

**INDIA'S MALDIVES OUTREACH**Jaishankar with Maldives President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih and Foreign Minister Abdulla Shahid in Addu. *P77*

Jaishankar takes stock of projects, inks pacts on health, education

SHUBHAJIT ROY
NEW DELHI, MARCH 27

EXTERNAL AFFAIRS Minister S Jaishankar signed pacts on health and education, and discussed regional security and maritime safety issues with his Maldivian counterpart Abdulla Shahid on Sunday.

Jaishankar, who arrived in the Maldives on Saturday, also met President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih.

He will fly to Sri Lanka on a three-day visit beginning Monday, as India seeks to bolster its ties with two very important neighbours in the Indian Ocean region, proactively reaching out with projects and initiatives to counter the influence of China.

"Defence cooperation" is a crucial component of the India-Maldives partnership, Jaishankar said as he formally handed over to the chief of the Maldivian defence forces the Coastal Radar

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

After China foreign minister, Russia's Lavrov may arrive in India this week

SHUBHAJIT ROY
NEW DELHI, MARCH 27

RUSSIA'S FOREIGN Minister Sergey Lavrov is expected to come to India this week, days after the visit by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

With the war having completed a month, India on Thursday abstained on a resolution pushed by Russia in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine.

The resolution, which was perceived to be critical of Ukraine, did not get the required nine votes and failed to pass. By its abstention, New Delhi signalled that it was not aligned with Moscow's position.

India had earlier abstained on Western-led resolutions that criticised the Russian military action in Ukraine. Thursday's abstention reflected an attempt by New Delhi to seek a neutral position as it continues to engage and walk a diplomatic tightrope on the issue.

Hours later, India abstained again on a United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

At Lviv railway station, where thousands of displaced people are helped by volunteers. The refugee numbers have now come down. *Krishn Kaushik*

War is new normal, a trickle starts to return home under 'illusion of safety'

**KRISHN KAUSHIK**
LVIV, MARCH 27

FLEEING THEIR homes in war-

ravaged eastern Ukraine, thousands are still coming to Lviv in the west every day. As they walk out of the over-a-century-old, grey-domed railway station, local volunteers feed them, provide medical assistance and help them find accommodation or move west to Poland.

But now, some Ukrainians have begun moving back to their

homes in the east -- low in number but a steady trickle nevertheless, lured by an "illusion of safety" with Russia announcing that it would now focus specifically on the Donbas region.

In the early days of the invasion, Andrew Ohirchak would see over 50,000 people coming to Lviv on trains. "But in the last

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AFFIDAVIT IN SC

States too can define minority status: Centre

Responds to plea that Hindus be given minority tag in some states

ANANTHAKRISHNAN
NEW DELHI, MARCH 27

CENSURED BY the Supreme Court for not taking a stand on the politically sensitive question of identifying minorities at the state level and granting of minority status to Hindus in states where their numbers have fallen below that of other communities, the Centre has finally broken its silence and put the onus on states, saying they too have the power to declare communities as 'minority'.

In an affidavit filed in the top court, the Union Ministry of Minority Affairs said "state governments can also declare a religious or linguistic community as a 'minority community' within the state".

The affidavit was filed in response to a 2020 petition by advocate Ashwini Upadhyay, who said that as per the 2011 Census, Hindus were a minority in Lakshadweep, Mizoram, Nagaland, Meghalaya, J&K, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, and Punjab and that they should be given minority status in these states in accordance with the principle laid down by the Supreme Court in its 2002 TMA Pai ruling.

In the TMA Pai case, the SC had said that for the purposes of Article 30 that deals with the

EXPLAINED
Politically sensitive issue

GRANTING THE prayer of the petitioner to identify minorities at the state-level would mean that the Centre will have to take a decision on according Hindus and smaller groups with minority status in places such as Kashmir, Punjab and many Northeastern states, where the respective majority communities currently hold minority rights.

rights of minorities to establish and administer educational institutions, religious and linguistic minorities have to be considered state-wise.

Under Section 2(c) of the National Commission for Minorities Act, 1992, the Centre had in 1993 notified five communities -- Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Parsis and Christians -- as minorities.

Upadhyay had in 2017 first moved the apex court praying for appropriate guidelines for the identification of minorities, and for Hindus to be declared as a

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IDEA EXCHANGE

'Even if I get 70%...I can take CUET...this entire focus on high scores will go away'

M JAGADESH KUMAR
UGC CHAIRMAN

PAGE 10

UTTAR PRADESH**YOGI CABINET 2.0: NO MINISTER FROM HALF OF U.P. DISTRICTS****MAHANA LIKELY TO BE BJP NOMINEE FOR SPEAKER** *PAGE 3*

Kushinagar man killed for celebrating BJP win, says family

MANISH SAHU
LUCKNOW, MARCH 27

POLICE HAVE arrested two persons in connection with the death of a 28-year-old Muslim man in Kushinagar, who was beaten up for allegedly supporting the BJP.

The family of Babbar Ali claimed that the 28-year-old, who had celebrated BJP's win in the UP Assembly elections by distributing sweets, had received threats for actively campaigning for the ruling party.



Babbar Ali

Police said they are probing into the allegations made by Ali's family, and added that they have also come to know that he had a dispute with his neighbours

and distant relatives, who are accused in the case.

According to his family, Ali, who used to run a food stall, was thrashed and thrown from the terrace of his home at Katghari village on March 20. "On March 20, he (Babbar Ali) was standing outside the house, when the four accused, armed with sticks and sharp-edged weapon, came and started hitting him. Babbar ran to the terrace where he was beaten by them. After he fell unconscious, they threw him from the terrace," said Ali's brother Chande Alam, who works in Mumbai and returned to the village after coming to know about the assault.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

BLAMES MUSLIMS FOR PARTY'S DEBACLE IN U.P. POLLS

BJP, RSS misled BSP supporters on making me President: Maya

LALMANI VERMA
LUCKNOW, MARCH 27

CLAIMING THAT she would never accept the post of President of India from any other party, Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) chief Mayawati on Sunday accused the BJP and RSS of "strategically spreading a false propaganda" to mislead her supporters in the recently concluded Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh.

"Through a well-thought-out strategy and conspiracy in this election, the BJP through RSS spread false propaganda among our voters that if the BSP does not come to power in UP, I will be made the President of the country and hence they should let the BJP come to power. In re-

BSP chief Mayawati at a meeting with party leaders in Lucknow, on Sunday. *P77*

ality, I cannot even think in my dreams to become the President.. Let alone becoming the President, I cannot even

imagine such a thing in my dream. I want to make it very clear that in the interest of our party and movement, I can not accept the post of President of BJP or any other party," Mayawati said, adding she is a "firm disciple of (BSP founder) Kanshi Ram who had rejected such an offer".

She was speaking to BSP leaders and workers during a meeting to review the party's debacle in the Assembly elections. The party managed to win only one seat in the 403-member Assembly with its voteshare dipping to 12.88 per cent.

She also held the rival Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Muslim community for the BSP's loss.

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3 UTTAR PRADESH

YOGI CABINET 2.0

No minister from half of 75 districts

Four of the five districts where BJP did not win any seats are among those that have gone unrepresented in the Cabinet

SHYAMLAL YADAV
NEW DELHI, MARCH 27

HALF OF the 75 districts in Uttar Pradesh find no representation in the Yogi Adityanath ministry that took oath on Friday, with the team of 53 ministers, including Adityanath, representing 37 of the state's districts.

Four of the five districts where the ruling BJP did not win any seats are among those that have gone unrepresented, shows a district-wise analysis of the ministry list.

The BJP didn't win any of the Assembly segments in Ambedkar Nagar, Kaushambi, Ghazipur, Azamgarh and Shamli districts. Except for Kaushambi - from where Keshav Prasad Maurya, who, despite his loss from Sirathu seat has been retained as Deputy Chief Minister -- all others have drawn a blank in the new ministerial formation.

Among other districts that have gone unrepresented in Adityanath's new team include Gonda and Bulandshahar, in each of which the BJP won all seven seats; Amroha, where the BJP won two out of four seats and Badaun (three out of the six for the party).

Of the 38 districts without ministerial representation, in eight, the BJP's allies have won a seat each - in Bahraich, Farrukhabad, Fatehpur, Jhansi, Kanpur Nagar, Pratapgarh and Siddharth Nagar, the Apna Dal (S) won a seat each, while in Maharajganj, Sanjay Nishad's NISHAD Party has a seat. Both the allies who have been made ministers - Ashish Patel of the Apna Dal (S) and Sanjay Nishad are MLCs.

Also, Ayodhya, where a Ram



A minister's room at Vidhan Bhawan being renovated, in Lucknow, Sunday. PTI

temple is being built and where the party won three out of five seats, doesn't have a minister. However, the adjoining Barabanki district has a minister in Satish Sharma, who has been elected from Dariyabad Assembly seat.

Data show that there are three districts that have three ministers each: Varanasi (Raveendra Jaiswal, Anil Rajbhar and Dayashankar Mishra Dayalu); Shahjahanpur (Suresh Khanna, Jitin Prasada and JPS Rathore); and Kanpur Dehat (Rakesh Sachan, Ajit Pal and Pratibha Shukla).

There are nine districts with two ministers each: Agra (Baby Rani Maurya and Yogendra Upadhyay); Ballia (Dayashankar Singh and Danish Azad Ansari); Saharanpur (Jaswant Singh Saini and Brijesh Singh); Hardoi (Nitin

Agarwal and Rajni Tewari); Aligarh (Sandeep Singh and Anup Pradhan Valmiki); Meerut (Dinesh Khateek and Somendra Tomar); Sitapur (Suresh Rahi and Rakesh Rathore); Deoria (Surya Pratap Shahi and Vijay Laxmi Gautam) and Gorakhpur (Yogi Adityanath and Sanjay Nishad).

Besides the districts from where the BJP has not won a single seat, the districts which have no representation in the Adityanath ministry are: Amroha, Auraiya, Behraich, Balrampur, Basti, Bhadohi, Bjnore, Budaun, Bulandshahar, Chandauli, Etah, Etawah, Ayodhya, Farrukhabad, Fatehpur, Firozabad, Gautam Buddh Nagar, Gonda, Hamirpur, Hapur, Jhansi, Kanpur Nagar, Kasganj, Kushinagar, Lakhimpur Kheri, Maharajganj, Mahoba,

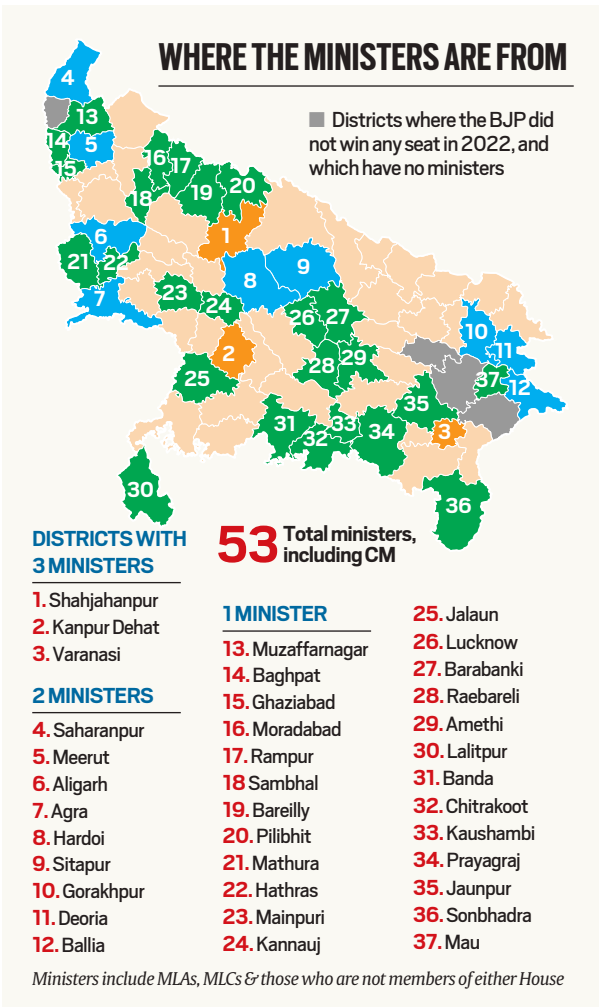
Pratapgarh, Sant Kabir Nagar, Shravasti, Siddharth Nagar, Sultanpur and Unnao.

Of UP's 18 administrative divisions, Basti (comprising Basti, Sant Kabir Nagar and Siddharth Nagar districts) and Devipatan (Behraich, Balrampur, Gonda, Shravasti districts) have no representation in the government.

Of Ayodhya division's five districts, only two (Amethi and Barabanki) have got a minister each.

While Kanpur city has no representation, there are three ministers from the adjoining Kanpur Dehat district (Rakesh Sachan, Pratibha Shukla and Ajit Pal).

The districts that have one minister each include: Bareilly (Arun Saxena); Mau (Arvind Sharma); Chitrakoot (Ashish Patel); Kannauj (Asim Arun);



Rampur (Baldeo Singh Aulakh); Moradabad (Bhupendra Singh Chaudhary); Lucknow (Brajesh Pathak); Hathras (Dharmveer Prajapati); Rae Bareilly (Dinesh Pratap Singh, who contested against Sonia Gandhi in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls); Jaunpur (Gireesh Yadav); Sambhal (Gulab Devi); Mainpuri (Jaiveer Singh); Muzaffarnagar (Kapil

Agrawal); Ghaziabad (Narendra Kashyap); Baghpat (KP Malik); Mathura (Lakshmi Narayan Chaudhary); Amethi (Mayankeshwar Singh); Prayagraj (Nand Gopal Gupta Nandi); Banda (Ramkesh Nishad); Pilibhit (Sanjay Gangwar); Sonbhadra (Sanjeev Goud) and Jalaun (MLC Swatantrdev Singh).

Eight-term MLA Satish Mahana likely to be BJP's choice for Speaker

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
LUCKNOW, MARCH 27

EIGHT-TERM MLA Satish Mahana is likely to be BJP's choice for the post of Speaker in the Assembly. He is likely to file nomination for the election of Speaker on Monday.

With Samajwadi Party (SP) deciding not to field its candidate for the Speaker's post, Mahana, if nominated by the BJP, would be elected unopposed. He was Industry Development minister in the first term of the Yogi Adityanath-led BJP government in the state.

He was one of the big names to be dropped from the previous Cabinet. He won from Maharajpur Assembly seat in Kanpur district.

Sources in the BJP said the party dropped him because it was considering Mahana's name for Speaker's election because of his long legislative experience.

In the outgoing Assembly, Hriday Narayan Dixit was the Speaker. He, however, did not contest the elections, and the BJP was looking for his successor in the new Assembly. Earlier, the names of Suresh Khanna, Mahana and Ramapati Shastri were doing the rounds as prospective names for



Satish Mahana. File

the position. After Khanna was re-elected into the new Cabinet, Shastri and Mahana were left in the race, sources said.

Shastri was on Saturday appointed pro tem Speaker and will administer the oath to the newly elected MLAs. Election for the Speaker is scheduled on March 29 and nomination will be filed on Monday.

SP spokesperson Rajendra Chaudhary on Sunday confirmed that the Opposition party will not field a candidate in Speaker's election. "SP will follow the tradition. BJP has the majority.. We expect that the new Speaker will be impartial in carrying out his duties in the Assembly," Chaudhary said.

The BJP has won 255 seats, and its two allies have together won 18 seats. The SP has won 111 seats, while its allies have won another 14 seats.

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Lucknow

Suspended for 2 yrs, Amarnath Yatra to resume on June 30

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
JAMMU, MARCH 27

AFTER HAVING remained suspended for two consecutive years in view of Covid-19, the 43-day Amarnath pilgrimage to South Kashmir Himalayas will begin in the Union Territory on June 30.

It will commence “with all Covid protocols in place and culminate, as per the tradition, on the day of Raksha Bandhan,” tweeted the office of the Lt Governor Manoj Sinha on Sunday soon after a meeting of the Shri Amarnath Ji Shrine Board, which was chaired by J&K Lt Governor Manoj Sinha. “We had an in-depth discussion on various issues regarding the upcoming Yatra,” it added.

The Yatra had remained suspended in 2020 and 2021 due to Covid-19 pandemic. Last year, it had announced a 56-day Yatra from both the Baltal and Chandanwari routes from June 28, but it was later called off due to rise in Covid cases.

However, in view of improved situation this year, the Shrine Board has decided to resume the Yatra from both the Baltal and Chandanwari routes on June 30.

Pointing out that the online registration for Shri Amarnath ji Yatra will start from April 11, an official statement quoting the Lt Governor said the “government is introducing Radio Frequency Identification system for pilgrims to track their movement en route to ensure their well-being”.

The Shrine Board has decided that the Yatra would commence simultaneously from both the routes — the Pahalgam track in Anantnag district and Baltal in Ganderbal district.

One killed as man fires after being denied beef in Kerala

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, MARCH 27

ONE PERSON was killed and another injured when a youth fired gun shots indiscriminately after being denied beef at an eatery in Moolamattam of Kerala's Idukki district on Saturday night.

Police arrested Philip Martin, 26, who recently returned from the Middle East, on charges of firing fatal shots at Sanal Babu, 32, and his friend Pradeep. Philip reportedly used a country gun to target the youths, said police.

According to police, Philip, along with his friend, had gone to a wayside eatery around 10.30 pm and asked for beef. As those at the fast-food joint said beef curry was over, Philip started abusing those present at the eatery. Following a brawl, Philip went back home and returned with a gun and fired indiscriminately at the eatery. Police said Sanal Babu and Pradeep were passing through the junction when Philip fired at them.

Naga outfit bandh in border area enters 7th day, Manipur stares at threat to supply line

TORA AGARWALA & JIMMY LEIVON
NEW DELHI, IMPHAL, MARCH 27

VEHICULAR MOVEMENT on National Highway 2, along the Manipur-Nagaland border, remained suspended as an indefinite bandh called by a Naga tribal outfit over a boundary dispute reached its seventh day on Sunday.

On March 21, the Southern Angami Public Organisation (SAPO), an outfit representing the Angami Naga tribe residing in areas bordering Manipur, had called a 72-hour bandh in connection to “permanent structures” and “deployment of armed personnel” at what it referred to as the “disputed” Kezoltso area by Manipur government.

In response to the SAPO's call, the All Assam Manipuri Youth's Association announced an indefinite counter blockade along the Assam part of the same highway from Sunday midnight. It said the blockade would continue until SAPO withdrew the bandh from the Nagaland part of the highway.

Kezoltso is a forested area located near Dzukou Valley, border-



At the funeral of Special Police Officer Ishfaq Ahmad and his brother Umar Jan in Chadbugh village, Budgam. Shuaib Masoodi

Kashmir village bids tearful adieu to SPO, brother killed in militant attack

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
SRINAGAR, MARCH 27

A DAY after the killing of a Special Police Officer (SPO) in a suspected militant attack, his brother, who was critically wounded in the same shootout, succumbed on Sunday, police said.

Umar Jan and his twin brother Ishfaq Ahmad, a Special Police Officer, were attacked on Saturday evening by suspected militants who barged into their house at Chadbugh in central Kashmir's Budgam district.

They were taken to a Srinagar hospital where Ahmad was de-

clared brought dead. Jan succumbed on Sunday morning, police said. Emotional scenes were witnessed as the brothers' bodies were brought home where a large number of people gathered to attend their funeral.

“What was my fault? What was my fault?” their grieving mother asked as women tried to console her. “They should have shot me in the heart... Where will I find my sons now?”

As women showered flowers and toffees, the brothers' coffins were taken to a local graveyard where they were laid to rest.

Top police officials, including Inspector General of Police Vijay

Kumar, visited their residence and expressed condolences to the family. Kumar said the entire police family stood with the bereaved family, according to a tweet by the Kashmir Zone Police.

Earlier, a wreath-laying ceremony was held at the District Police Lines in Budgam for the slain SPO where the deputy commissioner and the senior superintendent of police led police personnel in paying floral tributes to him.

PDP chief Mehbooba Mufti, while expressing condolences to the family, said death and destruction have become a norm in Kashmir Valley. “In Kashmir we watch helplessly as young lives are

snuffed out. Death & destruction have become the norm. Sadly GOI doesn't seem to care since Kashmiri lives have little value for them. Deepest condolences to the family,” she tweeted.

Condemning the killings, CPM's Mohammad Yousuf Tarigami termed it heinous and barbaric, and demanded that perpetrators be identified and booked. “It has sent shock waves in the whole region and everyone is pained and grieved,” he said.

Kashmir Valley has seen a sudden spurt in militants attacks this month. Saturday's attack was the third such attack in Budgam in the past fortnight. **(WITHPTI)**

Woman wishes Pak on R-Day with WhatsApp status, arrested

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
BENGALURU, MARCH 27

A 25-YEAR-OLD woman in Karnataka has been arrested for allegedly congratulating Pakistan on its Republic Day on March 23 through her WhatsApp status.

Identified as Kuthma Sheikh, a resident of Mudhol in Bagalkot district, she is a senior student at a Madrasa. Police sources said her status read: “May God bless every nation with peace, unity and harmony.”

A police officer said she had been released on bail. “She was arrested to maintain peace and law and order,” the officer said.

Sheikh was arrested after Arun Kumar Bhajantri, a Mudhol-based activist, registered a complaint against her, stating that she was creating enmity between communities by posting messages on Pakistan Republic Day.

In a complaint filed on March 24, the police registered the case under Sections 153-A (creating enmity between groups on the basis of religion, race, etc.) and 505-(2) (statements promoting enmity between groups) of the Indian Penal Code.

Bagalkot SP Lokesh Bharamappa Jagalasar told *The Indian Express* that a complaint was filed by the activist where he stated that the accused had posted an image wishing Pakistan Republic Day and they registered a case. The investigation is underway.

BIRBHUM KILLINGS

Victims' kin plan their return to rebuild lives

But family of dead Trinamool Cong leader fears to go back

RAVIK BHATTACHARYA & ATRI MITRA
RAMPURHAT (BIRBHUM), MARCH 27

THE SURVIVING family members of the eight victims who were charred to death following a TMC leader's murder at Bogtui village in Birbhum district last week are planning to return to their village to rebuild their lives and houses.

In contrast, the family of slain TMC leader Bhadu Sheikh fears for their lives and wonders if they can ever go back. Families of both the sides are currently living in their relatives' homes in nearby villages. “We do not know when we will return or whether we will ever,” says Tabila Bibi, wife of Bhadu who was the deputy pradhan of Barsal Gram Panchayat. After her husband's final rites, Tabila, Zarina — wife of Bhadu's brother Babur — and their children fled to Tabila's paternal house in Khostogora village, 35km from Bogtui. Babur was killed in January. A police team has been deployed outside the house.

Tabila's apprehension reflects a churn in the village's power balance. With Bhadu's death and the subsequent killings of eight people in the fire, the balance is tilting against his family. Bhadu allegedly ran an extortion and land grab syndicate. “In January, my husband's brother was murdered. But our family stayed on because we had my husband. Now, he is murdered. Five members of my family have been arrested and one detained. How do you think we can return to the village?” asks Tabila.

Babur's wife, Jarina Bibi, agrees with Tabila. “My brother-in-law has been murdered, and my two sons arrested. Police have made up a serious case against them. I do not know whether we will see them again. How can we return to Bogtui? It is unsafe for us there.”



Mihail Sheikh at his mother-in-law's house. Partha Paul

TMC leader, 3 others questioned

Kolkata: The CBI on Sunday recorded the statements of eye-witnesses in connection with the Bogtui killings in Birbhum district.

The CBI, which has set up a temporary camp office in a government guest house in Rampurhat town, also questioned four of the arrested suspects, including TMC's block president Anarul Hussain. A three-member team led by CBI DIG Akhilesh Singh visited the Rampurhat Medical College and Hospital to record the statements of three of the four injured persons — a minor and three women.

“Currently, four persons are admitted to the hospital. One of them having more than 65 per cent burn injuries couldn't record statement. The CBI officials spoke to three of them and took their statements on the incident,” said a senior hospital official. **ENS**

Adopt CUET from 2022-23 academic year, varsities told

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, MARCH 27

THE UNIVERSITY Grants Commission (UGC) on Sunday appealed to public universities under state governments, colleges and private universities to adopt the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) for admitting students in undergraduate programmes from the 2022-23 academic session.

UGC Secretary Prof Rajnish Jain wrote to the vice-chancellors, directors and principals of all universities and colleges to adopt the CUET, for which the application window will be open from April 2-30, in this regard. For now, CUET has been made mandatory for the 45 Central Universities from the next academic year.

Prof Jain wrote in the letter that if all Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), irrespective of affiliation, adopt the CUET, students will not have to take multiple entrance exams. It will also provide equal opportunity to students from different boards, he said. “Many state universities, deemed to be universities, private universities, and other Higher Education Institutions in the country also use either marks of 12th board or conduct entrance test for admission in UG programmes. To save students from appearing in multiple entrance examinations, conducted

in different dates, sometimes coinciding with each other, and to also provide equal opportunity to all students from different boards, UGC invites and encourages all state universities, deemed to be universities, private universities and other HEIs to adopt and use CUET score from 2022-23 onwards for admissions of students in their UG programmes,” said the UGC letter.

Meanwhile, the NTA, which will conduct the CUET, on Sunday shared broad guidelines of the test, which is likely to be conducted in the first week of July, on its website nta.ac.in. The test, based on NCERT Class XII syllabus, will be divided into four sections. Under Sections I A and I B, applicants will have to sit for papers on languages. Each of the sections will contain 50 questions each of which an applicant will have to attempt 40.

Section II of the test will test a candidate's hold on core subjects they wish to pursue at the undergraduate level. A candidate will have to attempt 40 out of 50 questions in the Section II paper, which will be 45-minutes-long as well. Section III of the CUET will be a general test for any such undergraduate programme/programmes being offered by universities where a General Test is being used for admission instead of admitting students based on their scores on domain subjects.

Karnataka: Board exams from today, minister says no hijab

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
BENGALURU, MARCH 27

WITH MORE than 8 lakh students set to appear for Class 10 board examinations from Monday, Karnataka Education Minister B C Nagesh on Sunday said that hijab would not be allowed inside examination halls as per the High Court order.

Touring Bagalkot to inspect preparedness for the exams, Nagesh said, “After the Karnataka High Court order, we have not allowed hijab or any other religious attire and we have made it clear that students can come wearing hijab to the college and enter campus but must remove it before they enter examination hall.”

According to the education department, 8,73,846 students from 15,387 schools across Karnataka will be appearing for the examination. Officials said Section 144 will be imposed in 100 metres of the examination halls.

Stating that there would not be re-examination for students who skip exams because of hijab, Nagesh said, “According to the Karnataka Education Act and the Rules, religious sentiments should not be part of the uniform dress rule. The same notification, the HC has upheld. Tomorrow, there is no scope of violation of the dress code.”

Techie arrested for stalking Mumbai singer

SAGAR RAJPUT
MUMBAI, MARCH 27

Police in Mumbai have arrested a 34-year-old IT engineer from Visakhapatnam for allegedly stalking, defaming and sending objectionable messages and images to a 27-year-old singer.

Vijaykant Manda had been allegedly following her and her manager since 2016 — showing up at her office and concerts in different states. The case was registered only on March 17, after he showed up at the gate of her residence in south Mumbai.

The manager, who lodged the complaint, said Manda had taken part in a contest organised by the singer in 2018. “After par-

ticipating in the contest, Manda had also come to her office in Mumbai when I happened to share my phone number with him,” said the 28-year-old manager in her statement to police.

Police said Manda showed up at the singer's concerts in Bengaluru, Mumbai, Chennai and Hyderabad in 2019. He would harass them by sending messages from four numbers.

The manager's complaint reads: “He would often call and tell me that he wants to meet the singer. I would then refuse by saying that she is busy with her work.”

According to police, Manda even went to her office along with his mother to propose marriage to the singer. In one instance, police said, he demanded a Rs 10-crore

loan from the singer. The singer and her manager chose to ignore him, assuming Manda was a fan.

“On November 21, 2020, when the 27-year-old was in the USA shooting for an album, I received a message from him saying ‘Dis is my passport I have visa no issues ticket is from Hyderabad to losangeles’. He would often message me saying that he wanted to marry her,” said the manager in her statement to police.

Manda allegedly managed to get the numbers of the singer's businessman father and mother and would message them too.

“He would message them that he wants to marry their daughter and after they blocked his numbers, Manda then started sending messages from

different numbers,” said the manager's complaint. When nobody acknowledged him, he allegedly sent objectionable messages and photos on their Instagram accounts.

He then showed up at their gate on March 10 and was denied entry. “Manda then stood outside the gate of her house and sent her objectionable messages on her Instagram account,” the manager stated.

Senior Police Inspector Rampiyare Rajbhar said, “We initially believed that he was in Hyderabad so a team was sent there. But we could not find him. Later, we came to know that he is in Visakhapatnam, after which a team was sent to his location and he was placed under arrest.”



TESTING THE WATERS

Wang Yi's Delhi visit is a beginning, but repairing India-China ties is a long haul

BEIJING'S OUTREACH TO Delhi last week with a visit by Foreign Minister and State Councillor Wang Yi was not expected to bring about any dramatic changes in bilateral ties. The relationship has been at its lowest point in three decades since Beijing tore up a decade's worth of agreements for maintaining peace and tranquility at the border and sent troops into India's side of the Line of Actual Control in eastern Ladakh in 2020. What it has done though is to convey that while Delhi cannot consider the relationship normal so long as troops continue to face off at "friction points" in the Ladakh heights, it is prepared to be pragmatic and engage at a fairly high level to talk about other day-to-day issues including trade and visas for students.

The pragmatism has been in evidence even before this. Despite the worst patch in the relations, India-China trade has touched new highs. Even though the words status quo ante were not used, both External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and National Security Adviser AK Doval have conveyed that the Ladakh issue has to be resolved expeditiously before the relationship can become normal. That much was evident in the secrecy around the visit, apparently at the request of the Chinese side, and the palpably cold reception Wang received in Delhi. If Wang was keen to convey where he was coming from — quite literally from Pakistan, where he backed OIC's "aspirations" for Kashmir, and Afghanistan, where he welcomed the Taliban's desire to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative, both red rags for Delhi — India responded in kind by lashing out at him for his remarks on Kashmir, on which it said China had "no locus standi to comment", and pointing out that India refrains from commenting on China's "internal issues".

While India rightly focused on the Ladakh border, from the Chinese point of view, the visit was likely made to gauge if India would be willing to play ball by attending, at a time of great geopolitical flux, the BRICS summit in June this year in China, as well as the Russia-India-China summit. For Beijing and Moscow, having Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping, along with the leaders of South Africa and Brazil, would be an important diplomatic victory. For now, Delhi appears to have conveyed that despite their common stand on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, both sides have their "respective" positions. The call — to attend or not — will have to be made soon, and the decision weighed against what could be gained and what might be lost.

GROWTH TONIC

Global policies that helped India hit \$400 billion in exports are changing. Exporters need to be competitive to stay in the race

LAST WEEK, THE Union government announced that merchandise exports from India have crossed \$400 billion in the current financial year. In fact, for the full financial year, which ends on March 31, this number is expected to touch \$410 billion. Two things stand out about this performance. One, in value terms, this level of goods exports is far higher than the previous record of \$330 billion, which was achieved in 2018-19. Two, this achievement is even more remarkable when one takes into account that the current financial year witnessed two waves of the Covid pandemic, especially the vicious second wave at the start of the financial year from April to July. However, for this growth to sustain, it is important to understand the true nature of this growth and what caused it.

The government has claimed that "there was a detailed strategy in place, including specific targets set — country-wise, product-wise & EPC-wise (Export Promotion Council), monitoring and course correction behind the achievement of the export target". While these efforts need to be commended, it is also important to recognise that India's exports are also a function of several global factors. Two factors stand out in particular. One is the overall rate of economic growth in the world. This matters because a strong economic recovery implies there will be demand for Indian goods in other countries. Two, the amount of easy money available in the global economy. The ongoing financial year — 2021-22 — provided a conducive environment on both counts. Many western economies recovered from the Covid dip quite fast, thanks to massive government spending in those countries. Moreover, in response to the pandemic, most central banks in the developed world also expanded their balance sheets and provided cheap credit. Both factors had a salutary effect on India's exports.

But close to the start of a new financial year, most central banks in the West are winding down their balance sheets and raising interest rates in a bid to contain inflation levels that are at multi-decade highs. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has further exacerbated inflationary concerns. Overall, the outlook on economic growth, too, has taken a beating. Globalisation, which was under threat even before the pandemic, is likely to come under renewed pressure with more and more countries wanting to become self-sufficient or at least reduce dependence on foreign goods. The global policy landscape has become more challenging for India and will demand renewed efforts at the domestic level to raise the competitiveness of the exporters. Lastly, the government must not forget that higher prices had a huge role to play in India reaching the \$400 billion target. As a percentage of the GDP, merchandise exports are far from where they were a decade ago.

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



RAM MADHAV

ADAM SMITH'S BOOK, *The Wealth of Nations*, is well-known. His other book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, though equally influential, is lesser-known. Smith raises a hypothetical scenario of ethical conflict in it, asking what would a European do if the great Chinese empire were to be swallowed up by an earthquake. He would obviously express sorrow, make "melancholy reflections" upon the precariousness of human life, and might also speculate over how this disaster would impact commerce in Europe. "And when all this fine philosophy was over, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, with the same ease and tranquillity, as if no such accident had happened", Smith concludes.

Wang Yi, the Chinese foreign minister, wanted to do something similar during his visit to India last week. After all the disasters in bilateral relations, he quietly walked into Delhi to tell the Indian leadership that the two should get along with "business as usual". Wang was at his pontificating best, as if nothing serious had happened between the two countries. "As mature and rational major developing countries, China and India should not let the border issue define or affect the overall development of the bilateral relationship", he told his counterpart S Jaishankar. He talked about a three-point approach: Viewing bilateral relations with a long-term vision, developing a win-win mentality about each other's development, and cooperating in multilateral processes. India responded with its three points: Mutual respect, mutual sensitivity and mutual interest.

This style is typical of China and has been played out several times in the past. The Peace and Tranquility Agreement of 1993 was also a product of this Chinese trickery. After making incursions into Indian territory in the winter of 1986 at Sumdorong Chu Valley in Arunachal Pradesh, they dug in their heels for seven years before forcing a treaty that provided a principle of peace and tranquillity but didn't protect India's sovereign interests. Even that principle has been violated several times subsequently in the last three decades.

The Chinese follow the formula — "what I occupy is mine, what I claim is to be debated".



BADRI NARAYAN

"BECAUSE THINGS ARE the way they are, things will not stay the way they are". These words of German poet Bertolt Brecht have always struck me as a socio-political analyst. In the context of the recent Uttar Pradesh assembly election results, they become more relevant. Why did a larger section of Dalits vote for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)? This question seems to trouble many political observers and a section of the public. It surprised a section of the metropolitan intelligentsia, who want to see reflections of their ideology and aspirations in the marginalised.

The UP election campaign can be considered as a text to explore this question. While caste, religion, women, youth appeared as overt categories of mobilisation by various political parties, an agenda for the poor did not come up in the political discourse. It is interesting to observe that the BJP emphasised the welfare of the poor ("garib kalyan") as one of the important components of its electoral campaigning strategy. The BJP's UP election in-charge, Dharmendra Pradhan, emphasised this agenda from his earliest meetings. When Narendra Modi started his rallies, his core argument was that BJP had delivered on development with special emphasis on social welfare schemes such as Ujjwala Yojana, PM Awas Yojana, free ration, etc. So, Dalits and marginals appeared in their discourse in two ways, as *labharthi* (beneficiaries) and in the campaign around the poor. The BJP tried to see Dalits and marginal communities not through caste but with the tinge of economic

Beijing wants business as usual.
But Delhi is having none of it

Chinese checkers

India's stand on Ukraine is markedly different from that of China. China justifies Russia's aggression in Ukraine in the name of security concerns. However, India takes a different view. India is committed to international rule of law and respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of nations. It stood for a diplomatic resolution of disputes and opposed the war. At the time of its abstention at the UN, India made its stand clear by asking for a cessation of conflict, immediate de-escalation of tensions and quiet and constructive diplomacy.

Wang Yi's proposal about a "long-term vision" amounted to India accepting the present standoff as normalcy. Fortunately, the Indian leadership refused to buy this "new normal", with Jaishankar insisting on peace and tranquillity along the LAC as a precondition for normalcy.

The Narendra Modi government has effected an important shift in India's border policy with China that includes, besides proactive diplomacy, strong ground posturing as well. While continuing with the military-led talks over disengagement — 15 rounds of which have concluded — India, during the two-year standoff, also participated in at least eight rounds of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC), a process to address the outstanding border issues. But, it simultaneously kept up ground offensive by deploying men and weapons in large numbers. If the Chinese moved their field guns and military aircraft, India too did the same.

Despite Doklam and Ladakh, the Chinese don't seem to realise that the current regime in India thinks differently and has a different approach. They continue with the old practice of upping the ante before every important bilateral visit to upset the Indian agenda by introducing new issues. Wang Yi's visit to Pakistan before coming to Delhi was one such old trick, which they play every time a senior Chinese leader visits India. Wang attended Pakistan's military parade where the Chinese-made J-10C fighter jets were flown for the first time. China supplied a full squadron of 25 jets to Pakistan recently.

In a deliberate provocation to India, Wang chose the Organisation of Islamic Conference Council of Foreign Ministers, held in Islamabad on March 22, to make unwarranted reference to Kashmir in a clear violation of the restraint hitherto followed by both countries in each other's internal matters. India never publicly articulated its views on Xinjiang or Tibet despite justifiable reasons. Naturally, the Indian side has forcefully conveyed its disapproval of his Kashmir references, both through an immediate media response naming Wang Yi in person, and also at the discussion table in Delhi forcing Wang on the defensive.

On the issue of relations with China, there are hawks and hyper-realists in India. But the current regime has always taken a realistic and pragmatic approach in dealing with its important and troublesome neighbour. Both the EAM and the NSA of India have been able to convey Delhi's position firmly but politely to Wang, sending him back almost empty-handed.

Wang Yi's reference to cooperation at the multilateral level also included co-opting India on the Ukraine issue. After India abstained from the vote on Ukraine at the UNSC and the UN, both the Russians and the Chinese have tried to project it as India's support to them. The Russian envoy at the UN, Dmitry Polyanskiy, publicly thanked India clubbing it with China, Kenya and Gabon, "who were brave to withstand US hand-twisting before the vote". The Chinese media went overboard suggesting it as India's change of heart.

India's stand on Ukraine is markedly different from that of China. China justifies Russia's aggression in Ukraine in the name of security concerns. However, India takes a different view. India is committed to international rule of law and respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of nations. It stood for a diplomatic resolution of disputes and opposed war. At the time of its abstention at the UN, India made its stand clear by asking for a cessation of conflict, immediate de-escalation of tensions and quiet and constructive diplomacy.

When the Nazi general Himmler battered Warsaw in Poland in 1944, turning 80 per cent of the city into rubble, Hitler shed crocodile tears, blaming the Russians, French and British for the plight of the Poles. Putin is doing the same by pounding Ukrainian cities, blaming the West and NATO. Notwithstanding several justifications from both sides, it's a war for supremacy over Eurasia, and China sees benefit in this new Cold War.

For India, it is as much about principles as about interests.

The writer is member, board of governors, India Foundation

DRAWING A BIGGER CIRCLE

Hindutva, labharthi identities worked together to influence choices in UP

class. They successfully drew a bigger circle through the politics of governance and development, unlike political parties that approached these communities through ideas of identity politics.

Interestingly, the welfare of the poor, the core of the liberal and socialist discourse in Indian electoral politics, is being incorporated by the BJP in its language of developmental politics through ideas of *garib kalyan* and *labharthi*. Through its connection with these beneficiaries, the BJP tried to create a new identity, that of a development-aspirant community, named recently as *vikas yoddha* by PM Narendra Modi. The process of this shift became quite clear when Modi said in one of his interviews that if showing concern for the poor and marginals may be called as socialist concern, "I am a socialist in that sense".

It must be mentioned here that whatever shifts we observe among Dalits and marginals' political choice is not the outcome of election campaigns alone, but a result of the long-term developmental strategies adopted and delivered by the BJP to include these communities in their electoral base. The calculated social engineering-based representation worked in BJP's favour, but the new social chemistry formed by the party through its governance strategies dented various identity-based mobilisations too.

BJP's Hindutva politics has tried to approach vulnerable communities not only through the state-led developmental initiatives. It has benefited from the ground pre-

pared by the Sangh Parivar and its organisations. Since many decades, the Sangh has been working among Dalits and marginal communities by imparting education, opening hospitals, organising health camps, strengthening entrepreneurship. In the Vidya Bharti-inspired chain of schools, the students from the Dalit and marginal communities are growing day by day. The Sangh is also present among these communities through its various chains of seva hospitals. Hindutva politics has approached these communities in symbolic as well as in substantial ways — by providing dignity in the Hindutva framework and also by effective delivery of various social welfare schemes.

It is true that humans can't be free from identities but sometimes new, broader identities become more effective than conventional ones. In this election, the Hindutva identity and the *labharthi* identity worked together to cultivate a shift in the political choice of Dalits and marginals. How the social projects initiated by the state or by the social movements work in mobilising people in an electoral democracy becomes clear from the statement of a youth from a marginal community: "*Jo hamari madad karega, hum uski madad karenge* (Whoever will help us, we will help them)". That sums up a new shift in our electoral democracy. It also shows the growing agency of the marginal.

The writer is professor at the G B Pant Social Science Institute

MARCH 28, 1982, FORTY YEARS AGO

INDIRA VS MANEKA

DESCRIBING THE LUCKNOW convention in support of Sanjay Gandhi's five-point programme as an "anti-party act" and especially against her, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on said it was sad that those who were supposed to have been close to Sanjay Gandhi wanted to destroy his image. Addressing a press conference within minutes of her arrival from London at Delhi airport, Mrs Gandhi said what she had said about the convention applied equally to the decision of Maneka Gandhi to attend it. Mrs Gandhi, however, said there was no question of her giving any call to her party-men to boycott the conference. About the convention, she said it was like the RSS and the

BJP using the name of Gandhiji to further their ends. The convention was being encouraged by the very people who were against Sanjay Gandhi and had done everything in their attempt to destroy him.

RAJYA SABHA POLL

THE CONGRESS (I) made a clean sweep of all four Rajya Sabha seats from Karnataka while the CPM-led Left Front captured all five West Bengal seats in the biennial elections to the Upper House. In Jammu and Kashmir, the ruling National Conference and the Opposition shared one seat each. With seven seats already in its bag from Orissa and

Gujarat, the Congress (I) has so far won 11 seats in the current biennial elections covering 63 seats from 14 states.

MARUTI WANTS SUZUKI

MARUTI UDYOG HAS recommended to the government Japan's Suzuki four-door small car for being manufactured in India. According to Udyog Bhavan sources, the recommendation is now being processed by the Heavy Industry Department. The final selection of the car and collaborator will be done by the cabinet after which the public investment board will have to take the decision.

THE IDEAS PAGE

From missiles to meals

Just as in the defence sector, India needs to reorient its approach to agricultural self-reliance with a greater focus on R&D



FROM PLATE TO PLOUGH
BY ASHOK GULATI AND
AYUSHI KHURANA

IN THE BACKDROP of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has emphasised the need for India to be *atmanirbhar* (self-reliant) in defence equipment. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman also pointed out that hardly any defence equipment was bought during the 10 years of UPA rule preceding the Modi government. We may add a footnote here that for the Amrit Kaal (next 25 years) that the Modi government has announced, we need to be self-reliant not just in missiles (defence equipment) but also in meals (food). As the old proverb goes, no army can march on an empty stomach. "Jai jawan, jai kisan" (salutation to the soldier and salutation to the farmer) was the slogan given by Late Lal Bahadur Shastri, and Atal Bihari Vajpayee added "jai vigyan" (salutation to the scientist) to that. Focusing on science and scientists is critical for attaining self-reliance today.

But self-reliance in food does not mean that we have to produce everything ourselves at home, irrespective of the cost. Its true meaning lies in specialising in commodities in which we have a comparative advantage, export them, and import those in which we don't have a significant comparative advantage. This is not an either/or situation — it is about the degree of self-reliance a country wants to have following the principles of comparative advantage. If some protection is needed for new areas to develop (infant industry argument), that may be okay. But one should not aspire to be self-sufficient behind high tariff walls. That would only breed inefficient and high-cost structures that cannot compete globally.

What is it that gives a country an edge over others in attaining comparative advantage? In the area of agriculture and food, our research reveals that it is the efforts and resources that a country puts in agri-research and development (agri-R&D), its extension from lab to land, investing in irrigation to boost yields, efficiency in marketing and processing the produce, and taking it from farmers' fields to consumers' table or export destinations.

Let us focus for the time being on agri-R&D. There is ample literature to show that agri-R&D raises total factor productivity and makes agriculture more competitive globally. Sometimes, the basic R&D to develop "miracle seeds" is done outside the country, but those seeds can be imported and adapted to local conditions with in-country R&D and scaled up for adoption at farmers' fields. The Green Revolution was such a case.

If India wants to be fully self-reliant in food, it is generally agreed that it must invest at least 1 per cent of its agri-GDP in agri-R&D. But the budgets of both the Union government and the states put together reveal that this expenditure on agri-R&D and education hovers around 0.6 per cent of agri-GDP, with a roughly equal share of the Centre and all states put together. This is way below the minimum cut off point of 1 per cent and government policy must urgently work towards raising this substantially.

So far, India has achieved self-reliance in



FIGURE: EXPENDITURE IN INDIAN AGRICULTURE

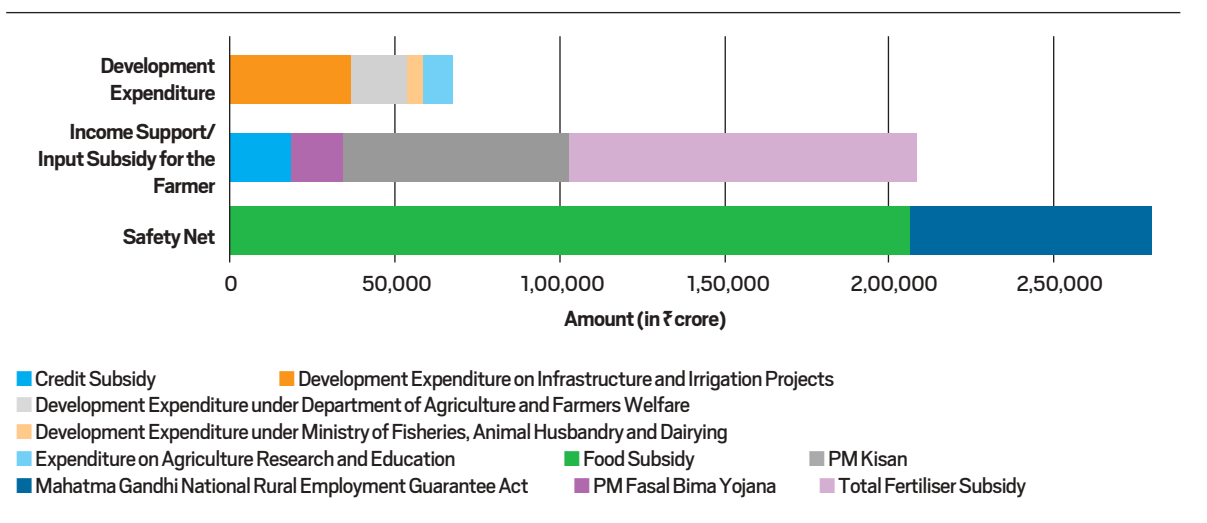


Illustration: C R Sasikumar; Graphics: Ritesh Kumar

agriculture by producing a reasonably large amount of food, and also being a net exporter of agri-produce. The high dependence on imports for edible oils — hovering around 55 to 60 per cent of consumption — however, remains a concern. India's potential to emerge as a significant exporter of agri-produce remains untapped.

The Economic Survey (2021-22) explicitly highlighted the correlation between spending on agri-R&D and agricultural growth. Our research also shows that every rupee spent on agri-R&D yields much better returns (11.2), compared to returns on every rupee spent on say fertiliser subsidy (0.88), power subsidy (0.79), etc. Yet, the competitive populism in Indian democracy leads to sub-optimal choices in the allocation of scarce resources. More on safety nets like food subsidy and MGNREGA or on income support and subsidies for farmers, but very little for agri-R&D (see figure).

With this type of resource allocation in the Union budget of FY23, which is heavily tilted towards safety nets and subsidies, India cannot develop cutting-edge technologies to attain competitiveness at a global level.

Can the private sector come forward and help India attain supremacy in agri-R&D and innovation systems that make the country not just *atmanirbhar* but a hub for exports and agri-technology?

There are some global and local companies like Bayer, Syngenta, MAHYCO, Jain Irrigation, and Mahindra and Mahindra that spend a considerable amount of their

If India wants to be fully self-reliant in food, it is generally agreed that it must invest at least 1 per cent of its agri-GDP in agri-R&D. But the budgets of both the Union government and the states put together reveal that this expenditure on agri-R&D and education hovers around 0.6 per cent of agri-GDP, with a roughly equal share of the Centre and all states put together. This is way below the minimum cut off point of 1 per cent and government policy must urgently work towards raising this substantially.

turnover on R&D programmes and developing high-tech inputs. The USP of these companies is that they develop technology that increases productivity while addressing the current challenges of limited net sown area, depleting water resources, vulnerability to climate change, and the need to produce nutrient-rich food.

The need of the hour is to focus on increasing expenditure on ARE and other development projects, which can aid in the sustainable growth of the agriculture sector. India's budget allocations in the agri-food space should thrive on creating "more from less". The financing should focus on altering the current atmosphere of a high incidence of hunger and malnutrition, keep a check on the mismanagement of natural resources and mitigate climate change issues. There is a need to work on building long-term sustainable solutions that have an aggressive approach to implementing relevant policies and developing new ones. India's current budgetary allocation strategy and trends need to be reoriented to ensure that there is more room for R&D expenditure by the government. In addition to this, the government should come out with policies that incentivise private companies to expand their R&D programmes and invest more financial resources on development projects, which have the potential to overcome the challenges of the current agrarian setup of India.

Gulati is Infosys Chair professor for Agriculture and Khurana is researcher at ICRIER

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"It may be that Putin is becoming more realistic. Or that, observing intra-European tensions, he is playing for time. It's possible that, in any negotiation, he would settle for the territorial gains he has made in the Donbas region."

— THE OBSERVER

A narrative that divides

Reconciliation, not revenge, is the way forward in Kashmir. Films like 'The Kashmir Files' ignore that path, facilitate polarising politics



MOHIT BHAN

THE EXODUS OF Kashmiri Pandits is in the spotlight following the release of *The Kashmir Files*.

The Kashmiri Pandit community is a minuscule minority, but it's an inseparable part of Kashmiri culture. For three decades, the community has been longing to return home and demanding justice for members of their community who had been brutally killed, raped, maimed and terrorised during the insurgency years. The failure of successive governments to rehabilitate Pandits is the primary reason why even genuine grievances of the Muslim majority in Jammu and Kashmir are viewed through the prism of communalism.

The present government at the Centre has given Kashmiri Muslims reasons to believe that there is a relentless campaign to tarnish the image of the entire community, which was not even part of the conspiracy hatched against the Kashmiri Pandits from across the border. A fair probe into the events that led to the mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandit families would help to rebuild the broken trust and bond between the two communities. That, in turn, could end the othering of the Muslim majority.

As a political activist, I have found that there is unanimous feeling among Kashmiris that a fair investigation could help to identify the perpetrators of violence and lead to their prosecution. This, they believe, would bring justice to the sufferers, and, perhaps, lead to closure in a tragedy that has hurt everyone.

Since 1990, the Congress or Congress-led governments have been in office for 15 years while the BJP-led NDA has ruled for 13 years. No government showed any interest in closure in this great tragedy. The Hindu Right weaponised it to polarise Hindu voters even if that meant destabilising efforts to bridge the gap between the two communities and facilitate the return of Kashmiri Pandits to the Valley. It has further helped the ruling regime use an iron-fist policy towards Kashmir.

Now, to the question of whether *The Kashmir Files* is an unbiased attempt at narrating the plight of Pandits.

I, a Kashmiri Pandit, left a well-paying corporate job in Delhi to return to the Valley to rebuild what I had lost 32 years ago, without any support from the government. So it is my imperative to dissect what has gone wrong after the release of the film, which the prime minister and his cabinet want the world to watch in order to know the truth about Kashmir.

For me, there are three takeaways from the film. The first is the targeting of institutions like JNU. I now see friends and relatives in WhatsApp groups making a case for silencing the "JNU-types".

The second is the perpetuation of an unending cycle of hatred for Muslims in general. Videos have surfaced on social media, where post the screening of the film, viewers are accusing the Muslim community of

sympathising with terrorists and are calling for boycott of tourism in Kashmir. The ruling regime has consistently equated Muslims with terrorism in election campaigns. We saw this recently in UP. Since the unconstitutional abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A, the BJP has lost considerable ground in J&K. The BJP and its allies were decimated in Kashmir in the DDC elections whereas their vote share declined by 19 per cent (as compared to the 2019 general election) in Jammu. The Kashmiri Files may help the party revive the Hindu vs Muslim narrative and consolidate Hindu votes in Jammu. The pain and misery of the Kashmiri Pandits is being exploited to push a political narrative.

The third takeaway is the matter of justice to Kashmiri Pandits, their return, rehabilitation and reconciliation. These have now been pushed to the background. The promoters of the movie within the Pandit community and influencers, like the Global Kashmiri Pandit Diaspora who in their vision document talk about restorative justice, have conveniently missed the issue of reconciliation between Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits. This departure from their official position of restorative justice, about which they had written to the Union home minister, raises doubts about the real intention of those who live abroad and show little interest in returning to their roots. By smartly co-opting the movie, the ruling regime has showcased itself as a victim of terrorism and thus helpless in providing justice to Kashmiri Pandits. This way the government has subtly conveyed the message that the atmosphere in the Valley is still not conducive for the return of Pandits and that its militaristic approach in Kashmir should not be questioned. It has also allowed the government to evade tough questions about its failure in providing a blueprint on the rehabilitation of Pandits and justice to the victims of militancy.

Any discussion on the impact of the insurgency on Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits tends to slide into mud-slinging about who has suffered the most. While Kashmiri Pandits have lost their homes, Kashmiri Muslims remain jailed in their houses. That's what three decades of armed insurgency has given the collective Kashmiri society. Many events shown in the film are true and as cruel or gruesome as depicted. But an honest and unbiased discussion about the violence inflicted on Kashmiri Pandits becomes impossible if bigots are to pick these and turn them into material for propaganda. What the minorities in Kashmir underwent in the 1990s is now being experienced by the minorities in the rest of India today, minus the armed insurgents. In both cases, the majority was unable to protect the minority. Also, claims and counter claims such as "only 200 of yours were killed while 1,600 of ours were killed" does not make a discussion. That a bloodbath took place is a fact.

We Kashmiris need to unlearn hate and learn to respect each other's trauma. People from both communities, or anyone for that matter, should be allowed to tell stories without apologising for the crimes meted out by the Indian state on Kashmiri Muslim civilians or by Pakistan-sponsored militants on Hindu minorities in the Valley.

Reconciliation is the way forward, not revenge. That's one crucial message missing in *The Kashmir Files*.

The writer is spokesperson, PDP



DEEPIKA SARASWAT

IRAN'S FOREIGN MINISTER Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, during his recent visit to Syria, noted that Iran and the major powers, who have been negotiating a mutual return to the Iran nuclear deal — or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) — over the last eleven months, were closer to an agreement "than ever before". If the US behaves realistically, Iran is ready to finalise the agreement in the presence of foreign ministers, he said. Amir-Abdollahian's optimistic remarks came after the talks in Vienna paused on March 11 following Russia's demands for written guarantees from the US that the sanctions imposed on Moscow over the Ukraine crisis will not harm its economic and military-technical cooperation with Iran. It was only after Amir-Abdollahian and Qatar's foreign minister visited Moscow in quick succession that Russia retracted its obstructionist stance by accepting guarantees on protecting the Russian involvement in Iran's sole nuclear energy plant in Bushehr. Moscow, given its involvement in Iran's civil nuclear programme, has a crucial role in implementing the nuclear commitment aspect of the JCPOA, namely the shipping of Iran's excess enriched uranium stockpile to Russia and providing 20 per cent enriched uranium

The long endgame in Vienna

Iran is using its growing nuclear capability to bargain with the US, West

for the Tehran Research Reactor. Tehran was therefore careful not to criticise the Russian move; instead, it maintained that the West needs to make "political decisions" about the remaining issues.

The ongoing eighth round of talks between Iran and P4+1, with the EU coordinator of the joint commission Enrique Mora playing the intermediary between the US and Iranian delegations, has been going on since December 27, 2021, except for routine breaks for political consultations with capitals. On February 23, when the European negotiators were leaving for their capital after two weeks of negotiations, they had signalled that the talks were in the endgame as only a "few difficult issues" remained. These issues are understood to be Tehran's demand for guarantees against another withdrawal in the future, the verifiable lifting of all US sanctions, and the IAEA investigation into Iran's past nuclear activities. On the last issue, in the run-up to the IAEA Board of Governors meeting in early March, Tehran signalled a cooperative approach as Mohammad Eslami, the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organisation and Rafael Grossi, the IAEA director-general agreed on a three-month timeline for Iran to answer questions about possible undeclared nuclear

activities and materials. On the issue of guarantees against another withdrawal, Iran is no longer demanding legal guarantees from Washington. It has made a case for the "inherent guarantees" of the JCPOA under which Iran will have the provision to swiftly scale up its nuclear activities as a retaliation measure. However, Tehran has refused to retreat from its uncompromising stance on the lifting of all US sanctions, while the Biden administration has so far been prepared to lift only those "inconsistent" with the deal. Another key sticking point, though not directly related to the nuclear deal, is Iran's demand that President Biden reverse his predecessor's designation of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation.

What is clear is that notwithstanding Moscow's obstructionism, which was largely aimed at demonstrating that the West will still need Moscow in resolving key international issues, Iran and the US are the real players in the endgame in Vienna. Further, Tehran thinks it has the upper hand. Though Tehran denies seeking a nuclear bomb, its Western interlocutors are alarmed by Iran's shrinking breakout time — the time needed for gathering enough weapons-grade uranium to make a single nu-

clear warhead. Also, they are concerned that the longer Iran stays outside the agreement, the more nuclear expertise and fissile material it will accumulate, thus making the original deal obsolete. Thus, time is of the essence for reaching an agreement that will turn the clock back on Iran's nuclear activities. Tehran, therefore, uses its nuclear activities as a bargaining counter to seek an agreement that will best serve its interests. Recently, Iran's atomic chief declared that the country's nuclear programme is not tied to the negotiations and that it will mark April 9 as National Nuclear Technology Day to unveil a "Comprehensive Strategic Development Document for Nuclear Industry". Such declarations serve the dual purpose of causing alarm in Western capitals and mobilising both elite and popular support for national technological achievements, irrespective of the economic costs borne by the people. Tehran's strategy seems to be working as Enrique Mora, before embarking on another trip to Tehran, has affirmed that the stakes are high and the negotiation must be concluded.

The writer is Associate Fellow, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

AFTER THE WIN

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'The second term' (IE, March 26). Now that the UP cabinet has taken shape, with many new faces inducted, the euphoria of a reasonably comfortable win needs to subside, the "winner-take-all" show at the oath-taking ceremony notwithstanding. There have been many sore points in Yogi Adityanath's first outing, with joblessness and price rise giving enough ammo to the opposition. Putting the state in an upward economic trajectory should be the topmost priority of the government.

Vijai Pant, Hampur

CENTRE'S DUTY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Spell it out' (IE, March 26). The egregious case of anthropologist Filipino Osella, who was turned back despite a valid visa to India, demands clarification from the government. This is quite unlike other cases of foreign scholars who were not issued visas for travel to India. More than the state government, however, it is the Centre that must clear the air, as the FRRO is under the ambit of the Union Home Ministry. This must be done soon, in view of the unusual cir-

cumstances of the case.

Hemant Contractor, Pune

IMRAN'S WOES

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'No tears for Imran' (IE, March 25). No PM in Pakistan has ever completed a five-year term. That trend might well continue as the incumbent, Imran Khan faces a no-confidence motion but doesn't have the required 172 parliamentarians to survive. It is widely believed that the support of the military was central to Khan's emergence as his country's political captain. Khan's political problems increased with apparent neutrality from the army.

SS Paul, Nadia

DUBIOUS MOVE

This refers to the editorial, 'Doing it wrong' (IE, March 25). The Centre's decision to club the East, North and South Delhi municipalities on the pretext of improving this body's financial position is patently bogus. Clearly, it wants to defer the elections to this body to avoid the ignominy of another defeat at the hands of the AAP. Such instances foreshadow coming events.

Tarsem Singh, Mahilpur

Sawant set to take oath as Goa CM today

PM, other top BJP leaders to attend swearing-in ceremony

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
PANAJI, MARCH 27

A DAY ahead of the grand swearing-in ceremony of Pramod Sawant as Chief Minister, posters welcoming Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union Home Minister Amit Shah, BJP national president J P Nadda and other top BJP leaders came up across Panaji on Sunday.

Sawant, who will take charge as the Chief Minister for the second time, will take oath in Modi's presence like his counterparts in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, where the BJP won in the recent Assembly elections.

A replica of the Goa Assembly has been created on the stage at the Dr Shyama Prasad Mukherjee Indoor Stadium in Taleigao where the ceremony will take place Monday morning.

After reviewing the preparations at the stadium along with state BJP leaders on Sunday, Sawant said top party leaders, including Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Union Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari, will attend the ceremony. Chief Ministers of 10 states, including Madhya Pradesh CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Haryana CM Manohar Lal Khattar and Karnataka CM Basavaraj Bommai, will also attend the event, he said.

A crowd of about 10,000 is expected at the stadium on Monday. While there are 12 ministe-



Chief Minister-designate Pramod Sawant reviews preparations at the venue of his oath-taking ceremony on Sunday. *Goa CMO*

rial berths in the Goa government, Sawant said a decision on how many ministers will take oath on Monday had not been taken yet. While ministers in the previous government Vishwajit Rane, Mauvin Godinho and Nilesh Cabral are tipped to return to Sawant's Cabinet, the BJP has an arduous task before it ensuring representation to Goa's 12 talukas, its different castes and religions.

Former chief minister Ravi Naik, who left the Congress to join the BJP ahead of the polls, is also expected to find a place in the ministry since he is a leader from the Bhandari community, the largest Hindu group in Goa that comes under the OBC category.

Either former revenue minister Jennifer Monserrate or her husband and Panaji MLA Atanasio 'Babush' Monserrate may also find a place in the

Cabinet. However, if Sawant picks Atanasio over Jennifer, his Cabinet may be left with no woman in it.

It is likely that Independent MLA Aleixo Reginaldo Lourenco, who supported the BJP after winning from Curtorim, may be accommodated in the Cabinet. Lourenco had earlier said his constituents were hopeful that he may become a minister this time.

The bone of contention, however, has been MGP leader Ramkrishna alias Sudin Dhavalikar, who extended support to the BJP after the election result was declared on March 10. Dhavalikar's inclusion in the government was opposed by most BJP MLAs, but the decision to make him a minister or not was left to the BJP's central leadership.

While the MGP had forged a pre-poll alliance with the TMC, it has supported the BJP twice before to form the government.

After BJP's demand, Nitish sacks VIP chief Mukesh Sahani from Bihar Cabinet

SANTOSH SINGH
PATNA, MARCH 27

BIHAR CHIEF Minister Nitish Kumar Sunday sacked Mukesh Sahani, a Cabinet minister and founding chief of Vikassheel Insaan Party.

Nitish, it is learnt, recommended that the governor's office terminate the services of the Animal Husbandry and Fisheries Minister after he received a letter by BJP to this effect.

The state Information and Public Relations Department confirmed it on its official WhatsApp group: "After BJP made the request for Mukesh Sahani's termination as minister, the CM has recommended it to the Raj Bhavan. BJP said in its letter to CM that 'since Sahani is no longer part of NDA, he should be removed as minister'."

Last week, all three MLAs from VIP had joined the BJP, making it the single largest party in the Assembly.

Before this, the EBC Mallah leader, who is said to have some standing among the fishing community, had said that his move to switch from the RJD-led grand alliance to the NDA camp ahead of the 2020 Bihar Assembly polls was a "mistake". In the 2020 Bihar polls, the BJP had allotted 11 seats to the VIP from its NDA quota. The VIP contested from these seats and won four. The three VIP MLAs owed their allegiance to the BJP unofficially from the beginning.

On Sunday, before the sacking, Bihar BJP chief Sanjay Jaiswal alleged that Sahani had caused major damage to the fishing commu-



Mukesh Sahani

nity by tampering with the organisational structure of the Prakhand Matsyajivi Sahyog Samiti, a registered society, through an order earlier this month.

The order looks to give more powers to bureaucrats rather than a 13-member block-level body of fishermen. The new order also provides for a system of making online members of fishermen who elect the block level cooperative committee. But the new order does not define who are "fishermen".

BJP state chief Jaiswal, who paraded several members of the cooperative society at the party office, alleged that Sahani, as minister, removed posts of ministers in the cooperative committee and formed an executive body, which has been under the control of a bureaucrat.

Lalan Sahani, state convenor of the BJP's fisheries cell, added: "Sahani has sought to tell us who are registered fishermen. He has to clarify who can become members of the cooperative committee. The cooperative department has taken the matter seriously".

Sahani has been sacked despite the possibility of adverse reactions from the EBC Nishad/Mallah community ahead of the MLC polls next month.



A screengrab taken from a video of the incident

Bihar man breaches security, assaults Nitish

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
PATNA, MARCH 27

BIHAR CHIEF Minister Nitish Kumar was on Sunday assaulted by a man who unexpectedly breached his security at a programme in his home town of Bakhtiyarpur near state capital Patna.

Video grabs of the incident showed the local resident, Shanker Verma alias Chhotu, brisely walking towards the stage, holding the right hand of the CM from behind and landing a punch on his shoulder.

Nitish had been offering floral tributes to the statue of freedom fighter Sheelbhadra Yaji when this happened. The man was immediately nabbed and detained in police custody.

Gadkari: Hope Cong gets stronger as strong Opp is good for democracy

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
PUNE, MARCH 27

UNION MINISTER for Road Transport and Highways and senior BJP leader Nitin Gadkari has said that a strong Congress is important for democracy and that it's his honest wish that the party becomes strong on the national level.

In an interview against the backdrop of a journalism award function by Lokmat in Pune on Saturday, Gadkari said with the weakening of the Congress, its place has been taken by regional parties, which was not good for the Indian democracy.

He said he expedited the Pune Metro DPR which was pending for several years due to the unending underground and overhead debate. "I sat with Devendra Fadnis for an hour and asserted that we shall go ahead with the consultant's plan. We resolved not to debate that issue again and now you see that the work has reached fruition. Sometimes, you have to bulldoze the decisions," he said.

"Democracy runs on two wheels -- the ruling dispensation and the Opposition. A strong Opposition is a need for democ-



Union Minister Nitin Gadkari

racy. Hence it is my honest wish that the Congress party should become stronger. Also, with the Congress weakened, its place is being taken by regional parties which is not good for democracy," said Gadkari.

"Those who follow Congress ideology should remain in the party and have faith in its ideals. In 1978-80, I had joined the BJP and had come to Pune to participate in the party convention. When I got off at the railway station, carrying the publicity material on my shoulders, I bumped into Shrikant Jichkar who suggested to me that I should enter a 'good party' which will give me a future. I told him that I will jump into a well and end my life but won't abandon my ideology. At that time, BJP had only two MPs in Lok Sabha. But times changed with the efforts of party workers, and we got a Prime Minister in Atal Bihari Vajpayee. So one should not abandon one's ideology in moments of despair," he said.

Offshore trusts first in searches tied to probe in Pandora Papers

RITU SARIN
NEW DELHI, MUMBAI, MAR 27

THE INCOME Tax Department and its newly created Foreign Asset Investigation Unit (FAIU) have stepped up action on information revealed in records from Pandora Papers investigated by *The Indian Express* last year, conducting two major search operations this month that officials said were linked to the global media leak.

The first operation focused on family members of former Congress Union Minister, the late Satish Sharma, and the other on construction major, Hiranandani Group. Officials described both the operations as "successful".

What is significant is that following the dispatch of notices to "almost all" Indians named in the collaborative investigation by *The Indian Express* and International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), the Government's probe team, supervised by a Multi Agency Group (MAG), has started action first on offshore trust-owning individuals and companies named in Pandora Papers.

The MAG was set up by the Government on the day *The Indian Express* published its first

report on Pandora Papers in tandem with 150 media outlets, detailing offshore ownerships contained in 11.9 million leaked files.

What distinguished Pandora Papers from previous ICIJ offshore investigations was the unveiling of thousands of offshore trusts set up in tax havens -- evidently, as an opaque structure for its beneficiaries and to avoid or reduce inheritance and estate taxes. Indians are required to declare any association with an offshore trust -- be it as a Settlor, Trustee or Beneficiary -- in the Foreign Asset (FA) declaration section of their Income Tax returns. If they fail to do so, they are liable for stiff penalties and fines under the 2015 Black Money Act.

While it is early days yet, probe officers say they are finding a pattern of either non-disclosure or partial disclosure of offshore trusts linked to Indians named in Pandora Papers. In the case of Satish Sharma's family members, the FAIU conducted search operations in Delhi, Mumbai and Goa early this month. Records investigated by *The Indian Express* in Pandora Papers showed that Satish Sharma was

Protector of two trusts: Jan Zegers Trust, incorporated in 1995 in Cayman Islands with at least 10 members of his family shown as beneficiaries, and JZ II Trust in New Zealand in which his wife Sterre Sharma was listed as beneficiary. The trusts, records revealed, had several underlying offshore companies and properties in France and Singapore that were linked as assets.

Similarly, the records showed how members of the Hiranandani family set up a BVI entity called Solitaire Trust. The trust had as many as 25 offshore companies linked to it -- the shareholding of these companies was transferred to it -- with assets totaling \$60 million in 2017. Last week, searches were conducted by the IT Department in this connection in Mumbai, Bengaluru and Chennai with the company issuing a statement subsequently that the trust and its assets were "bonafide and in compliance with law".

Officials told *The Indian Express* that with a plethora of leads on dozens of complex trust structures detailed in Pandora Papers under the scanner, action could be in the offing against more Indians named in the records.

Roadways employees to strike for two days in Haryana

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
CHANDIGARH, MARCH 27

AS MANY as 10 unions of Haryana Roadways employees will go on strike for two days (Monday, Tuesday) on the call of national unions against privatisation policies. They are also demanding restoration of the Old Pension Scheme.

The unions said employees and workers of other departments, including municipal bodies and electricity, will also participate in the nationwide strike.

A leader of Haryana Roadways employees, Dalbir Kimara, said that the employees will go on strike from 4 am on Monday and they would be on strike till Tuesday late evening.

However, authorities plan to keep the transport services running in emerging circumstances. In a communication to all general managers, Director (State Transport) asked them to keep an eye on routes and a decision may be taken to ply/stop operations as per law-and-order contingencies. General managers were asked "to ply/stop the buses strictly as per the availability of the passengers and potential disturbances/strike".



Navjot Sidhu and other Congress leaders at the Sultanpur Lodhi house of Navtej Singh Cheema on Saturday. *Express*

With Sidhu at centre, churn in Punjab Cong after poll debacle

MANRAJ GREWAL SHARMA
CHANDIGARH, MARCH 27

THE PUNJAB Congress is undergoing a churn following its election debacle earlier this month. And at its centre is former Congress state president Navjot Singh Sidhu.

The cricketer-turned-politician stepped down as the party's Punjab chief on March 16, a day after Congress president Sonia Gandhi asked him to put in his papers. At the time, an associate of the former cricketer had claimed that Sidhu had taken a vow of silence for two months, but four days later Sidhu invited seven Congress leaders to his home. A similar meeting held at the home of former Sultanpur Lodhi legislator Navtej Singh Cheema on March 26 saw 24 such leaders in attendance. Two more meetings are slated for the coming week, including one in Ludhiana on Tuesday, and the number of participants is expected to touch 36.

Though Cheema claimed that the meetings were held in an attempt to paper over internal differences, a senior Congress legislator labelled such meetings an "assembly of the defeated", and pointed out that the attendees of the March 26 meeting included eight candidates who lost their security deposit and five leaders who were not given poll tickets.

Explaining why the meetings were being held, Cheema told *The Indian Express*, "Our infighting killed us. The high command could not stop it. We told Sidhu 'if you want to work, then we will start'. If we do not unite now, it is all over for the party."

Five-time Ludhiana North MLA Rakesh Pandey who lost this time to the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) claimed that the meetings were about identifying

Kerala man arrested in Rs 1,200-crore crypto fraud

SHAJU PHILIP
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, MARCH 27

THE ENFORCEMENT Directorate has arrested one of the prime accused in the Rs 1,200-crore fake cryptocurrency racket busted by the agency in January this year.

According to ED sources, Abdul Gafoor, a native of Malappuram, has been remanded in judicial custody by a PMLA (Prevention of Money Laundering Act) court in Kozhikode.

The central agency will move the court seeking his custody for interrogation on Monday, the sources added.

According to ED sources, Gafoor is the director of an inactive firm (shell company), Stox Global Brokers Private Limited, based in Malappuram. They said he had been actively involved in allegedly siphoning money from people who were lured with fake crypto investment offers, and then placing it in shell companies.

The ED had earlier identified K Nishad, who has sneaked out of the country after the racket was busted, as the kingpin of the racket that allegedly cheated around 900 investors.

The agency picked up the money laundering case last year after police in Kannur and Malappuram registered several cases against Nishad and others.

The alleged scam took place in 2020, ED sources said. The alleged victims were compelled to buy a non-existent crypto currency "Morris Coin", listed with a Coimbatore-based exchange called 'Franc Exchange'.

Maharashtra govt may change its mind, hope for Nanar refinery project revival, says Pradhan

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
MUMBAI, MARCH 27

THERE IS a hope for revival of the Nanar refinery project as the Maharashtra government seems to be changing its mind about the project in Konkan region, said Union Minister for Education, Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, Dharmendra Pradhan, at an event in Mumbai on Sunday.

Pradhan was in conversation with *Loksatta* Editor Girish Kuber at the 'Loksatta Tarun Tejankit Awards 2021', where awards were given to talented young achievers from different sectors of Maharashtra by the Union Minister.

At the event, the Union Minister was introduced by Anant Goenka, Executive Director of the Indian Express Group. Senior scientist Dr Anil Kakodkar, senior researcher Priyadarshini



Karve, social activist Girish Kulkarni and Subhash Patil of PricewaterhouseCoopers were felicitated by Goenka at the event.

Speaking at the event, Pradhan said, "In collaboration with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, it was planned to build a 6-million tonne oil re-



(In front row, from left) MPCB spokesperson Sanjay Bhuskute, Deputy Managing Director at Saraswat Bank Aarti Patil, Union Minister of Education, Skill Development and Entrepreneurship Dharmendra Pradhan, Executive Director of The Indian Express Group Anant Goenka and CEO of The Indian Express Group George Varghese, with some of the winners of Loksatta Tarun Tejankit Awards. *Express*

finery on the Konkan coast. But unfortunately, it was opposed. This wasted precious time. But now there are indications that the Maharashtra government is

changing its mind. The plan is to reduce the size of the project and build it in Konkan," Pradhan said, adding that the government's change of mind should be wel-

comed with the phrase *Der aaye durust aye* (better late than never).

"The Nanar oil refinery project in Konkan has the potential to contribute millions of crores of rupees and employment to Maharashtra's economy. Though the project has been stalled for the last few years due to opposition, now that the Maharashtra government seems to be changing its mind, there is hope for revival of the Nanar project," said Pradhan.

Pradhan also said that millions of crores will flow into Maharashtra's economy in the next few years due to the project. Complementary industries related to this project will be established and these will also generate a large number of jobs, he said.

The minister said the mega project in petrochemical sector will also help the country achieve the goal of energy security.

He also said, "Education in India has unfortunately become degree-oriented. However, the

central government wants it to job-oriented. Higher education institutions like IITs produce better employees for employment." Pradhan said there was a need to create employment generators. At the same time, there was also a need to gradually reconsider how much higher education fees should be. "It is time to consider whether the fees for children of rich entrepreneurs, political leaders and the children of common man coming from rural areas should be the same in government educational institutions," he said.

Some of the winners of the Loksatta Tarun Tejankit Awards are mathematician Dr Mahesh Kakade, IAS officers Nidhi Chaudhary and Abhijeet Bangar, entrepreneur Ajinkya Dharia, boxer Alfia Pathan, para badminton player Mansi Joshi, painter Shishir Shinde, producer-director Manava Naik, director-actor Sarang Sathye and director Chaitanya Tamhane.



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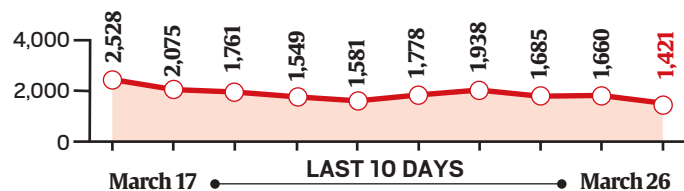
If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

TRACKING INDIA'S COVID CURVE

DASHBOARD, AS ON MARCH 26

755
DAYS SINCE
PANDEMIC
BEGANNew cases
1,421Active cases
16,187Deaths
149Weekly CFR: **16.14%** | Overall CFR: **1.21%** | Total deaths: **5,21,004**

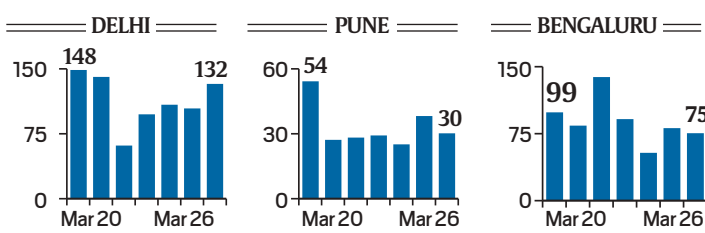
NEW CASES, DAILY



CASES IN THE STATES

State	ON MARCH 26			Weekly positivity
	New cases	Active cases	Deaths	
Kerala	496	4,881	141	2.97%
Mizoram	146	1,227	1	11.57%
Maharashtra	138	893	0	0.36%
Delhi	120	464	0	0.41%
Karnataka	79	1,818	1	0.33%

CASES IN THE CITIES, LAST 7 DAYS



TOTAL TESTS

78,69,22,965

TESTS ON MARCH 26

6,20,251

WEEKLY POSITIVITY

0.27%

OVERALL POSITIVITY

5.47%

INDIA TOTAL DOSES

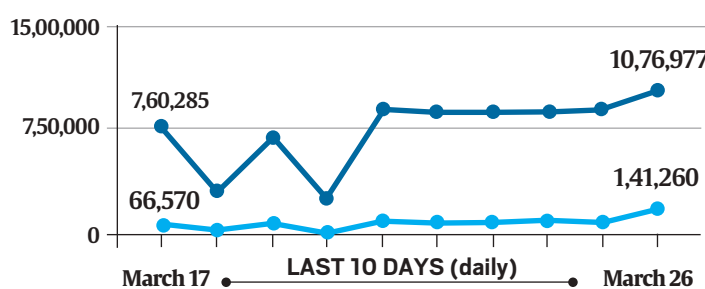
(Adults 1st dose: **91,24,82,858**; 2nd: **79,07,81,757**;15-18 age group 1st dose: **5,68,14,422**; 2nd: **3,71,74,113**;Age group 12-14 1st dose: **1,22,01,065**; Precautionary: **2,25,55,815**)

183,20,10,030

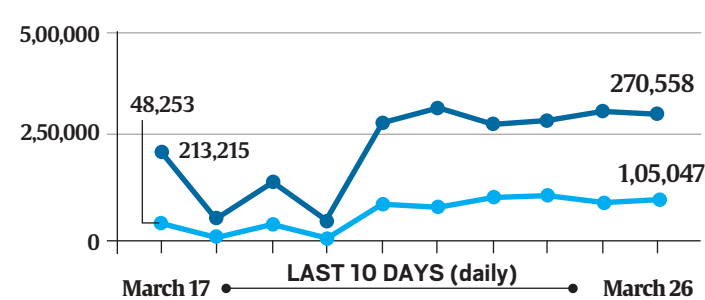
First dose Second dose

March 26 total: **32,41,552**

ADULTS



AGE GROUP 15-18



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SOURAV ROY BARMAN

NEW DELHI, MARCH 27

APPLICATION FORMS for the Central Universities Entrance Test (CUET) for undergraduate programmes will be open from April 2-30, the National Testing Agency (NTA) of the Ministry of Higher Education has announced.

All admissions to UG courses in central universities will now be through CUET, replacing the class XII scores-based admission system wherever it was being followed. The test will be computer-based, with Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs) in each paper.

The NTA has advised candidates to go through details of programmes on offer, and eligibility criteria, on the websites of the universities they wish to apply to. After making their choice, they can visit cuet.samarth.ac.in and submit their application forms.

What will be the format of the test?

The test, based on the NCERT class XII syllabus, will be divided into four broad sections. Sections I-A and I-B will involve papers on languages; Section II will be on core subjects a candidate wishes to pursue; and Section IV will be a general test, only for programmes in certain universities where such a test is required.

What will the language papers contain?

Sections I-A and I-B will each contain 50 questions, of which an applicant must attempt 40. These papers will test for reading comprehension by setting passages, based on which the candidate will have to answer MCQs.

Section I-A, compulsory for all, will test a candidate in English or an Indian language to be chosen from a basket of 12 — Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Urdu, Assamese, Bengali, Punjabi, and Odia. The duration of this test will be 45 minutes.

Section I-B is for those looking to study foreign languages. The 19 languages on offer in various central universities are French, Spanish, German, Nepali, Persian, Italian, Arabic, Sindhi, Kashmiri, Konkani, Bodo, Dogri, Maithili, Manipuri, Santhali, Tibetan, Japanese, Russian and Chinese.

What are the core subjects in Section II?

Students can pick up to six subjects from a list of 27: Accountancy/ Book Keeping; Biology/ Biological Studies/ Biotechnology/ Biochemistry; Business Studies; Chemistry; Computer Science/ Informatics Practices; Economics/ Business Economics; Engineering

SHEETAL BANCHARIYA

NEW DELHI, MARCH 27

LAST WEEK, Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan urged Lok Sabha to debate and decide whether the MP quota in Kendriya Vidyalaya admissions should continue or end. Since then, Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla has suggested that there could be an all-party meeting on this, and BJP leader Sushil Kumar Modi has moved a Zero Hour notice in Rajya Sabha for withdrawal of the quota.

What is the MP quota in KV admissions?

The Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan (KVS), the autonomous body under the Ministry of Education that manages the KVs, introduced a special scheme in 1975 allowing a fixed quota for admission to each member of the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. Granting these discretionary powers was aimed at helping MPs serve their constituents better.

An MP's recommendations for admission are limited to Classes 1 to 9, and to children



Counselling in Delhi University in 2017. So far, DU admissions were based on Board scores; now, UG admissions will be through CUET across central universities. *File*

Graphics; Entrepreneurship; Geography/ Geology; History; Home Science; Knowledge Tradition and Practices of India; Legal Studies; Environmental Science; Mathematics; Physical Education/ NCC / Yoga; Physics; Political Science; Psychology; Sociology; Teaching Aptitude; Agriculture; Mass Media/ Mass Communication; Anthropology; Fine Arts/ Visual Arts (Sculpture/ Painting)/ Commercial Arts; Performing Arts — (i) Dance (Kathak/ Bharatnatyam/ Odissi/ Kathakali/ Kuchipudi/ Manipuri); (ii) Drama — Theatre; (iii) Music General (Hindustani/ Carnatic/ Rabindra Sangeet/ Percussion/ Non-Percussion); Sanskrit.

A candidate will have to attempt of 40 out of 50 questions within 45 minutes.

And what is Section III about?

Section III will be a general test for any undergraduate programme offered by universities where a general test is being used for admission rather than a test on domain subjects. The paper, for which an hour will be given to candidates, has been designed to assess their general knowledge, knowledge of current affairs, general mental ability, and numerical ability. It will also test quantitative reasoning through simple application of basic mathematical concepts of arithmetic/ algebra, geometry/ mensuration taught until class VIII. This paper will have 75 questions, of which 60 will have to be attempted.

Can a science stream switch to

whose parents belong to the MP's constituency. The quota has undergone several changes, including being discontinued on at least two occasions. Earlier, an MP could recommend two admissions in an academic year, which was increased to five in 2011, six in 2012 and 10 in 2016. Currently, with 543 MPs in the Lok Sabha and 245 MPs in the Rajya Sabha, 7,880 admissions are possible against this quota every year.

There was also a separate 'discretionary' quota allowed the Education Minister (earlier known as the Human Resources Development Minister) to recommend 450 students for admission each academic year until 2021. This, too, was abolished and reinstated several times; it was last abolished last year.

What is the admission process under the MP quota?

Every MP has a coupon sent to the KVS and Ministry of Education with details of the child and parents. The list of shortlisted candidates is hosted on the KVS website. If a student's name is listed, the admission process begins.

SIMPLY PUT QUESTION & ANSWER

The format for CUET

The National Testing Agency has announced the format of the Central Universities Entrance Test. What will the papers contain, how many can a candidate take, and how will admissions take place based on CUET?

bility requirements of various Central Universities in this regard," the NTA says.

Can a student who has already cleared class XII take this year's CUET?

Yes, if any university permits students of previous years of class XII to take admission in the current year, such students would also be eligible to appear in CUET(UG)—2022.

How will universities admit students based on the CUET?

The CUET will not rank students, and will just provide scores. There will be negative marking for wrong answers. While marks scored in the class XII Board exam will not be given any weightage, universities have been given the option to use Board exam scores on one count — they can set a minimum score as a requirement. For example, a particular university can say, irrespective of a candidate's score in the CUET, their application for admission will be considered only if they have scored at least 60% in the Board exams. That will vary from university to university and will be optional: not all universities will use Board exam scores as qualifying criteria. These aspects will have to be checked by the candidates with the universities they are applying to.

Should a student take special coaching?

"All questions in various testing areas will be benchmarked at the level of Class XII only. Students having studied Class XII Board syllabus would be able to do well in CUET (UG)—2022," the NTA notice said.

UGC chairperson M Jagadeesh Kumar too has stressed that coaching will not be necessary as the questions in the test will be drawn up based on NCERT syllabus, which is widely accepted across the country. "Board-wise syllabus variations will also be taken into account. These exams are not going to be like the IIT exams. Experts will moderate the difficulty level and questions will be confined to Class XII syllabus alone," Prof Kumar said.

"In the case of the IIT entrances, over a million candidates compete for around 16,000 seats. But in the case of central universities, Delhi University alone has around 70,000 seats and when the other universities (total 45) are taken into account, there will be a couple of lakhs seats. The ratio of seats against applicants will be 1:5 as against 1:50 or 1:60 in the case of IITs. In the case of IITs, tough questions drive people to coaching. But in CUET, the difficulty level of questions will be moderated so that students are comfortable without coaching," he said.

MP quota in KVs, and why an attempt to scrap it

Admissions against the MP quota — and also the Education Minister's discretionary quota — are above the sanctioned seat strength across KVs. And over the years, admissions have often exceeded the quota size since MPs and ministers receive several requests, many of which, they claim, are hard to turn down. For instance, in 2018-19, 8,164 students were admitted against the MP quota of 7,880 and 9,402 students were taken against the Education Minister's quota of 450.

Because the excess admissions distort the student-teacher ratio and deprive meritorious students of an opportunity to study in a Kendriya Vidyalaya, governments have tried to scrap the two quotas over the years.

What has come out of such attempts?

These have often run into a wall with MPs prevailing over the government to retain it. For instance, the MP quota was first scrapped in 1997 but reintroduced in 1998 on the orders of then HRD minister Murli Manohar Joshi. In March 2010, then HRD minister Kapil Sibal surrendered both quotas but, in less than two

months, restored and increased the MP quota from 2 admissions per member to five in 2011, and six in 2012. Sibal did not restore the minister's quota, which was done by the subsequent government, with Smriti Irani as HRD minister, with a limit of 450 recommendations in a year. In 2016, the MP quota was raised from six to ten admissions each year. In 2021, Pradhan scrapped his discretionary quota of 450 admissions.

Why is the MP quota in the news now?

During the ongoing Parliament session, Congress MP Manish Tewari raised the issue arguing that the ten-seat quota is not enough for an MP who is forced to turn down a large number of applicants.

"Each of us represents 15-20 lakh people and each constituency has at least 35-40 lakh people... Those who are denied get angry with us. I have a request: either you enhance the quota from 10 to 50 or do away with it," he said.

Pradhan suggested that the government could work towards ending the MP quota altogether if the House agreed.

What is behind the new anti-India campaign in the Maldives?

NIRUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN

NEW DELHI, MARCH 27

ON MARCH 23, People's Majlis, the Maldivian Parliament, accepted an emergency motion disallowing an opposition rally planned for two days later in the capital Malé. The rally had been called by former president Abdulla Yameen and his Progressive Party, and its ally, the People's National Congress.

The motion was moved by Abdulla Jabir, a member of former president Mohamed Nasheed's Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP). It stated the rally was endangering national security, and sowing discord between the Maldives and one of its neighbours. It asked the Maldivian National Defence Forces to stop the rally and other similar events.

The theme of the rally was "India Out", a slogan coined two years ago by protesters who claim that the MDP government led by President Ibrahim Solih has "sold out" the country to India. The protest was scheduled for the day before External Affairs Minister S

Jaishankar was to arrive in the Maldives.

The rally was not allowed to take place, with police cracking down on protesters travelling to Malé from other parts.

Political context

The archipelago nation of about 500,000 people, which won democracy only in 2005, lies at a strategic crossroads in the Indian Ocean. India and China have vied for influence in the Maldives, and Islamists have found a base in the country where Islam is the state religion. Politically, the country has experienced turmoil that democracy has brought.

As the closest big neighbour, India has been the first responder in Maldives for decades, the relationship cemented by the strongman former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who ruled the country from 1978 to 2008, when he was defeated by Nasheed. In 1988, Indian special forces dramatically cut short an ongoing coup against Gayoom by a businessman who had hired mercenaries from the Sri Lankan Tamil militant group PLOTE for the job.

Since the transition to democracy, foreign policy has played a big role in the politics of Maldives, tied as it is to the small country's economic development. The period coincided with China's rise and its projection of power in the region and beyond.

Geopolitical frictions arising out of Beijing's intervention in a part of the Indian Ocean where India was the pre-eminent power had repercussions in the national politics of both Sri Lanka and Maldives. In Maldives, the MDP and its top leaders, especially Nasheed, are seen as pro-India, while Yameen, who was president for five years from 2013, is seen as a China proxy.

In the last presidential and parliamentary elections in 2018, the MDP was voted back to office. Nasheed could not contest because of a conviction under the Yameen government, and Solih became President. Yameen was convicted on corruption charges soon after.

With a friendly government in Malé, India has been able to regain some of its previous influence after the Yameen years that saw relations dip to their lowest point.

But Yameen's release in December 2021 led to an increase in the pitch and frequency of the anti-India rallies. Protesters have been carrying his posters, and Yameen has been present at some protest sites and rallies.

The next presidential and parliamentary elections are in 2024, and Yameen is using the campaign to paint the MDP as a party that has enslaved the country to India.

Security cooperation

What began as a general protest at the Solih government's perceived India-friendly policies has turned into an allegation that India has sent a large military contingent to the Maldives, a claim that the Solih government has repeatedly denied.

Attention has focused particularly on the co-operation between the two countries to develop a harbour on the Uthuru Thilafalhu (UTF) atoll for the Maldivian Coast Guard. The Solih government has said there are no Indian military personnel in the Maldives other than a maintenance and flight crew operating three Dornier aircraft used for surveillance,

and for rescue and air ambulance operations.

In a statement on March 13, the Maldives Defence Ministry clarified that "Statements that allege UTF to be a foreign military base are simply untrue."

Besides the February 2021 agreement for development of the UTF harbour, the countries are collaborating in other ways. India has extended a \$50 million line of credit to the Maldives for defence purchases, and the countries have agreed to combat terrorism in "all its forms and manifestations". Maldives is part of the India-driven Indian Ocean mini-lateral Colombo Security Conclave, in which the other members are Sri Lanka and Mauritius, with Bangladesh and Seychelles expected to join soon. Last November, the Indian Navy, Maldives National Defence Force, and the Sri Lankan Navy conducted a two-day exercise in the Exclusive Economic Zones of the three countries in the southern Arabian Sea to "build understanding and interoperability".

Domestic politics

Yameen hopes to harness Maldivian na-

tionalism to come back to power on an anti-India plank. Solih's government has argued domestically that Maldives imports virtually everything, and relies on India for its security, including food security.

The MDP has begun an "India First" campaign, and had even drafted legislation to criminalise anti-India protests as anti-national. The legislation was ultimately dropped.

Yameen also hopes to politically leverage the differences between Solih and Nasheed. The two men have largely managed to keep these differences from coming in the way of the work of government, but following an attempt on his life last year, which was traced to a local Islamist group, the former president criticised the government openly for not doing enough against such forces.

An MDP defeat in a local election saw the differences spill out into the open. Nasheed wants Solih to use the MDP's two-thirds majority in Parliament to change Maldives from a presidency to a country in which a Prime Minister heads the government.

10

IDEA EXCHANGE

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

These exams are not going to be like the IIT exams, considered among the toughest in the world. Our experts will moderate the difficulty level. The questions will be confined to Class XII NCERT syllabus alone

Sourav Roy Barman: One key criticism against the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) for central universities is that you are making board exams irrelevant in a country where so much attention is given to it... You say the CUET draws from the same syllabus. That argument was also offered in the case of JEE but we have seen how the coaching industry has mushroomed.

First of all, we need to see what is the purpose of education. Is it to get high scores of 99 per cent or is it to become a well-rounded person and a good learner? For too long, we have unnecessarily driven our children to achieve high scores rather than encourage them to be good learners. If the student gets admission in a top college of his or her choice, what would he/she like to be? The student has to continue to be a good learner. And if you want to be a good learner in your college, you must have been a good learner even in your school. So, if I neglect my board exams, just because I have to focus on my entrance examination, then that is going to defeat the very purpose of my entire education. As parents and educators, it is very important for us to emphasise that your primary goal is to be good learners, to become a well-rounded human being. Your goal is not scoring high percentages. I think we need to drive this into the minds of both parents and students.

Why would Class XII board exams become redundant? The universities will still use these marks as a qualifying mark for admission. For example, some universities may set this benchmark at 60 per cent of Class XII results. Some universities may set 70 per cent as the qualifying mark or to be eligible to apply for admission in a university. So, once you have crossed 65 or 70 per cent, whatever be the threshold set by the university, you don't have to be stressed to get 98 per cent. Even if you get 70 per cent, if that is the qualifying mark, then your actual admission will depend on the CUET score. The Class XII education will not become redundant.

Will it lead to a huge coaching industry training our students for CUET? Look at the IIT, for example. The entire IIT system has about 16,000 seats and nearly a million students compete for them. But if you look at the 45 central universities — take, for example, Delhi University alone — it has 70,000 seats. And if you look at all the central universities, there will be a couple of lakhs of seats in the undergraduate programmes. And the same one million students are competing for these seats. So, it's a kind of 1:5 as compared to 1:50 or 1:60 kind of competition. Therefore, my belief is that CUET won't fuel any coaching industry.

Ritika Chopra: **How and why was the decision taken to not accord any weightage to the board marks?**

The five pillars on which the NEP is built are access, equity, quality, affordability and accountability. For us, access and equity to high-quality education is of primary importance. If you look at students from rural backgrounds or remote areas, they don't have access to high-quality public education. I come from a village and I know the ecosystem there has a lot of disturbance and the students may not be able to focus on their studies. As a result, they may not get 98 or 99 per cent. But they are really talented people. With the introduction of CUET, without the cut-throat competition to get 98-99 per cent, we are providing a level-playing ground for students who come from different economic backgrounds and are geographically distributed across the country.

The other reason is that we have seen non-uniformity in awarding marks for the Class XII across boards. For students of some boards, where evaluation is really tough, even getting 80 per cent is difficult, while in others, it is easy to get even 95 per cent. So, this diversity leads to a lot of inconvenience to students and is not a level-playing ground.

P Vaidyanathan Iyer: **Many state boards don't necessarily follow the NCERT syllabus. How difficult will it be for them to take CUET? Will it lead to an IIT kind of system where students in rural areas, studying for board exams, will now have to take coaching for NCERT?**

The NCERT syllabus is widely accepted across the country. We're aware that there are some differences between the state syllabus and the NCERT. Now, I'm sure when our experts set the question papers, some of these issues will be taken into account. These exams are not going to be like the IIT exams, which are supposed to be among the toughest in the world. I'm sure our experts will moderate the difficulty level. And the questions will be confined to the Class XII NCERT syllabus alone, not some advanced version. So, whether you're com-



WHY **M JAGADESH KUMAR**

University Grants Commission (UGC) Chairman M Jagadesh Kumar, who recently announced the Common University Entrance Test (CUET) for all central universities, plays an important role in taking forward the government's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP). An electronics engineer, Kumar taught at IIT-

Delhi for nearly two decades before taking over as Vice-Chancellor of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in 2016, a tenure marked by controversy. He is now focussing on setting up a digital university, taking on the challenges of higher education and is set to bring in value-based reforms to the education system.



If you continue to construct physical campuses, we will not be able to meet the needs of the millions of students who will be coming into higher education. The UGC will establish a digital university, and amend online regulations

‘Even if I get 70%...I can take CUET... this entire focus on high scores will go away’

UGC head M Jagadesh Kumar talks about how the common entrance exam for central universities won't make board exams irrelevant but will take the pressure off students. This session was moderated by SOURAV ROY BARMAN, Senior Correspondent, *The Indian Express*



Mamidala Jagadesh Kumar, academician, administrator, author, and Chairman of University Grants Commission, during Idea Exchange. Praveen Khanna

ing from a rural or urban background, it should not make much difference.

Some people have also said, children from rural background are not much familiar with a computer-based test. I come from a village and I interact with children there. They are very smart. Those who are saying that they cannot use computers, do not have the ground reality in the villages. In a computer-based test, all you need to use is the mouse. On the screen, you choose from the multiple-choice questions, work out the solutions on a piece of paper and choose using a mouse. That's going to be an easy task. The CUET will be conducted in 13 languages: English and 12 Indian languages. So, if a student has studied in the local language or in their mother tongue, they can opt to write this exam in their mother tongue. NTA (National Testing Agency) will take special measures to ensure that exam centres are accessible to the students. Our goal is to see that a large number of students, who are not necessarily from the urban areas but from rural areas, take the CUET test.

Sourav Roy Barman: The higher education sector is also grappling with other major challenges: vacant teaching posts, swelling enrollment and too few good colleges and universities. How are you going to address these?

One of the solutions suggested in the NEP is the introduction of digital technology in higher education. If you continue to construct physical campuses, at this rate, we will not be able to meet the needs of the millions of students who will be coming into higher education. So, what the UGC has done is to focus on offering online education to the students who could not join a physical university. There are two things that we are doing — one is the establishment of a digital university. We are also amending the current online regulations.

Sourav Roy Barman: What exactly is a digital university? As a student, can I apply for a digital university? Will it have a name? Can I pursue undergraduate or postgraduate degrees from that digital university?

It's available on the portal. This portal will provide you with information on all kinds of undergraduate programmes that are available. You will have technical experts who will source the best of the courses that are available from educational institutes within the country and also from abroad. The IITs and the best central universities, which are going to offer some of these courses, will be the spokes of this digital university. The edtech companies will provide the technological support for conducting the online assessments for providing the students information on career development, career growth, and also bringing the employers face to face with the students so

that a matchmaking happens. Our goal is that in the next six to eight months, we should have a complete picture of this digital university. And our goal is that by the academic session of 2023, the digital university should be in place to offer the courses.

Aakash Joshi: During the pandemic, there was a huge boom in online learning. But campus life plays a huge role, too. Is digital the only way you see that future being addressed? Or is there going to be a genuine old-fashioned infrastructure expansion as well?

One is the social aspect. You are saying that if I don't go to a physical university, I miss out on meeting my own peers and developing networking. That is true. But imagine the other side. I come from a village. At the age of 10, I left my family to go to a nearby town to live away with my parents and study. From there, I went to a city. I stayed away from my parents for long. Now imagine if I didn't have to go out of my village, and if I could access this online education, I would have stayed with my parents. Socially, I would have bonded much more with my own place, with my own people. Therefore, it's a question of, from which side you see, is it half full, or half empty?

The other factor is that the focus will be more on online education, to the extent that we will neglect physical education. Please remember that online education cannot be given in all disciplines. In many disciplines, you need a lab, you need real experiential learning. I'm sure if I do an online MBBS degree, you will not come to me, right? So, there are going to be a lot of other disciplines for which we need to continue to develop the physical infrastructure. But even there, digital technology will play a much larger role. Physical universities will continue to be built. But there are emerging areas like data science, data analytics, financial management, and fintech. These are areas in which a large number of jobs are going to be generated. And if you don't have physical infrastructure to train our

aspirational youth, and if you are simply waiting for years for them to be built, what will happen to their future? This is where digital technology, the digital university will play a major role.

Vandita Mishra: In the film, The Kashmir Files, the action is set in a university which is a thinly veiled caricature of JNU. In the movie, it is the place for very villainous, anti-national academics and students. You've been the Vice-Chancellor of JNU, and you are also now heading the UGC. Does it worry you that a premier university should be demonised like that?

Did anyone from JNU object to this? Did anyone who might have thought that those characters are actually representing me, object? I have not seen anybody objecting to that. So let us leave it there. You're saying that this film targets JNU, but in JNU itself, those people who are apparently represented in this movie have no problem with that. Let people watch it and then make sense of whatever they want to make of it.

Unni Rajen Shanker: A classroom in Delhi University can take 100 students for one subject but they are forced to take 300, sometimes 350. CUET doesn't address that...

The competition for admission in some of the best higher educational institutions will continue to be there. Globally, don't we see people aspiring to get admission into some of the well-known universities? But with the introduction of CUET, even if I get, let's say, only 70 per cent, I don't have to think that it's the end of my life, my career. I still have an opportunity to attempt CUET and check out if I can get admission. So, this entire focus on getting only high scores will now go away.

Raj Kamal Jha: Looking back to your days as V-C, what was your learning from JNU?

At JNU, we train our students to ques-

At JNU, we train our students to question the status quo, which is very important. If we can create that kind of openness in the classroom, students will become fearless in asking questions

tion the status quo, which is very important. If we can create that kind of openness in the classroom, and in the educational institute, students will become fearless in asking questions and it will lead to creativity and innovation. One of the unfortunate things in Indian society is that we look at failures with repugnance. But what we need to emphasise in our classroom is that failing is a natural phenomenon and that every failure can actually be used as a lesson to improve yourself further.

And this is what happens in JNU. We don't look at failures as something bad. In fact, unlike in many other universities, we have a system known as the zero semester system. If a student feels they don't want to study the next semester because they have a health problem or something else, in any other university, perhaps, he will be out of the system.

But in JNU, we have created a facility for the students to take off and come back to study. In JNU, the education is highly affordable; the tuition fee in JNU is just Rs 300 per annum and this has enabled a lot of students from economically weaker sections to study at JNU. By the time they pass out of JNU, they are a completely transformed bunch. Only the kind of ecosystem that JNU has can create this transformation.

Ritika Chopra: During your time as JNU V-C, one of the fiercest student protests was over the fact that you were trying to raise hostel fees. Students felt you were trying to change the very character of JNU. How would you respond to that?

I think there was some misunderstanding. It was not raising the hostel fees, it was about paying the establishment charges such as electricity and water charges. So, you only pay for what you consume. There was an increasing electricity bill burden on the university. But having said that, we also gave heavy concessions to the students from lower-economic backgrounds. By charging only lightly to the reserved-category students and weaker sections, and by charging the general students who are anyway getting scholarship, our calculation was that we could offset some of the expenditure and use that spend for improving our lab facilities, our research facilities. But ultimately, we withdrew those and then continued with whatever the existing charges were.

Sukrita Baruah: You have introduced FYUP (four-year undergraduate programme)...Is there anything in the works about supplying additional resources to institutes to be able to accommodate all these students?

Infrastructure will continue to be a challenge and we cannot create it overnight. Can we also look at the possibility of optimum utilisation of our existing resources?

I think efficiently using our existing infrastructure also needs to be looked into, while we continuously try to expand the infrastructure. Expansion and introduction of new programmes will stretch the existing capabilities of the universities. But that's how we need to go forward. You can't wait until all the buildings come up and start only then, that will be too late.

Harikishan Sharma: The unemployment rate across the cities in the country is around 23 per cent for the youth, in the age group of 18 to 29 years. Does this pose a challenge to you, how do you factor this in your plans?

If you ask experts, what are the major challenges that human societies are facing today, they will identify three. One is growing inequality. The other is the failing economic systems. And the third one is deteriorating environment. So, the rise in unemployment, perhaps, is a fallout of the failing economic systems. And growing inequality is another major issue. So, as an educator, my challenge will be how to enable my students to acquire appropriate skills, so that they match the requirements of the job sector, which is growing.

Shashank Bhargava: You said CUET will be set in a way that the difficulty level is moderate. But is there a worry this will also lead to high cut-offs based on those CUET scores?

This is a multiple-choice-question-based test and it will also have negative marking. There will be a certain weightage for correct marks and certain weightage for wrong answers and so on. Therefore, we expect that there will be enough granularity in order to distinguish students...these are all issues we internally discuss and will introduce measures to overcome any challenges that may pop up.

Sourav Roy Barman: What was your most challenging time at JNU and your biggest achievement?

My challenge was to make sure that the research facilities are expanded in the university. When I joined, there was no R&D cell in the university, we established one. Many people don't understand the importance of integrating social sciences with mainstream science and technology education. Our School of Engineering is unique in the entire country, where our engineering students also have the opportunity to do a master's degree in social sciences, languages, humanities, and in other areas.

I will always stand by all the students and teachers. They have every right to protest. However, you may have a right to protest but others have a right to carry out their academic programmes and research. As long as you do not disturb them, do not do anything unlawful, it is perfectly all right for you to go on with your protest.

11ECONOMY

CURRENCY WITH PUBLIC UP ₹38,196 CR TO ₹30.18 LAKH CR, AS OF MARCH 11

Cash with public at new high this fiscal even as digital payments rise by a third

GEORGE MATHEW
MUMBAI, MARCH 27

THE UNABATED rise in currency with the public is continuing without any let-up, despite the sharp rise in digital transactions in the financial system.

Currency with the public rose by Rs 38,196 crore to an all-time high of Rs 30.18 lakh crore during the fortnight ended March 11, according to the latest Reserve Bank of India (RBI) data. During the financial year so far, currency with the public has gone up by 9.7 per cent, or Rs 2.66 lakh crore, from Rs 27.51 lakh crore in March 2021.

According to the RBI's definition, currency with public is arrived at after deducting cash with banks from total currency in circulation (CIC).

CIC refers to currency notes and coins issued by the central

bank within a country that is physically used to conduct transactions between consumers and businesses.

With cash remaining the preferred mode of payment, currency with the public has risen by 68 per cent, or Rs 12.21 lakh crore, from a level of Rs 17.97 lakh crore on November 4, 2016, just before the government announced demonetisation on November 8, 2016.

Cash with the public has shot up 285 per cent from a low of Rs 7.82 lakh crore, recorded on December 23, 2016. By December end of 2016, currency with the public fell sharply after the Centre withdrew Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 currency notes from the system.

Although the government and the RBI have pushed for a "less cash society" and digitisation of payments, as well as imposed restrictions on the use of cash in various transactions, cash in the sys-

EXPLAINED
Preferred mode of payment

EVEN AS the government is pushing for a "less-cash society" and with digital transactions clocking steady growth, cash remains the preferred mode of payment. While cash usage was widespread in FY21 due to the Covid-induced lockdowns, it still remains the dominant mode of payment among numerous merchants.

tem has been steadily rising.

The sudden withdrawal of notes in November 2016 had roiled the economy, with demand falling, businesses facing a crisis

and gross domestic product (GDP) growth declining nearly 1.5 per cent. Many small units were hit hard and downed shutters after the note ban. It also created a liquidity shortage.

The rise in CIC in absolute numbers is not the reflection of reality. Since demonetisation in 2016, currency in circulation has risen steadily every year, with the CIC to GDP ratio having surged to 14.5 per cent in 2020-21 from 8.7 per cent in 2016-17, as per data presented by the Finance Ministry in Parliament. CIC to GDP ratio is now ever higher than that in the pre-demonetisation period.

The jump in cash with the public was primarily driven by a rush for cash by the public in 2020-21 as the government announced a stringent lockdown to tackle the spread of the Covid pandemic. As nations around the world announced lockdowns in

February and the government here also prepared to announce lockdowns, people began accumulating cash to meet their grocery and other essential needs that were being mainly catered by neighbourhood grocery stores.

During festival seasons and elections, cash demand remains high. A large number of merchants still depend on cash payments for end-to-end transactions. Moreover, 90 per cent of e-commerce transactions use cash as a mode of payment in tier four cities compared to 50 per cent in tier one cities.

According to the Ministry of Electronics and IT, the volume of digital payments in the country rose by 33 per cent year-on-year during the financial year 2021-22. As many as 7,422 crore digital payment transactions were recorded during this period as against 5,554 crore transactions in FY21.

‘Ukraine war unlikely to roil ₹5 tn refinancing next fiscal’

Over 1,400 large companies have to refinance ₹5 lakh crore in FY23, but the global crisis caused by the Ukraine crisis is unlikely to cause them any trouble, said a Ind-Ra report

Top 1,423 non-financial, debt-heavy corporates have to refinance as much as ₹5 lakh crore, but the risk is manageable despite challenges posed by: ■ Tightening monetary policy condition ■ Volatile commodity prices

TOTAL REFINANCING REQUIREMENT is estimated at: ■ ₹5 lakh cr, marginally up from ₹4.98 lakh cr in FY22, on a blue-sky scenario ■ ₹6.6 lakh cr, up 33%, based on a hazy-sky scenario



Source: India Ratings/PTI

PVR, INOX set for merger; to be India's largest entertainment co

ENSECONOMIC BUREAU
MUMBAI, MARCH 27

MULTIPLEX CHAINS PVR Ltd and INOX Leisure Ltd have decided to merge to form the largest entertainment company in the country. The boards of the two companies on Sunday approved the amalgamation and the share exchange ratios.

Accordingly, INOX shareholders will receive three shares in PVR for 10 shares of INOX. After the merger, PVR promoters will have 10.62 per cent stake while INOX promoters will have 16.66 per cent stake in the combined entity.

Post merger, the promoters of INOX will become co-promoters in the merged entity along with the existing promoters of PVR. Further, the board of directors of the merged company would be re-constituted with total board strength of 10 members and both the promoter families having equal representation on the Board with 2 board seats each.

With PVR currently operating 871 screens across 181 properties in 73 cities and INOX operating 675 screens across 160 properties in 72 cities, the combined entity will become the largest film exhibition company in India operating 1,546 screens across 341 properties spread over 109 cities. On Friday, PVR shares closed with a gain of 2.84 per cent at Rs 1,827.60 on the BSE. INOX Leisure shot up by 6.10 per cent to Rs 469.70.

The merger is likely to augur well for the growth of the Indian cinema exhibition industry, besides ensuring tremendous value creation for all stakeholders, in-



APVR multiplex in New Delhi. PVR and INOX said the merger will fight adversities posed by after-effects of Covid. Reuters file

cluding customers, real estate developers, content producers, technology service providers, the state exchequer and the employees.

Ajay Bijli would be appointed the managing director and Sanjeev Kumar the executive director. Pavan Kumar Jain would be named the non-executive chairman of the Board. Siddharth Jain would be appointed as non-executive non-independent director in the combined entity. "The combined entity will be named as PVR INOX Limited with branding of existing screens to continue as PVR and INOX respectively," PVR said in a statement.

New cinemas opened after the merger will be branded as PVR INOX. While strongly countering the adversities posed by the advent of various OTT (over-the-top) platforms and the after-effects of the pandemic, the combined entity would also work towards taking world-class cinema experience closer to the consumers in Tier 2 and 3 markets, PVR and INOX said in a statement.

INOX had posted a revenue of Rs 296.47 crore and a loss of Rs 1.31 crore for the quarter ended December 2021, while PVR made a loss of Rs 24.53 crore on a

turnover of Rs 546.94 crore for the third quarter of FY22.

Ajay Bijli, chairman and managing director, PVR, said, "The film exhibition sector has been one of the worst impacted sectors on account of the pandemic and creating scale to achieve efficiencies is critical for the long-term survival of the business and fight the onslaught of digital OTT platforms."

"As we head into the industry's revival amidst headwinds, this decisive partnership would bring in enhanced productivity through scale, a deeper reach in newer markets and numerous cost optimisation opportunities, and continue to delight cinema fans with world-class experiences and landmark innovations," Siddharth Jain, director of INOX Leisure, said.

Drushiti Desai, registered valuer, partner at Bansil S. Mehta & Co, and SSPA & Co Chartered Accountants, the independent valuers appointed by INOX and PVR respectively, have recommended a share exchange ratio. Ernst & Young Merchant Banking Services LLP provided the fairness opinion to INOX, while Axis Capital provided a fairness opinion to PVR on the share exchange ratio.

MARKET WATCH

7 OF TOP-10 VALUED COS LOSE M-CAP

New Delhi: The combined market valuation of seven of the top-10 valued firms tumbled Rs 1,14,201.53 crore last week, dragged down by Hindustan Unilever and HDFC twins. Reliance Industries Limited, TCS and Infosys were the three gainers. PTI

INTERVIEW WITH MINISTER OF STATE FOR ELECTRONICS AND IT

‘Need to relook laws to de-risk Indian internet, make it difficult for Big Tech to be weaponised’

SOON AFTER the Russian invasion of Ukraine began on February 24, Big Tech firms and intermediaries announced either partial or total stoppage of services for Russia and its citizens. This, Minister of State for Electronics and IT RAJEEV CHANDRASEKHAR believes, is a dangerous precedent, and brings back focus on the power that such platforms wield. Edited Excerpts from an interview with AASHISH ARYAN and LIZ MATHEW:

How do you view the events in Russia and Ukraine vis-à-vis the internet companies?

The recent events in Ukraine and Russia have again in a lot of ways drawn the attention to the power of platforms on the internet, the power of some governments to direct platforms on the internet to take decisions that are partisan and effectively what I call the weaponisation of the internet.

Two phenomena are very visible. One is the weaponisation of the internet, of which we were aware of in some sense as we discussed user harm etc in the past. The second is what I call the phenomenon of the splinter-net. The internet is now increasingly being splintered driven by the power of some western countries.

It is clear today that we need Aatmanirbhar internet which says that don't depend only on these platforms that have now demonstrated during the Russia-Ukraine war that they are not removed from state influence for all of the narrative they put out. They are absolutely subject to sovereign influence and it can make them weaponised against a country or for another country. We have to completely relook at our legislative and jurisprudential framework in that context.

There are draft laws with respect to data and cybersecurity pending? What does a re-look mean?

We must first create a national data governance framework, establish some principles of law, define the role of these intermediaries and what should be the nature of the relationship between the intermediaries and the user. We must define what should be the consumer rights. Are they more than the fundamental rights that they have? Do we need a magna carta of consumer rights on cyberspace so that every man, woman and child can consider the internet to be a safe, trusted and open space?



Rajeev Chandrasekhar PTI file

It is clear today that we need Aatmanirbhar internet which says that don't depend only on these platforms that have now demonstrated during the Russia-Ukraine war that they are not removed from state influence for all of the narrative they put out"

RAJEEV CHANDRASEKHAR

So the jurisprudential legal principles have to be built on that before we go on saying we need to come up with this law or that. We will be selling the cat on one corner without addressing the overall piece. We have framed issues, such as regulation of ad tech.

We have to de-risk our Indian internet and that de-risking urgency has, in a sense, been amplified by what we are seeing in Ukraine-Russia. It is validating our thinking what we have been talking about in terms of a new digital law, the need for a data governance framework. We will create a framework, which will have the data protection law, the digital law and the cybersecurity statutes. Our approach now is exactly in keeping with the Aatmanirbhar Bharat principles and the success we have had in the fintech space and replicating it in other areas.

We are not averse to Big Tech. But we have to make

sure that our rules and laws in India do not permit Big Tech platforms to be weaponised deliberately, wittingly, unwittingly, by any other force.

Until such a governance framework is put into place, how will the government protect the cyberspace?

You cannot. With a law that is 20 years old, you cannot do it. You have to accept that. That is why the urgency to become an Aatmanirbhar cyberspace that you need an overarching framework, data protection law, cybersecurity policy, along with the basic tool kits for cybersecurity. The weaponisation of the internet and the use of the internet where the biggest and most dominating platforms are of an external jurisdiction is an area of concern for public policymakers.

Therefore, we have to ensure that the internet is diversified and is open, safe and trusted, as well as accountable. How do you achieve that? Through a series of new legislation, laws, rules and additional policy framework that addresses the issue of security. I do not have an instant gratification response on what will we do tomorrow.

As of today, how prepared are we?

We have to be clear that unlike in the past, where laws lagged innovation, here law should be in lock-step with innovation and that is the only protection we can have. The domestic laws must make it very difficult for the intermediaries who are jurisdictionally present in India, to be weaponised against the interest of India and its citizens.

Full interview on www.indianexpress.com

Over ₹1.14L cr of FPI outflows in 2022 so far

ENSECONOMIC BUREAU
NEW DELHI, MARCH 27

IN THE backdrop of heightened geopolitical tensions and inflation worries, overseas investors have pulled out a total Rs 1,14,855.97 crore from domestic markets in calendar year 2022 so far.

According to depositories data, in March so far, foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) have sold domestic equities worth Rs 48,261.65 crore, taking the year-to-date tally this year to Rs 1,14,855.97 crore.

The exodus of FPIs was largely owing to inflationary pressures and deepening global macroeconomic conditions following the Russia-Ukraine war, experts said. WITHPTI



An employee at a Sinopec refinery in Wuhan, Hubei province. Reuters file

ural gas fields in Sichuan province and the Inner Mongolia region.

"Looking ahead in 2022, the market demand for refined oil will continue to recover, and demand for natural gas and petrochemical products will keep growing," Sinopec said in the statement.

REUTERS
BEIJING, MARCH 27

CHINA PETROLEUM & Chemical Corp, known as Sinopec, is planning its highest capital investment in history for 2022 after recording its best profit in a decade, echoing Beijing's call for energy companies to raise production.

Sinopec expects to spend 198 billion yuan (\$31.10 billion) in 2022, up 18 per cent from a year ago, beating the previous record of 181.7 billion yuan set in 2013, according to a company statement filed to the Shanghai Stocks Exchange on Sunday.

It plans to invest 81.5 billion yuan in upstream exploitation, especially the crude oil bases in Shunbei and Tahe fields, and nat-

purchase orders placed for forgings for steam generators, SS304L lattice tubes and plates for end shields, pressuriser forgings, bleed condensers forgings, incoloy-800 tubes for steam generators, reactor headers, the DAE officials said, adding that the EPC package for turbine island has been awarded for the Gorakhpur units 3 & 4 and the Kaiga units 5 & 6.

The new reactors are of significantly higher capacities compared to the PHWRs currently under operation — the standard PHWR being used in India is of 220 MWe, though two 540 MWe reactors were installed in Tarapur in 2005 and 2006. The 10 new reactors will be installed in Kaiga in

Karnataka (Unit 5 & 6), Chutka in Madhya Pradesh (Unit 1 & 2), Gorakhpur in Haryana (Unit 3 & 4) and Mahi Banswara in Rajasthan (Unit 1, 2, 3 & 4).

The decision to step up the indigenous civil nuclear reactor programme comes amid delays in the deployment of imported light water reactor-based projects in collaboration with global vendors.

The NPCIL will set up the projects deploying the proposed 700 MWe reactor units, which marks a big leap for the state-owned nuclear operator that has so far been building smaller-sized 220 MWe and 540 MWe reactor units as part of the country's indigenous nuclear power programme.

BRIEFLY

Fuel price hike

New Delhi: Petrol price on Sunday was hiked by 50 paise a litre and diesel by 55 paise. In Delhi, petrol now costs Rs 99.11 per litre against Rs 98.61 earlier, while diesel has gone up from Rs 89.87 per litre to Rs 90.42, as per a price notification of state fuel retailers.

Strike today

New Delhi: Some essential services related to banking, transportation, railways and electricity may be hit Monday due to a two-day strike called by trade unions. PTI

BULK PROCUREMENT OF CRITICAL GEAR FOR CONSTRUCTION OF 10 PROPOSED UNITS OF PRESSURISED HEAVY WATER REACTORS

Equipment orders to kick off 700 MWe nuke projects in ‘fleet mode’ from 2023

ENSECONOMIC BUREAU
NEW DELHI, MARCH 27

IN KICKING-OFF the biggest expansion of the country's nuclear power capacity, the purchase orders for bulk procurement of critical equipment such as steam generators, lattice tubes, pressuriser forgings and reactor headers have been placed for the construction of the 10 proposed units of the new indigenous 700 MWe (mega watt electric) pressurised heavy water reactors (PHWRs).

The engineering, procurement and construction packages for the turbine island (conventional part of the atomic power stations)

have been awarded for four units of two of these projects being developed by state-owned Nuclear Power Corporation (NPCIL).

The moving of the reactor construction from the "pre-project stage" to the "under construction stage" will be marked by the First Pour of Concrete (FPC) of the 700 MWe atomic power plant in Karnataka's Kaiga in 2023, which will be first of the blocks and will set into motion the construction of the 10 nuclear reactors in 'fleet mode' over the next three years, Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) officials told the Parliamentary panel on Science and Technology, Environment, Forests and Climate Change.

FIRST POUR OF CONCRETE OF KAIGA PLANT

■ The moving of the reactor construction from the "pre-project stage" to the "under construction stage" will be marked by the First Pour of Concrete (FPC) of the 700 MWe atomic power plant in Karnataka's Kaiga in 2023, which will be first of the blocks

■ This will set into motion the construction of the 10 nuclear reactors in a 'fleet mode' over the next three years, Department of Atomic Energy officials told the Parliamentary panel on Science and Technology, Environment, Forests and Climate Change

The Centre had approved the construction of these 10 PHWR in June 2017 — the first time that it had cleared the building of 10 nuclear power reactors in one shot in

a 'fleet mode' with an aim to reduce costs and speed up construction time. The projects entail an estimated cost of Rs 1.05 lakh crore. The PHWRs use natural uran-

TOP OF THE WORLD



Senior General Min Aung Hlaing

MYANMAR

Junta vows to 'annihilate' opponents of military rule

MYANMAR'S LEADER vowed Sunday to intensify action against home-grown militia groups fighting the military-run government, saying the armed forces would "annihilate" them. Senior Gen Min Aung Hlaing, speaking at a military parade marking Armed Forces Day, also urged ethnic minorities not to support groups opposed to army rule and ruled out negotiations with them. The military seized power last year from the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi. Security forces used lethal force to suppress mass nationwide protests, resulting in the deaths of more than 1,700 civilians. **AP**

CHINA

Plane crash: Second 'black box' found

THE SECOND "black box" from a China Eastern Boeing 737-800 was found Sunday, raising hopes that it might shed light on why the plane nosedived into a mountainous area in southern China last week, killing all 132 people on board. Firefighters taking part in the search found the flight data recorder on a mountain slope about 40 metres from the point of impact and 1.5 metres underground, state media said. Experts confirmed it was the second black box. The impact of the crash created a deep pit on the side of the mountain and scattered debris widely. **AP**

SRI LANKA

1st international flight in 54 years at this airport

SRI LANKA'S oldest and first international airport was relaunched on Sunday with its first international flight landing in 54 years, aviation officials said. A flight from the Maldives landed at the Ratmalana International Airport here. The 50-seater Maldivian flight will operate three flights a week to Colombo, and it will be later expanded to five per week, the aviation officials said. The Ratmalana airport was turned into a domestic airport after the Bandaranaika International Airport at Katunayake was commissioned in the late 1960s. **PTI**

U.S. CLARIFIES AFTER PRESIDENT SAYS PUTIN 'CANNOT REMAIN IN POWER'

Biden's aides say his remarks on Putin not a call for regime change

Macron: I would not use this type of wording

REUTERS
MARCH 27

WHITE HOUSE officials have said that US President Joe Biden's comments during a speech he delivered in Warsaw, Poland, on Saturday where he said Putin "cannot remain in power" were meant to prepare the world's democracies for extended conflict over Ukraine, not back regime change in Russia.

Biden's remarks on Saturday, including a statement earlier in the day calling Putin a "butcher", were a sharp escalation of the US approach to Moscow over its invasion of Ukraine.

In a major address delivered at Warsaw's Royal Castle, Biden evoked Poland's four decades behind the Iron Curtain in an effort to build a case that the world's democracies must urgently confront an autocratic Russia as a threat to global security and freedom.

But a remark at the end of the speech raised the spectre of escalation by US, which has avoided direct military involvement in Ukraine, and has specifically said it does not back regime change.

"For God's sake, this man cannot remain in power," Biden told a crowd in Warsaw after condemning Putin's month-long war in Ukraine.

A White House official said Biden's remarks did not represent a shift in Washington's policy.

"The President's point was that Putin cannot be allowed to exercise power over his neighbours or the region," the official said. "He was not discussing Putin's power in Russia, or regime change."

Asked about Biden's comment, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Reuters: "That's not for Biden to decide. The president of Russia is elected by Russians."

On Sunday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters that the US had no strategy of regime change for Russia.

During a visit to Jerusalem, Blinken also said that what Biden meant was "President Putin cannot be empowered to wage war or engage in aggression against Ukraine or anyone else".

French President Emmanuel Macron distanced himself from Biden's comments, saying, "I wouldn't use this type of wording because I continue to hold discussions with President Putin."

"We want to stop the war that Russia has launched in Ukraine without escalation — that's the objective," he told France 3 TV channel, adding, "If this is what we want to do, we should not escalate things — neither with words or actions."

Biden delivered a speech in Warsaw, Poland, Saturday. **AP**People clear debris from a school that was damaged by shelling in Kharkiv, on Sunday. **Reuters**

Zelenskyy says West needs more courage in helping Ukraine fight, seeks more weapons

YURAS KARMANAU
LVIV, MARCH 27

UKRAINIAN PRESIDENT Volodymyr Zelenskyy accused the West of lacking courage as his country fights to stave off Russia's invading troops, making an exasperated plea for fighter jets and tanks to sustain a defense in a conflict that has ground into a war of attrition.

Speaking after US President Joe Biden said in a lacerating speech that Russian President Vladimir Putin could not stay in power — words the White House immediately sought to downplay — Zelenskyy lashed out at the West's "ping-pong about who and how should hand over jets" and other weapons while Russian missile attacks kill and trap civilians.

"I've talked to the defenders of Mariupol today... Their determination, heroism and firmness are astonishing," Zelenskyy said in a video address early Sunday, referring to the besieged southern city that has suffered some of the war's greatest deprivations and horrors. "If only those who have

People fleeing the Luhansk region at a school gym in Uzhgorod, Ukraine, on Sunday. **Reuters**

been thinking for 31 days on how to hand over dozens of jets and tanks had 1% of their courage."

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, now in its 32nd day, has stalled in many areas, its aim to quickly encircle the capital, Kyiv, and force its surrender faltering in the face of staunch Ukrainian resistance.

Moscow claims its focus is on wresting from Ukraine the entirety of the eastern Donbass region, which has been partially controlled by Russia-backed

separatists since 2014.

The leader of one of the separatist-controlled areas of Donbass said Sunday that he wants to hold a vote on joining Russia, words that could indicate a shift in Russia's position. Leonid Pasechnik, the head of the self-proclaimed Luhansk People's Republic, said it plans to hold a referendum on becoming part of Russia "in the nearest time."

Kyrylo Budanov, the head of Ukrainian military intelligence, ac-

RUSSIA WARNS MEDIA: DO NOT REPORT ZELENSKY INTERVIEW

London: Russia's communications watchdog told Russian media on Sunday to refrain from reporting an interview with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and said it had started a probe into the outlets which had interviewed him. In a statement, it said a host of Russian outlets did an interview with Zelenskyy. **REUTERS**

cused Russia of seeking to split Ukraine in two, like North and South Korea. He also predicted that guerrilla warfare by Ukrainians would derail such plans.

In pointed remarks, Zelenskyy accused the West of being "afraid to prevent this tragedy. Afraid to simply make a decision". "So, who is in charge of the Euro-Atlantic community? Is it still Moscow, thanks to its scare tactics?" he said. "Our partners must step up their aid to Ukraine." **AP**

Ukraine: Some Russian units withdrawing to Belarus

A satellite image of Chernobyl nuclear facilities earlier this month. Ukrainian forces said some Russian units were going to Belarus via the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. **NYT**

dozens of small wildfires in the surrounding forest were spreading radiation in smoke.

The Ukrainian military's statement about the partial pullback of Russian troops toward Chernobyl came as another sign that the Russian attack on Kyiv, the capital, has largely stalled in chaotic, inconclusive battles raging for weeks now in several mostly destroyed suburban towns.

There was no way to independently confirm the Ukrainian statement, but it was consistent with what Western intelligence agencies have said about the fighting to the northwest of Kyiv.

The Ukrainian military said an unspecified number of units of Russia's 35th Combined Arms Army, a Russian military term for a large formation, were being pulled back to regroup after suffering losses in the fighting. It said several units were pulling back to the Chernobyl area and then crossing into Belarus, about 15 km away. It is possible, the statement said, that after the regrouping, they will be redeployed in a renewed effort to encircle Kyiv. That effort has in any case not wholly halted. On Saturday Boyarka, a satellite town outside Kyiv, was shelled for the first time. **NYT**

MEANWHILE

PHILIPPINES ON ALERT OVER VOLCANO

A small but restive volcano near the Philippine capital Manila ejected two more plumes on Sunday, indicating continued eruption and prompting authorities to urge residents to stay out of harm's way. Located in a lake in Batangas province south of Manila, Taal volcano spewed an 800-metre-tall plume followed by one of 400 metres.

SHOW OF STRENGTH AHEAD OF TRUST VOTE

At huge rally, Imran says foreign powers behind 'conspiracy' to topple his govt

SAJJAD HUSSAIN
ISLAMABAD, MARCH 27

IN A show of strength ahead of the tabling of a no-confidence motion against his government, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan on Sunday addressed a massive rally in the national capital where he said that foreign powers were involved in a "conspiracy" to topple his coalition government.

Addressing the rally, organised by the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Khan said foreign elements were using local politicians and money to "mend the country's foreign policy".

"Attempts are being made through foreign money to change the government in Pakistan. Our people are being used. Mostly inadvertently, but some people are using money against us. We know from what places attempts are being to pressure us. We have been threatened in writing but we will not compromise on national interest," his said in his speech that lasted more than an hour and a half.

"The letter I have is proof, and I want to dare anyone who is doubting this letter. I will invite them off the record. We have to decide for how long we will have to live like this. We are getting threats. There are many things about foreign conspiracy which will be shared very soon," he said.

Khan also thanked the rally's participants for responding to his call and gathering in Islamabad from different parts of the country.

In apparent references to Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leader and former PM Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan Peoples'



Pakistan PM Imran Khan

Party leader and former president Asif Ali Zardari and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) leader Fazlur Rehman, Khan said, "These three stooges are looting the country for years, and all this drama is being done to have Imran Khan surrender like [former Pakistan president Pervez] Musharraf. They are trying to blackmail the government. General Musharraf tried to save his government and gave these thieves NRO (National Reconciliation Ordinance) and it resulted in the destruction of Pakistan," Khan was quoted as saying by *Dawn* newspaper.

"Come what may, I will not forgive them, even if my government goes or even if I lose my life," he said.

Pakistan has been on the edge since Opposition parties on March 8 submitted the no-confidence motion before the National Assembly Secretariat, alleging that the Khan's government was responsible for the economic crisis and the spiralling inflation in the country.

On Friday, the National Assembly's crucial session on the no-trust motion was adjourned by the Speaker without the resolution being tabled. A National Assembly session is now scheduled to be convened on Monday. **PTI**

China will oppose any attempt to interfere in Nepal's affairs: Wang

YUBARAJ GHIMIRE
KATHMANDU, MARCH 27

CHINA'S STATE Councillor and Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, wound up his visit to Nepal with a warning to other regional and global powers that Beijing would oppose any attempt to interfere in Nepal's internal affairs.

During his 48-hour visit to the country, Wang held meetings with Nepal President Bidya Devi Bhandari, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, Foreign Minister Narayan Khadka, Opposition leader K P Oli and Maoist party leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal "Prachanda". In his talks with these leaders, Wang reiterated China's support for Nepal's development, and also firmly conveyed that any external influence in Nepal would be unacceptable and that China would stand against it.

"China firmly stands in favour of Nepal's sovereignty, independence, and its right to self-determination on internal affairs, and any attempt to disturb them will be firmly opposed by China," Wang told Nepalese leaders.

Nepal Foreign Minister Narayan Khadka with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi in Kathmandu, Saturday. **AP**

Wang's South Asia trip included visits to Pakistan, Afghanistan, India and Nepal.

It comes amid speculation in Kathmandu that China was not happy with the Nepal Parliament's decision to ratify a \$500-million dollar US infrastructure grant.

Nepal Foreign Minister Khadka, and almost all other leaders that Wang met, assured him that Nepal firmly believed in the One-China policy and that it was committed to not letting its territory be used against China in any manner.

TWO DECADES AFTER DESTROYING BAMIAN BUDDHAS

Eye on China investment, Taliban now preserve Buddhas

SAMYA KULLAB
MES AYNAK (AFGHANISTAN), MARCH 27

THE ANCIENT Buddha statues sit in serene meditation in the caves carved into the russet cliffs of rural Afghanistan. Hundreds of metres below lies what is believed to be the world's largest deposit of copper.

Afghanistan's Taliban rulers are pinning their hopes on Beijing to turn that rich vein into revenue to salvage the cash-starved country amid crippling international sanctions.

The fighters standing guard by the rocky hillside may once have considered destroying the terracotta Buddhas. Two decades ago when the Taliban were first

Two decades ago, when the Taliban were first in power, they sparked global outrage by blowing up gigantic Buddha statues in Bamiyan. **Reuters file**

in power, they sparked global outrage by blowing up gigantic Buddha statues in central Afghanistan's Bamiyan, calling them pagan symbols that must be purged.

But now they are intent on preserving the relics of the Mes Aynak copper mine. Doing so is key to unlocking billions in Chinese investment, said Hakumullah Mubariz, the

Taliban's spectacular reversal illustrates the powerful allure of Afghanistan's untapped mining sector

Taliban head of security at the site, peering into the remnants of a monastery built by first-century Buddhist monks.

"Protecting them is very important to us and the Chinese," he said. Previously, Mubariz commanded a Taliban combat unit in the surrounding mountains battling with US-backed Afghan forces. When those troops capitulated last year, his men rushed to secure the site. "We knew it would be important

for the country," he said.

The Taliban's spectacular reversal illustrates the powerful allure of Afghanistan's untapped mining sector. Successive authorities have seen the country's mineral riches, estimated to be worth \$1 trillion, as the key to a prosperous future, but none have been able to develop them amid the continual war and violence. Now, multiple countries, including Iran, Russia and Turkey are looking to invest, filling the vacuum left in the wake of the chaotic US withdrawal.

But Beijing is the most assertive. At Mes Aynak, it could become the first major power to take on a large-scale project in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, potentially redrawing Asia's geopolitical map. **AP**

Ahead of Israel-Arab summit, US seeks to reassure allies on Iran

HUMEYRA PAMUK
JERUSALEM, MARCH 27

US SECRETARY of State Antony Blinken sought to reassure Israeli and Arab partners convening for a rare summit in Israel on Sunday that Washington would continue to counter any Iranian threat even as he promoted nuclear diplomacy with Tehran.

The issue is likely to dominate the two-day summit which will include foreign ministers from three Arab states that normalised ties with Israel even as peace-making with the Palestinians remains stalled. Blinken pledged in parallel to work on improving Palestinian conditions.

Blinken's visit comes as some

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken with Israeli President Isaac Herzog on Sunday. **AP**

US allies in the region question President Joe Biden administration's commitment and brace for fallout from an Iranian nuclear deal and the Ukrainian crisis.

The nuclear talks had been close to an agreement several weeks ago until Russia made last-minute demands of the United States, insisting that sanctions imposed on Moscow over

its invasion of Ukraine should not affect its trade with Iran.

Restoring a 2015 nuclear deal "is the best way to put Iran's nuclear programme back in to the box it was in", Blinken said.

But whether or not that happens, "our commitment to the core principle of Iran never acquiring a nuclear weapon is unwavering", he said. **REUTERS**

Thippong rallies to win maiden Asian Tour title in playoff

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
MARCH 27

AMIDST A plethora of Indian names, previously-unheralded Thai Nitithorn Thippong managed to capture the DGC Open, beating Ajeetesh Sandhu in a playoff at the Lodhi Course on Sunday.

Thippong led by two shots going into the final round, but a topsy-turvy day saw him trailing by two with two to play. A double bogey on the par-three 17th hole brought Sandhu back level with Thippong. The two could not be separated on the 72nd hole after making birdies, before the 25-year-old from Bangkok went ahead and took his first Asian Tour title in the playoff.

Thippong reached the green on the par-five 18th hole in two shots and had a 15-foot eagle putt.

"I talked to my caddy. I just wanted to lay up and he said 'just go for it, no problem'. He is my friend's father and has caddied for me since 2015."

The three-wood he hit to perfection was what eventually won Thippong the trophy.

Sandhu, on the other hand, didn't have things going his way on the extra hole.

"I hit a good drive which landed on the fairway and just took off to the right. So, I got a little unlucky there. I then chipped out with a 7-iron and followed that up with a gap wedge. I felt the wind held up the third shot a little bit leaving me a tricky 15-feet birdie putt," Sandhu reflected.

He missed the first putt, and Thippong had two putts to take the first prize cheque of US\$90,000. It was a triumph of his never-say-die spirit. He was leading by two shots going into the back nine before bogeys on 10th, 14th and 16th holes handed the advantage to Sandhu.

The Indian looked set for his second Asian Tour title, after the 2017 Yeangder Championship in Chinese Taipei, when he faltered on the penultimate hole. Sandhu pushed his tee shot to the right, losing his ball and making a double bogey.

"I tried to hit a shot which was not a high percentage one. I tried to move it with the wind to go into the flag but just didn't make a good swing," he looked back.

Still, Thippong had to make a 10-foot birdie putt on the 18th, with Sandhu much closer to the hole, to force a playoff. The Thai carded a final-round 73 while Sandhu had a 71, to be tied at seven-under.

It was a good week for the Thai contingent with Settee Prakongvech finishing a shot short of the playoff. Danthai Boonma set the course record for the reworked layout with an eight-under par 64 on Sunday that took him to a tied-10th finish.

Easy as Swiss cheese

Sindhu overpowers Busanan to bag another title at site of 2019 Worlds triumph



PV Sindhu now has eight Super 300 (or Level 4) titles from 23 outings.

Reuters

SHIVANI NAIK
MARCH 27

SECOND-GAME blitzkriegs at St Jakobshalle in Basel, Switzerland, are routine for PV Sindhu.

This time, the Indian shuttle star decimated Thailand's Busanan Ongbamrunphan 21-16, 21-8 in the final of the Swiss Open on Sunday to claim her second Super 300 title of the year. She erased the painful memories of her own 21-12, 21-5 rout by Carolina Marin last year. St Jakobshalle has been Sindhu's stomping ground ever since she won the World Championships there in 2019, though this was a vastly pared-down occasion and not a Top-10 opponent.

Such bruising scorelines (Sindhu was 20-4 in the second game at one point) are what the venue has been associated with given the tall Indian's 21-7 drubbing of opponents in Basel three years ago in a field lacking only Marin.

However, the 2022 Swiss Open was a fourth-tier tournament (after Super 1000, 750 and 500s) and saw a commensurate thinning of the field, with the World No. 7 Sindhu being the highest-ranked player in the field, strolling past opponents. Busanan was ranked No. 11. Sindhu improved her head-to-head record against the Thai to a staggering 16-1. Incidentally, she had beaten Busanan 21-8, 21-7 at the German

Open, and boasts one of the most one-sided results against the Thai retriever.

On the day, Sindhu started on an even keel in the opener till 13-13, but knew she had the menace to spook Busanan at any point she wished to switch gears. Rallies were mid-level long, and Sindhu was steady in her retrievals for most part of the first game, before going on the offensive to close out with a whirlwind collecting of points. She switched to attack at will against the hapless opponent, and snuck up on her in the short period of closing out the first.

The second game was absurdly one-sided as Busanan was pulverised by Sindhu's power game, in what was reminiscent of Marin's 21-5 mauling of her last year. But like an ace athlete, Sindhu put those demons to rest. Smashes rained down on both flanks of Busanan as Sindhu lunged for her low retrievals at the net before ending with shearing kills.

It was one-way traffic, with a sense of inevitability when Sindhu reached 11-2. At 20-4, she took her foot off the pedal, grabbed a breather and then put Busanan out of her misery at 21-8.

Sindhu now has eight Super 300 (or Level 4) titles from 23 outings in Macau, Malaysia and Switzerland. Plus one of Level 3 in India, two of Level 2 in Korea and China, besides her Worlds title.

Sindhu, forever a big-stage player renowned for challenging the best in the top finals, has been focusing on the smaller

tournaments this season in search of titles, and confidence.

Christie downs Prannoy easily

Indonesian Jonatan Christie completely outplayed HS Prannoy in the men's singles final, with his pinpoint accuracy and controlled error-free game to win 21-12, 21-18. The Asian Games champ used deep clears to Prannoy's forehand back corner to great effect, as the Indian was kept busy at the backline and deprived of his own attacking options at the front.

Christie also amped up the pace when needed and had the better of the exchanges in the forecourt when he varied the tempo, even as Prannoy's attack didn't yield enough points to seriously put Christie under the pump.

Lifts, tosses and clears helped Christie pull away at 8-all in the final, his first title clash in two-and-a-half years. Prannoy, who made a final after five seasons, couldn't really get going against the disarming game of Christie, who doesn't carry a venomous weapon, but plays a technically creaseless game in finals.

After 7-all, Prannoy caught up at 13-all in the second game, but Christie pulled away at will, this time in net charges from the forecourt. Prannoy was a winner here in 2016, but had to be content with a runner-up finish this time, though he's been playing a much more compact game than before.

287 days after collapsing on field, Eriksen scores with first touch

Making his international comeback 287 days after he suffered a cardiac arrest on the pitch, Denmark star Christian Eriksen scored with his first touch during a friendly match against the Netherlands on Saturday. Eriksen was introduced as a half-time substitute in Amsterdam. And he made an impact within two minutes by latching on to Andreas Skov Olsen's low cross inside the box and curling a first-time shot into the top left corner of the Dutch goal. Eriksen was surrounded by his teammates as he celebrated the goal and received huge applause from a packed stadium.



Denmark's Christian Eriksen after the friendly against the Netherlands. Reuters

The cardiac arrest

Nine months ago, a scene like this seemed improbable. During Denmark's Euro 2020 game against Finland, the 30-year-old collapsed on the pitch after suffering a cardiac arrest. His heart had stopped beating and, as per Denmark's team doctor Morten Boesen, he "was gone". Morten and his brother Anders, also a doctor, rushed to treat Eriksen. A defibrillator was produced quickly and together with the heart massage given by the Boesen brothers, Eriksen was revived. After spending several days at the hospital, Eriksen was released and was fitted with an Implantable Cardio Defibrillator (ICD).

Uncertain future

At this point, it seemed his football career was over. Eriksen had told the paramedics to keep his boots, saying he 'wouldn't need them,' according to an ESPN report. This possibility looked increasingly likely after Inter, the club was played for back then, released him in December 2021. Rules in Italy forbid professional players to compete with an ICD and with his options very limited, his agent admitted it was tough to predict Eriksen's future.

The comeback

However, in January, the Dane made a remarkable comeback to football after he was signed by Premier League side Brentford. Eriksen said the ICD was just for 'protection' and felt safe to play football again. "It is in because, if anything would happen to me, there is no need for a defibrillator because I will have my own. It is really just extra security. I am more protected here than you guys," he said during his presentation at Brentford. "And that is how I feel. I feel very protected with it.

I feel normal. I don't feel it in any annoying way. Only going through the airport, I have to go around instead of going through a scanner." Even the club's manager, Thomas Frank said there was 'zero chance' something should happen to him. Eriksen played his first match since the incident on February 26 against Newcastle United and was welcomed with rapturous applause.

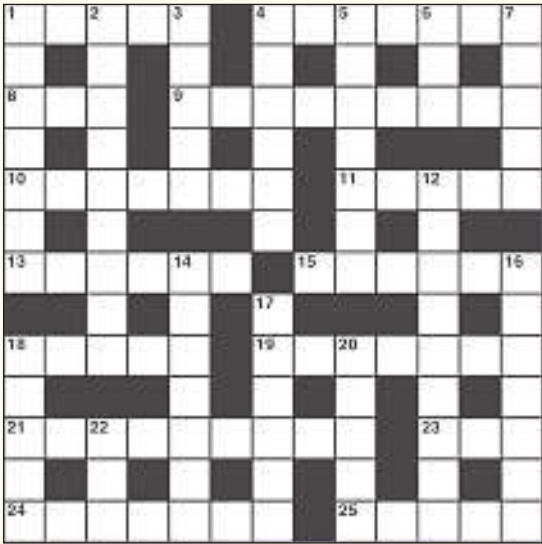
Instant impact

Following his successful return to football and after clocking sufficient minutes, Eriksen was recalled to the Denmark team last week for friendly matches. His goal against the Netherlands came in a losing cause, with Denmark losing 4-2. But Eriksen looked refreshingly good. Apart from scoring the goal, he also hit the woodwork once. Eriksen told Dutch TV that he was 'emotional' to be back. "I was pleased to show I can still play. It feels like I've never been away from the team. It was a bit emotional to be back in the national team but I've hardly missed any games over the last 10 years so I'm like part of the family."

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

NETHERLANDS	4-2	DENMARK
Bergwijn 16', 71'		Vertergaard 20'
Ake 29'		Eriksen 47'
Depay 37' (P)		
SPAIN	2-1	ALBANIA
Torres 75'		Uzuni 85'
Olmo 90'		
GERMANY	2-0	ISRAEL
Havertz 36'		
Werner 45+1'		

CROSSWORD 4699



- ACROSS**

1 They may blow the lights out (5)

4 He often resorts to a piece in colour (7)

8 Old agreement from extremely early times (3)

9 Gives up an office from a basic date (9)

10 The late converted into the quick? (7)

11 Having no inclination for a palindrome (5)

13 More distant relative we hear about (6)

15 Much time and trouble is taken in its drafting (6)

18 Another name for a criminal (5)

19 Postal despatch means trouble in China (7)

21 Man to speak to for capital investment (9)

23 Leave the French out of the welcome (3)

24 Used by writer and poet perhaps (7)

25 People who pull strings create rows (5)
- DOWN**

1 Rugby player is made to run to limited extent (3,4)

2 Kind of western pasta (9)

3 A ghost from Hades (5)

4 Acted evasively being naturally guarded (6)

5 Combination lock in case is left undone (7)

6 A child's drink (3)

7 An unfinished picture frame (5)

12 Justify making cat dive in (9)

14 Relaxed in the deep USA perhaps (5,2)

16 Sportsmen seen at the bank (7)

17 Threaten one politician with death (6)

18 A female Pole is pale (5)

20 It's put in during games of tennis (5)

22 A small court of law (3)

Solutions Crossword 4698: Across: 1 Thermostat, 8 Realm, 9 Symptom, 10 Preface, 11 Order, 12 Reside, 14 Offers, 17 Staff, 19 Ruction, 21 Custard, 22 Speed, 23 Precedents. Down: 2 Heaters, 3 Rumba, 4 Oyster, 5 Time off, 6 Toted, 7 Imprisoned, 8 Report sick, 13 Defiate, 15 Evident, 16 Bridge, 18 Aesop, 20 Caste.

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 quip.

Zeal is a volcano, the peak of which the grass of ____ does not grow. - Khalil Gibran (14)

REEEI

■■■■■

EEUNNS

■■■■■

ENIIS

■■■■■

IICDSV

■■■■■

SOLUTION: REEIE, EERIE, NISEL, UNSEEN, VISCID
Answer: Zeal is a volcano, the peak of which the grass of indecisiveness does not grow. - Khalil Gibran

OVER THE HEDGE by Michael Fry & T Lewis



CALVIN & HOBBS by Bill Watterson



MARVIN by Tom Armstrong



SUDOKU 4787

Difficulty Level 4s
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.

Difficulty Level
1s = Very easy; 2s = Easy; 3s = Medium; 4s = Hard; 5s = Very Hard; 6s = Genius



SOLUTION SUDOKU 4786



DAY TODAY

BY PETER VIDAL

ARIES (Mar 21 - Apr 20)

You're moving towards passionate, flexible and romantic influences as the planets head towards the next big crunch. When it happens it will be global as much as personal, so don't feel singled out for harsh treatment. At least you'll finally begin to understand what is what and who is who.

TAURUS (Apr 21 - May 21)

The week gets under way with planets which are almost perfect but also slightly flawed. Travel stars are now beginning to focus on long-distance adventures rather than short-range excursions. You may be attracted to the people and places from your past.

GEMINI (May 22 - June 21)

The week will be cut into two by the movement of Mercury, your ruling planet, into a new and down-to-earth region. Whatever your commitments or responsibilities at the beginning of the week, by the weekend you'll be rushed off your feet. You might even be breaking free from a comfortable rut.

CANCER (June 22 - July 23)

You appear to have come to the conclusion that a move or reorganisation of your domestic life should take place. You must also be aware that this is no time for complacency. The best advice may come from people who haven't known you for long, and can be impartial

LEO (July 24 - Aug 23)

You may either conform or go your own merry way. You see, although some planets are advising you to keep your head down, Mercury is shortly to alter its position and is due to boost your morale no end. It will do this partly by encouraging you to make up your own mind for a change.

VIRGO (Aug 24 - Sep 23)

Only after another month has passed will you be clear about the future. Even then you may be so deluged with social engagements or routine commitments that you may not be sure where to turn. At work, you're in a strong position but must use your skills wisely.

LIBRA (Sep 24 - Oct 23)

You are not one to bow the knee, but there may be times this week when it is best to defer to authority. On the other hand, you are due a little respect for your undoubted achievements. You may just receive it early next week, with another bout, a couple of weeks later.

SCORPIO (Oct 24 - Nov 22)

The tide of fortune is turning in your favour. The stars have already set up a number of chances. Your task this week is to move very rapidly to commit others to whatever promises they have made. The only proposals which work will be those which have a proper practical basis.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov 23 - Dec 22)

Remember that the long-term issue is still one of your security, financial and emotional. You are now approaching the final resolution of a major question, one that has bugged you for far too long. Just a word of advice, let partners take first place.

CAPRICORN (Dec 23 - Jan 20)

These are intense and highly significant times for all your most important emotional ties. While some of you are still uncertain, others are recognising that a period of stability and consolidation is essential. What else can we expect at a time of change?

AQUARIUS (Jan 21 - Feb 19)

You may be confused and perplexed after recent emotional upsets, but I'd advise you to play safe and not to use current uncertainty to settle any old scores. Pay more attention to relations' needs and desires. Understand these and you're halfway home.

PISCES (Feb 20 - Mar 20)

There are a number of questions to be answered, but it is unlikely that the answers will be clear just yet. But that probably won't bother you, for you tend to operate intuitively and telepathically. Of course, you still have to make sure that other people get your drift.

After coming close to finish line, India overstep

PRATYUSH RAJ
MARCH 27

A NO-BALL in the final over of the match made all the difference in a thriller as India crashed out of the ICC Women's World Cup with a last-ball three-wicket defeat to South Africa in Christchurch on Sunday.

Chasing 275 for victory, South Africa needed three runs off two balls with Mignon du Preez (51) on strike. It was their game to lose. But off-spinner Deepti Sharma had du Preez hole out to Harmanpreet Kaur at long-on. That would have meant three needed off the last ball with two tail-end batters at the crease, making India the favourites to seal the win and a semifinal spot.

But while they were celebrating, a no-ball check found that Deepti had overstepped by the slenderest of margins. Not only was Du Preez recalled, South Africa got an extra ball – that too a free hit – and got home.

India can blame misfortune for their ouster, but they also contributed to their own downfall. Dropped catches, poor ground fielding, uninspiring captaincy, and some clueless bowling towards the end meant last edition's losing finalists ended their campaign at the Hagley Oval. That experienced pacer Jhulan Goswami didn't play due to a side strain may have made a bit of difference to the outcome.

Valiant Harmanpreet

Harmanpreet, at least, didn't deserve to be on the losing side. The India vice-captain scored a 57-ball 48 and provided India with

the much-needed breakthrough with the wicket of the tournament's leading run-scorer Laura Wolvaardt (80 off 49 balls; 11x4s). Thereafter, she trapped South Africa skipper Sune Luus (22 off 27 balls; 1x4). Not to forget the three run-outs she was responsible for. Her pinpoint throw caught Lizelle Lee (6) short of the crease to provide India their first wicket.

When du Preez (52 not out off 63 balls; 2x4s) and Marizanne Kapp (32 off 30 balls; 3x4s) were involved in a 47-run stand for the fifth wicket, it was Harmanpreet's underarm throw to wicketkeeper Richa Ghosh's gloves that caught Kapp short. Du Preez was given a reprieve in the 44th over, with Mandhana dropping a regulation catch in the deep but India made up for it by running her out two balls later.

Needing 45 off 30, the tide shifted in South Africa's favour in the next two overs, with Chloe Tryon and Du Preez finding five boundaries to bring the required run rate down to almost a run-a-ball. Rajeshwari Gayakwad struck with the final ball of the 46th over, taking a simple return catch off Tryon's leading edge.

With 14 needed off two overs, South Africa decided to avoid risks in Gayakwad's final over, playing the field to take seven runs. Du Preez got to her fifty in the final over, but Trisha Chetty was run out on the same ball when they tried to steal a brace.

Last-over drama

It all came down to the 100th over of the game. Du Preez's attempted big shot couldn't clear the boundary, only for the delivery to be adjudged a no-ball on replay.

With two needed from the last two balls,



SA's Mignon du Preez celebrates after scoring the winning runs. ICC/Twitter

the South Africans avoided any more risks and eliminated India from the World Cup, taking West Indies into the final four.

Sanjay Manrekar, on-air, said, "Shafali Verma is a rare gift to Indian women's cricket. And the team management must take great care of her." The Indian opener had made her intentions clear very early. She took on Shabnim Ismail, the quickest bowler of the tournament, and hit her for a hat-trick of boundaries. Luus had to remove her trump card from the attack after she conceded 31 runs in her first three overs. However, the experienced bowler made a fiery comeback with figures of 7-1-11-2 in her subsequent spells.

Shafali (53 off 46 balls; 8x4s) was run out in the 15th over after a bizarre mix-up with opening partner Smriti Mandhana, sacrificing her wicket for the senior player.

Yastika Bhatia (2) followed shortly after

to Chloe Tryon (1/24) as India were reduced to 96/2. Smriti and skipper Mithali Raj looked assured at the crease before a moment of brilliance on the field ended the 78-run stand. Smriti tried to clear the in-field, but a stunning catch by Tryon diving to her wrong side ended her innings on 71.

After a few quiet overs, Mithali started to take the attack to the bowlers and got to her fifty in the 36th over. The onslaught continued before another good catch from Tryon sent the skipper back.

South Africa managed to tie India down at the start of the final 10 overs with a short-ball ploy. Pooja Vastrakar was pushed up the order, but the move didn't work as she was dismissed by Ismail's slower ball.

Boundaries were hard to come by before Harmanpreet finally found her timing in the 48th over with two consecutive fours to give some impetus to the innings. The South Africans again pulled it back in the final two overs with the wickets of Richa Ghosh and Kaur to restrict India to 274/7.

Semi-final line-up

West Indies will lock horns with till-now unbeaten Australia in Wellington in the first semi-final on Thursday, while South Africa will be up against defending champions England in Christchurch on Thursday.

BRIEF SCORES: India 274/7 in 50 overs (Smriti Mandhana 71, Shafali Verma 53, Mithali Raj 68, Harmanpreet Kaur 48; Shabnim Ismail 2/42) lost to South Africa 275/7 in 50 overs (Laura Wolvaardt 80, Lara Goodall 49, Mignon du Preez 52 not out; Harmanpreet Kaur 2/42) by three wickets

No total too big for Kings

Firepower throughout the order gets the job done for Punjab against RCB

SYNOPSIS: Punjab's resolve trumps Bangalore's classy partnership. Chahar makes a good start

SHAMIK CHAKRABARTY
MARCH 27

ANUJ RAWAT dropped the catch and the match. He had it covered at deep extra cover, as Odean Smith mistimed a swat off Harshal Patel. But the ball popped out. Smith went on to score a match-winning 25 not out off eight balls. Just about 10 minutes earlier, Rawat had taken a blinder to dismiss Liam Livingstone but squandered an easier opportunity. Cricket can be cruel at times. Given that Smith and Shahrukh Khan were Punjab Kings' last big-hitting pair, the former's wicket in the 17th over probably would have sealed the deal for Royal Challengers Bangalore. They lost the game instead, failing to defend 205.

Punjab's resolve

When Mohammed Siraj dismissed the dangerous-looking Bhanuka Rajapaksa (43, 22 balls) and broke into a 'Siuuu', and trapped U-19 World Cup final hero Raj Bawa leg-before next ball, it felt like it was RCB's game to lose. Livingstone, for whom Punjab had broken the bank at the auction, was still at the crease, as was Shahrukh. But Punjab were up against scoreboard pressure. Livingstone's dismissal notwithstanding, they refused to throw in the towel. From a gung-ho 71-run opening partnership between Mayank Agarwal and Shikhar Dhawan to Rajapaksa's middle-overs pyrotechnics and cool finishing from Shahrukh and Smith, Punjab's resolve shone through, which trumped a classy RCB partnership between Faf du Plessis and Virat Kohli. Punjab won by five wickets with six balls remaining.

Classy partnership

The scoreboard says du Plessis made a 57-ball 88, including three fours and seven sixes. It says Dinesh Karthik's 14-ball 32 not out took RCB past 200. Somewhere in between, it puts Virat Kohli's numbers – 41 not out off 29 deliveries, with a four and a couple of sixes. The RCB innings, though, presented a case for looking beyond the hard numbers.

Without Kohli, the unshackling of du Plessis probably wouldn't have happened. Without the 118-run (61 balls) second-wicket partnership between the two, Karthik wouldn't have had the platform for his merry hitting at the death. Du Plessis' contribution in the partnership was 75 runs, a direct result of the ex-skipper taking the pressure off his successor and helping him flourish.

Du Plessis was batting on 13 off 22 balls when Kohli joined him at the crease. After seven overs, RCB were 50/1. The South African had had a reprieve on seven, Shahrukh dropping him at mid-wicket off Smith. He was struggling to find the boundaries, while Rahul Chahar was getting into the groove. The leg-spinner was unlucky not to castle du Plessis, as a dipper evaded an attempted slog-sweep and missed the bails by a whisker.

Getting bogged down against spinners has been Kohli's recent batting problem in shorter formats. Last year, his strike rate against spin in the IPL was below 108. But here, he took the attack to the opposition, dancing down the track to Harpreet Brar and clearing the long-on boundary. Kohli didn't want the young spinner to carry the confidence of a dot ball that preceded the six. However, big hitting wasn't



Punjab's Odean Smith (L) and Shahrukh Khan celebrate after the win. Sportspics/IPL

Axar, Lalit star as Delhi stun Mumbai

Mumbai: Axar Patel and Lalit Yadav revived the chase and steered Delhi Capitals home with an unbroken 75-run seventh-wicket stand after Ishan Kishan's 81 had taken Mumbai Indians to 177 for 5.

From responding with 'Mumbai jeetega' (Mumbai will win) whenever the announcer exhorted them over the course of the afternoon, the Brabourne crowd was forced to admit 'Dilli jeetega' (Delhi will win) in the dying moments of the chase. At 104 for 6 in the 14th over in pursuit of 178, a sense of inevitability had descended over proceedings but DC had a deep batting lineup, with Kamlesh Nagarkoti slotted at No 9. To his credit, Lalit had kept the match from totally slipping out of DC's grasp with the odd boundary, and Shardul Thakur played his part with some furious swishing.

But the game-changer was Axar's unbeaten 38 off 17. The first sign of his lovely touch was when, with 56 needed off the last five, he calmly lifted Jasprit Bumrah over long-on. Short straight boundary or whatever, that takes some doing on any ground. What zone Axar was in became clearer when the ball af-

ter being dropped off Basil Thampi at long-on, he lofted the same bowler past the same fielder Tim David for a boundary. MI tried denying him the pace and the fuller length, so he swatted Daniel Sams over deep backward square leg for six. Hitting is an under-rated aspect of Axar's game, what with the white-ball run denial and the red-ball wicket deluge taking away most of the attention.

Axar would sometimes be caught out of position against the pacy fuller ones but he said that he has been working on holding his shape while going for the hits and also trying to react to the ball. "When you see you have to get so many runs and only so many balls are left, you can start thinking that I should loft the ball there, or that I can hit the sweep. But I keep talking to (coach) Ricky (Ponting) and I have worked on staying in the moment, about seeing the ball and hitting the ball."

BRIEF SCORES: MI 177/5 in 20 overs (Kishan 81*, Rohit 41; Kuldeep 3/18) lost to DC 179/6 in 18.2 overs (Lalit 48*, Axar 38*; Thampi 3/35) by 4 wickets

ABHISHEK PUROHIT

Good start for Chahar

With the second wrist-spinner's slot still vacant in the Indian team for the T20 World Cup in Australia later this year, this IPL is the testing ground for the aspirants. Chahar made an impressive start. On a placid pitch, he varied his pace to good effect and returned with 1/22 from four overs. A new acquisition for Punjab, Chahar cleaned up Rawat in his first over, the ball dipping and skidding off the pitch. He teased du Plessis, while Kohli never tried to force the pace against him. Punjab captain Agarwal gave the leggie a three-over spell upfront, and when he came back in the 15th over, Chahar conceded only six runs.

He didn't have much support, but Chahar would be happy with a good start, a day before his direct rival for a spot in the Indian team, Ravi Bishnoi, turns up for Lucknow Super Giants.

BRIEF SCORES: RCB 205/2 in 20 overs (du Plessis 88, Kohli 41 not out, Karthik 32 not out; Chahar 1/22) lost to PBKS 208/5 in 19 overs (Dhawan 43, Rajapaksa 43; Siraj 2/59) by five wickets

PLAYING TONIGHT

Indian Premier League
Gujarat Titans vs Lucknow Super Giants, 7:30pm,
Live on Star Sports Network

It should be the end of the road for Mithali & Jhulan

DIANA EDULJI

DESPITE THE girls failing to make the semifinals of the Women's World Cup, I'm happy with the way we played. In hindsight, it was our game if it wasn't for the no-ball in the last over. We had managed to get the batter who was playing on 50. I would have loved to see more replays of that no-ball. It was not clear and I didn't see the foot touching the ground. It could have been shown from more angles, I wasn't convinced with the decision.

A few overs here and there were expensive and while batting too, I felt we were 25 runs short. At the 40th over, we were well placed to cross 300. We managed to get only one run in the 41st over. Finishing should have been much better.

Missing Jhulan (Goswami) did make a difference as it was a big game. But I think it's definitely time to look to the future. There are juniors waiting in the wings and it's time we play them. At the same time, it's important who captains the Indian team now. It's Harry (Harmanpreet Kaur) or Smriti (Mandhana).

I think it should be the end of the glorious careers of two Indian cricketers – Mithali Raj and Jhulan Goswami. Jhulan had already expressed that this will be her last World Cup. You can't block two places in the XI, but you also can't put two inexperienced players in a crucial game.

EMOTIONAL ROLLERCOASTER

Hot heads, calm minds and everything in between at the game

The Yadav roar

The usually-restrained Kuldeep Yadav let out a ripping roar after he dismissed Rohit Sharma. The ball was far from spectacular—unlike the many gems he has produced (Babar Azam in World Cup for one). The ball was on the shorter side, one Sharma would usually ferry to the roof of the Brabourne Stadium. But it came slower, as if dulled by the pitch, did not turn as much as Sharma had judged and seemed to stop at him a bit, denying Sharma off any power. Then, it's not about how Sharma missed (rarely ever) a pull shot, but how Yadav celebrated and what the wicket might have meant for him. He stood in the scream-roar pose for a few seconds, before he began punching and swiping the air and was soon swarmed by his teammates. Not just that he had provided his team an early breakthrough, but was a release of all the angst that had piled up in him in the last 15 months. From India's No 1 bowler in overseas Test matches, he had slipped into



Kuldeep Yadav took three wickets.

anonymity, an afterthought for his ex-franchisee KKR and the second-choice for his domestic side (Uttar Pradesh). His control had gone off-kilter, his variations had dwindled, his morale seemed punctured. But the redeeming moment perhaps came when he nabbed Sharma's wicket. The one confidence-shot he might have been desperately searching for. And he let the world know how it meant to him.

Pundit to finisher

A few months back during India's tour to England, Dinesh Karthik, with notes in his hands, made Virat Kohli sit on the Nottingham turf for a long, insightful interview. It wasn't a Hard Talk like grilling but Karthik did ask tough questions to the then skipper. Making his debut as a Sky Sports pundit, Karthik won English hearts as much for his TMS-like serious-casual tone as for his outrageously floral shirts. He was the 'Find of the tour'. Having made the successful switch, you thought the one-time India keeper wouldn't be seen behind the stumps ever. The assumption proved wrong. His 14-ball 32 in the final three overs for RCB was the cherry on the cake that the old and new skipper — Kohli and Faf du Plessis — had diligently baked. Every time Karthik sent the ball soaring — he hit three sixes — Kohli would smile, applaud and later put his arm around him and walk him to the dressing room. RCB had a finisher, Karthik was the man. From asking questions, the pundit was providing answers.



Quick-spin Murugan

Murugan Ashwin managed to get three games last year with Punjab Kings. He picked up just a wicket and leaked nearly nine runs an over. But he didn't sulk; rather he utilised the time mining tips from Anil Kumble, who advised him to focus on googlies and accuracy. "He also wanted me to bowl closer to the stumps and concentrate on more over-spin," he had said in a Punjab Kings video. Ashwin, for most part of his career, would strive for precocious side-spin both ways and used to give lavish flight. But the 2022 version is different — he doesn't turn the ball as much, bowls flatter, the turn is subtler, but the purchases more bounce and is far more accurate than he ever had been. The wicket of Seifert was peak-Kumble double-bluff. He set him up with a pair of leg-breaks, turning just a shade and bouncing quite generously from a spinner's good length. He thus pushed him to the back-foot, made before he slipped in a brisker, fuller googly that burst through the gap between his bat and pad to crash onto the stumps. In identical fashion, he outfoxed Prithvi Shaw.



DC's second thoughts

After their very first power play of the IPL 15, Delhi Capitals might be having second thoughts about their auction pickings. Mumbai Indians were 53/0 in 6 overs and their openers Rohit Sharma and Ishan Kishan were barely beaten by the DC bowlers. The track was flat, there was nothing for pacers but still the DC decision-makers might be revisiting their pre-season selection decision. They had spent close to Rs 17 crore to sign up Shardul Thakur, Khaleel Ahmed and Kamlesh Nagarkoti and the first power-play return of investment wasn't great. For about a crore less, Mumbai Indians had snapped up Ishan Kishan and the young opener hadn't disappointed them.

