affordable homes — priced up to Rs 60 lakh each, declined 38 per cent across eight major cities to 33,420 units during January-March this year, with builders focusing on developing luxury flats, according to PropEquity

Mumbai Metropolitan Region: New supply declined to 15,202 units in January-March, from 22,642 units in year-ago period

Pune: Supply plunged to 6,836 units, from 12,538 units

Ahmedabad: New supply fell to 5,504 units, from 5,971 units

Hyderabad saw a decline to 2,116 units, from 2,319 units

Chennai witnessed a fall to 501 units, from 3,862 units

Bengaluru: New supply decreased to 657 units from 3,701 units



33,420 units:

Fresh supply of homes, up to Rs 60 lakh each, during January-March 2024 across top eight cities, as against 53,818 units in the year-ago period

Kolkata: Supply declined to 2,204 units, from 2,747 units

Delhi-NCR: Supply rose to 400 units, from 38 units a year ago

In 2023, 179,103 units priced under Rs 60 lakh were launched, a drop of 20 per cent compared to 2022, wherein 224,141 units were launched

"Several factors are contributing to this decline. Rising real estate prices (up to 50-100 per cent in some cities over the past two years) and increasing construction costs are making affordable housing projects less profitable for developers," Samir Jasuja, CEO and MD of PropEquity, said

Source: PropEquity/PTI

Q4 GDP likely around 6.1-6.7%: Economists

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

INDIA'S GDP in the fourth quarter of financial year 2023-24 is expected to have grown within the range of 6.1-6.7 per cent, lower than over 8 per cent rate recorded in the previous three quarters, according to projections by various economists.

The GDP numbers for the fourth quarter (January-March 2024) and the provisional estimates for the 2023-24 fiscal year are scheduled to be released by the government on May 31. According to economists, the expected growth in 2023-24 fiscal is estimated to be in the range of 7.6-7.8 per cent. The Indian economy grew 8.2

DATA SET TO BE RELEASED ON MAY 31

The GDP numbers for the fourth quarter (January-March 2024) and the provisional estimates for the 2023-24 fiscal year are scheduled to be released by the government on May 31

per cent in the June quarter, 8.1 per cent in the September quarter and 8.4 per cent in the December quarter of 2023-24. Kotak Mahindra Bank Chief Economist Upasna Bhardwaj said high frequency data suggests robust growth across the board.

Also, trade and hotels have held up in the fourth quarter. "Manufacturing activities have also been good, and construction linked and investment segments should be doing better, but agriculture sector growth could be a laggard and see contraction during the quarter. We are expecting 6.1 per cent GDP growth for the fourth quarter and as a result, the full-year number for GDP growth should be close to 7.6 per cent," Bhardwaj said.

India's GDP expanded 6.1 per cent in the March quarter of 2022-23 fiscal, as per May 31, 2023 estimates. The growth for full fiscal 2022-23 was 7 per cent. GDP is the total value of goods and services produced in a given period, while GVA is GDP minus net taxes (gross tax collection mi-

Govt directs telcos to block incoming international spoofed calls

New Delhi: The government has directed telecom operators to block all incoming international spoofed calls that display Indian mobile numbers, an official statement said on Sunday.

The Department of Telecom (DoT) said that it has been reported that fraudsters are making international spoofed calls displaying Indian mobile numbers to Indian citizens and committing cyber-crime and financial frauds.

Such calls appear to be originating within India but are being made by cyber-criminals from abroad by manipulating the calling line identity (CLI) and have been misused in recent cases of fake digital arrests, FedEx scams, drugs or narcotics in courier, impersonation as government and police officials, disconnections of mobile numbers by DoT or TRAI officials, etc. **PTI**

As far as the current fiscal (2024-25) is concerned, Kotak Mahindra Bank expects growth to be 6.6 per cent but with an upward bias. "It is anticipated that the GDP growth in the fourth quarter of the fiscal year 2024 might surpass 6.5 per cent, leading to an annual growth close to 7.8 per cent as projected by the IMF," EY India Chief Policy Advisor DK Srivastava said. Another rating agency, India Ratings & Research expects the country's GDP growth rate for the March quarter at 6.2 per cent for 2023-24. Rating agency ICRA on Tuesday projected India's GDP growth to moderate to a four-quarter low of 6.7 per cent in March quarter of 2023-24 fiscal.

2023-24

India in trade deficit with nine of top 10 trading partners

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

INDIA HAS recorded a trade deficit, the difference between imports and exports, with nine of its top 10 trading partners, including China, Russia, Singapore, and Korea, in 2023-24, according to official data.

The data also showed that the deficit with China, Russia, Korea, and Hong Kong increased in the last fiscal compared to 2022-23, while the trade gap with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Indonesia, and Iraq narrowed.

The trade deficit with China rose to \$85 billion, Russia to \$57.2 billion, Korea to \$14.71 billion and Hong Kong to \$12.2 billion in 2023-24 against \$83.2 billion, \$43 billion, \$14.57 billion and \$8.38 billion, respectively, in 2022-23. China has emerged as India's largest trading partner with \$118.4 billion of two-way commerce in 2023-24, edging past the US.

The bilateral trade between India and the US stood at \$118.28 billion in 2023-24. Washington was the top trading partner of New Delhi during 2021-22 and 2022-23.

India has a free trade agreement with four of its top trading partners - Singapore, the UAE, Korea and Indonesia (as part of the Asian bloc).

India has a trade surplus of \$36.74 billion with the US in 2023-24. America is one of the few countries with which India has a trade surplus. The surplus is also there with the UK, Belgium, Italy, France and Bangladesh. India's total trade deficit in the

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

FPIs take out ₹22K cr from equities in May so far

FOREIGN INVESTORS have pulled out a massive Rs 22,000 crore from Indian equities so far this month, due to uncertainty surrounding the outcome of the Lok Sabha elections and outperformance of Chinese markets. This came following a net outflow of over Rs 8,700 crore in the entire April on concerns over a tweak in India's tax treaty with Mauritius and a sustained rise in US bond yields. Before that, FPIs made a net investment of Rs 35,098 crore in March and Rs 1,539 crore in February.

Going forward, as clarity emerges on the election front, Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) are likely to buy in India, since they cannot afford to miss the post-election rally. Actually, the rally may begin even before the election results, VK Vijayakumar, Chief Investment Strategist, Geojit Financial Services, said.

According to data with depositors, FPIs witnessed a net outflow of Rs 22,047 crore from equities this month (till May 24). "This heavy selling was triggered by the massive outperformance of Chinese stocks. The Hang Seng index, dominated by Chinese stocks (FPIs invest through the Hong Kong market since there are restrictions on investing through the Shanghai market) surged 7.66 per cent during the last month," Vijayakumar, said. Foreign investors at this point are wary to enter the Indian equity markets before the election results, Himanshu Srivastava, Associate Director - Manager Research, Morningstar Investment Research India, said.



ONE HALF OF SONGWRITER DUO 'SHERMAN BROTHERS'

DISNEY SONGWRITER RICHARD SHERMAN DIES AT 95

RICHARD SHERMAN, 95, a man behind famed Disney songs such as "It's a Small World (After all)" and *Mary Poppins'* songs died on Saturday, the Walt Disney Co announced on its website. The cause was only listed as an "age-related illness". Sherman was one half of the duo "the Sherman Brothers" along with his late brother Robert Sherman.

REUTERS

TOP OF THE WORLD



Water flows on to the Kuakata beach in Barisal on Sunday. AP

BANGLADESH Cyclone nears coast, over 8 lakh people moved

Dhaka: Bangladesh evacuated nearly 800,000 people from vulnerable areas on Sunday as the country awaited the arrival of a severe cyclone that has formed over the Bay of Bengal. The storm is expected to cross Bangladesh and West Bengal coasts around midnight Sunday. Bangladesh's junior minister for disaster management and relief, Mohibur Rahman, said volunteers have been deployed to evacuate people to 4,000 cyclone shelters across the country's coastal region. The government also closed all schools in the region until further notice. AP

PAPUA NEW GUINEA Landslides toll doubles to 670, says UN agency

Melbourne: The International Organization for Migration Sunday increased its estimate of the death toll from a massive landslide in Papua New Guinea to more than 670 as emergency responders and traumatized relatives gave up hope that any survivors will now be found. Serhan Aktoprak, the chief of the UN migration agency's mission in the South Pacific island nation, said the revised death toll was based on calculations by Yambali village and Enga provincial officials that more than 150 homes had been buried by Friday's landslide. The previous estimate had been 60 homes. AP

SRI LANKA Rajapaksas to launch political comeback bid

Colombo: Sri Lanka's powerful Rajapaksa clan, which suffered political battering due to the country's worst economic crisis in 2022, will launch its political comeback bid Sunday by targeting the impending polls. The ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna of the Rajapaksas (SLPP), will hold a public rally later in the day in the north central town of Thalawa, former minister SM Chandrasena said. He said that Mahinda Rajapaksa would inaugurate the rally aiming to prepare the party grassroots for the major polls. PTI

FIRST LONG-RANGE ROCKET ATTACK FROM GAZA SINCE JANUARY

Hamas rocket attack sets off air raid sirens in Tel Aviv for 1st time in months

8 projectiles enter Israel, a number of them intercepted, says military

ASSOCIATED PRESS DEIR AL-BALAH, MAY 26

HAMAS FIRED a barrage of rockets from Gaza that set off air raid sirens as far away as Tel Aviv for the first time in months on Sunday in a show of resilience more than seven months into Israel's massive air, sea and ground offensive.

There were no immediate reports of casualties or damage in what appeared to be the first long-range rocket attack from Gaza since January.

Hamas' military wing claimed the attack. Palestinian militants have sporadically fired rockets and mortar rounds at communities along the Gaza border, and the military arm of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad group later Sunday said it fired rockets at nearby communities.

The Israeli military said eight projectiles crossed into Israel after being launched from the area of the southern Gaza city of Rafah, where Israeli forces recently launched an incursion. It said "a number" of the projectiles were intercepted

Meanwhile, Norway on Sunday handed over diplomatic papers to the Palestinian prime minister in the latest step toward recognizing a Palestinian state, a largely symbolic move that has infuriated Israel.

Ireland and Spain had also made a concerted pledge with Norway to recognize a Palestinian state.



Police use water cannon on anti-government protesters demanding the release of hostages, in Tel Aviv on Sunday. AP

Aid expected to enter Gaza strip through southern Israel crossing

REUTERS CAIRO, MAY 26

ISRAEL PREPARED on Sunday to allow around 200 aid trucks into Gaza through Kerem Shalom at the southeastern edge of the Palestinian enclave, bypassing the main Rafah crossing that has been blocked for weeks.

The aid shipments follow an agreement between U.S. President Joe Biden and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi on

Friday to temporarily send aid via the crossing. Khaled Zayed, an official from the Egyptian Red Crescent, told Reuters 200 trucks, including four fuel trucks, were expected to enter Sunday through the Kerem Shalom crossing.

Egypt's state-affiliated Al Qahera News TV shared a video on social media platform X, showing what it said were aid trucks as they entered Kerem Shalom, which before the current conflict was the main commercial crossing station between Israel, Egypt and Gaza.

Israel is under growing pressure to get more aid into Gaza after more than seven months of a war that has caused widespread destruction and hunger.

The Rafah crossing, which during the war has been the main entry point into Gaza for humanitarian aid and commercial supplies, has been shut for almost three weeks, since Israel took control of the Palestinian side of the crossing as it stepped up its military offensive in the area on May 6.

HOUTHIS FREE MORE THAN 100 PRISONERS

Sanaa: Yemen's Houthi group freed more than 100 detainees in Sanaa on Sunday, calling the move a "unilateral humanitarian initiative" to pardon prisoners and return them to their families. "Most of them are humanitarian cases, including the sick, the wounded, and the elderly," said Abdul Qader Al-Murtada, head of the Houthi-run prisoner affairs committee, said the detainees were government soldiers captured at the battlefield. REUTERS

Pak Taliban burn down bus, torture passengers in restive KPK province: Police

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA PESHAWAR, MAY 26

TERRORISTS BELONGING to Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) burnt down a bus and tortured its passengers in the country's restive Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, police said Sunday.

The incident occurred on Saturday when the bus enroute to Dera Ismail Khan was intercepted by the TTP terrorists in Daraban Tehsil and the passengers were forcibly disembarked.

"The TTP terrorists burnt to ashes the passenger bus after disembarking them. They first of all tortured the passengers and later threatened them for supporting government," a senior police official said.

Heavy contingents of police rushed to the site to control the situation. Law and order in the southern districts of the KPK Province has virtually collapsed as militants take control of the public order in the evening and could be seen marching on main roads in the districts bordering tribal districts South and North Waziristan.

25 held after mob attacks Christians in Pak Punjab

Lahore: Police in Pakistan's Punjab province on Sunday booked over 450 people and arrested 25 of them under terrorism and other charges for attacking members of the minority Christian community and police personnel on the issue of the alleged desecration of a religious book.

An enraged mob led by radical Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan activists on Saturday attacked the Christian community members in Mujahid Colony, Sargodha district, some 200 kms from Lahore, and injured 10 policemen.

According to the FIR, over 450 people, 50 of them are nominated, surrounded the residence and shoe factory of Nazir Masih (an elderly Christian) accusing him of desecration of the religious book. The Punjab police said currently over 2,000 policemen have been deployed in Sargodha Mujahid Colony to maintain law and order. PTI

In Kharkiv, Zelenskyy urges Biden, Xi to join Switzerland peace summit

REUTERS KYIV, MAY 26

PRESIDENT VOLODYMYR Zelenskyy appealed to US President Joe Biden and Chinese leader Xi Jinping Sunday to attend his peace summit as Ukraine struggles to stave off attacks by Russia.

Ukraine hopes to host as many countries as possible at Kyiv-led talks in Switzerland next month aimed at uniting global opinion on how to halt the



Volodymyr Zelenskyy inside a printing house destroyed on Thursday in a Russian airstrike, on Sunday. Reuters

war and piling pressure on Russia's Vladimir Putin, who has not been invited.

Zelenskyy spoke in a video recorded in the northeastern city of Kharkiv. "I am appealing to the leaders of the world who are still aside from the global efforts of the Global Peace Summit - to President Biden, the leader of the United States, and to President Xi, the leader of China," said Zelenskyy.

Zelenskyy added the summit would "show who in the world really wants to end the war".

Anora: Comic, devastating drama on sex worker wins Cannes' top honour

ASSOCIATED PRESS CANNES, MAY 26

SEAN BAKER'S *Anora*, a comic but devastating Brooklyn odyssey about a sex worker who marries the son of a wealthy Russian oligarch, won Cannes Film Festival's top award, the Palme d'Or.

The win Saturday for *Anora* marked a coronation for Baker, the 53-year-old indie filmmaker of *The Florida Project* who used iPhones to make his 2015 film *Tangerine*.

Baker accepted the prize with



Sean Baker with the Palme D'or at Cannes, Saturday. AP

his movie's star, Mikey Madison, watching in the audience at the closing ceremony.

"This, literally, has been my singular goal as a filmmaker for the past 30 years, so I'm not really sure what I'm going to do with the rest of my life," said Baker, laughing. But Baker, the first American filmmaker to win the Palme since Terrence Mallick in 2011 with *The Tree of Life* quickly answered that his ambition would remain to "fight to keep cinema alive."

The awards were chosen by the nine-member jury led by Greta Gerwig, who told reporters she was "forever changed as a filmmaker because of this experience."

FIRST TIME IN 60 YEARS IF IMPLEMENTED

UK Conservatives pitch bringing back mandatory national services at 18 years



Rishi Sunak and Akshata Murty campaign in London, Sunday

ASSOCIATED PRESS LONDON, MAY 26

ALL 18-YEAR-OLDS in Britain will have to perform a year of mandatory military or civilian national service if the ruling Conservative Party wins the July 4 national election, the party said Sunday.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak pledged to bring back a form of national service for the first time in more than 60 years, seeking to energize his election campaign after a faltering start.

The UK introduced military conscription for men and some women during World War II, and imposed 18 months of mandatory military service for men between 1947 and 1960. Since then it had an all-volunteer military whose size has steadily shrunk.

Under the plan, a small minority of 18-year-olds - 30,000 out of an estimated 700,000 - would spend 12 months in the military, in areas such as logistics or cyber defense. The rest would spend one weekend a month working for charities, community groups, or organizations such as hospitals, the police and the fire service.

\$3.2bn-plan for inclusivity

CLEVERLY SAID the main goal of the plan was building "a society where people mix with people outside their own communities." Tories estimated the cost of the plan at \$3.2 billion a year. They said it would be paid for partly by taking \$1.9 billion from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, which was set up in 2022 to regenerate poor communities.

Sunak said the program would help "create a shared sense of purpose among our young people and a renewed sense of pride in our country."

Home Secretary James Cleverly said no one would be forced to serve in the military. Labour said the national service announcement was a "desperate 2.5 billion pound unfunded commitment" from a party "bankrupt of ideas."

SHOW OF UNITY AHEAD OF EU POLLS

Macron visits Berlin, 1st French presidential visit in over 24 years

REUTERS BERLIN, MAY 26

FRENCH PRESIDENT Emanuel Macron lands in Germany on Sunday for a three-day state visit followed by a bilateral cabinet meeting as the European Union's two biggest powers seek to show unity ahead of next month's EU parliamentary elections.

Macron's trip to the capital Berlin, Dresden and Muenster is the first French presidential state visit to Germany in 24 years.

The visit will be watched as a checkup on the health of the German-French relationship that drives EU policymaking, at a time of major challenges for Europe: from the Ukraine war to the possible election of Donald Trump as US president in November.

Macron and Olaf Scholz have very different leadership styles and have publicly clashed on issues from defence to nuclear energy since the latter took power in late 2021. However, they have



Emmanuel Macron and his wife Brigitte Macron arrive at the BER Airport near Berlin on Sunday. Reuters

reached compromises on various fronts of late, from fiscal reform to changes to power market subsidies, allowing the EU to put on a more united front.

The two countries will also try to find common ground on the EU agenda for the next five years, in view of the expected strong showing for the far-right in the parliamentary elections.

SINCE 1990, 28 OF THE ANNUAL CONTEST WINNERS HAVE BEEN INDIAN AMERICAN

National Spelling Bee reflects economic, cultural impact of Indian immigrants in US

ASSOCIATED PRESS NEW YORK, MAY 26

WHEN BALU Natarajan became the first Indian American champion of the Scripps National Spelling Bee in 1985, a headline on an Associated Press article read, "Immigrants' son wins National Spelling Bee," with the first paragraph noting the champion "speaks his parents' native Indian language at home." Those details would hardly be newsworthy today after a quarter-century of Indian American spelling champs, most of them the offspring of parents who arrived in the United

States on student or work visas. This year's bee is scheduled to begin Tuesday at a convention centre outside Washington and, as usual, many of the expected contenders are Indian American, including Shradha Rachamreddy, Aryan Khedkar, Bruhat Soma and Ishika Varipilli.

Nearly 70 per cent of Indian-born US residents arrived after 2000, according to census data, and that dovetails with the surge in Indian American spelling bee champions. There were two Indian American Scripps winners before 1999. Of the 34 since, 28 have been Indian American, including three straight years of

Indian American co-champions and one year (2019) when eight champions were declared, seven of Indian ancestry. The experiences of first-generation Indian Americans and their spelling bee champion children illustrate the economic success and cultural impact of the nation's second-largest immigrant group.

As of 2022, there were 3.1 million Indian-born people living in the US, and Indian American households had a median income of \$147,000, more than twice the median income of US households, according to census data. Indian Americans also were over twice as likely to have college degrees.



Balunatarajan with his son in front of a photograph of him winning the Scripps National Spelling Bee in 1985. AP

Indians received 74 per cent of the H-1B visas for specialised occupations approved in fiscal 2021, and a record total of nearly 269,000 students from India were enrolled at US colleges and universities in 2022-23, according to the Institute of International Education. Those numbers paint a picture of a high-achieving demographic that is well-suited for success in academic competitions.

Even among Indian American spellers, a particular subgroup is overrepresented: families from the southern states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

Indian-born parents of kids with an affinity for spelling have

a network of similar families to provide guidance and support, as well as access to organisations like the North South Foundation, which offers academic competitions aimed at the Indian diaspora.

The relative wealth and stability of Indian American households could lead observers to conclude their children are benefiting primarily from a privileged upbringing. The truth is more nuanced, said Devesh Kapur, a professor of South Asian Studies at Johns Hopkins University and a co-author of "The Other One Percent: Indians in America." "It is important to note that the children participating in the spelling bee com-

petition come from middle-class families... and not from wealthier households," Kapur said.

Natarajan, now a Chicago-based physician and health care executive, serves as the volunteer president of the NSF, and he experienced the spelling bee as a parent when his son, Atman Balakrishnan, competed.

He said he sometimes feels out of place because he was born in the US and he admires the grit of Indian-born parents and their children. "It's hard to describe, but it's a very specific mindset that just drives effort and in many ways drives outcomes and sustainable success," Natarajan said.



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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

Adani Ports to enter Sensex: how India's major stock indices work

HITESH VYAS
MUMBAI, MAY 26

ADANI PORTS and Special Economic Zone Ltd (APSEZ) will become the first Adani Group company to be included in the Sensex at the Bombay Stock Exchange, replacing Wipro on June 24. APSEZ and Adani Enterprises, the flagship of the Adani Group, are already part of the Nifty at the National Stock Exchange, the other stock market index that tracks the performance of a set of large and actively traded companies in the country. The announcement has come months after activist short-seller Hindenburg Research accused the Adani Group of stock manipulation and accounting fraud, which led to the share prices of Adani companies crashing by

30-80%. These stocks, including APSEZ and Adani Enterprises, have now recovered to higher than pre-Hindenburg levels. Adani has denied any wrongdoing.

What is the Sensex at the BSE?

Both the Sensex and Nifty are tools by which traders and market participants measure the domestic market's performance. While Sensex considers 30 stocks; the Nifty considers 50. Companies that are included in the Sensex and Nifty are selected based on specific criteria.

Launched in 1986, the Sensex is the country's oldest and most tracked bellwether index. It is designed to measure the performance of the 30 largest, most liquid, and financially sound companies across key sectors of the Indian economy that are listed at BSE Ltd. Among the companies that are part of the Sensex are

**EXPLAINED
ECONOMICS**

ADANI-HINDENBURG CASE

ON JANUARY 24, 2023, Hindenburg Research accused the Adani Group of stock manipulation and accounting fraud. It also flagged concerns over the Group's high leverage. The Adani Group denied all allegations.

THE REPORT came a few days ahead of the opening of the Rs 20,000-crore follow-on public offer (FPO) of Adani Enterprises Ltd (AEL). Although the FPO successfully closed on January 31,

2023, it was later called off and money was returned to investors.

SHARES OF ADANI Group companies came under heavy selling pressure on the stock exchanges after the report was published. The Group's listed companies crashed by 30-80%.

STOCK PRICES of Adani Enterprises and Adani Ports have now erased the losses caused by the report.

Reliance Industries, ICICI Bank, and ITC Ltd.

These companies are selected to represent the broader Indian equity marketplace. As such, even though the Sensex is composed of

only 30 stocks, investors make decisions to buy or sell based on the movement of the Sensex.

As of May 24, the total market capitalisation, or the total value of all listed shares, of

BSE-listed firms was Rs 419.99 lakh crore.

And how is Nifty different from Sensex?

The difference lies in the number of stocks that each index tracks. While the Sensex constitutes 30 companies trading on the BSE, the Nifty 50 is a broad-based index consisting of 50 blue chip large and liquid stocks traded on the National Stock Exchange of India (NSE).

The Nifty 50 was started in November 1995. It includes companies such as Adani Enterprises, Bajaj Finance, and Coal India.

The market capitalisation of NSE firms stood at Rs 416.04 lakh crore as of May 24.

How are companies selected in Sensex?

To be considered for selection, a stock must satisfy certain requirements. The Sensex is reconstituted biannually, in June and December of every year.

It must have a listing history of at least

six months at BSE, and it should have traded on every trading day at the BSE during this six-month reference period.

To be eligible, the stock should have a derivative contract, that is, an agreement between two parties to buy or sell any form of security at a certain price in the future. A derivative is a financial instrument whose value is based on the value of an underlying asset like equities and currency.

The company must be among the top 75 companies based on their average three-month float or total market cap. It should have a minimum free-float market cap of 0.50% after market cap and liquidity criteria are met.

In terms of liquidity, the cumulative weight of the three-month average daily value traded (ADVT) is calculated for companies that meet the eligibility requirements. Any prospective constituents with a total weight of ADVT greater than 98% are excluded from the index.

EXPLAINED CULTURE

WATERMELON AT CANNES: HOW THE FRUIT BECAME A PALESTINIAN SYMBOL

YASHEE
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

ACTOR KANI Kusuruti posed with a watermelon clutch at the 2024 Cannes Film Festival last week, during the screening of her movie *All We Imagine As Light*. Directed by Payal Kapadia, the film later won the Grand Prix or the second most prestigious prize at the festival. Kapadia has become the first Indian to have won the award.

Amidst Israel's ongoing assault on Gaza, Kusuruti's handbag was viewed as an expression of solidarity with Palestinians since watermelons have long been considered a symbol of their struggle.

Why watermelon

A watermelon when sliced shows the colours of the Palestinian flag — red, green, black, and white. This makes it a useful symbol of Palestinian identity, especially since carrying and displaying the Palestinian flag has often been barred by Israeli authorities. On social media too, the watermelon emoji has gained currency, with many claiming that posts with more overt Palestinian symbols are restricted by US-based tech platforms.

Watermelons are widely cultivated in Palestine, from the West Bank to Gaza, and feature prominently in Palestinian cuisine.

Symbol of protest

Although flying the Palestinian flag is not legally banned in Israel, authorities often crack down, claiming the flag could "disturb peace".

In 2007, Palestinian artist Khaled Hourani painted a slice of watermelon for the Subjective Atlas of Palestine project. His work received wide viewership and served to strongly associate the watermelon with the Palestinian cause.

Contested origins

It is somewhat unclear how the watermelon first came to be used in protests. While many Western media organisations have reported it being a prominent symbol of resistance during the First Intifada (1987-1993), Arab news websites



Kani Kusuruti (second from right) with a watermelon clutch. Reuters

and blogs trace its use to a later time.

The First Intifada was against Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza since 1967, and the criminalisation of the display of Palestinian flags. In this context, it is possible that the image of a sliced watermelon turned into a protest symbol.

However, Abu Dhabi-based *The National* reported in 2020 that "The story has become a bit of a contemporary myth, proliferated recently on social media, with its true origins buried in various retellings and reposts."

Those who trace the watermelon symbol to the First Intifada rely heavily on two sources — a 1993 report from *The New York Times*, and a story involving artists Sliman Mansour, Nabil Anani, and Issam Badr. As *The National* reported, an exhibition by the artists in 1980 was "shut down by the Israeli army as the artworks were deemed political and bore the Palestinian flag and its colours. Confronting the officer, Badr asked, "What if I just want to paint a watermelon?", to which he replied, "It would be confiscated."

The NYT article, written after Israel and Palestine recognised each other as part of the Oslo Accords, said, "In the Gaza Strip, where young men were once arrested for carrying sliced watermelons — thus displaying the red, black and green Palestinian colours — soldiers stand by, blasé, as processions march by waving the once-banned flag."

Israeli authorities later wrote to *The NYT* and denied making such arrests.

SHYAMLAL YADAV
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

AFTER CONGRESS pulled down the United Front government in late 1997, the elections of February 1998 gave the BJP a second chance at power in less than two years. This BJP was defeated in about a year in Parliament. Another election took place in 1999.

1998-2004 were the years of Atal Bihari Vajpayee in Indian politics. It was a tenure scattered with momentous signposts — the Pokhran-II nuclear tests; a real attempt at making peace with Pakistan, followed within months by war and a heroic victory in the Himalayas; the terrorist attack on Parliament; and the 2002 communal riots in Gujarat.

The election of 1998

In August 1997, at the Congress plenary in Calcutta, Sonia Gandhi joined the party. After Prime Minister I K Gujral resigned that November and elections were announced, the Congress Working Committee requested her to campaign for the party in its "difficult" time.

She addressed almost 130 election rallies, beginning in Tamil Nadu, the state in which an LTTE terrorist had killed her husband in 1991. On March 14, 1998, soon after the election, the Congress removed Sitaram Kesri as its leader, and Sonia formally took over the party.

A total 37.54 crore voters, almost 62% of the 60.58-crore electorate, voted on February 16, 22, and 28, 1998. The Election Commission under TN Seshan had changed the rules on nominations, increasing the number of proposers. This dramatically reduced the number of non-serious candidates crowding ballot papers. Only 4,750 contestants stood in the 1998 elections, compared to 13,952 in 1996.

The BJP won 181 seats, 20 more than in 1996; the Congress won 141, an improvement of just one seat. The CPI(M) won 32, Mulayam Singh Yadav's SP 20, Jayalalithaa's AIADMK 18, and Lalu Prasad's RJD 17.

The BJP put together a 19-party coalition — the National Democratic Alliance — and, in the interest of unity, agreed to put aside its core agenda of building a Ram Temple in Ayodhya, abrogating Article 370, and promulgating a Uniform Civil Code.

N Chandrababu Naidu, who had been convener of the United Front, decided to support the NDA. Other United Front partners such as Mulayam and Lalu joined hands in an anti-Congress, anti-BJP front called the Rashtriya Loktantrik Morcha. Vajpayee took oath as Prime Minister on March 20, 1998. GMC Balayogi, an MP of Naidu's Telugu Desam Party became Speaker of Lok Sabha.

Two months after coming to power, Vajpayee's government, conducted five successful underground nuclear tests in the desert of Pokhran in Rajasthan. Vajpayee then began



Vajpayee saluting Indian soldiers in Kargil on June 13, 1999; Kalam and Vajpayee after Pokhran's success. Express Archive

his peace initiative with Pakistan in late 1998, and collaborated with his counterpart Nawaz Sharif to make a historic bus journey across the border, and sign the Lahore Declaration on February 21, 1999.

Defeat by one vote

Vajpayee had an extraordinarily difficult task of managing his fractious coalition. AIADMK, with its 18 MPs but temperamental leader, posed the biggest problem. Jayalalithaa pulled the plug on the NDA on April 8, 1999.

Vajpayee then tabled a motion of confidence on April 15. The outcome of the vote that

took place two days later saw Vajpayee lose by a single vote with 269 yeas to 270 noes. Three MPs claimed credit for casting the vote that defeated the government: Mayawati of the BSP; Saifuddin Soz, then with Farooq Abdullah's Jammu and Kashmir National Conference; and Giridhar Gamang, whom Sonia had appointed Chief Minister of Orissa earlier that year, but who was yet to give up his Lok Sabha membership.

On April 21, Sonia met President KR Narayanan and staked her claim to form the next government, saying she had the support of 272 MPs. But after originally promising his support, Mulayam flipped, saying he could not back a person of "foreign origin" as Prime Minister. Instead, he floated the name of West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu for the job. Within the Congress, Sharad Pawar led a rebellion against Sonia, which ended with him being expelled, along with P A Sangma and Tariq Anwar. On June 10, Pawar formed his Nationalist Congress Party.

With no party or coalition in a position to form the government, President Narayanan

dissolved Lok Sabha. Vajpayee continued as caretaker Prime Minister. But before the next election could be held, war came India's way.

Atal wins war and election

On May 3, 1999, the Indian Army, with support from the Air Force, launched Operation Vijay to push back Pakistani infiltrators who had captured Indian posts along the Line of Control in Kargil. Victory was achieved on July 26, but more than 500 Indian soldiers fell in the war.

The Lok Sabha election of 1999 finally began on September 5. The BJP, heading a 20-party coalition, contested 339 seats. The election held in eight phases — although voting at just four seats was spread over three of the phases — concluded on October 3. Of the 61.95-crore electorate, 37.16 crore, just below 60%, cast their votes.

Despite the victory in Kargil, the BJP won only 182 seats, one more than in 1998. The party suffered greatly in Uttar Pradesh as a result of ego clashes between Vajpayee and Chief Minister Kalyan Singh, winning just 29 of the 85 seats — half its tally of 58 in 1998.

The Congress's diminished further to 114 seats. The CPI(M) won 33 seats, TDP 29, and SP 26. Contesting their first Lok Sabha elections, Pawar's NCP and Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress won eight seats each. Vajpayee won in Lucknow, Muri Manohar Joshi in Allahabad, and L K Advani in Gandhinagar, where the Congress fielded retired Chief Election Commissioner Seshan. Sonia, contesting her first election, won in Amethi, and Chandra Shekhar in Ballia after Mulayam chose not field a candidate against him.

On October 13, 1999, Vajpayee took oath

for the third time, heading a 303-MP NDA.

An eventful five years

In November 2000, India got three new states — Uttaranchal, later renamed Uttarakhand, was carved out of UP, and Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh were carved out of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh respectively.

In 2001, Bangaru Laxman, the BJP's first Scheduled Caste chief, was caught on camera allegedly accepting a bribe of Rs 1 lakh. K N Govindacharya, the BJP's RSS-appointed general secretary (organisation), was ousted after reportedly calling Vajpayee the party's *mukhota* (mask), and Advani its "real leader". Conflict with Vajpayee also led to Kalyan Singh's removal in UP. In October 2001, Narendra Modi replaced Keshubhai Patel as Gujarat Chief Minister.

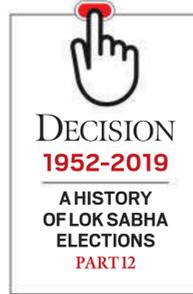
Terrible communal riots took place in Gujarat in February-March 2002. Modi was under pressure for some time, but at the meeting of the BJP's national executive in Goa in April, second-generation leaders like M Venkaiah Naidu (future Vice President) and Arun Jaitley backed him strongly.

In the 2002 presidential election, the BJP backed Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, India's Missile Man. Kalam entered Rashtrapati Bhavan with support from Mulayam and Pawar, and the veteran BJP leader Bhairon Singh Shekhawat became Vice President.

A 1976 policy had frozen parliamentary and Assembly constituencies till the 2001 Census. The Vajpayee government decided to continue the freeze until 2026, but allowed the rationalisation of constituency boundaries. A Delimitation Commission was constituted under Justice Kuldeep Singh (retired) in July 2002.

Lok Sabha polls were due in September-October 2004, but the BJP, confident of victory, advanced the election to take advantage of their "India Shining" campaign.

Elections were held in April-May 2004.



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Overlapping territorial claims, Cold War: what led to the Antarctic Treaty

ALIND CHAUHAN
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

MINISTER OF Earth Sciences Kiren Rijiju, on May 21, inaugurated the 46th edition of the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting in Kochi, Kerala.

The meeting, scheduled to go on till May 30, is being attended by all 56 member states of the Antarctic Treaty, which provides the framework for peaceful coexistence and scientific cooperation in Antarctica.

Tussle over territory

Parts of mainland Antarctica were first spotted by British, American, and Russian ships in the 1820s. But it was the race to reach the South Pole — between Captain Robert Scott from the United Kingdom and Roald Amundsen from Norway, which Amundsen won on December 15, 1911 — that piqued the world's interest in the continent.

By the 1950s, Argentina, Australia, Chile, France, New Zealand, Norway, and the UK had made formal territorial claims over Antarctica. Some of these claims were overlapping, and led to conflict. The US, the USSR, Belgium, Japan, and South Africa explored the continent but made no territorial claims.

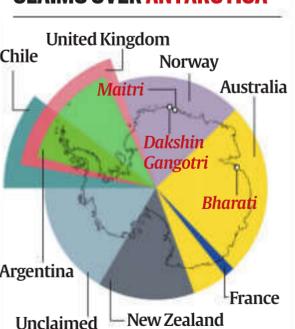
"Only five claimants (Australia, France, New Zealand, Norway, and the United Kingdom) mutually recognised each other's claims. Of particular concern...[were] the claims of

Argentina, Chile, and the United Kingdom," scholar K M Shusterich wrote in *The Antarctic Treaty System: History, Substance, and Speculation* (1984).

Between 1947 and 1955, Argentina and Chile twice rejected the British proposal to go to the International Court of Justice to sort out their overlapping claims, insisting that their sovereignty was unquestionable.

Several unsuccessful attempts were

CLAIMS OVER ANTARCTICA



Countries have made territorial claims over Antarctica that overlap at times. The dots mark locations of India's research stations. UK Govt

made to enact an international agreement over the control of Antarctica. In 1956, India requested the UN to include "the question of Antarctica" on the provisional agenda of the General Assembly. But opposition from Argentina and Chile, and scant support from the US and USSR doomed the effort.

Treaty amidst Cold War

A major breakthrough came during the 1957-1958 International Geophysical Year (IGY), where 12 nations — Argentina, Australia, Chile, France, New Zealand, Norway, the UK, the US, the USSR, Belgium, Japan, and South Africa — agreed to not let their differences hinder scientific research in Antarctica, and allowed countries to place scientific stations anywhere on the continent, regardless of territorial claims.

The IGY was an international endeavour to further scientific collaboration among countries notwithstanding their political relations during the Cold War. "Both the US and USSR had not asserted territorial claims in

Antarctica," Donald R Rothwell, Professor of International Law at the Australian National University, told *The Indian Express* in an email. They wanted to ensure that their rivalry did not spill over to the continent, he said.

On May 2, 1958, the US invited IGY participants to Washington to negotiate "a treaty designed to preserve the continent as an international laboratory for scientific research and ensure that it be used only for peaceful purposes," Shusterich wrote. The Washington Conference went on from October 15 to December 1, 1959 and culminated with the signing of the Antarctic Treaty by all 12 members. It came into force in 1961.

It contains 14 articles and froze all territorial disputes in Antarctica. It barred countries from making new territorial claims, banned militarisation and nuclear testing in the continent, and promoted scientific research.

Today, 56 countries are a part of the Antarctic Treaty — 29 of which (including the 12 original signatories) are "Consultative Parties", part of the decision making process.

India joined the treaty in 1983, and is a Consultative Party.

A success story

According to Shusterich, "the treaty has been able to survive over the years as it strikes a fine balance between specificity and vagueness." It promotes "compromise rather than conflict... instils a sense of exclusivity for the consultative parties, yet invites all nations to join," he wrote.

Another reason for its success is that the treaty has been able to evolve to address new challenges. Rothwell said several additional conventions and other legal protocols have dealt with issues like marine conservation, prohibition on mining, and protection of Antarctica's environment.

But the treaty faces a bumpy road ahead. With Antarctica witnessing record-breaking high temperatures and low ice coverage, climate change is the biggest challenge in front of it. A spike in tourism-related activities in and around the continent is also a concern.

18 IDEA EXCHANGE NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

ON RBI-GOVERNMENT TUSSELES

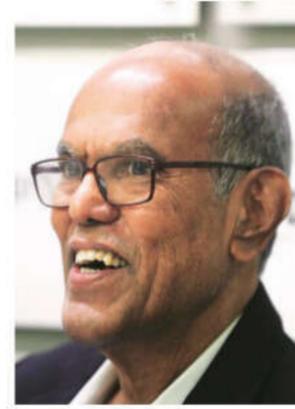
Tension between govts and central banks is in some sense hardwired into the system... As the central bank tries to maintain price stability and financial stability, short-term goals might be compromised



WHY D SUBBARAO

Hardly had D Subbarao taken charge as the Governor of the RBI on September 5, 2008, that the Lehman Brothers collapsed in the US, triggering a global financial crisis which quickly spilled over to the real economy. With the Indian government led by Manmohan Singh immediately swinging into action, Subbarao became

part of the team that ensured India emerged relatively unscathed. In his new book, *Just a Mercenary? Notes from My Life and Career*, published by Penguin, he writes about the many assignments, challenges and lessons in his long career, and the constant soul searching if he is giving back to the society



ON FISCAL MANAGEMENT

The economy would have been served better if I had withdrawn the monetary stimulus faster... In hindsight, the credit flow, particularly to the infrastructure sector, was more than what was healthy for the economy

Ishan Bakshi: The Indian economy has seen two major shocks in the past two decades: the financial crisis of 2008 and the Covid pandemic. What are your views on the policy response of the then and now government and RBI?

Let's first talk about the two crises and their origins. We had the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008, and then we had the financial crisis triggered as a consequence of the pandemic. The GFC had its origins in the financial sector, whereas the financial disruption that happened following Covid was a result of a cause outside the financial sector. When the GFC happened, central bankers and governments were in the forefront because the solution had to come from within the financial sector. In the financial crisis after Covid, the solution had to come from outside the financial sector. You are right in the sense that both governments and central banks played from the same playbook in terms of responses to the financial instability. But, as I said, there is a difference because central banks were doing a holding operation during and after the pandemic, until a solution came, whereas in the GFC you were there right in the centre and front, fighting it. In the GFC, America was the epicentre. Whereas, after the pandemic you had to ensure that there was no pandemic anywhere in the country. In terms of effectiveness, at least in managing the financial fallout of the Covid pandemic in India, both the government and the RBI have done very well.

Ishan Bakshi: Do you think the central bank should be actively intervening in currency markets?

No, if anything, the RBI should be less interventionist than it is. I say this because we want to be a developed economy, we want financial deepening, we want more capital to come in. So we need more exchange rate flexibility instead of an expectation in the market that every time the exchange rate moves, the RBI intervenes. If the RBI intervenes, let's say, to prevent appreciation, it is building reserves, but there are costs to holding reserves. Unlike China, whose reserves are built out of their earnings, our reserves are built out of borrowing.

The second reservation I have about RBI's intervention is that you're shifting the burden of adjustment from one segment in the economy to another. Again, illustratively, if the RBI is preventing appreciation of the rupee, it is benefiting exporters at the cost of importers. Is that fair?

Third, if the RBI's stated policy is that we do not target an exchange rate, we only manage volatility and if the RBI is seen intervening even if there is no apparent volatility, the market will tend to believe that the RBI is targeting an exchange rate.

My most important reservation about this policy is that when the RBI intervenes, there is a moral hazard. If you want to be a developed economy, you want our market participants, corporates to be able to manage the exchange rate risk. If the RBI keeps intervening, they will outsource risk management to the RBI, which has a cost.

Finally, on the 90th anniversary of the RBI, the Prime Minister had said that the RBI must try and internationalise the rupee. That's not going to be possible if the RBI continues to intervene.

Harish Damodaran: You have talked about too much fiscal stimulus during the UPA period and the stimulus not being withdrawn. One is fiscal stimulus, second is the monetary stimulus, but there was a third stimulus which was too much credit and that created a legacy problem of twin balance sheets. They have now come out with draft regulations on project-lending, but was that the real problem?

I must admit that the monetary stimulus we had given during the crisis was not withdrawn soon enough. And that was for reasons... I admitted that the economy would have been served better had I withdrawn the monetary stimulus faster. But we were acting in real time within the universe of knowledge available to us. The information we were getting was that the economy had not picked up. Only in hindsight we realised that growth was in fact faster. If you throw back your mind to that time, there was a lot of concern about financial instability. The global financial crisis had not died. In hindsight, the credit flow, particularly to the infrastructure sector, was much more than what would have been healthy for the economy. But again, we were acting in real time. Infrastructure was uncharted territory, both for the corporates investing in infrastructure and for banks lending to them.

'Democracy functions best if there is sufficient space for Opposition'

Economist and former central banker D Subbarao on how the RBI has dealt with multiple crises, internationalisation of the rupee and why corporates are not investing yet. This session was moderated by Ishan Bakshi, Associate Editor, *The Indian Express*



Economist D Subbarao (right) with Ishan Bakshi during the interaction *Abhinav Saha*

Other factors that came into play included the Supreme Court orders cancelling coal blocks, cancelling 2G ban on exports, which affected the quality of credit, quality of recovery and growth.

Ravi Dutta Mishra: In your book *Who Moved my Interest Rate?* (Penguin) you mentioned that it was not the financial crisis that bothered you more but the currency depreciation that followed. How do you compare that period and now, the volatility and the management?

The management was better this time. I don't want to be defensive but that was a different problem as compared to today. The taper tantrums happened because of a lot of quantitative easing that money had flowed in. Then (Federal Reserve) chairman (Ben) Bernanke said they were going to taper and emerging economies lost stability, our exchange rate dived 20 per cent peak to trough in a matter of four months. We were part of the fragile five because of structural problems in our economies, not just the exchange rate... The fiscal deficit we were running, the quality of our imports, high oil prices and so on.

We learnt from that lesson but this time the exchange rate had moved. The flows that had come had not exceeded suddenly, so there was not that sudden stop and reversal as we had seen that time. It was relatively easier to manage the exchange rate this time. Apart from that, we have a war chest of reserves, our fiscal deficit is much lower, our fiscal credibility is higher.

Sukalp Sharma: Do you think the internationalisation of the rupee can be achieved in near-to-medium term or is it wishful thinking?

It certainly cannot be achieved in the short term. Whether it's achieved in medium-term or long-term, I do not know. But it's feasible. The US dollar is the world's dominant reserve currency today not because countries got together and anointed the US dollar as the reserve currency but because of the strength of the American economy, depth and resilience of the American financial markets, and credibility of American institutions of governance.

For India, it is good for our trade and investment. But if two trading partners have to do their trade in their bilateral currencies, the trade has to be roughly balanced. For example, between India and Bangladesh, they pay us in taka, we pay in rupees, let's say Bangladesh builds up huge balances and they say, 'What do we do with the rupee, pay us in dollars'. So if

a trade is roughly balanced, it's possible to internationalise the rupee, but if there is a large trade imbalance one way or the other, it would be challenging.

Sukalp Sharma: Since 2014 — when we had a majority government for the first time in decades — two central bankers have left amidst voices of erosion of autonomy. During such periods, when we have a majority government, do you think central banks can be politics-proof?

Tension between governments and central banks is in some sense hardwired into the system. The core mandate of a central bank is to maintain price stability and financial stability. Delivering on this core mandate enjoins the central bank to keep long-term sustainability of the economy. Typically, there is a conflict between short-term compulsions and long-term sustainability. Because there is a conflict, institutionally, we have established a central bank at an arm's length from the government. It acts independent of political compulsions. You cannot give the control of the printing press to governments because driven by short election cycles, political compulsions, they would misuse that. That's why you have a central bank with a certain amount of autonomy. That is the institutional rationale for central banks, and that is why there is tension because as the central bank tries to maintain price stability and financial stability, certain short-term goals might be compromised.

During my time, growth was trending down, inflation remained stubborn and the growth inflation conflict was quite tense. Today, growth is doing reasonably well, inflation is above target but within reasonable range. So, the tension is not very strong. It is also a function of the

chemistry between the Governor and Finance Minister and the Prime Minister.

Ishan Bakshi: During this electoral cycle, there has been a reference to the issue of inequality and redistribution. There has been some advocacy of an inheritance tax. What are your thoughts on that?

I'm not competent to comment on that because I have not studied it. We certainly have a problem of inequality. (Economist) Thomas Piketty and others have done studies and there are several other world inequality indexes which show that India is one of the most unequal societies in the world. Resolving inequality is not just a moral issue or political issue. It is also an economic issue. We need to resolve inequality for our own long-term economic interest.

Our biggest growth driver is the consumption of the bottom segments of the population. If their incomes go up, they'll spend that money. Their marginal propensity to consume is higher. If they spend that money, there will be more production, more jobs, more growth and we can get on to a virtuous cycle. If, on the other hand, the benefits of growth do not go to them, we cannot sustain our current growth momentum.

Harish Damodaran: Why do you think corporates are not investing yet?

For about seven to eight years, we've had the NPA (Non-Performing Assets) problem, twin balance sheet problems. That is now behind us. Both corporate balance sheets and bank balance sheets are cleaned up. They are in the pink of health... The economy is running on a single engine now, which is public investment... If you look at capacity utilisation, it's been low. It's picking up. I think it's 75 or 76 per

cent now, and historically corporates have thought about investment when capacity utilisation gets to about 80 per cent. They must also be waiting for the election to get over.

Ravi Dutta Mishra: You mentioned the relationship between the RBI and the government is sometimes ruled by political considerations. In that context, how do you see the RBI's dividends that it is giving to the government?

That's a tricky question because I was on both sides of that battle. When I was finance secretary, I was resisting pressure from the RBI to pay higher dividend and as governor, I was resisting pressure from the government to pay higher dividend.

I don't think that is a policy issue like monetary policy or regulatory policy. That is more of a fiscal issue. It is legitimate, appropriate for the government to ask for more money and for the RBI to make sure that its balance sheet is robust enough to command credibility because the central bank balance sheet is an important variable in potential investors assessing our economy. When does the IMF (International Monetary Fund) come into play? Typically when the government balance sheet is weak, they draw confidence from the fact that the central bank balance sheet is strong. After much thought, you should work on the central bank balance sheet. You should not do it light-heartedly.

It's right for the government to ask for more, but the RBI wants to put it into reserves for covering their losses. The Bimal Jalan Committee has determined what is the level of reserves that the RBI must hold. I hope that formula will see that the friction on dividend payment is lower.

Ishan Bakshi: This government has made a concerted attempt, like previous governments, to encourage manufacturing. There has been a lot of debate on manufacturing versus service. Former RBI governor Raghuram Rajan also advocated a more service-oriented pathway as opposed to manufacturing because the view is that we may have already missed the bus for manufacturing. What is your view?

Let me preface by what Dr Rajan and Rohit Lamba, his co-author, have said (in *Breaking the Mould*). To paraphrase what they've said, India is spending public resources in subsidising manufacturing, the hardcore of manufacturing. But if you take the entire chain of manufacturing, that is

the least value-added segment. If the argument is that this is the entry point for the entire vertical chain to come to you, perhaps that expectation may not be realised because the comparative advantage of global value chains itself is getting eroded. In any case, India is a high tariff regime, so it is not worthwhile for the value chains to come in. On the other hand, as populations are ageing in rich countries, the demand will be more for services than for manufacturing. Because of technology, we are now able to deliver service from a distance. We have a first-mover advantage that we must exploit. That is the argument of this book. I agree with that.

But I do not think that is a solution to our short-term or medium-term problem. First of all, manufacturing and service are not mutually exclusive. Even Dr Rajan and Dr Lamba have not said that they are mutually exclusive. We have a huge unemployment problem. Numbers can be disputed but the problem cannot be denied.

We need to provide jobs in the semi-skilled segment. We need to focus on future generations, give them more skills and more education. But for the next five to 10 years, we need to provide jobs to this segment of labour force which is largely semi-skilled. The only way to do that is in the manufacturing sector.

Ishan Bakshi: Many have described this election as a make-or-break election. At the end of the day, what gives you hope, what worries you, what scares you and what are your expectations?

What gives me hope is the resilience of our democracy. What is of concern is the deeper problems that we have. As much as poverty has gone down, awareness levels, literacy levels have gone up and people now have a better quality of life than they did 25 years ago, there is still a lot of inequality and unemployment. My deeper worry is about the long-term challenges, which includes climate change. What are Artificial Intelligence and robotics going to do to comparative advantage? How are the geopolitics going to unfold? How will globalisation unfold? How in this world are different demographic transitions taking place that are going to change demand patterns and comparative advantages? How is India going to navigate through that? That's a long list of my worries.

Ishan Bakshi: Does the shrinking Opposition space worry you?

I think democracy functions best if there is sufficient space for the Opposition.





HOW SUN SET FOR SRH: FROM STRATOSPHERIC HIGHS... TO AN ALL-TIME LOW IN FINAL

277/3 vs MI

HYDERABAD, MARCH 27
18 SIXES

Riding on a stunning Travis-Abhishek onslaught, SRH broke RCB's long-standing record for the highest score in the history of IPL on a night they made the cricketing world sit up and take notice.

287/3 vs RCB

BENGALURU, APRIL 15
22 SIXES

In about three weeks after that Hyderabad run-fest, SRH broke the IPL record once more, this time riding on a 41-ball 102 from Travis Head. Two highs that were seen as redefining T20 batting.

113 all out vs KKR

CHENNAI, MAY 26
3 SIXES

SRH were blown away by a superb KKR bowling display, to register the lowest score ever in the history of IPL finals. And also the first team ever to lose all 10 wickets in IPL title deciders.

Knights crowned Kings

Starc starts carnage with unplayable ball and their bowlers bundle Hyderabad for lowest score in final before completing the job on a canter

SYNOPSIS

In a lopsided final, Kolkata Knight Riders's clinical effort with the ball blows away Sunrisers Hyderabad to clinch third IPL title.



No words to describe [holds his tears]. It means so much. I am happy that all of us were very disciplined and worked towards one goal. This franchise has done a lot for me. It's a big gift from all of us to them."

ANDRE RUSSELL
ON KKR WINNING IPL 2024

Only moments before the toss, Starc was marking his run-up and Abhishek shadow-practising from one end and visualising what he would be facing from the Australian. But no amount of practice would have prepared Abhishek for what Starc came up with. Having sent four deliveries that swung away, the fifth too followed the pattern. But this one pitched on the middle-stump line and shaped away, squaring up Abhishek. At 139.1kmph, Abhishek didn't stand a chance.

Right through the season, the new ball has barely swung at Chepauk. But on Sunday, even Vaibhav Arora found swing straightaway. Like they did in Ahmedabad, Kolkata's new ball bowlers denied any width to Abhishek and Head. They stuck to what worked for them in Qualifier 1 as Arora got one to angle away, and Head edged the first ball he faced to the wicket-keeper. Hyderabad have seldom recovered from such blows in the past, and the trend would continue as Rahul Tripathi too departed in the fifth over. At 40/3 after the Powerplay, Kolkata had the final under control.

Taking a stranglehold

There is a reason Kolkata have never lost a match this season while chasing. Despite playing in batting-friendly conditions, Kolkata's attack is as rounded as any team can wish for. Their entire gameplan revolves around winning games with the right intent with the bat, but their bowlers have been no pushovers. And they didn't even need to turn to their mystery spinners Sunil Narine and Varun Chakravarty to complete the job that Starc started. Instead, Harshit Rana - Kolkata's find of the season - and Andre Russell would squash whatever comeback hopes Hyderabad had. For a batting line-up that made six-hitting the norm this season, they managed only three on the night. It showed how ruthless Kolkata were in terms of execution. Making full use of the red-soil pitch that offered good bounce, Rana and Russell shared five wickets between them, conceding only 43 runs in 6.3 overs.

For a team that had three 250-plus totals, everything that could go wrong for Hyderabad on the night, did.

BRIEF SCORES: Sunrisers Hyderabad 113 all out in 18.3 overs (Pat Cummins 24; Mitchell Starc 2/14, Andre Russell 3/19, Harshit Rana 2/24) lost to **Kolkata Knight Riders** 114 for 2 in 10.3 overs (Venkatesh Iyer 52 not out).



Kolkata Knight Riders celebrate after beating Sunrisers Hyderabad in the 2024 IPL Final at Chepauk on Sunday. *Sportspics*

Equanimous Cummins gives Sunrisers a legacy

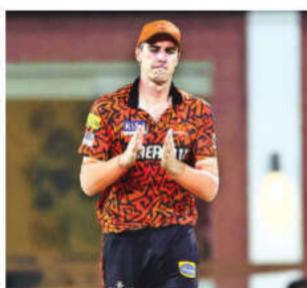
SANDIP G
MAY 26

THE DAY before the final against Kolkata Knight Riders, Pat Cummins jested: "My trophy-winning luck would end some day." In the last 10 months, he has lifted the World Test Championship mace, kissed the urn and raised the ODI World Cup crown too.

Those words turned out to be eerily prophetic - Cummins finally lost a final - but he did not wear a beaten expression. In both defeat and victory, he remains splendidly dignified, neither celebrating triumphs with arrogance nor mourning losses with bitterness. Somehow, he keeps that genial, almost perfect, smile of his.

He finds a rare sense of perspective in every act of his life. Perhaps, it's the product of his experiences. He was three when his sister accidentally slammed a door on him, and he lost a centimetre of his middle finger, after a splendid Test debut at 18, injuries piled on one after the other, and before he made his comeback after seven years in the wilderness. He had missed 64 Test matches. Those setbacks must have instilled in him a sense of equilibrium.

With a Buddha-like calm he watched his colleagues capsiz on Sunday night in Chennai. When his turn came, he batted as hard as he always did and gave the total a semblance of respectability. He knew he was espousing a lost cause, but still fought, and still tried.



Pat Cummins' Sunrisers showed the future of T20 batting this IPL. *Sportspics*

With the ball, he strove as defiantly as he could to ignite flames of a rare miracle.

It was not to be; but Cummins didn't bite the apple of defeat with sourness. He knew this was not his night, or their night. His team might not have won the trophy, but it showed the future of T20 batting, the direction the sport would take.

The IPL would have been considerably poorer without the cavalier batting philosophy of theirs. Thrice, his men sped past 250; are the two highest team scores ever in the league are in Sunrisers' name.

This perhaps is his biggest legacy - he has instilled an identity to Sunrisers. A band of fire-

brands. Yet, Cummins is an iceman. He rarely loses his temper; barely shouts at his men, never picks an argument with an opposition batsman or the umpire. Even team meetings are short and sharp.

"He is not a time-waster and avoids wasting time in conferences. Our team meeting lasted for thirty-five seconds," assistant coach Simon Helmot would say. He details his style of captaincy: "He is an extremely practical individual. He is modest and compassionate towards his coaches and colleagues. He is interested in statistics and observes the data he needs under specific circumstances to take on a given opponent."

Roles and tactics are well-defined, yet flexible.

From the start, they had conceived their plan of full-on aggression. It's not a sustainable plan, but they were willing to take the gamble and the inevitable defeats on the way. One of the most striking elements of this team is how serenely they deal with the certainty of failure.

"We were pretty strong with how we wanted to play - super-aggressive - and in a 14-game season, you're not going to win every single game but we think if we play that way, you're going to win most of them. That's kind of how it played out - there are little bumps that come along the way but that's okay but you try and make sure it stays on course," Cummins said on the eve of the final.

Pace is their biggest strength, yet he had the confidence to thrust the scantily experienced

part-time spinner Abhishek with four overs in Qualifier 2.

A fierce competitor, he is not hyper-obsessive about results. He takes cricket just seriously enough, is willing to risk defeat in pursuit of victory, and is inventive in the field. His philosophy is simple: "Primarily, I want my teammates to enjoy the game, help them produce their best, without being over conscious of the results."

He is fiercely loyal to his players, and stood by his teammates during the Justin Langer saga in Australia.

In such a supportive environment, be it Australia or Sunrisers, players feel secure. It's little coincidence that several players have revived or blossomed this season. Abhishek Sharma, hitherto floating in the batting order, wondering whether he was a batsman or a bowler, was furnished the license to go berserk at the top; T Natarajan was drilled the confidence to roar back on his return from injuries; Rahul Tripathi was told to bat without thinking of failures. Some of the left-field tactics have worked - like the left-arm spin assault on Rajasthan Royals in Qualifier 2. Cummins ends up being right, because he has led his team in making it work. He wins their trust; he wins the love of the teammates and fans.

It would hurt him that his trophy-winning spree ended, but he would face it with the stoic smile of his. He would be quietly confident that the trophy-winning ways would wink again on him.

EMOTIONAL ROLLERCOASTER

Hot heads, calm minds and everything in between at the game



From Starc's banter to his bullet to Abhishek

Just before the toss as **Mitchell Starc** was marking his run-up, Abhishek Sharma stood at the opposite end and was shadow batting a lofted shot. He even appeared to be visualising what he would be facing later on. There was funny banter between Starc and Travis Head, at the non-striker's end, after the first ball in the IPL final. The first ball swung past the outside edge of Sharma, and as Starc walked back, he directed a gesture at Head with his thumb back at striker's end. As if to say you get there. Head said something that brought up a big laugh from Starc. In the stands, a huge banner waved: "Travis Head, drop them dead!" Three balls later, it was Starc dropping one dead with an absolute beaut. It landed on a length around middle and off and curved away past the iffy prod from Abhishek Sharma to clatter into the off peg. Starc roared. Abhishek winced, and the final was alive and kicking.

Chronicles of Narine: A rejigged second act

And to think that it was the controversy over his bowling action which was reported that has made **Sunil Narine** an even harder proposition to hit these days. When the issue broke out and he had to remodel his action, Narine went for one big change. He began to hold the ball behind him, de-



laying its sighting to the batsmen. He had been practising it for six years prior to that but hadn't used it in game situations but forced by the problems over his action, he pulled out his trump card. "That helped my economy rate go even lower - batsmen see the ball as late as possible and have to react, rather than see what is going to happen. They have to wait and try to hit the ball. That split-second delay works in my favour," he once told Cricket Monthly. The SRH batsmen too had no clue, and kept waiting that fraction longer and could only push him around for singles. When Cummins tried to take him on, he skied a catch to long-on where it was grassed by Mitch Starc.

Arora of shining Knights

For all the big hitting that's been a feature of this IPL, it just takes a bit of movement at pace to redress the balance of the game. While the delivery Mitchell Starc unleashed to cast Abhishek Sharma would have got any left-hander, even in a Test match, Travis Head succumbed to some late movement and his propensity to stay leg-side of the ball moving away from him, and not exercising his feet much. Head allowed Abhishek to take first strike against Starc, who had made a mockery of his stumps in Qualifier 1. But if he thought that Vaibhav Arora would be an easier proposition, he was mistaken. The uncapped Indian pacer has just about enough pace to keep batsmen honest in the early overs, hits the perfect length and gets the ball to move, primarily into the right-hander and away from left-handers. The length on the last ball had him rooted to the crease and the late away movement forced him to just fend indecisively at the ball, resulting in an outside edge and the dismissal of Sunrisers' man for the



Vaibhav Arora celebrates after flummoxing Travis Head. *Sportspics*

big occasion. Starc is the quintessential big-match player, but when he was not firing in the first half of the tournament, it was Arora who did the heavy lifting in the opening exchanges.

A piece of subtle art from Rana

On a night of spectacular deliveries, **Harshit Rana** produced a piece of pure subtlety to devour Nitish Kumar Reddy. The devious setting up was there - three slower balls followed by one at full pelt, which meant he lingered on the back-foot - but you expect batsmen at this level to see through such layers of deception. But the real beauty was the ball itself. The ball swung in a wee bit, even in the seventh over, thanks to those dexterous fingers of Rana, which ensured the uprightness of the seam. That minuscule inward movement tricked Reddy. He shaped to ease the ball off the leg-side, before he saw with startled eyes, the ball moving off the seam after landing. He altered his stroke and tried to force it through the off-side. By then, he had lost his shape, his feet stood static and he could only swish his bat at what he perceived as the line of the ball. Nitish wore the expression of a defeated man.



KKR ace strategy on big night at Chepauk

When a big game is talked up too much, very often it turns out to be a damp squib. An IPL final is inevitably a hyped event, but it seemed that only one team had come out to play. KKR had been the most consistent team throughout the tournament, but the best side can come unstuck in a one-off match. Sunrisers had shown they are a dangerous side, but Sunday was a day when the cream did rise to the top. And their success owed as much to the talent and big-game temperament of the group as to the preparation and homework done by KKR's think tank. They read the pitch well and knew what sort of bowling would be most effective on the surface. Of course, it helps if the team has all bases covered in their bowling attack, and the opposition doesn't have a clue how to go about an innings if they lose a few wickets upfront. The destiny of the big final seemed decided much before the halfway mark.



Sindhu's finishing funk

Indian star just couldn't kill a rally with accurate shot selection in the third game as Wang Zhi Yi produced a stunning turnaround to clinch the title

SHIVANI NAIK
MAY 26

IN THE decisive phase of her Malaysia Masters final against Wang Zhi Yi, PV Sindhu could score just 5 points while the Chinese racked up 18. The Indian had led 11-3 in the third set at the change of sides before her endgame spectacularly crumbled and she was blown away 16-21 by the Asian Champion. That decider lasted 36 whole minutes and Sindhu played many long rallies in utter vain in that period.

The 21-16, 5-21, 16-21 loss, denying the 28-year-old a title, was the latest exhibit of how things fall apart routinely for the two-time Olympic medallist in recent years at the clutch. She got tired. Her mind went clueless. The opponent pounced on the opportunity and Sindhu just couldn't stem the flow.

This would not be worrisome had Sindhu been playing badly, making errors, defending tamely or attacking recklessly. But she was playing good strokes, even if the power in them was slightly punctured like a slowly deflating tire. But she just couldn't kill a rally with accurate shot selection after switching sides in the third. That's the phase where Sindhu historically needs a steady stream of pithy instructions from the coaching bench, for she gets sucked into the opponent's pace and blanks out. She tried this and that, and several other options, tiring herself out, when pinpoint tips would've helped her cross the tape.

They split the first two sets, but though Wang won the second, she didn't carry any particular momentum into the third. Sindhu was still dictating rallies from the favourable side on court. It's when the ends changed that Wang did two things right - she defended far more stoutly, so even when Sindhu increased her hand speed, the Chinese hung on in the attrition to narrow the gap to 13-15 on an outrageous low pick-up. But before that the Chinese went from 3-11 to 8-11, a run of five straight points, with a mix of dipping drops to the front court and some teasing tosses to the back. It was a pure play to sap Sindhu's endurance.

Like being hypnotized by a harmful harp, Sindhu has been guilty of blindly being drawn into the opponent's pace in the endgame stages. She simply doesn't snap out of these and points disappear in a bunch, and suddenly they are breathing at her neck, the leads vamoos from her grasp and they draw level. Wang who was spraying the shuttle all over in



PV Sindhu lost 21-16, 5-21, 16-21 to Wang Zhi Yi in the final. BWF/BadmintonPhoto

the opening set, kept it simple just mixing her placements and added a sprinkling of power. The Chinese went from 8-13 down to leading 15-13 in 7 barely believable point-heists.

Sindhu had played 248 minutes this week till semis, averaging over an hour in each match. Wang Zhi Yi had been on court for 160 (avg 40 mins) including two 39-minute strolls against fellow Chinese. When the decider began, they had both been at it for 43 minutes, so it wasn't especially surprising that the Indian was tired. But her fitful end-game endurance leading to an unravelling of her game is also down to clueless tactics precisely and bespoke for this phase, which ought to scream, "tired, but will destroy you". It's that 36 km + second wind after hitting the wall in a marathon, but in badminton it's also reading the mental geometry of the court.

For Sindhu had begun promisingly. Though Wang wasn't allowing her leeway at the net by pushing her back with her midcourt drops, Sindhu did well to use the body smashes against the fairly tall 5'7" Chinese, hitting awkwardly to her hips. Even if the Chinese returned, she was bogged enough when Sindhu sent the next return out of her reach. Wang was also shabby going for the back lines, and it's how Sindhu pocketed the first.

The drift, some shoring up of her nerves, and tweaking her accuracy gave Wang the sec-

ond, though that 21-5 scoreline meant the shoot-off of a decider fetched up quick enough. Still, Sindhu did well to race up to 11-3. But the familiar endgame paralysis then struck.

"It's sad that I didn't get the result that I expected. I think I should have pulled it off, maintaining the lead (in Set 3), but there were really good rallies and she also came back," Sindhu told BWF, adding that she was overall happy to make the final after a year.

Sindhu isn't known to unnecessarily dwell on losses, and her ability to move on to the next challenge and give it a good go, is the reason why she has immense success at the topmost level. Carolina Marin is tantalizingly placed in her quarter of the draw for next week at the Singapore Open, so Malaysia needs no mulling. "It's important to get back and maybe just a day off and then be prepared for the next tournament. It's important that you keep pumping up, you keep pushing yourself, you keep encouraging yourself in these low times. That's what I can do now at the moment. I mean, it is disappointing, but it is also important to just cheer myself up and, just focus and relax and prepare for the next tournament," she added.

The final loss means she stays hungry to prove a point. Navigating the endgame though must push her coaching team to dig for solutions.

2 months to go for Olympics, Neeraj suffers scare after back-to-back events

NIHAL KOSHIE
NEW DELHI, MAY 26

EXACTLY TWO months before the Paris Olympics, India's biggest medal hope Neeraj Chopra has pulled out of the World Athletics Continental Tour Gold event at Ostrava in the Czech Republic because of adductor muscle stiffness. The health scare comes towards the end of a hectic month where the Tokyo Olympics javelin gold medalist had participated in two competitions - Doha Diamond League and Bhubaneswar Federation Cup - that were just four days apart.

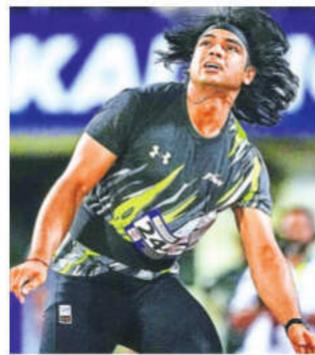
Neeraj in a statement on social media said that he "felt something" in his adductor after a recent throwing session and wasn't taking the risk of competing because of his past problems with the muscle. "...I am not injured but I don't want to take any risk during the Olympic year so I had to take this decision. Once it's fully recovered, I will get back to competitions," he said.

Manisha Malhotra, the head of Sports Excellence and Scouting at JSW Sports, the firm that manages Chopra, mentioned "back-to-back competitions" as a reason for the pull out. "Neeraj has pulled out because of adductor tightness and the fatigue of competing in back-to-back events in Doha and Bhubaneswar. The day after the Federation Cup in Bhubaneswar he travelled back to Poland, where he has been training. Neeraj skipping the meet is a precautionary step. He is scheduled to participate in the Paavo Nurmi Games in Turku next month," Malhotra told *The Indian Express*.

The blip in Neeraj's preparation, so close to the July 26-August 11 Olympics, raises a question: Why did the world's top javelin athlete participate in a domestic event like the Fed Cup at Bhubaneswar?

It is learnt that the Federation Cup was not on the star javelin thrower's original schedule but he made the trip following a call with top Athletics Federation of India (AFI) officials. In the conversation, Chopra said that he wasn't willing to participate in the June-end Inter-State Championships at Panchkula, a competition mandatory for all Olympics-bound athletes as per AFI policy, since it would disturb his training and competition schedule in Europe.

So, in lieu of that, he opted for the Fed Cup and took the Bhubaneswar detour after the Diamond League in Doha. It is learnt that Neeraj's adductor flared after the Fed Cup final, his first competition at home following the Tokyo Olympics.



AFI's chief national coach Radhakrishnan Nair gave a chronology of the events. "Two weeks before the Federation Cup we had a meeting which was attended by myself, president (Adille Sumariwalla), Lalit Bhanot (AFI planning commission chief) and Neeraj. In that meeting, Neeraj said that he won't be able to compete in the Inter-State Championships because he has a competition in Finland on June 18 and another competition on July 7. The AFI policy is that all athletes must participate in the Inter-State competition... So, Neeraj offered that he can participate in the Federation Cup instead."

No exemption for Neeraj: AFI

Asked if Neeraj, a proven gold medal winner at the Olympics and the World Championships, should have been given an exemption, chief coach Nair said: "No, this year we have made it compulsory for everyone to participate. Athletes, including Neeraj, were informed about this over two months ago."

Chopra reached Bhubaneswar on May 14, a day before the men's javelin final. He won gold with an 82.27-metre throw in the fourth round, way below his personal best of 89.94 metres, and gave the last two rounds a miss. After the final, the same evening, Neeraj and five other athletes had a promotional shoot for Puma. The next day, the AFI announced that they had signed a deal with Puma for apparel, shoes and accessories for 400 Indian athletes. On May 16, a day after the Puma promotion shoot, Neeraj appeared before the camera for an Indian Olympic Association shoot, which also had a slot for JSW Inspire

WHAT THEY SAID

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RADHAKRISHNAN NAIR,
CHIEF NATIONAL COACH AFI

"Neeraj has pulled out because of adductor tightness and the fatigue of competing in back-to-back events in Doha and Bhubaneswar. The day after the Federation Cup in Bhubaneswar he travelled back to Poland, where he has been training. Neeraj skipping the meet is a precautionary step. He is scheduled to participate in the Paavo Nurmi Games in Turku next month."



MANISHA MALHOTRA,
HEAD OF SPORTS EXCELLENCE & SCOUTING,
JSW SPORTS

Apparel, also in Bhubaneswar.

Chief national coach Nair denied that Neeraj's participation in the Federation Cup was linked to the tie-up between the AFI and Puma.

In his first competition of the year, the Doha Diamond League, Neeraj finished second with a throw of 88.36 metres. The Czech Republic's Jakub Vadlejch, the Tokyo Olympics silver medalist, won the competition in Qatar's capital city with a throw of 88.38 metres.

BRIEFLY

Leclerc ends his Monaco jinx with win

Monaco: Ferrari's Charles Leclerc celebrated a boyhood dream come true on Sunday as the first home winner of Formula One's showcase Monaco Grand Prix since Louis Chiron triumphed in 1931. It was also the first time the 26-year-old had stood on the Monaco podium in six attempts and came after two standing starts from pole position in a race halted when first-lap collisions took out a fifth of the field. McLaren's Oscar Piastri finished runner-up, 7.1 seconds behind after 78 laps without a chance to overtake on a street circuit that often produces professional races, and Ferrari's Carlos Sainz was third. "It means a lot," said Leclerc, who screamed over the radio as he took a chequered flag waved by France forward Kylian Mbappe. **REUTERS**

IOC launches Games programme for India

Lausanne: The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has announced the launch of Let's Move, India campaign to invite everyone to celebrate athletes participating at the Paris Olympic Games, which begin on July 26. The programme will get underway on Thursday, and will include people of all age groups. According to an IOC statement, "The campaign would allow people all over the country to join the movement through a digital challenge on social media. Young people can also take part in a series of regional school initiatives in collaboration with the Reliance Foundation and Abhinav Bindra Foundation to coincide with Olympic Day on 23 June," said the statement. **ENS**

Dipa wins gold in Asian Senior C'ships

Tashkent: Top gymnast Dipa Karmakar on Sunday became the first Indian to win a gold medal in the Asian Senior Championships as she clinched the yellow metal in the women's vault event here. The 30-year-old Dipa secured an average of 13.566 in the vault final on the last day of competitions in Uzbekistan's capital city. North Koreans Kim Son Hyang (13.466) and Jo Kyong Byol (12.966) grabbed the silver and bronze medals respectively. Dipa, who had finished fourth in the vault final at the 2016 Rio Olympics, had won a bronze medal in the same event in the 2015 edition. **PTI**

Nadal hopes brutal 1st round won't be his last in Paris

NAMIT KUMAR
MAY 26

AND SO it may not be. What had been billed for months as the grand farewell, for the grandest of relationships between an athlete and his favourite hunting ground, may not be a farewell after all. Rafael Nadal could return to Roland Garros after this year - "maybe, maybe not."

Ahead of the start of this year's French Open, Nadal bounced into his pre-tournament press conference, smirking and chirping at questions about his future - a far cry from his bleak outlook from a month ago - and left things tantalizingly ambiguous.

"If I have to tell you it's 100% my last Roland Garros, sorry but I will not, because I cannot predict what's going on. I hope you understand," he was quoted as saying by Reuters. "I don't want to close 100% the door... Maybe in one month and a half I'll say 'OK, it's enough, I can't keep going'. But today I cannot guarantee that it's going to be the last one."

Nadal, who has always played this tournament as a top-five seed, was left to the mercy of the draw as an unseeded player this time around and was dealt a brutal first-round assignment against fourth seed and recent Italian Open champion Alexander Zverev, which takes place on Monday.

Upbeat and playing "without limitation" for the first time in a year and a half, Nadal was not quick to complain about his upcoming opponent either. "I'm enjoying what I'm doing again. Sorry, but I am feeling competitive in practices. Maybe not yet in matches, but in the practices, I am able to play almost against anyone. It's giving me some hope," he said.

Scraps of hope is what Nadal must live on to be competitive after just 15 professional matches since the start of 2023 and a ranking of World No. 275 as he has nursed adnominal and hip injuries.

A month ago, Nadal arrived in Madrid struggling for fitness and rhythm, claiming he will not be able to play the French Open in the form and shape he was in at the time. That week, though, he was able to stitch together a few wins and leave with a positive mindset. Even though he ran into reality in Rome a week later, suffering a dire loss to Hubert Hurkacz in the second round, the rhythm seems to have returned, and an unusually confident persona has emerged.

Even then it will be a tall order for him to take on the in-form Zverev, who may be mounting a title challenge himself - even while his domestic abuse trial kicks off in Berlin during this tournament.

In terms of matchups, this is not a favourable one for Nadal either. Zverev's tall frame, power, and solid backhand nullify, to an extent, the Spaniard's greatest strength - his high-bouncing, topspin-laden lefty fore-



Rafael Nadal, not at his best following injury-forced break, will be the underdog in their opening clash. **Reuters**

HEAD-TO-HEAD

PLAYED: 10 times
RAFAEL NADAL: 7 wins
ALEXANDER ZVEREV: 3 wins

hand which he uses to target a right-handed opponent's backhand. Given his recent injuries, Nadal has not been able to find much purchase on his serve either, which will not allow him to squeeze his way out of trouble under pressure.

Effective returner

Yet, Nadal's body of work on this ground makes it impossible to see this encounter as a foregone conclusion. If the Spaniard can construct points using his heavy forehand, and unleash it down the line with depth and accuracy, Zverev may find it difficult to cope. Nadal is also an effective returner, and while Zverev has a huge first serve, he has a notoriously poor record on his second serve.

The German has also, over the years, shown a capacity to collapse - having lost a Major final from two sets and a break up, and as recently as this year's Australian Open, lost a semifinal from the same position. Minuscule chances may open up for Nadal to take control if the pressure of a hugely partisan crowd gets to Zverev and he begins to blink.

This match - a realistic title contender taking on a 14-time champion in the first round - remains a rarity and is likely to be a blockbuster showdown for its larger significance. Despite all the narrative-rich subtext, Nadal will have to search for the kind of form and fight that he has not found in the last two years. The last time he did, after a fortnight of applying pain-numbing injections to address a chronic foot issue, he limped out of this very arena with the trophy. Expect him to believe, even if that may not be enough.

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