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ALL EYES ON CABINET MAKER, HIS CREATION

DEEPAK KUMAR JHA/ RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Ahead of the swearing in ceremony of Prime Minister-designate Narendra Modi for the third consecutive term, a high level meeting of BJP top brass held at the residence of Amit Shah to finalise the composition of new Cabinet in the Modi 3.0. BJP national president JP Nadda and national general secretary BL Santosh attended the meeting. Sources said the BJP is likely to keep Home, Finance, External Affairs, Railways, Road and Transport, Law and Justice, Information Technology, and Education Ministries. The alliance partners are likely to get 12 to 15 Ministries. The NDA partners might not have some of their big demands met, despite speculations to the contrary. The JD (U) has asked for Railways and is persistently pressing on it. The TDP has asked for Information Technology, which it is likely to not get.

Telangana BJP may get four Ministries and JD (United) three seats each. Three of the four TDP leaders who may find a place in PM Modi's new Cabinet are - Ram Mohan Naidu, Harish Balayogi and Daggumala Prasad. JD (U) has proposed the name of two senior leaders - Lalan Singh and Ram Nath Thakur. Lalan Singh was elected to the Lok Sabha from Bihar's Munger, while Ram Nath Thakur is a Rajya Sabha MP. Thakur is the son of Bharat Ratna recipient Karpoori Thakur. The JD (U) and TDP both are interested in funds for the



Preparations underway for the swearing-in-ceremony of the new Government, at the Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi

PTI

development of Bihar and Andhra Pradesh respectively. The Tribal Affairs Ministry is likely to go with an NDA ally while the Ministry of Power may go with TDP or JD (U). From Shiv Sena Prataprao Jadhav name is being discussed. There is no indication yet on how many Ministers will be sworn in, though it is expected to be at least a 30-member strong Cabinet. It is also being considered that in first round of Cabinet formation there would be one MP from major allies to be given Cabinet

berth. As per sources, JD (S), LJP (Ram Vilas), HAM, Shiv Sena, NCP, RLD and Apna Dal (S) could have one Minister each. From JD(S) HD Kumaraswamy, Jayant Chaudhary of RLD, Chirag Paswan of LJP (Ram Vilas) and Anupriya Patel of Apna Dal (S) may become Ministers. JD(S) is eyeing Agriculture Ministry. Bihar BJP and JD (United) will get equal number of ministries in view of next year Assembly polls in the State. Telangana BJP may get four ministries and Odisha can

get lion share of six to seven Ministries. Shah and Singh are seen within the party as a certainty in the new Cabinet, former Chief Ministers who have won the Lok Sabha polls like Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Rajiv Pratap Rudy, Basavaraj Bommai, Manohar Lal Khattar and Sarbananda Sonowal are strong contenders for joining the Government. BJP leadership had earlier met their National Democratic Alliance partners discuss their cabinet berths on Friday. Nadda, Shah held discussion with JD(U) chief and Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, TDP supremo N Chandrababu Naidu and Shiv Sena president and Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde. After discussing with allies, Nadda and Shah held discussions with senior BJP leader and outgoing Defense Minister Rajnath Singh.

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'Premature to wish Modi yet'

Pakistan has said it is "premature" for the country to congratulate Prime Minister Narendra Modi for securing third consecutive term since the formation of Government was going on in India. These remarks by Pakistan's Foreign Office spokesperson Mumtaz Zahra Baloch came on Friday two days ahead of Modi's swearing-in ceremony. "We do not have any comments on their electoral process," Baloch said, adding that since the formation of Government was going on in India, it is "premature" to talk about congratulating the Indian Prime Minister.

Leaders of seven countries start arriving in Delhi



PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina arrived in New Delhi on Saturday afternoon to attend the swearing-in ceremony of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister on the evening of June 9. India on Friday formally announced that the leaders of seven countries from the neighbourhood and the Indian Ocean region will attend the ceremony. Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe, his Maldivian counterpart Mohamed Muizzu, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Nepalese Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal "Prachanda" will attend the ceremony, according to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). Modi is expected to hold separate meetings with the visiting leaders, it was learnt.

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Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge with party leaders Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi during the extended Congress Working Committee meeting, in New Delhi

PTI

CWC wants Rahul as LoP, he says let me sleep on it

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Congress Working Committee (CWC) on Saturday unanimously urged Rahul Gandhi to take on the mantle of the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha to which he told the party's top brass that he will take a decision on it "very soon". At a meeting of the CWC, the party's highest decision-making body, chaired by Congress chief Mallikarjun Kharge and attended by Sonia Gandhi, Rahul and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, among others, the party's Lok Sabha polls decision was hailed but it was also decided that separate committees would be set up in States where the performance was not good or below expectations, to take corrective measures. Kharge said the Lok Sabha poll mandate is a "decisive rejection" of the politics of divisiveness and hate, and stressed that the INDIA bloc must continue functioning cohesively both inside and outside Parliament. Two

resolutions were unanimously passed by the CWC, including one requesting Rahul to assume the position of the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha. Asked if he had agreed to take on the position, Congress general secretary K C Venugopal said Rahul took note of the sentiments of the CWC members and told them that he would take a decision on it "very soon". In the other resolution, the CWC congratulated the people for voting so powerfully to preserve democracy, protect the Constitution and enhance social and economic justice. "They have decisively rejected both the substance and style of governance over the past decade. The verdict of the people is not just a political loss but a personal and moral defeat for the Prime Minister who sought the mandate in his name and ran a campaign anchored in lies, hate, prejudice, divisiveness and extreme bigotry," the resolution alleged.

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Sena's claim of UBT MPs crossing over 'baseless'

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

The Opposition Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) on Saturday rubbished as "baseless" a claim by Shiv Sena MP and Chief Minister Eknath Shinde's confidant Naresh Mhaske that at least two Shiv Sena (UBT) MPs were likely to support the NDA Government of Prime Minister-elect Narendra Modi who will be sworn into office on Sunday. Within hours after Mhaske went to town claiming that at least two MPs from the Uddhav Thackeray-led Sena "were in touch with his party" and may join the NDA, Shiv Sena (UBT)'s deputy leader Sushma Andhare mocked at the rival Sena MP saying: "Making such baseless claims does not augur well for the newly elected MP. If what he is saying is true, he should come out with the names of two MPs".

But, he should realise that there are already Ministerial aspirants like Prataprao Jadhav (Sena's newly elected MP from Buldhana constituency) whom Shinde will favour". Earlier in the day, Mhaske had refused to name the two Lok Sabha members "who were in touch" with the party, citing the anti-defection law. "Four more Sena (UBT) MPs would soon join these two MPs. Together, they would join MV our party," Mhaske had said. Leader of Opposition in the Maharashtra Assembly Vijay Wadettiwar of the Congress said: "Such ridiculous claims made by the ruling party leaders reflect their mindset of the ruling alliance. They have not understood the current political situation". "The Maharashtra Assembly elections are just a few months away. No MP will think of taking such steps at a politically crucial time like this. Mhaske should be aware of this. The MVA won the peoples' confidence and is fully united, so his comments are baseless," Wadettiwar said. In the recently concluded Lok Sabha elections, the Opposition MVA won 31 seats (Congress 14 — which include the support it has received from one Independent MP, Shiv Sena (UBT) — 9, and NCP (Sharad Pawar) — 8), while the ruling MahaYuti bagged 17 seats (BJP — 9, Shinde Shiv Sena — 7 and Ajit Pawar NCP-1).

NEET grace marks fine but panel to review results: NTA

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

Amid allegations of inflation of marks in the NEET-UG medical entrance exam, the National Testing Agency (NTA) announced on Saturday that the Education Ministry has set up a four-member panel to review the grace marks awarded to more than 1,500 candidates. The NTA denied any irregularities and said the changes made in the NCERT textbooks and grace marks for losing time at the examination centres were some of the reasons behind the students scoring higher marks. "A high-powered committee has been set up to review the results of over 1,500 candidates. The four-member panel headed by a former UPSC chairman will submit its recommendations within a week and the results of these candidates might be revised," NTA Director General Subodh Kumar Singh said at a Press conference on Saturday. The issue took a political turn with the AAP demanding a Supreme Court-monitored SIT probe into the alleged irregularities and the Congress alleging paper leaks, rigging and corruption have become an integral part of many examinations. The party also accused the BJP of cheating youngsters and playing with their futures. Indian Medical Association too has demanded as CBI probe on the allegations. The Maharashtra Government has sought immediate cancellation of



Photo: The Pioneer

last month's NEET exam, alleging that its results have caused injustice to the students from the state. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin said the trends from the latest NEET results have once again vindicated the DMK on its stand opposing the exam and reiterated that the entrance test goes against social justice and federalism. There have been calls from several quarters for a re-exam alleging that the grace marks awarded to make up for the loss of time at six exam centres have led to the inflation of marks and tampered with the chances of other candidates. These centres are from Meghalaya, Bahadurgarh in Haryana, Dantewada and Balodh in Chhattisgarh, Surat in Gujarat and Chandigarh. Singh denied any paper leak and irregularities in the exam and reiterated that the integrity of the crucial test had been compromised. He further said awarding of grace marks has not impacted the

qualifying criteria of the exam and the review of results of the affected candidates will not impact the admission process. According to experts, the mark inflation in NEET UG 2024 result is expected to make securing a spot in medical school this year more difficult. Some aspiring students have turned to online platforms to demand the cancellation of the results and a re-examination. Asked about whether the exam will be re-conducted for certain students, the NTA DG said, it will be decided depending upon the committee's recommendations. "The idea is to ensure that students who lost time or other students are not at any disadvantage," he said. The result of the medical entrance exam was announced on June 4. Sixty seven candidates had shared the first rank in the exam including six from the same centre in Haryana. A record more than 24 lakh candidates had registered for the exam this year.

The Congress in Kerala alleged that results have raised concerns about the authenticity of the national exam for medical courses, with many students casting doubt on the procedure. "The Modi government is directly responsible for this. For the candidates appearing in recruitment exams, then facing several irregularities, getting caught in the labyrinth of paper leaks, is playing with their futures. The BJP has cheated the youth of the country," Congress Chief Mallikarjun Kharge said in a social media post. "We demand that a high-level investigation should be conducted under the supervision of the Supreme Court so that our talented students appearing in NEET and other exams get justice," he had added. The NTA DG reiterated that the increase in cutoff reflects the competitive nature of the examination and the higher performance standards achieved by the candidates this year. "The number of candidates who appeared in 2023 was 20,38,596 while the number of candidates who appeared in 2024 increased to 23,33,297. The increase in candidates naturally led to an increase in high scorers due to a larger pool of candidates," he said. Explaining the rationale behind the awarding of grace marks, Singh said, the process has been completed using a formula devised and adopted by the Supreme Court in a 2018 judgement.

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President, Modi condole death of doyen Ramoji Rao

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ NEW DELHI

President Droupadi Murmu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday condoled the demise of renowned media tycoon Ramoji Rao and said his contributions to the industry will be long remembered. Rao, who revolutionised the news and entertainment industry, died at a hospital in Hyderabad early on Saturday. He was 88. "With the demise of Shri Ramoji Rao, India has lost a titan of the media and entertainment sector," President Murmu said in a social media post. An innovative entrepreneur, Rao pioneered a number of ventures, including the Eenadu newspaper, ETV news network and Ramoji Film City, President Murmu said. "Honoured with Padma Vibhushan, he succeeded as his vision was essentially rooted in society. His contributions to this industry will be long remembered. My condolences to his family and well-wishers," she said. Prime Minister Modi expressed grief at the death of noted media personality Ramoji Rao, describing him as a visionary who revolutionised Indian media. Rao's rich contributions have left an indelible mark on journalism and the world of films, Modi said in a social media post, adding that through his noteworthy efforts, he set new standards in innovation and excellence in the media and entertainment world.

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Nightbirds, hit the sack early for mental health, longevity

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

Night owls, take note: Grandma was right all along about the benefits of an early bedtime, irrespective of your chronotype (the natural inclination of your body to sleep at a certain time). A new study has upended the traditional belief that aligning sleep schedules with one's natural sleep preference, or chronotype, is the best approach for mental well-being. The research shows that staying up late is linked to higher rates of mental health disorders, regardless of whether individuals are morning people or night owls. To safeguard mental health, researchers recommend turning off the lights by 1 a.m. Conducted by Stanford Medicine, the study analysed nearly 74,000 adults and found that the timing of

sleep itself plays a critical role in mental health. Surprisingly, the findings highlight that early bedtimes offer significant benefits for everyone, across all chronotypes. Published in Psychiatry Research, the study's senior author, Jamie Zeitzer, a professor of psychiatry and behavioural sciences, remarked, "We found that alignment with your chronotype is not crucial here, and that really it's being up late that is not good for your mental health. The big unknown is why." Renske Lok, a postdoctoral scholar in psychiatry and behavioural health, led the study, which presented unexpected results. Previous research by Zeitzer's team suggested that women with cancer who did not align their sleep with their chronotype had shorter lifespans. This led to an expectation that aligning sleep schedules with



chronotype would be beneficial. However, the new findings challenge this assumption. The researchers examined middle-aged and older adults in the United Kingdom, gathering data on their sleep habits, including their morning or evening preferences. Participants wore wearable accelerometers for a week

to track their sleep patterns, and their mental health status was assessed through health records, covering any mental or behavioural disorder listed in the International Classification of Diseases. Among the 73,880 participants, 19,065 identified as morning types, 6,844 as evening types, and 47,979 fell somewhere in between. The results were revealing: both morning and evening types who stayed up late exhibited higher rates of mental health disorders, including depression and anxiety. The study showed that night owls who adhered to their natural late schedules were 20 per cent to 40 per cent more likely to be diagnosed with a mental health disorder compared to those who adopted an early or intermediate sleep schedule. Likewise, evening types who went to bed earlier fared better in terms of

mental health, while morning types who went to bed later suffered less severely. The study also explored whether poor mental health led people to stay up late but found that late-night wakefulness itself was a significant risk factor for developing mental health issues. Harmful behaviours, such as suicidal thoughts, violent crimes, alcohol and drug use, and overeating, are more common at night, further exacerbating mental health risks. Strategies like getting morning sunlight and maintaining a consistent early routine could help shift sleep patterns, though changing one's chronotype remains difficult. "Biologically speaking, it's very much like a rubber band—you take a day off and you snap back to where your body wants to be," Zeitzer explained.

Group fighting in Congress over defeat of Muraleedharan

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

It is free for all in Congress in Kerala following its landslide win in the recent Lok Sabha election. The party won 14 out of the 16 seats it contested while its allies including Muslim League won the remaining four seats. The two seats where the party lost were Thrissur (K Muraleedharan) and Alathoor (Remya Haridas). The defeat of Haridas was in expected lines as her performance was lacklustre.



But Muraleedharan, son of former chief minister late K Karunakaran getting battered at Thrissur has sent shock waves across the party. Muraleedharan was shifted to Thrissur from Vadakara (where he had defeated Marxist strongman P Jayarajan in the 2019 Lok Sabha poll) to neutralize the setback suffered by the Congress as his sister Padmaja Venugopal had joined the BJP days before the announcement of the poll schedule. What led to Muraleedharan's shock defeat was the retaliation by the sitting member from Thrissur T N Prathapan who got furious

over the party action of denying the ticket to him despite the Congress leadership giving him the green flag to launch the campaign work. Prathapan who reportedly broke down on hearing the news just vanished from the battlefield and played havoc with Muraleedharan's poll prospects. Muraleedharan literally exploded with anger on hearing about his defeat and remained incommunicado till Saturday. Though KPCC president K Sudhakaran tried to pacify him, Muraleedharan has not moved an inch from

Sudhakaran told The Pioneer that Muraleedharan was upset because of the back stabbing by leaders like Prathapan. "I am keeping away from public life for the time being and am not ready to face election immediately," Muraleedharan told reporters on Saturday. He also asked the media and party cadre not to vitiate the atmosphere by publishing hearsay. Sudhakaran said on Friday after his one-to-one meeting with Muraleedharan that the party was willing to go to any extent to make him happy. "Muraleedharan is a precious leader of the Congress and we will do anything to make him remain in the party," said Sudhakaran. The KPCC is likely to nominate Muraleedharan as the party candidate from Wayanad Lok Sabha constituency in the by poll if Rahul Gandhi decides to vacate the seat and retain Raebareilly in UP. Meanwhile the Thrissur District Congress Committee office saw two sections of leaders owing allegiance to Muraleedharan and Prathapan fighting it out in the open necessitating police intervention.

JK Government terminates services of four staff for involvement in anti national activities

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ JAMMU



The Jammu and Kashmir Government on Saturday dismissed four employees, including two policemen and a teacher, for their involvement in anti-national activities. According to the official spokesman of the Union Territory administration, the activities of these employees had come to the adverse notice of law enforcement and intelligence agencies, as they found them involved in activities prejudicial to the interests of the State, such as involvement in terror-related activities. Out of these four employees, 02 belong to the Police Department (Constables), 01 to the Education Department (Teacher), and 01 to the Jal Shakti Department (Assistant Lineman). According to the spokesman, "Abdul Rehman Dar, Selection Grade Constable in Police Department S/o Sona Ullah Dar R/o Larmooch, Tral, District Pulwama, was involved in the commission of the offense of not only carrying illegal Arms and Ammunition from one place to another for their delivery to the terrorists but also providing camouflage uniform

cloth and other material to them, taking undue and criminal advantage of his being a member of the Police force". The spokesman said, "Shabeer Ahmad Wani, Teacher in the Education Department S/o Mohammad Ashraf Wani R/o Bungam, Damhal Hanjipora, District Kulgam, has been an active member of Jamat-e-Islam (JeI), a proscribed separatist association having tangible links with a terrorist organization. He played a substantial role in strengthening JeI and creating a network of people among JeI sympathizers". The spokesman said, "various FIRs have been registered against him because of his direct involvement in inciting and leading an unlawful assembly of mob instigating

rioting and violence in D.H. Pora, during the 2016 unrest. He continues to be a hardcore OGW of banned terror outfits, in particular the HM and his affiliation has perpetually aided terrorist activities in and around Kulgam, collecting information for facilitating attacks, clandestinely". An employee of the Jal Shakti department identified as Anayatullah Shah Pirzada, Assistant Lineman in the Jal Shakti Department S/o Ab. Rashid Shah Pirzada R/o Watergam, Rafiaband, District Baramulla, was also dismissed from the services. The government spokesman said, Anayatullah Shah was a terrorist associate/OGW of Al-Badr Mujahideen, a proscribed terror outfit, and has worked covertly in a variety of ways to support the agenda of terrorists. He had direct association with dreaded terrorists like Yousuf Baloch and Tameem, who were the Commanders of Al-Badr Mujahideen, operating at different times in Kashmir. He has been involved in various FIRs about the recovery of satellite phones, hand grenades, etc communicating with the terrorists of Al-Badr Mujahideen based in Pakistan.

JK now prepares for maiden Assembly polls

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

Close on the heels of the announcement of the Lok Sabha poll results the Election Commission Authorities and the regional political parties have started preparations for the maiden Assembly polls in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir.



The Election Commission of India is expected to take a final call on the timeline of much-awaited Assembly polls in Jammu and Kashmir in the coming weeks. The Apex Court had earlier set a deadline of September 30, 2024, to conclude the poll process in the region. The Election Commission gave the first indication in this direction after it decided to accept applications seeking allotment of 'common symbols' from registered unrecognized parties in the Union Territory with immediate effect. "The Commission has decided to accept applications seeking allotment of common symbols under Para 10B of the Election Symbols (Reservation & Allotment) Order, 1968, for the General Election to the Legislative Assembly of Union Territory of J&K with immediate effect," the EC statement read. An official explained that under Para 10 B of the Election Symbols (Reservation & Allotment) Order, 1968, any registered unrecognized political party can apply for a com-

mon symbol' six months before the end of the term of a House. But since no Assembly is functional in J&K, the Election Commission (EC) has issued a press statement inviting applications for symbols. While recognized national and State parties have their 'reserved symbols', registered unrecognized parties must apply for one to field candidates. When free symbols are allocated to unrecognized parties, the Returning Officer allocates the remaining unclaimed symbols to Independents "on the spot". On the other hand, after studying the assembly-wise voting pattern in the recently concluded Lok Sabha polls the regional and National political parties have started preparing their poll strategies in the run-up to the Assembly polls. The Bharatiya Janta Party candidates who won both the Lok Sabha seats in the Jammu division had established a lead

across 29 out of 36 Assembly segments while the Congress party and the National Conference managed to garner majority votes from the seven assembly segments each in the Jammu division. In Kashmir valley, the National Conference garnered majority votes from at least 27 Assembly segments, the People's Democratic Party from five, and the Peoples Conference from the lone Assembly segment of Handwara. Abdul Rashid Sheikh, an Independent candidate from the Baramulla Lok Sabha seat, garnered sympathy votes from at least 14 Assembly segments. Rashid defeated former Chief Minister Omar Abdullah from the seat. It remains to be seen whether the new political formations will emerge in the Assembly polls or the pre-poll alliance partners Congress and the National Conference will take on the BJP and its proxies in the valley.

Mamata to hold meeting with newly elected TMC MPs, senior party leaders

PTI ■ KOLKATA

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee will hold a meeting of senior TMC leaders and newly elected LS MPs on Saturday to decide the party's strategy in the Lok Sabha. The TMC maintained its dominance in the state as Banerjee led her party to a resounding victory by bagging 29 of the 42 Lok Sabha seats in the state, whereas the principal opposition BJP was down to 12 and the Congress to one seat. Apart from Lok Sabha MPs, Rajya Sabha MPs and district presidents will also attend the meeting. "The party supremo has convened a meeting of our newly elected MPs on Saturday. During the meeting, the role and strategy of the party in the Lok Sabha will be discussed. The party might also decide on who will be the leader of the TMC party in Lok Sabha," a party leader said. In the last Lok Sabha, 75-year-old TMC MP Sudip Bandopadhyay was the leader of the party in the lower house of the parliament. Bandopadhyay has retained his Kolkata North Lok Sabha seat for the fourth consecutive term. "Apart from the strategy for the Lok Sabha polls, the seats where the party lost will also be discussed," the TMC leader said.

Old is gold: Dilip Ghosh's cryptic message amid disgruntlement in Bengal BJP

PTI ■ KOLKATA



nearly 1.38 lakh votes in the Bardhaman-Durgapur seat. Ghosh had earlier said that it was now established that sending him to contest from his old constituency of Medinipur to a fresh one "was a mistake". He was relocated from his winning seat of Medinipur to Bardhaman-Durgapur, a seat where the battle against the TMC was perceptively tough. Ghosh replaced sitting MP SS Ahluwalia in Bardhaman-Durgapur. Ahluwalia, in turn, was moved to Asansol. The party's sitting MLA from Asansol Dakshin seat, Agnimitra Paul, replaced Ghosh in Medinipur. All the three BJP candidates were trounced by their TMC counterparts in the recently concluded elections. On Friday, Ghosh questioned the choices made by the state BJP leadership, particularly in relocating experienced leaders like him and former Union MoS Debasree Choudhury from their constituencies to unfamiliar ones.

After questioning the rationale behind relocating established leaders like him from winnable constituencies to challenging electoral battlegrounds, senior BJP leader Dilip Ghosh on Saturday put out a social media post, sparking speculations of 'old versus new' debate in the party's West Bengal unit. In a cryptic message, Ghosh posted on X, "Old is Gold." Ghosh had earlier said that it was mistake by the party to sideline old guards and the poll debacle was waiting to happen as newcomers and inexperienced leaders were calling the shots. BJP's Lok Sabha tally in the state dipped to 12 in this election from 18 in 2019, when Ghosh was the BJP state president. The saffron party had targeted to win 30 of the 42 seats this time. Ghosh was defeated at the hands of TMC's Kirti Azad by

Shrikant elected as leader of Shinde Sena Parliamentary party

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI



Maharashtra Chief Minister Eknath Shinde's son and three-time MP Dr Shrikant Shinde was on Saturday elected as leader of the Shiv Sena Parliamentary Party (SSPS). The 37-year-old orthopaedic surgeon-turned-politician, Dr Shinde was elected to the Lok Sabha for the third time from Kalyan. At a meeting held in New Delhi which was attended by Shiv Sena's seven newly-elected seven Lok Sabha MPs and its Rajya Sabha MP Milind Deora, Dr Shinde was elected unanimously as the SSPS leader. Among the Shiv Sena MPs, Dr Shinde has had the maximum number of terms in Lok Sabha.

In the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, Dr Shrikant Shinde trounced Vaishali Thacker-Rane of Uddhav Darekar-led Shiv Sena (UBT). In the 2014 and 2019 elections when he had contested from the undivided Shiv Sena, he had defeated Anand Paranjpe and Babaji Patil, both from undivided Sharad Pawar-led NCP. Of the 15 seats it had contested in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena won seats. The seven newly elected Shinde Sena MPs are: Ravindra Waikar (Mumbai North-West), Dr Shrikant Shinde (Kalyan), Naresh Mhaske (Thane), Shrirang Barne (Maval), Dhairyashil Mane (Hatkanangle), Sandipan Bhumre (Aurangabad) and Prataprao Jadhav (Buldhana).

ALL EYES ON... Leaders of seven countries...

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According to sources, impending changes within the BJP's organisation will also be on the mind of its brain trust in finalising the names of ministers from the party. Nadda's term was extended due to the Lok Sabha polls, and organisational imperatives will be an important consideration for the party as the poll results have sent signals that all may not be well within its vast machinery. This opens the possibility of some seasoned hand being sent to the party and Nadda being given a berth in the Government, the sources said. The BJP is keen to send out a message of continuity and ward off any impression of political vulnerability following its surprising below-par show in the Lok Sabha polls as its seat tally fell to 240 from 303, considerably short of the majority mark of 272. The BJP won 240 seats in the Lok Sabha elections, but fell 32 short of the majority mark. The four allies whose support is critical for the BJP to reach the majority are Naidu's TDP, which has won 16 seats, Kumar's JDU (12), Eknath Shinde's Shiv Sena (7) and Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party-Ram Vilas (5).

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Prime Minister of Mauritius Pravin Kumar Jugnauth, his Bhutanese counterpart Tshering Tobgay and Vice-President of Seychelles Ahmed Afif have also accepted India's invitation to grace the swearing-in ceremony, it said. Hasina arrived in New Delhi on Saturday afternoon. Afif is scheduled to reach the national Capital on Saturday. The other leaders will arrive on Sunday. The invitation to Muizzu assumes significance as it comes amid frosty ties between India and the Maldives. The ties between India and the Maldives came under severe strain since November last year when Muizzu, known for his pro-China leanings, took charge as Maldivian president. Within hours of his oath, Muizzu had demanded the withdrawal of Indian military personnel from his country. The Indian military personnel were replaced by civilians earlier this month. According to PTI from Male, Muizzu said on Saturday he would be honoured to attend Prime Minister Modi's

swearing-in ceremony and his first visit to India for the historic event would demonstrate that bilateral ties are heading in a "positive direction". This will mark the pro-China president's first official visit to India since assuming office on November 17 last year. Unlike his predecessors, who made the first port of call to New Delhi after assuming office, Muizzu had travelled to Turkey first and to China for his first State visit in January. Munu Mahawar, India's Higher Commissioner to the Maldives, presented the letter of invitation to the President during a courtesy call at the President's Office. At the call, the High Commissioner extended greetings from Prime Minister Modi, stating that the Prime Minister is looking forward to having the President attend this momentous ceremony marking his third swearing-in as Prime Minister of India, the statement said. The President expressed his gratitude to the Prime Minister for the invitation, adding that he would be honoured to attend this historic event.

NEET grace marks fine...

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The concerns raised by the candidates through the writ petitions and representations about loss of examination time was ascertained and 1,563 candidates were compensated for the loss of time, and the revised marks of such candidates vary from -20 to 720 marks. Amongst these, the score of two candidates also happens to be 718 and 719 respectively due to compensatory marks," the official added. The NTA had on May 5 claimed that the distribution of wrong question papers at an exam centre in Rajasthan led to some candidates walking out with the papers. The agency had denied any leak of the question paper. A day later, the NTA had reiterated that the reports claiming question paper leak in the medical entrance exam NEET-UG are "completely baseless and without any ground", and every question paper has been accounted.

CWC...

From Page 1

The verdict of the people is clearly against the undermining of democracy and democratic institutions that has taken place since 2014, it said. In his opening remarks at the meeting, Kharge asserted that while celebrating its "revival", the party should pause a little as it did not perform to its abilities and expectations in some states. "Further, we could not repeat our

President, Modi condole death of doyen Ramoji...

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Former Vice President M Venkaiah Naidu, TDP Chief N Chandrababu Naidu, Union Minister G Kishan Reddy, Telangana Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy, former Telangana CM K Chandrasekhar Rao and several other leaders condoled the death of Ramoji Rao set a new trend in every field he worked. Ramoji Rao's service to Telugu language and culture will be remembered forever, he added. Revanth Reddy termed Ramoji Rao's death as a "great loss" to the Telugu newspaper and media industry. The Chief Minister, who is in Delhi to attend CWC meeting, directed state Chief Secretary Santhi Kumari to conduct Ramoji Rao's funeral with official honours. Chandrababu Naidu said Ramoji Rao left an indelible impression on the lives of Telugu people. Ramoji Rao's demise is a loss not just to the state but the country, he said.

performance in states where we had previously done well in Vidhan Sabha elections and formed the Government," he said. Separate discussions on each such State will be held soon, the Congress chief said. "We have to take urgent remedial measures. These are States which have traditionally favoured the Congress, where we have opportunities which we have to harness not for our own advantage but for the benefit of our people. This exercise I propose to hold very soon," he said. Kharge further said whether

the party is in power or not, its work continues amongst people "24 hours, 365 days", and raise their issues. "People have spoken against the dictatorial and anti-democratic ways of the ruling party. It is a decisive rejection of the politics of the last 10 years. It is rejection of the politics of divisiveness, hate and polarisation," Kharge said. "I want to draw your attention to the fact that wherever Bharat Jodo Yatra went we saw an increase in the vote percentage and number of seats for the Congress party," he said. especially for the field of journalism and film. His contribution as a pioneer in adding unique features and practices in his chosen field will be long remembered. "We extend our heartfelt condolences to the bereaved family and also countless admirers and pray the almighty to bestow 'sadgati' to the departed soul," he added. The Editors Guild of India condoned the death of its former president Ramoji Rao, the founder of Eenadu daily and the ETV network.

Security beefed up in city ahead of Modi's oath taking ceremony

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

As the swearing-in ceremony of Prime Minister-designate Narendra Modi for the historic third consecutive term will be held at Rashtrapati Bhavan at 7.15 pm on Sunday, unprecedented security has been beefed up in the national capital and special measures have also been arranged for leaders from the neighbourhood and Indian Ocean region attending the high-profile event. Artificial Intelligence technology and intrusion warning systems will be used for scanning and facial recognition, while snipers will be deployed at strategic locations and high-rise buildings. The Rashtrapati Bhavan will have a three-layered security both inside and outside the premises. Delhi Police personnel will remain deployed at the outer ring, followed by paramilitary personnel and internal security of the President's house at

the inner ring. The swearing-in ceremony will be attended by over 8,000-9,000 guests, including various professionals and cultural performers. Enhanced security measures are in place for foreign dignitaries, including special protocols at their hotels. Security measures include designated routes for dignitaries from their hotels to the venue, with top hotels like Leela, Taj, ITC Maurya, Claridges, and Oberoi under special security cover. A host of heads of government from neighbouring countries will attend the swearing-in ceremony of Modi. An official statement said Sri Lanka's president Ranil Wickremesinghe, Maldives' Mohamed Muizzu, Bangladesh's prime minister Sheikh Hasina, Bhutan's Tshering Tobgay, Nepal's Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda', and Mauritius' Pravind Kumar Jugnauth have accepted the invitation to attend the event. Seychelles' Vice President Ahmed Afif



will also be attending the ceremony. "In addition to participating in the swearing-in ceremony, the leaders will attend a Banquet hosted by President Droupadi Murmu at Rashtrapati Bhavan, the same evening," the statement said. It added that the visit of the leaders to attend the swearing-in ceremony is in keeping with the highest priority accorded by India to its 'Neighbourhood First' policy and 'SAGAR' vision. According to officials with the Delhi Police, a multi-layered security with five companies of paramilitary personnel, NSG commandos, drones and snipers will blanket the Rashtrapati Bhavan for the event. Visuals from the Kartavya Path police station showed the officials keeping a watch on the areas through CCTV cameras. According to the police, the area around the Rashtrapati Bhavan has been made a 'controlled' area.

In areas including, Sansad Marg, Rafi Marg, Raisina Road, Rajendra Prasad Road, Mother Teresa Crescent, and Sardar Patel Marg, vehicles having passes of the event will be allowed for the movement. A public advisory declared a No-Fly Zone over Delhi, prohibiting the use of various aerial platforms to prevent threats from criminal or terrorist activities during the ceremony. This restriction will be in effect from June 9 to June 10, with violators facing penalties under Section 188 of the Indian Penal Code. Police officials also said that the dignitaries attending the swearing-in will be given designated routes from their hotels to the venue and back. Snipers and armed police personnel will remain deployed on the routes of the dignitaries and drones, while drones will be deployed at strategic locations in the national capital. As the event is scheduled to be held inside the Rashtrapati

Bhawan, it will have a three-layered security both inside and outside the premises. Commandoes from Delhi Police's SWAT (Special Weapons And Tactics) and NSG will remain deployed around the President's house and various strategic locations on the event day. "Around 2500 police personnel, including five companies of paramilitary and Delhi Armed Police (DAP) jawans, have been planned to be deployed around the venue," an official said. The change of guard ceremony at Rashtrapati Bhawan has been suspended on June 8, 15, and 22 due to preparations for the swearing-in ceremony of Modi and his council of ministers and President Droupadi Murmu's address to both Houses of Parliament. The change of guard ceremony is a military tradition that is held every week to enable a fresh group of the President's Bodyguards to take charge.

Atishi blames Haryana for city water woes, BJP says AAP responsible

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The national Capital has been grappling with a water shortage, with Delhi Water Minister Atishi blaming Haryana for not releasing Yamuna water to the city. Atishi on Saturday alleged that Haryana is not releasing to Delhi its share of 1,050 cusecs of water through the Munak canal. Addressing a press conference, Atishi said during the summer, when Haryana releases 1,050 cusecs of water, Delhi receives about 995 cusecs. Meanwhile, the Delhi BJP President Virendra Sachdeva pinned the responsibility for the ongoing water crisis in the city on Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal led AAP government due to its negligent attitude. He remarked that Kejriwal Government quickly called assembly sessions to shine its political agenda on minor issues, but while the people of Delhi have been facing a water crisis for several days, the Kejriwal Government is merely playing a blame game. Several parts of the national capital are facing acute shortage of water this summer. The



situation has worsened in unauthorized colonies and slum areas. "However, in the past one week, Delhi has been getting less water. It received 924 cusecs on June 1, 884 cusecs on June 4, 856 cusecs on June 6, and 840 cusecs on June 7. During every summer, there is a loss of around 59 to 60 cusecs of water due to evaporation. If 840 cusecs of water is reaching Delhi, it means Haryana is not releasing water in the Munak canal," Atishi said. The national capital has been grappling with a water shortage, with Atishi blaming

Haryana for not releasing Yamuna water to the city. The problem has become acute in some areas such as Chanakyapuri, where residents were seen climbing on top of a tanker with pipes to get their share of water. The acute shortage has become an "existential problem" in Delhi, the Supreme Court observed on Thursday and directed the Himachal Pradesh government to release 137 cusecs of surplus water to the national capital and Haryana to facilitate its flow. The top court also said there should be no politics over

water. Atishi said if water at the carrier-lined channel and the Delhi sub-branch -- two sub-branches of the Munak canal -- stay at this level, then all of Delhi will face a shortage in the coming two days. On Friday, visiting Wazirabad barrage to take stock of the situation, she said the shortage would not be solved even if Himachal Pradesh released water as Haryana had "reduced" the city's share. "Haryana is conspiring against the people of Delhi behind the back of the Supreme Court," she had alleged. "The water level of the Yamuna at Wazirabad has come down from 671 feet on June 2 to 669.7 feet on Friday. If the water level falls so low, how will the water treatment plants supply water to the people of Delhi?" she had said. Meanwhile, Delhi BJP challenged Atishi for an open debate with Haryana government and Delhi BJP or to call an all-party meeting regarding the water supply from Haryana. Sachdeva said, "Water Minister Atishi inspected the Wazirabad barrage on Friday and the Munak-Bawana canal

today, where she falsely claimed that the Haryana government is not sending enough water. However, she did not mention that silt has not been removed from the Wazirabad barrage for the past ten years, which has reduced its storage capacity." The Delhi BJP President stated that disproportionate water distribution in many areas of Delhi has led to people fighting over water. "Today, people are falling victim to the arbitrary behaviour of tanker mafias, and a game of extortion money under the patronage of Kejriwal's MLAs and municipal councilors is ongoing in exchange for water." He stated that the Kejriwal government must answer all these questions from the public. On Thursday, the Supreme Court observed that the acute shortage had become an "existential problem" in Delhi and directed the Himachal Pradesh government to release 137 cusecs of surplus water to the national capital and Haryana to facilitate its flow. The top court also emphasised that there should be no politics over water.

Three killed, six injured in three separate fire incidents in city

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The national Capital on Saturday reported three fire incidents in which three workers were killed and six injured. In the first incident that took place at a food processing unit in the Narela Industrial Area in the early hours of Saturday in which three workers were killed and six injured while no casualty reported in the other two fire incidents. The second fire incident has been reported in east Krishna Nagar while the third incident report in Shaheen Bagh area. The police received a distress call at 3:35 am about the fire at the factory of Shyamam Kripa Foods Private Limited, which processes dry moong dal, the police said. The fire engulfed the factory, trapping some workers inside, a police officer said. Fourteen fire tenders were pressed into service and the blaze was doused by noon, a Delhi Fire Services official said. He said nine people were rescued from the building and admitted to Satyawadi Raja Harish Chandra Hospital in



Narela. The police officer said three of them -- Shyam (24), Ram Singh (30) and Beerpal (42) -- were declared dead while the others are undergoing treatment. The injured -- Pushpender (26), Akash (19), Mohit Kumar (21), Ravi Kumar (19), Monu (25) and Lalu (32) are undergoing treatment at Safdarjung Hospital for burn injuries, he added. Preliminary investigations suggest that the blaze started after a gas leak from one of the pipelines. The pipelines supplied gas to burners used for

roasting the moong dal, the officer said. As the fire spread, it caused the compressor to overheat, resulting in a blast, he said. The factory owners have been identified as Rohini residents Ankit Gupta and Vinay Gupta. A case is being registered under appropriate sections and investigation taken up, the officer said. In another incident, a fire broke out at a house in East Delhi's Krishna Nagar Area on Saturday afternoon. They said no one was injured in the incident.

Photos alleging adultery to be proved by way of evidence, says HC

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

In the era of deepfakes, photographs placed by a spouse alleging adultery by the other partner would have to be proved by way of evidence before the family court, the Delhi High Court has said. The court's observation came while dealing with a man's contention that his estranged wife was living in adultery. The high court dismissed the appeal of the husband challenging a family court's order directing him to pay Rs 75,000 maintenance to his wife and minor daughter. As the counsel for the husband drew the court's attention to certain photographs of his wife, a bench of justices Rajiv Shakdher and Amit Bansal said, "It is not clear as to whether the respondent/wife is the person in the photographs, as alluded to by the counsel for the appellant/husband." "We may take judicial notice of the fact that we are living in the era of deepfakes and, therefore, this is an aspect that the appellant/husband, perhaps, would have to prove by way of evidence before the family court," the bench said. Deepfake technology allows for the creation of realistic videos, audio recordings and images that can manipulate and mislead viewers by superimposing the likeness of one person onto another, altering their words and actions, thereby presenting a false narrative or spreading misinformation. Asked by the bench whether this averment of adultery found mention in the husband's reply to the wife's plea under the Hindu Marriage Act, the man's counsel conceded that there was no mention of this aspect in the reply. The bench noted that since



the petition instituted by the husband for divorce is pending adjudication, if this issue is pressed, the court may give opportunity to the parties to place their evidence on record in support of their respective cases. "Notably, this aspect, which is vehemently pressed before us, almost as a measure of desperation to wriggle out of the obligation cast in the impugned judgment, finds no mention in the impugned judgment (of family court)," the high court said. The husband's counsel however, it was ignored while rendering the judgment. "If this was the situation, the best course open to the appellant/husband was to move an application for review before the family court. However, no such measure has been taken recourse to by the husband," it said. The man, an architect, has challenged a family court's April 15 order, directing him to pay Rs 75,000 as monthly maintenance to his estranged wife and child. The couple had married in 2018 and has a five-year-old girl child. The court was told that the wife was a post-graduate but was currently unemployed and living with her parents after her separation. While the woman had sought Rs 2 lakh as monthly maintenance from her husband, the family court ordered the man to pay her Rs 75,000.

Delhi Zoo set for transformation with new appearance

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The National Zoological Park here is set for a significant transformation with the focus on enhancing its appearance and visitors' experience while making arrangements for new animal species. Popularly known as the Delhi Zoo, the zoological park is situated on a 176-acre site behind the historic Purana Qila and has been a prominent landmark since its inception in 1952. Speaking about the 'Zoo Transformative Plan', Sanjeev Kumar, director of the National Zoological Park, said, "A lot of work is currently

underway. We are working on projects that will enhance the visitors' experience and aesthetic improvements to change the look of the zoo." "We are also making arrangements for the convenience of the visitors and enhance the living conditions of the animal. We will make new components and fix some old components in the zoo," Kumar added. The official said the zoo plans to welcome some new species of animals but before that happens, "necessary habitats" have to be created. "There is a lot of fixing that needs to be done, especially if we are planning to welcome



some new animal species. "Before we welcome any new animals to the zoo, we are committed to providing them with the necessary habitats," Kumar said. "Our priority is to create a more suitable and enriched environment for all our animals," Kumar added. A key feature of the transformative plan is the introduction of an innovative audio guide providing detailed information about the animals, Kumar said. "Visitors will soon be able to scan QR codes placed on trees and other strategic locations throughout the zoo. Once scanned, these codes will provide detailed audio information

about the animals, making it easier and more convenient for visitors to learn about the zoo's diverse wildlife," Kumar said. "The QR codes will revolutionise how our visitors interact with and learn about animals. This is part of our broader efforts to transform the zoo and make it more educational and engaging," he added. Additionally, the zoo will undergo extensive beautification efforts. This includes the construction of new sections, renovation of existing structures, and overall improvements to the landscape, Kumar said.

Gurugram court sets aside MGF's plea on land dispute with M3M

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

In a big setback to real estate developer MGF, a city court has set aside a plea filed by the real estate major challenging a compromise between M3M and a land-owning company. It observed that MGF has no locus as it was never the owner nor was ever in possession of the land. As per the court order, the agreement on the basis of which the compromise decree was passed stands fully complied with. Apparently, MGF had challenged compromise deed and Lok Adalat award of 2016 by filing civil suit in 2022, thus, same is also barred by limitation. The court noted that MGF has challenged the compromise and consent decree despite the fact that MGF was not party to the same and thus, MGF had no right to claim said relief of setting aside compromise and consent decree. As per the court findings, MGF was never the owner of the land and the land-owning companies



belonging to Emaar were always owner and in possession of the land. "By way of exchange deeds and compromise decree, all rights, titles & interests in the land were conveyed by land owning companies to Cosmo Propbuild etc. (M3M entities) in 2016. Validity of Lok Adalat award passed on basis on compromise decree and exchange deeds has been challenged before trial court, executing court and Punjab & Haryana High Court and all

Courts have upheld the Lok Adalat award, compromise deed and exchange deeds," read findings by Saurabh Gupta, civil judge (senior division), Gurugram. Regarding MGF claim that due to dishonour of cheques, compromise deed, exchange deeds and Lok Adalat award are automatically nullified, the court stated that cheques were dishonoured in 2018 but suit was filed in 2022, thus, same is barred by limitation.

Delhi BJP to pick Bidhuri's replacement for position of LoP

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

With Leader of Opposition in the Delhi Assembly Ramvir Singh Bidhuri elected to the Lok Sabha, the BJP will have to pick a replacement from among its seven remaining MLAs in the House. A senior party leader in Delhi said, "The names of Mohan Singh Bisht, Ajay Mahawar and Vijender Gupta are doing the rounds as probables to replace Bidhuri." Bidhuri, who won the Lok Sabha elections from the South Delhi constituency, will have to vacate his seat in the assembly, bringing the BJP's tally down to seven in the 70-member House. Mahawar, the MLA from Ghinda in northeast Delhi, was convener of the Delhi BJP's poll management committee for the parliamentary elections. He is also the BJP's chief whip in the assembly. Bisht, the MLA from Karwal Nagar in northeast Delhi, is a five-time legislator whose



claim on the post is strengthened by his experience. Rohini MLA Gupta held the post of Leader of Opposition before Bidhuri. OP Sharma, Abhay Verma, Anil Bajpayi and Jitendra Mahajan are the other BJP

MLAs in the assembly. The new Leader of Opposition will have a tenure of around six to seven months as assembly polls in Delhi are due early next year. The ruling AAP has 62 MLAs in the Delhi Assembly.

Israel rescues 4 more hostages

AP ■ JERUSALEM

Israel said on Saturday it rescued four hostages who were kidnapped in a Hamas-led attack on October 7, in the largest such hostage recovery operation since the war with Hamas began in Gaza. Heavy fighting raged in central Gaza, where the hostages were rescued, and at least 55 people, including children, were killed in multiple attacks Saturday as people fled for safety, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. The army said it rescued Noa Argamani, 25; Almog Meir Jan, 21; Andrey Kozlov, 27; and Shlomi Ziv, 40, in two separate locations in a complex special daytime operation in the heart of Nuseirat in central Gaza. Argamani, has been one of the most widely recognized hostages since she was abducted from a music festival in southern Israel. The video of her abduction was among the first to surface, images of her horrified face widely shared — Argamani detained between two men on a motorcycle, one

arm outstretched and the other held down as she screams "Don't kill me!" Her mother, Liora, has stage four brain cancer and in April released a video pleading to see her daughter before she dies. Hamas killed about 1,200 people and kidnapped some 250 hostages during the October 7 attack, which triggered the Israel-Hamas war. About half were released in a weeklong cease-fire in November. Israel says more than 130 hostages remain, with about a quarter of those believed dead, and divisions are deepening in the country over the best way to bring them home. The rescue comes as international pressure mounts on Israel to limit civilian bloodshed in its war in Gaza, which reached its eighth month on Friday with more than 36,700 Palestinians killed, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not distinguish between fighters and civilians. Seeking a breakthrough in the apparently stalled cease-fire negotiations between Israel and

Hamas, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will return to the Middle East next week. Palestinians are facing widespread hunger because the war has largely cut off the flow of food, medicine and other supplies. UN agencies say over 1 million in Gaza could experience the highest level of starvation by mid-July. Saturday's operation is the largest recovery of alive hostages since the war erupted, bringing the total of rescued captives to seven. Two men were rescued in February when troops stormed a heavily guarded apartment in a densely packed town, and a woman was rescued in the aftermath of October's attack. Israeli troops have so far recovered at least 16 bodies of hostages from Gaza, according to the government. Defence Minister Yoav Gallant called Saturday's rescue "a heroic operation" and said the army will continue fighting until all the hostages are returned. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is facing growing

pressure to end the fighting in Gaza, with many Israelis urging him to embrace a deal announced last month by US President Joe Biden, but far-right allies threatening to collapse his government if he does. Argamani spoke by phone with Israeli President Isaac Herzog and Netanyahu. In an audio message released by the government, Netanyahu is heard asking Argamani how she's feeling and said he hasn't given up on the hostages. She tells him she is "very excited", saying she hasn't heard Hebrew in so long. Her friend, Yonatan Levi, reacted to the news with a sense of disbelief. "Wow. Don't know what to say. So excited such a crazy reality. So happy now and joyful," Levi said. The rescue comes as Israel intensifies operations across central Gaza, where the hostages were rescued. The bodies of the dozens of Palestinians killed on Saturday were taken to Al-Aqsa Hospital, where they were counted by Associated Press reporters.

Man assaults Danish PM, arrested

AP ■ COPENHAGEN (DENMARK)

A man who reportedly assaulted the Danish Prime Minister in central Copenhagen will appear in a pre-trial custody hearing on Saturday, authorities said. Police confirmed "there has been an incident" with Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen on Friday and that a 39-year-old man was arrested. They didn't provide further details and it wasn't clear if Frederiksen was hurt. The man is expected to arrive at 1100 GMT at the Copenhagen District Court in Frederiksberg, a municipality enclave within the Danish capital. The prime minister's office told the Danish state broadcaster DR on Friday that Frederiksen was "shocked" by what happened. Two eyewitnesses, Anna Ravn and Marie Adrian, told the daily BT that they saw a man walking toward Frederiksen and then "pushing her hard on the shoulder so she was shoved aside." They stressed that the premier did not fall down. Another witness, Kasper Jorgensen, told the Ekstra Bladet tabloid that a well-dressed man, who seemed part of Frederiksen's protection unit, and a police officer took down the alleged assailant. Soren Kjaergaard who was working at a



Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen

local bar on Kultorvet Square where the incident happened told the BT that he saw Frederiksen after the incident and she had no visible injuries to her face but walked away quickly. Politicians in the Scandinavian country and abroad condemned the reported assault. Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said that "an attack on a democratically elected leader is also an attack on our democracy", while Charles Michel, president of the European Council, condemned on X what he called a "cowardly act of aggression". European Union parliamentary elections are currently underway in Denmark and the rest of the 27-nation bloc and will conclude on Sunday.

Frederiksen has been campaigning with the Social Democrats' EU lead candidate, Christel Schaldemose. Media reports said the attack was not linked to a campaign event. Violence against politicians has become a theme in the run-up to the EU elections. In May, a candidate from Germany's centre-left Social Democrats was beaten and seriously injured while campaigning for a seat in the European Parliament. In Slovakia, the election campaign was overshadowed by an attempt to assassinate populist Prime Minister Robert Fico on May 15, sending shockwaves through the nation of 5.4 million and reverberating throughout Europe. Frederiksen, 46, is the leader of the Social Democratic Party and has been Denmark's prime minister since 2019. She has steered Denmark through the global COVID-19 pandemic and a controversial 2020 decision to wipe out Denmark's entire captive mink population to minimize the risk of the small mammals retransmitting the virus. Assaults on politicians in Denmark are rare. On March 23, 2003, two activists threw red paint on then-Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen inside the parliament and were immediately arrested. Foreign Minister Per Stig Moller also suffered some splashes that day.

Ukrainian attacks leave 28 dead in Russian-occupied regions

PTI ■ NEW YORK

Russia-installed officials in the partially occupied Ukrainian regions of Kherson and Luhansk said Ukrainian attacks left at least 28 people dead as Russia and Ukraine continued to exchange drone attacks overnight into Saturday. A Ukrainian attack Friday on the small town of Sadove in Ukraine's partially occupied Kherson region killed 22 and wounded 15 people, Moscow-backed governor Vladimir Saldo said. Russian state news agency Tass cited Saldo as saying that Ukrainian forces first struck the town with a French-made guided bomb, then attacked again with a US-supplied HIMARS missile. He said Ukrainian forces had "deliberately made a repeat strike to create greater numbers of casualties" when "residents of nearby houses ran out to help the injured". Further east, Leonid Pasechnik,

the Russia-installed governor in Ukraine's partially occupied Luhansk region, said Saturday that two more bodies had been pulled from the rubble following Friday's Ukrainian missile attack on the regional capital, also called Luhansk. Russian state news agency Interfax cited regional authorities as saying this brought the death toll to six. Pasechnik also said 60 people were wounded in the attack. Pasechnik declared Saturday a day of mourning in the region, with public events cancelled. Ukraine did not comment on either assault. Meanwhile, drone attacks between Russia and Ukraine persisted. Ukraine launched a barrage of drones across Russian territory overnight Friday, Russia's Defence Ministry said Saturday. Twenty-five drones were reportedly destroyed over Russia's southern Kuban and Astrakhan regions, the western Tula region, and the Moscow-

annexed Crimean peninsula. On Saturday morning, officials said air defences for the first time shot down Ukrainian drones over the North Ossetia region in the North Caucasus, some 900 km (560 miles) east of the front line in Ukraine's partially occupied Zaporizhzhia region. Russia's Ministry of Defence said that one drone had been destroyed, whereas regional Gov. Sergei Menyailo reported three downed drones over the region. Menyailo said that the target was a military airfield. Ukrainian air defence overnight shot down nine out of 13 Russian drones over the central Poltava region, south-eastern Zaporizhzhia and Dnipropetrovsk regions, and the Kharkiv region in the northeast, Ukraine's air force said Saturday. Dnipropetrovsk regional Gov. Serhiy Lysak said the overnight drone attack damaged commercial and residential buildings.

Russia puts former Ukrainian PM on its wanted list

AP ■ MOSCOW

Russia has put former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko on its wanted list, Russian state media reported, citing the Interior Ministry's database. Russian state news agency Tass said Tymoshenko was listed as wanted on unspecified criminal charges. She reportedly joins Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his predecessor, Petro Poroshenko, on the same list, which also includes scores of officials and lawmakers from Ukraine and NATO countries. Tymoshenko and her Batkivshchyna (the Fatherland) party did not immediately comment Saturday. Mediazona, an independent Russian news outlet, reported that both Zelenskyy and Poroshenko had been listed since at least late February. Among others on the list is Kaja Kallas, the prime minister of NATO and EU member Estonia.

Pakistan, China agree to upgrade CPEC

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Chinese President Xi Jinping in their meeting have affirmed consensus on the upgradation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and advancing high-quality development of the multi-billion dollar project in the second phase. The two leaders held an in-depth discussion at the historic Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Friday during the five-day official visit of Sharif which began on June 4. The two leaders were accompanied by the ministers and senior officials. This was the first meeting of Sharif with President Xi since assuming office in 2024. According to the state media, the two leaders showed consensus on up-gradation of the CPEC and advancing the development of the mega pro-

ject in the second phase. The CPEC, which connects Gwadar Port in Pakistan's Balochistan with China's Xinjiang province, is the flagship project of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is seen as an attempt by China to further its influence abroad with infrastructure projects funded by Chinese investments across the world. China has also invested billions in various power projects and road networks in Pakistan under the USD 65 billion CPEC plan, but the implementation of various projects has slowed in recent months. Associated Press of Pakistan reported that Prime Minister Sharif briefed President Xi on Pakistan's policies for economic reform and sustained growth, industrial development, agricultural modernisation and regional connectivity and the critical role played by the CPEC in Pakistan's

'Indian voters proved West wrong about democracy'

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

Prominent Indian-American leader Jasdeep Singh Jassee said the recently concluded polls in India have not only highlighted the robust electoral process in the country but also sent a powerful message to the world about the resilience and vibrancy of its democracy. Despite a wave of scepticism from the Western media regarding the integrity of India's democratic processes, the results have decisively dispelled such doubts, Sikhs for America leader Jasdeep Singh Jassee told PTI in an interview. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is set to take oath for a third consecutive term, a first in over 60 years. Singh, who was in Punjab for two weeks during the general elections, said that the allegations appearing in the west of a compromised Election Commission and malfunctioning voting machines have been proven baseless, underscoring the legitimacy and fairness of the elections in the country. "The people of India, through their votes, have demonstrated that they prioritise the nation's overall development. Indian democracy has emerged more mature and it has strengthened as a result of the latest elections," Singh said. Responding to a question on Punjab, Singh said the elections have further debunked allegations of human rights violations and curbs on freedom. Showing the inclusiveness of India's democratic framework, he said that Amritpal Singh, a radical pro-Khalistan separatist, participated and won the poll from jail. Additionally, the son of Beant Singh, who assassinated Indira Gandhi, also contested and won, Singh said. Batting for the prime minister's leadership for its "fast-track development in India", Singh said, "There is optimism that Modi's third term will bring stability and further economic development. The relationship between the United States and India would continue to improve."



Pope Francis cheers at children during an audience with members of choirs from different countries in the Paul VI Hall at The Vatican on Saturday. AP/PTI

Sikh pilgrims from India arrive in Pakistan for Jor Mela

PTI ■ LAHORE

Over 800 Sikhs from India arrived here on Saturday to take part in Jor Mela, a three-day festival commemorating the death anniversary of the fifth Sikh guru, Guru Arjan Dev Ji. The Jor Mela will be held from June 15 at Gurdwara Dera Sahib Lahore. Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB) officer Ghulam Mohayuddin told PTI that Pakistan Sikh Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee president and Punjab Minorities Minister Ramesh Singh Arora and the ETPB senior officers welcomed the 846 visiting pilgrims at the Wagah border. The Sikh pilgrims expressed great joy upon their arrival. "We will have the darshan (blessing to witness) of our



Guru's land. I feel very happy," Gurbachan Singh, who heads the delegation, said and added there is a sense of belonging here. Arora, the first Sikh minister in Pakistan's Punjab province, said all the arrangements for the Sikh pilgrims have been made by the ETPB, which looks after the affairs of the minorities in the country. Special arrangements have been made for the security, transport and medical facilities

of the pilgrims, he said. Soon after their arrival, the pilgrims left for Gurdwara Panja Sahib in Hasanabdol, about 400-odd kms northwest of here. During their 10-day stay, the Indian Sikhs pilgrims would also visit Gurdwara Janam Asthan, Nankana Sahib, the birthplace of Guru Nanak; Gurdwara Sacha Sauda, Ferozqabad; Gurdwara Kartarpur Sahib, Narowal; and Gurdwara Rohri Sahib, Aminabad.

Macron, Biden hope to move past trade tensions

AP ■ PARIS

President Joe Biden is being feted by French President Emmanuel Macron with a state visit Saturday as the two allies aim to show off their partnership on global security issues and move past trade tensions. Biden and Macron attended ceremonies marking the 80th anniversary of D-Day on Thursday and met separately the following day with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Paris. The leaders both used those engagements used to underscore the urgent need to support Kyiv's fight against Russia's invasion. But Macron and Biden have often chafed at the pace of support for Ukraine, especially as the United States, by far the largest contributor to Kyiv's defense, was forced to pause aid shipments for months while congressional Republicans held up an assistance package. The state visit began with a ceremony at the Arc de Triomphe,

including a wreath-laying at France's tomb of the unknown soldier, and a military parade along the Champs-Élysées leading to the Élysée Palace, where the two will hold official meetings and deliver public statements. Later, there is a state dinner at the palace for Biden and his wife, Jill. Biden hosted Macron in December 2022 at the White House for the first state visit of his presidency as the COVID-19 pandemic receded. Jill Biden flew back to Paris aboard a US government plane after spending Friday in Delaware to support their son, Hunter Biden, who is standing trial on federal gun charges. As the president's trip draws to a close, the far right is likely to emerge as one of the biggest winners in Sunday's European Parliament election while Macron's pro-European Union movement is flagging. A top French official said Macron and Biden have a friendly and warm relationship and stressed that the US pres-

ident is spending five days in France, reflecting the importance he attaches to the visit. The official spoke anonymously, in line with customary practices for Macron's office. The official said the US presidential campaign was not a factor in the discussion. Macron hosted then-President Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee this year, for Bastille Day in 2017, and he came to Washington for a state visit in 2018 before their relationship soured. US and French officials said Ukraine would be at the top of Saturday's agenda, but the centerpiece of the weekend event would be the strength of the alliance, fortified at Normandy 80 years ago, but with roars far deeper. "It's probably a good thing for us to remember that we didn't win our independence either without some foreign help or foreign assistance, specifically from France," White House national security spokesman John Kirby said Friday.

Max Bergmann, a former US State Department official who leads Europe research at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said the US-French relationship is strong despite occasional disagreements. "There's always tension in Franco-American relations because the French try to do stuff," he said. "They're bold, they throw up proposals, and that leads to some friction when we push back." For example, he said, France proposed putting Western trainers on the ground in Ukraine, leading to questions of whether this is "really giving Ukraine a major, tangible benefit" or has the "potential to be escalatory and dangerous." Regarding Macron, Bergmann said, "he's the one that pushes the boundaries and throws up ideas." Kirby said the two leaders would have an announcement Saturday on deepening maritime law enforcement cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region. They also were to discuss economic and cli-

mate challenges. While praising the Biden administration's commitment to supporting Ukraine, Macron said earlier this year that Europe must become "capable of defending its interests, with its allies by our side whenever they are willing, and alone if necessary," arguing the continent should rely less on the US for its own defense. He also warned Western powers against showing any signs of weakness to Russia as he repeatedly said that sending Western troops into Ukraine to shore up its defense should not be ruled out. The leaders were also set to discuss their efforts to bring about a cease-fire to the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, as the US and Israel await Hamas' response to a Biden-promoted cease-fire proposal that would allow a surge of humanitarian assistance into the territory. Macron is expected to raise US trade practices that he has often criticized, including the Inflation Reduction Act, which favors American-made climate tech-

nology such as electric vehicles. Macron said the US, like China, has "decided not to respect the rules of global trade" by shoring up protections and subsidies while Europe's industry remains open and is stuck in overregulation. The French official said Europe has to defend European interests, after watching the US do the same with its own, but said Macron hopes to find a mutually acceptable outcome. Gary Hufbauer, nonresident senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, said trade with China is a sticking point between the US and Europe, particularly regarding technology. Biden is also moving toward tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles and batteries, which could affect European cars that include Chinese parts. Overall, Hufbauer said, "Europe wants to maintain much more trade with China than the US wants."



French President Emmanuel Macron, center right, stands with US President Joe Biden, First Lady Jill Biden and Brigitte Macron, right, during a ceremony at the Arc de Triomphe on Saturday in Paris. President Joe Biden is being feted by French President Emmanuel Macron with a state visit Saturday, as the two allies aim to show off their partnership on global security issues and move past trade tensions. AP/PTI

Looking forward to doing exciting work in India: Musk

PTI ■ NEW YORK
American tech billionaire Elon Musk has said he is looking forward to his companies doing "exciting work" in India, as he congratulated Prime Minister Narendra Modi on his historic election victory. Modi will be administered the oath of office on June 9, his third consecutive term as Prime Minister. "Congratulations @narendramodi on your victory in the world's largest democratic elections! Looking forward to my companies doing exciting work in India," Musk, 52, said in a post on X on Friday. Responding to Musk's post, Prime Minister Modi said: "Appreciate your greetings @elonmusk." Modi said the talented Indian youth, the country's demography, predictable policies and stable democratic polity would continue to provide the business environment for all its partners. The congratulatory message came two months after the CEO of the electric carmaker Tesla and microblogging platform X in April postponed his proposed visit to India due to "very heavy Tesla obligations". Musk — who was expected to be in India on April 21 and 22 and scheduled to meet Prime Minister Modi — later wrote on X that he is

TESLA CEO CONGRATULATES MODI ON HIS POLLS WIN



looking forward to coming to India later this year. In June last year, Musk met with Modi during the latter's US visit and stated that he planned to visit India in 2024 while expressing confidence that Tesla would enter the Indian market soon. His proposed visit had raised expectations that he would announce plans for electric car maker Tesla to set up shop in the country, along with his satcom venture Starlink. It was also expected that Musk would announce plans for Tesla to set up its manufacturing unit in India and investments could be to the tune of billions of dollars and the way forward for selling Tesla electric cars in India at the earliest. Not just electric cars, he is also eyeing the Indian market for his satellite internet business Starlink, for which regulatory approvals are awaited. Musk had in the past sought import duty reduction in India for it to be able to sell Tesla cars in the country. Musk's plan to visit India in April came on the heels of the government announcing a new electric vehicle policy, under which import duty concessions will be given to companies setting up manufacturing units in the country with a minimum investment of USD 500 million, a move aimed at attracting major global players like Tesla.



Maharashtra, Karnataka, Delhi top UK's investment flows from India: Report

PTI ■ LONDON
Maharashtra followed by Karnataka and Delhi are the top three states of India bringing in foreign direct investment (FDI) into the UK, according to a new joint report produced by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and the High Commission of India in the UK. "Indian Assets: Charting the Journeys of Indian Companies in the UK", launched in London earlier this week, revealed that companies headquartered in Maharashtra brought in the highest amount of FDI into the UK at 20 per cent in 2023, followed by Karnataka (12 per cent) and Delhi (8.6 per cent). Completing the top 10 tallies are the states of Gujarat (7.1 per cent), Tamil Nadu (6.7 per cent), Telangana (6.5 per cent), Uttar Pradesh (5.9 per cent), Haryana (4.5 per cent), West Bengal (3.14 per cent) and Kerala (3.05 per cent) — making up 78 per cent of the total FDI from India into the UK. "As India and the UK continue to evolve and navigate the complexities of a rapidly changing global landscape, I believe that our businesses reimagining the India-UK corridor will realise our shared vision and aspiration for a secure and sustainable future prosperity," said Vikram Doraiswami, the Indian High Commissioner to the UK, who launched the report in London. The analysis finds the leading sector bringing in FDI from India in terms of the number of companies and employees is IT and software, highlighting the achievements of Indian companies in the UK across sectors such as automotive, electric car batteries, diagnostics and healthcare, and technology. It also spotlights the positive impact Indian companies can have on heritage British brands and how the value of these legacy brands is retained and protected when acquired by Indian companies. "Today, Indian companies with operations in the UK have integrated themselves into the British economy, making their mark in industries in almost all leading sectors. Their ability to adapt, innovate, and forge meaningful partnerships has not only propelled their growth but has also enriched the economy of the UK and its regions, promoting job creation, driving investment, and fostering a culture of diversity and inclusion," said CII Director General Chandrajit Banerjee. Among some of the other findings of the report, new Indian students cumulatively contributed an estimated GBP 4.3 billion to UK universities against the backdrop of a 5 per cent increase in UK student visas last year. It also showcases the robust relationship that Indian companies have across different UK regions, with the West Midlands, London and the north-west being the top recipients of Indian FDI in the UK across the fields of automotive, software and IT services and energy. According to the latest official data from the UK's Department of Business and Trade, total trade in goods and services (exports plus imports) between the UK and India was GBP 39.0 billion in the four quarters to the end of Q4 2023, an increase of 4.8 per cent or GBP 1.8 billion in current prices from the four quarters to the end of Q4 2022.

GSTN rolls out form for tobacco manufacturers to report inputs, outputs to tax authorities

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The GST Network (GSTN) has rolled out a special form for manufacturers of pan masala and tobacco products to report inputs and outputs procured with tax authorities to check evasion. This new form GST SRM-II came within a month of GSTN rolling out form GST SRM-I for registering machines of such manufacturers. "The second form namely Form GST SRM-II is also available on the portal. Taxpayers dealing in the manufacture of Pan Masala and Tobacco products can now report the details of inputs and outputs procured and consumed for the relevant month," GSTN said in an update to its taxpayers on June 7. Moore Singhi Executive Director Rajat Mohan said the newly available Form GST SRM-II requires detailed monthly reporting of inputs and outputs. "This form aims to enhance transparency and

accountability in the manufacturing process of Pan Masala and Tobacco products. Taxpayers must meticulously document their procurement and consumption of inputs to avoid any discrepancies and ensure accurate tax filings," Mohan said. Taxpayers are advised to familiarise themselves with the details and instructions provided in these forms to ensure seamless compliance and avoid any potential penalties, he added. In January, the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) announced the introduction of a new registration and monthly return filing procedure to improve GST compliance for manufacturers of pan masala and tobacco products effective April 1. The date was later extended to May 15.



The move to overhaul the registration, record-keeping, and monthly filing of such businesses was aimed at improving GST compliance for manufacturers of pan masala and tobacco products. The GST law was also amended via Finance Bill 2024 to say that manufacturers of pan masala, gutka and similar tobacco products will have to pay a penalty of up to Rs 1 lakh, if they fail to register their packing machinery with GST authorities with effect from April 1. However, this penalty

provision is yet to be notified. The procedure was to be applicable for manufacturers of pan-masala, unmanufactured tobacco (without lime tube) with or without a brand name, 'Hookah' or 'gudaku' tobacco, smoking mixtures for pipes and cigarettes, chewing tobacco (without lime tube), filter khaini, jarda scented tobacco, snuff and branded or unbranded 'Gutka', etc. The manufacturers of such tobacco products were required to furnish the details of packing machines being used for filling and packing of packages in Form GST SRM-I, electronically within 30 days of the notification coming into effect i.e., April 1, 2024. The input and output statement GST SRM-II was to be filed by the 10th of the succeeding month.

Sri Lanka has made strong progress on debt restructuring front: IMF

PTI ■ COLOMBO
Sri Lanka's macroeconomic policy reforms have started to "bear fruit" and the country is expected to reach agreements with external commercial creditors soon, the IMF has said ahead of the second review of its USD 2.9 billion bailout programme to the cash-strapped country. Addressing a press conference on Friday, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Communication Department Director Julie Kozack asserted that Sri Lanka has made "sufficiently strong progress on the debt restructuring front". She said that the island nation's programme performance is "strong", with most quantitative and structural conditionality for the second review met or implemented with delay, adding that reforms are still ongoing in some areas. The second review of the IMF's Extended Fund Facility under the USD 2.9 billion bailout of Sri Lanka has been set for June 12. Kozack confirmed that the IMF's Executive Board will meet to discuss the second review and the Article IV Consultation. Under Article IV of the IMF's Articles of Agreement, the global lender holds bilateral discussions with members, typically every year, with a staff team visiting the country, collecting economic and financial information, and discussing with officials the country's economic developments and policies. "In Sri Lanka, we do see macroeconomic policy reform starting to bear fruit," Kozack said, adding that "commendable outcomes" include rapid disinflation, robust reserve accumulation, and initial signs of economic growth while preserving the



financial system's stability. She said that Colombo's next steps on debt restructuring are to conclude negotiations with external commercial creditors and implement agreements in principle with the official creditors. Kozack said Sri Lanka's domestic debt operations have largely been completed, and debt restructuring discussions are continuing. "The authorities have been holding extensive discussions with external official creditors regarding an MOU (memorandum of understanding) with the official creditor committee and the final agreements with the Export-Import Bank of China," she said, adding that talks with the China Development Bank are also at an advanced stage. "There is a strong expectation that agreements with external commercial creditors consistent with programme parameters will be reached soon. So, overall, we assess that there has been sufficiently strong progress on the debt restructuring front," she said. In March, the Washington-based IMF said it reached a staff-level agreement with Sri Lanka for the next phase, enabling access to USD 337 million from the nearly USD 3 billion bailout approved in 2023 for the cash-strapped country. Two tranches of USD 330 million each were released in March and December 2023.

Delhi airport operator DIAL awaits BCAS nod for airside transfer of passenger baggage from T1 to T3

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Soon, passengers landing at STerminal 1 of the Delhi airport might not have to carry their checked-in baggage for a connecting flight from Terminal 3 as the airport operator plans to ensure the baggage transfer through the airside. Delhi International Airport Ltd (DIAL) is awaiting approval for the proposal regarding the airside transfer of checked-in baggage of passengers between T1 and T3 from the Bureau of Civil Aviation Security (BCAS), according to officials in the know. Similarly, airside baggage transfer from T3 to T1 for international flight passengers will also be considered, the officials said. At the Indira Gandhi International Airport (IGIA), international flights are operated from T3, while T1 and T2 are for domestic flights. Currently, passengers landing at T1 have to carry their checked-in baggage to T3 for the connecting flight. Once the system of airside transfer of the checked-in baggage is in place, the passengers will not be required to carry them while taking a connecting flight from T3. In the case of an international flight passenger landing at T3 and then taking a domestic



flight from T1, modalities will be worked out, as the baggage has to be cleared by customs. One of the officials quoted

can be dropped at T1. T1 and T3 of the Delhi airport are slightly away from each other and passengers travel between the terminals by road. The airport, having a passenger handling capacity of 100 to 105 million, has three terminals — T1, T2 and T3. The expanded T1 is expected to be operational in June. As part of upgrading the airport infrastructure, DIAL, a consortium led by the GMR Group, plans to have an Automated People Mover (APM) or an air train for passengers for seamless transit between the three terminals. Air passenger traffic is on the rise, and airlines are also expanding their fleet as well as networks to meet the rising demand. Strategic Cooperative Partnership' and expressed the resolve to further deepen cooperation across diverse domains ranging from political and security to economic, trade, and people-to-people exchanges. They also exchanged views on regional and global developments including Afghanistan, Palestine and South Asia, including Kashmir. President Xi Jinping also hosted a banquet in honour of the prime minister, where another round of discussion on different matters of mutual interests was held.

Bajaj Housing Finance files papers for ₹7,000 crore IPO

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
Bajaj Housing Finance has filed preliminary papers with capital markets regulator Sebi to raise Rs 7,000 crore through an initial public offering (IPO). The proposed IPO comprises a fresh issue of equity shares of up to Rs 4,000 crore and an offer for sale (OFS) of equity shares worth Rs 3,000 crore by parent Bajaj Finance, according to the draft red herring prospectus (DRHP). The share sale is being conducted to comply with the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) regulations, which require upper-layer non-banking finance companies to be listed on stock exchanges by September 2025. Proceeds from the fresh issue will be used to augment the company's capital base to meet future capital requirements. Bajaj Housing Finance is a non-deposit-taking housing finance company registered



with the National Housing Bank since September 2015. It offers financial solutions for purchasing and renovating residential and commercial properties. It has been identified and categorised as an "upper layer" NBFC by the RBI in India, and its comprehensive mortgage products include home loans, loans against property, lease rental discounting and developer financing. For the entire financial year 2023-24, the housing lender posted a net profit of Rs 1,731 crore, marking a growth of 38 per cent from Rs 1,258 crore in FY23. Housing finance companies Aadhara Housing Finance and India Shelter Finance have been recently listed on the stock exchanges. On June 6, the board of Bajaj Finance approved the sale of shares worth Rs 3,000 crore in the initial public offering of Bajaj Housing Finance. Kotak Mahindra Capital Company Ltd, BofA Securities India Ltd, SBI Capital Markets Ltd, Goldman Sachs (India) Securities Private Ltd and JM Financial Ltd are the book-running lead managers that will manage the company's public issue.

CBIC clarifies on display Assembly of mobile phones for levy of 10 per cent import duty

PTI ■ NEW DELHI
The CBIC on Friday listed out parts or components, such as touch panel, cover glass, and LED backlight, which constitute the display assembly of a mobile phone and will attract a 10 per cent import duty. It also said components, including the frame, SIM tray, and side keys like power/volume button, when fitted/attached to the display assembly, integrated display assembly can be imported at the concessional 10 per cent customs duty. In a circular, the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) said currently a concessional basic customs duty (BCD) rate of 10 per cent is imposed on display assembly for use in the manufacture of a cellular mobile phone and a nil BCD rate on inputs or parts for use in the manufacture of a display assembly for use in manufacture of a cellular mobile phone. It said certain cases of misdeclaration by importers were intercepted by the Directorate of Revenue Intelligence (DRI) and other field formations and demand notices were issued in certain cases as well. With the industry facing "interpretational challenges" with regard to the display assembly of cellular mobile phones, a committee constituted with officials from both CBIC and MeitY, recommended a principle that may be used to determine the interpretation of display



assembly for extending the concessional BCD rate. If the display assembly is imported with the items/components, including receiver mesh, speaker net, support frame, and antenna pin, which are fabricated, embedded, fitted or attached to the assembly, the whole integrated assembly should also be treated as a display assembly of a cellular mobile phone, attracting a BCD rate of 10 per cent. ICEA Chairman Pankaj Mohindroo said this circular is a big relief to the industry and will avoid unnecessary litigation.

"If you can reach out and touch and love and be with wildlife, you will forever be changed, and you will want to make the world a better place."
— Terri Irwin



INVASIVE SPECIES THREATEN WAYANAD WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Senna spectabilis planted with good intentions has become an ecological nightmare, swiftly overtaking large areas of the sanctuary. Its unchecked growth not only threatens biodiversity but also triggers a chain of ecological and economic repercussions, affecting both wildlife and local communities

Approximately one-fifth of the Earth's surface is threatened by invasive species. These biotic invaders, benefiting from rapid reproduction and a lack of natural predators, outcompete native species for vital resources like food, water, and habitat, posing a significant threat to biodiversity and ecosystem stability.

The Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary (WWS), nestled in the heart of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR), is a biodiversity hotspot, brimming with a rich variety of flora and fauna. The sanctuary serves as a habitat for a substantial population of Asian elephants, along with over 3,700 documented species of plants and animals. Spanning an area of 344.44 km², the sanctuary is comprised of four distinct ranges: Sulthan Batherly, Muthanga, Kurichiat, and Tholpetty. Each range, with its distinct characteristics, adds to the rich tapestry of the WWS, making it a vital and vibrant hub of ecological diversity.

However, this ecological paradise is under severe threat from several invasive species, including *Senna spectabilis*, *Lantana camara*, and *Acacia* species. This is particularly noticeable in the case of *Senna spectabilis*, which has proliferated aggressively throughout the WWS and beyond, affecting the NBR and the corresponding ecological continuum of three southern Indian states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka.

A decision made in good faith by the forest department in 1986 to plant *Senna spectabilis*, an ornamental tree with striking yellow flowers, has morphed into an ecological disaster. Little did one know, that this tropical American tree had a notorious history of invading continents, including parts of Asia, Africa, and Australia. By the time the mistake was realized, *Senna* had stealthily spread into many parts of the sanctuary. It expanded from covering less than 16 km² in 2013-2014 to 89 km² in 2019 and now stands at a staggering 123.86 km². Considering the total area of the sanctuary is 344.44 km², *Senna* has already engulfed 35% of it. If this trend is not curbed, the entire sanctuary could be swamped within a decade, turning it into a dense *Senna* forest.

A 2021 study has revealed that the Asian elephant, a significant inhabitant of the sanctuary, is aiding the spread of the invasive *Senna spectabilis*. The elephant's dung provides a fertile environment for the *Senna* seeds to sprout, with a single pile of dung found to contain



approximately 2000 seeds. The study also found other mammals, such as the chital and the Indian crested porcupine, contributing to the spread of *Senna*. The researchers observed that the fruiting period of *Senna* trees in the summer coincides with a high concentration of elephants in Wayanad due to their seasonal migration. This synchronicity could potentially expedite the plant's dispersal across the landscape, particularly in micro-habitats commonly inhabited by elephants.

A single *Senna* pod harbours over a hundred seeds, and a medium-sized tree can yield at least one lakh seeds. The invasive nature of the *Senna* species has had a significant impact on the local ecosystem. It has displaced native vegetation by monopolizing the area and inhibiting the growth of species like grass, bamboo and several other minor forest produce.

The *Senna* tree employs a unique method of colonizing its surroundings. It releases specific substances, known as allelochemicals, either directly onto the target plants or indirectly into the surrounding soil. These allelochemicals interfere with the normal growth processes of other plants, providing the *Senna* tree with a competitive advantage. The dominance of the *Senna* tree has significant implications for the livelihoods of rural and tribal people who rely on non-timber forest produce, like amla or gooseberry, for sustenance. Many edible items like berries, mushrooms, and wild tubers, which were once a significant part of the tribal diet, are gradually disappearing from the forest.

The bitter leaves and irritating bark of *Senna* do not find favour with herbivores resulting in a decline in their numbers in the area. This has had a cascading effect on the region's tiger population, which has decreased from 120 in 2018 to 84 in 2023. The scarcity of prey in the *Senna*-dominated areas is believed to be driving tigers to migrate in search of richer hunting grounds. Similarly, elephants are moving into areas outside the forests in their quest for food and water. Unfortunately, this has led to increased human-elephant conflicts, resulting in a backlash against the preservation efforts of elephants. The ecological disruption has had an unexpected benefit for local communities. With fewer wildlife incursions, settlements near the jungle have seen a significant drop in crop damage and cattle lifting incidents. The data from the past three years shows a downward trend in compensation claims



by farmers for crop raids. In the fiscal year 2021-22, there were 734 cases of crop damage reported in the border agrarian hamlets of WWS. This figure fell to 475 in 2022-23, and in 2023-24, the number has further decreased to just 93 cases. Similarly, cattle lifting cases have also seen a decline, from 83 cases in 2021-22 to a mere 19 in 2023-24. While the decrease in human-wildlife conflict might be viewed as a positive development by those seeking to address this issue, the underlying causes warrant serious concern. Locals like Mr. Stanley Augustine, a member of the Biodiversity Management Committee of Poothadi village, find these changes deeply troubling, particularly from the standpoint of the rural economy. The area is witnessing a worrying decline in agricultural productivity and an increasing trend of farmers abandoning their paddy fields. The forests too are under mounting pressure. The real challenge, therefore, lies in re-establishing equilibrium in the WWS while simultaneously securing the future of the human communities in the area. In response to these challenges, the Forest Department has launched an initiative known as the 'Senna Eradication and Forest Regeneration

Project'. The project, supported by the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development, has a budget of Rs 5.31 crore. The initiative is currently being implemented in the Kurichiat and Muthanga forest ranges, to eradicate *Senna* from 1,672 hectares. To further support this initiative, the sanctuary authorities are exploring partnerships with the newsprint industry, taking inspiration from Tamil Nadu. The state government there has allowed the Tamil Nadu Newsprint and Papers Ltd (TNPL) to extract invasive trees like Wattles and *Senna* for paper production. In return, TNPL compensates the Forest Department and employs various extraction techniques, attempting to turn an ecological challenge into an opportunity for resource utilization. In some areas, invasive plants, including *Senna*, are being repurposed to manufacture furniture. *Senna*, in particular, is valued as a timber source for making lightweight furniture and other wooden products. There is hope that policy changes could permit the extraction of *Senna* from forest areas and its subsequent sale outside. Such changes could potentially motivate the local community to actively participate in clearing the forest of this invasive plant.

The process of removing the *Senna* tree, however, is fraught with challenges. Traditional methods such as uprooting, girdling, and herbicide application for eliminating *Senna* from the area are labour-intensive, costly, and environmentally damaging. Uprooting large *Senna* trees could disturb the soil, leading to erosion, especially in hilly areas that receive high rainfall. Techniques like girdling and felling can inadvertently harm non-target species. Moreover, the use of herbicides may contaminate water sources and negatively impact the area's biodiversity. Additionally, the resilience of the *Senna* tree is evident in its ability to regenerate from lateral roots, which complicates its eradication. Given these challenges, it is clear that innovative and sustainable strategies are needed to manage and ultimately remove the *Senna* species while simultaneously assisting the re-establishment of local species.

As we forge ahead, conservation measures must be holistic, encompassing not only the immediate environs of the sanctuary but also the larger watersheds and catchment areas that feed into the rivers. This holistic approach is particularly significant for Wayanad, the source of the Kabini River. The health of this river is essential for sustaining the lives and livelihoods of communities across Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. Notably, initiatives are in progress to increase the flow of the Kabini River—a major tributary of the Kaveri River—to address the issue of water scarcity in Bengaluru.

The situation in Wayanad is a stark reminder of the domino effect triggered by the introduction of invasive species. The ecological and economic ramifications are far-reaching, impacting not just the wildlife within the sanctuary but also the lives and livelihoods of communities dwelling in its vicinity and beyond. The fight to save Wayanad is a race against time. If immediate and decisive action is not taken, the future of this biodiversity hotspot and the well-being of the millions who depend on it hang in the balance. Wayanad's plight serves as a cautionary tale, urging us to prioritize rigorous scientific evaluation before introducing any new species in an area and to act swiftly and collaboratively in the face of ecological threats posed by invasive species.

(The writers are Former Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, UP and Maharashtra; views expressed are personal)

“A SINGLE SENNA POD HARBOURS OVER A HUNDRED SEEDS, AND A MEDIUM-SIZED TREE CAN YIELD AT LEAST ONE LAKH SEEDS. THE INVASIVE NATURE OF THE SENNA SPECIES HAS HAD A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON THE LOCAL ECOSYSTEM. IT HAS DISPLACED NATIVE VEGETATION BY MONOPOLIZING THE AREA AND INHIBITING THE GROWTH OF SPECIES LIKE GRASS, BAMBOO AND SEVERAL OTHER MINOR FOREST PRODUCE”



DISCOVER THE DESERT SERENGETI AND ENCHANTING ISLAND OF BUTTERFLIES

Sharjah creates a 'la African Safari' in the Desert and its commitment to nature shines at Al Noor Island, writes **GYANESHWAR DAYAL**

Sharjah, a jewel in the crown of the United Arab Emirates, boasts a captivating terrain that marries the charm of golden deserts with the allure of pristine coastlines along the Arabian Gulf. The landscape is punctuated by rolling sand dunes, tranquil oases, and rugged mountains that rise in the eastern region, creating a picturesque backdrop to its vibrant cityscape. Sharjah's climate is characterized by its arid nature, with hot summers that see temperatures soar, and mild, pleasant winters that offer a refreshing respite. The gentle coastal breeze, coupled with the serene desert air, weaves a unique atmospheric tapestry, making Sharjah a place of both stark beauty and subtle elegance. However, it lacks the lush green vegetation and abundance found in tropical climates. Yet, this absence is masterfully compensated by human ingenuity, as nature is carefully crafted and enhanced through thoughtful intervention.

Sharjah has been a beacon of cultural heritage in the region. However, not many people know its commitment towards nature. In fact, it has one of the rarest treats around the world to showcase which has never tried elsewhere on the large scale. Sharjah's commitment to preserving nature and promoting biodiversity is exemplified through its innovative projects, notably creating Serengeti and Sawana in the heart of the desert and organising the African Safari in the desert. As if that was not enough it also has a full-on nature conservation project at Al Noor Island which hosts thousands of species of plants and birds and has a unique Butterfly House. These initiatives reflect Sharjah's dedication to balancing development with sustainability and fostering a deep respect for the natural world.

A 'LA AFRICAN SAFARI' IN THE DESERT

Sharjah's African Safari, set against the backdrop of the Arabian Desert, is a testament to the emirate's vision of creating unique and sustainable tourism experiences. This ambitious project recreates the diverse ecosystems of Africa, providing a sanctuary for a wide range of species in an environment that mirrors their natural habitats. The African Safari in Sharjah is not just a tourist attraction; it is a conservation effort aimed at protecting endangered



species and educating the public about wildlife and ecosystems. The park hosts animals such as giraffes, zebras, elephants and various species of antelope, living in conditions that closely resemble their native habitats. This approach ensures that the animals can exhibit natural behaviours, contributing to their well-being and offering visitors an authentic experience. Sharjah's African Safari employs sustainable practices to minimise its environmental footprint. This includes the use of renewable energy sources, water conservation techniques, and eco-friendly infrastructure. The park also engages in breeding programs for

endangered species, playing a crucial role in global conservation efforts. By fostering a connection between visitors and wildlife, the safari park encourages a greater appreciation for the natural world and the importance of its preservation.

AL NOOR ISLAND: WHERE SERENITY AND ART COME TOGETHER

Nestled in the heart of Khalid Lagoon, Al Noor Island is a testament to Sharjah's vision of blending nature, art, and culture. Since its opening in 2015, this picturesque island has become a beloved destination for both locals and

tourists, offering a serene escape and a feast for the senses. Al Noor Island is more than just a park; it is an embodiment of Sharjah's commitment to enhancing the quality of life through innovative public spaces that foster a connection with nature and the arts. Al Noor Island spans 45,470 square meters and is adorned with a rich variety of flora, creating a verdant oasis in the middle of the city. The island's landscaping features over 70,000 plants and trees from around the world, carefully curated to thrive in the local climate. This lush greenery provides a habitat for diverse wildlife, including numerous bird species that find sanctuary on the island. The meticulously maintained gardens offer visitors a tranquil environment to unwind and connect with nature.

The Butterfly House

One of the island's crown jewels is the Butterfly House, an architectural marvel that houses over 500 exotic butterflies. The structure itself, designed with intricate latticework inspired by Islamic art, is a sight to behold. Inside, the climate-controlled environment mimics tropical conditions, allowing butterflies to flourish year-round. Visitors can walk among the butterflies, witnessing their delicate beauty up close and learning about their life cycles and ecological importance. The Butterfly House is not only a visual delight but also an educational experience, emphasizing the significance of conservation.

Art Installations and Sculptures

Al Noor Island is dotted with stunning art installations and sculptures, seamlessly integrating art with nature. These pieces,

created by renowned artists from around the world, add a layer of cultural richness to the island. Notable installations include the "OVO" art sculpture, a glowing egg-shaped structure that symbolizes rebirth and renewal, and the "Torus" sculpture by David Harber, which captures the interplay of light and shadow.

The island caters to visitors of all ages with its well-designed children's playground and exercise facilities. The playground is equipped with safe, modern equipment that encourages imaginative play, while the exercise stations offer adults a chance to stay active in a scenic setting.

Night Illumination

As the sun sets, Al Noor Island transforms into a magical landscape illuminated by artistic lighting. The island's pathways and installations glow with soft, colourful lights, creating an enchanting atmosphere. This nighttime transformation offers a unique experience, making evening visits to the island particularly memorable. Al Noor Island exemplifies Sharjah's dedication to sustainability and environmental preservation. The island employs eco-friendly practices, such as using solar energy for lighting and maintaining a commitment to water conservation. These efforts ensure that the island remains a green and sustainable haven for future generations.

Al Noor Island also plays a vital role in community engagement and education. It regularly hosts workshops, guided tours, and cultural events that promote environmental awareness and appreciation for the arts. These programs aim to foster a sense of responsibility and connection to the natural world among visitors.

Al Noor Island as its African safari is a shining example of Sharjah's innovative approach to nature conservation with cultural enrichment. This serene oasis offers a retreat from the hustle and bustle of city life, inviting visitors to explore its lush landscapes, admire its art installations, and engage with its diverse flora and fauna. Through Al Noor Island, Sharjah demonstrates its commitment to creating spaces that nurture the soul, inspire the mind, and promote a sustainable future. Whether you're a nature lover, art enthusiast, or simply seeking peace and tranquillity, Al Noor Island is a destination that promises to captivate and inspire.

Bookmark these boutique destinations for a summer getaway

BY RUPALI DEAN

STERLING PARK, KALIMPONG

Where? Ringkingpong Rd, Kalimpong, Khasmahal, Kalimpong, West Bengal. Nestled in the scenic mid-range of the Himalayas, at a lofty 4,100 feet above sea level lies Kalimpong—a perfect fusion of serene mountain vistas and vibrant cultural encounters, offering an enchanting getaway for those in search of an unforgettable holiday experience. This cultural hub, blending influences from Indian, Chinese, Nepalese, and Tibetan traditions, provides a captivating and immersive retreat.



Perched atop a hill with a panoramic view of the snow-capped Himalayan peaks, Sterling Park Kalimpong resides in a historic edifice once owned by the Maharaja of Dinajpur, allowing guests a peek into a majestic bygone era. The vistas of Mt Kanchenjunga and other majestic peaks like Pandim and Narsingh, alongside the historic Jelep-la and Nathu-la Passes, resonate with old tales of the Silk Trade Route winding through Lhasa to Tibet. This mountain retreat, situated away from the urban hustle of downtown Kalimpong, exudes an aura of old-world charm with its colonial-era architecture adorned with intricate woodwork, vintage furnishings, and spacious verandahs, transporting guests

back to a nostalgic age. The lavishly appointed rooms and suites boast breath-taking views of the majestic Himalayas, creating a perfect sanctuary for relaxation. Guests can unwind on the cosy patio, indulge in the finest Darjeeling tea, or revel in the tranquility of the lush courtyard surroundings. The signature restaurant, Kokomendo, beckons visitors with a diverse array of Indian, Continental, Chinese, Nepalese, and Tibetan delicacies. Together with Sterling Park Kalimpong, Darjeeling, and Gangtok Orange Village, they form a delightful mountain circuit in the Eastern Himalayan foothills, promising an

BAREFOOT BUNGALOW, CHAMBA

Where? Buranskhanda, Chamba-Mussoorie Road, Buranskhanda, Dehradun, Uttarakhand. Set amidst the enchanting Himalayan landscape, Barefoot Bungalow, a luxurious 3-bedroom homestay in Buranskhanda, offers a sublime escape from the routine of daily life. Located just 25 kilometres from the renowned hill station of Mussoorie, this serene refuge captures the essence of tranquillity and natural beauty in the Garhwal Himalayas.

unforgettable journey for nature and culture enthusiasts alike. At the heart of Barefoot Bungalow lies a deep commitment to hospitality, where a dedicated team of professionals ensures that guests are pampered and well looked after. This pet-friendly haven features a personal butler and a talented in-house chef named Arjun, who delights guests with delicious home-cooked meals. The cosy wooden interiors create a warm hill station ambiance, perfect for creating memorable evenings by the bonfire, accompanied by live music performances or the inviting glow of an indoor fireplace. Guests at Barefoot Bungalow can indulge in a culinary delight at the glasshouse restaurant, where they



can watch their meals being freshly prepared in a live kitchen setting. The expansive 14,000-square-foot private garden, embellished with ponds and meticulously landscaped, provides a lush sanctuary for relaxation and reflection. And to top it all off, sweeping views of the majestic snow-capped Himalayan range serve as a breath-taking backdrop to this picturesque retreat.

ONENESS, RISHIKESH

Where? Rishikesh, Badrinath Highway, Byasi, Uttarakhand. Cocooned within a Lower Shivalik mountain valley, 30 kilometres away from Rishikesh, this resort is

a harmonious blend of river, flora, and fauna, inviting guests to embark on a mesmerizing journey where nature's wild beauty takes centre stage and showcases a diverse array of Sal, Haldu, Figs, and Mulberry trees, forming a biodiverse sanctuary. This lively mountain retreat encourages visitors to immerse themselves in the wilderness, surrounded by monkeys, langurs, wild cats, the elusive Black Bear, and the captivating Scarlet Minivet. Its commitment to ecology shines through in the careful planting of 30,000 saplings of over 50 medicinal plants, fostering a flourishing ecosystem that embodies the ethos of the resort.

As the Ganges flows below, resonating with the sacred energy of Devprayag, spirituality becomes intricately woven into the fabric of Oneness. Guests can luxuriate in unparalleled comfort within the Luxury Cottages, each intricately designed to provide a unique and immersive stay. From the spacious and finely appointed rooms to the breath-taking views of the gardens and mountains, every aspect has been thoughtfully curated to offer an unforgettable escape. Beyond being just a resort, on offer is an immersive journey.

Engage in a variety of inclusive activities, ranging from leisurely beach moments to captivating stargazing sessions. For our younger guests, an array of kid's activities awaits. Furthermore, optional activities such as Fun Family Float and Memory Plantation present distinctive and memorable experiences. Go for an adventure intertwined with the allure of unspoiled wilderness. Your expedition commences with experienced guides guiding you through a brief hike, unveiling the untouched beauty of the Lower Shivalik mountains. The path then seamlessly transitions to a unique river crossing experience via a raft, adding a touch of thrill to your sojourn.

(Awarded the 'Best food writer in the country' by the Indian culinary forum, WACS and the Ministry of Tourism, Rupali Dean writes on food and travel)

GAJRAJ RAO, the Newgen method actor, redefines the cinematic experience by performing even non-descript roles with élan. This journey explores the nuances of his method acting, writes **GYANESHWAR DAYAL**

THE METHOD HIS MADNESS

Gajraj Rao, a name that resonates with authenticity and a deep understanding of character portrayal, has carved a niche for himself in the Indian film industry through a blend of meticulous method acting and a rich repertoire of roles. Rao's journey from the sidelines to the spotlight is a testament to his dedication, perseverance, and exceptional talent. Gajraj Rao's foray into acting was marked by a series of small but significant roles that gradually built his reputation as a reliable character actor. Born in Dungarpur, Rajasthan, Rao's initial years in the industry were filled with struggles and uncredited roles. His career began in the late 1990s, with minor roles in films and television. However, his ability to imbue even the smallest roles with depth and realism did not go unnoticed. Rao's breakthrough came with the 2018 film *Badhaai Ho*, where he played Jeetender Kaushik, a middle-aged man who discovers his wife's unexpected pregnancy. The film's success catapulted Rao into the limelight, earning him critical acclaim and several awards. His portrayal of Jeetender Kaushik was lauded for its warmth, subtlety, and humor, marking a significant shift in the perception of middle-aged characters in Indian cinema.

What sets Gajraj Rao apart is his approach to method acting. Rao's dedication to his craft involves deep immersion into his characters. He often spends extensive time understanding the background, motivations, and nuances of the roles he portrays. This approach allows him to deliver performances that are both authentic and relatable. Method acting, a technique pioneered by Konstantin Stanislavski and later popularized by Lee Strasberg, emphasizes the psychological and emotional aspects of character development. Rao's use

of this technique involves drawing from his own experiences and emotions to bring a character to life. His preparation often includes detailed research, observing people with similar backgrounds to his characters, and even adopting their mannerisms and speech patterns. Rao's impact on modern Indian cinema extends beyond his performances. He represents a shift towards more realistic and nuanced storytelling in Bollywood. Films like *Shubh Mangal Zyada Saavdhan* and *Lootcase* further showcase his versatility, moving away from stereotypical depictions to more layered and authentic characters. In contemporary cinema, method actors like Gajraj Rao are redefining the narrative. They are moving away from the star-centric approach to one that values story and character depth. This trend is visible in the rise of content-driven films and web series that focus on everyday stories and real-life issues. And the time is ripe for such experiments. "Twenty years back I, Pankaj Tripathi, Nawazuddin Siddiqui and many others could not imagine of getting a significant role. Hindi cinema is more democratic and character

driven and gives chance to everyone," says Rao. Method actors today are increasingly collaborating with directors and writers to develop well-rounded characters. They are involved in the creative process from the early stages, contributing to script development and character arcs. This collaborative approach results in performances that are not just believable but also deeply engaging. While method acting is rewarding, it is also challenging. The emotional toll of deeply immersing oneself in a character can be significant. For Rao, balancing the intense preparation required for his roles with his personal life is a constant challenge. However, his passion for acting and his commitment to his craft continue to drive him forward. "I have theatre background where script is very important which all of us cherish. Then we prepare for the role meticulously. What viewers see on the screen is culmination of that preparation." Looking ahead, Gajraj Rao's journey seems poised for further success. With the increasing popularity of OTT platforms and a growing

audience for nuanced storytelling, actors like Rao are likely to find even more opportunities to showcase their talent. His upcoming projects are eagerly awaited by fans and critics alike, who expect nothing short of brilliance from this seasoned actor. Gajraj Rao's journey as an actor is an inspiring tale of perseverance, talent, and the power of method acting. His contributions to Indian cinema have paved the way for more realistic and relatable storytelling. As he continues to explore new horizons, Rao remains a beacon of authenticity and excellence in the world of acting, embodying the transformative power of method acting in modern cinema. In the film *Maidaan*, Gajraj Rao excels in his role by bringing a nuanced depth and authenticity that enhances the movie's historical and emotional landscape. The film, directed by Amit Ravindernath Sharma, chronicles the golden era of Indian football from 1952 to 1962, focusing on the life of Syed Abdul Rahim, the coach who led the Indian team to remarkable victories. Rao portrays a pivotal character whose support and conflict with the protagonist add layers to the narrative, showcasing his ability to seamlessly blend into the historical setting while delivering a performance that is both compelling and resonant. His meticulous approach to embodying his character contributes significantly to the film's overall impact, making *Maidaan* a captivating tribute to a lesser-known yet glorious chapter of Indian sports history.

WHAT SETS GAJRAJ RAO APART IS HIS APPROACH TO METHOD ACTING. RAO'S DEDICATION TO HIS CRAFT INVOLVES DEEP IMMERSION INTO HIS CHARACTERS. HE OFTEN SPENDS EXTENSIVE TIME UNDERSTANDING THE BACKGROUND, MOTIVATIONS, AND NUANCES OF THE ROLES HE PORTRAYS. THIS APPROACH ALLOWS HIM TO DELIVER PERFORMANCES THAT ARE BOTH AUTHENTIC AND RELATABLE

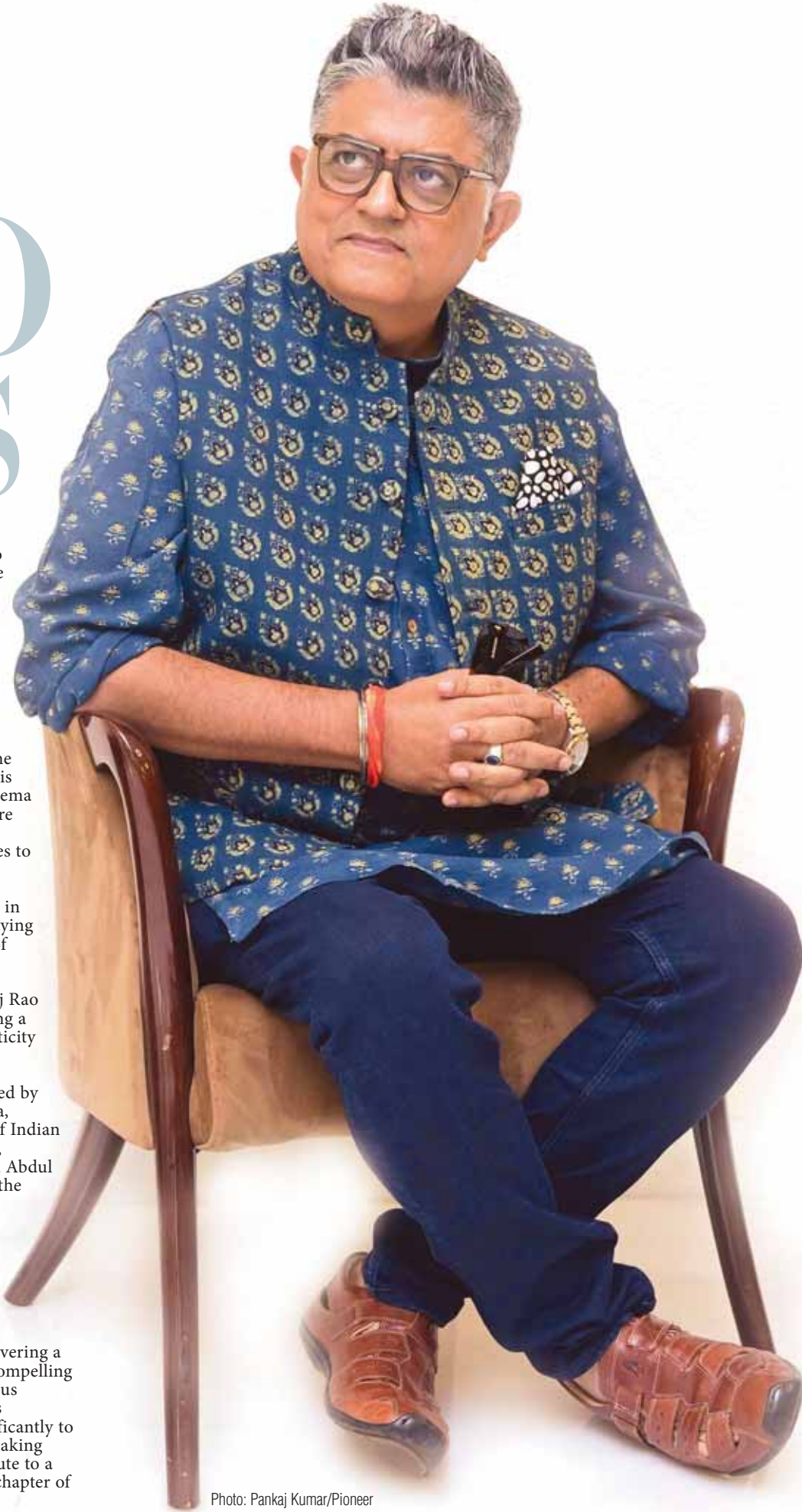


Photo: Pankaj Kumar/Pioneer

Reflections on Acting, Challenges and Audience Influence

MAHESH THAKUR shares insights into his illustrious acting career, spanning television and cinema. From memorable roles to industry evolution, he reflects on the challenges and successes that have shaped him as an artist. In a conversation with **SAKSHI PRIYA**, he also opens up about his recent show *Aangan Aapno Kaa*, shedding light on his experience playing a father's role in this heartwarming project

What motivates you to continue acting and how do you view the role of the audience in your career?

I get the audience's love and reaction. Being an actor means experiencing the audience's reactions, which keep me going. They encourage me to do better. I would say it is the audience that inspires me to act.

Among the numerous characters you've portrayed, which role has been the most memorable for you and why?

I think a role that is very different from my personality would be Tej Singh Oberoi from *Ishqbaaz*. That character is nothing like me and I had to create a persona that was really nasty, cunning and thought differently. It's a really interesting character that I played, so I would definitely give credit to that role. Generally, the roles I play are similar to my personality and I feel that's not very challenging but the role in *Ishqbaaz* was challenging. Playing the honorable Prime Minister Narendra Modi was also challenging because it is difficult to embody a character who is very much in the public eye. Another challenging role was playing Sadhu Vaswani. All these characters are memorable because they are different from who I am.

You've often played positive characters. Did you relish the opportunity to portray a villain in *Ishqbaaz*, and how did you approach that transformation?

First of all, in television, we have very different ways of working. The episodes and scripts come on set, so we don't have time to

do much homework. My basic approach in the initial days when I worked on any television character, which is very different from the rest, is to do a lot of reading. I read one to six episodes, and once I am done with reading, I try to get into the character and experiment with different voice modulations in my own space. I try taking pauses when delivering dialogues and ensure that I don't repeat certain expressions. In *Ishqbaaz*, my character was so negative that I didn't want my kids to watch it, as they were very young at that time.

What have been some of the biggest challenges and successes in your acting career and how have they shaped you as an artist?

One of the biggest challenges in my acting career was transitioning to television. When I started doing daily soaps, I realised that you put in just as much hard work as you do in films but it's for one telecast. After that, it's gone and often forgotten. As actors, we used to be very particular about giving a fantastic shot, striving for perfection. However, in television, you don't have much time. You get only a few minutes and maybe 4 to 5 takes to get the shot right. No matter how perfect a shot I gave, there was always room for improvement, but in television, it often goes unnoticed because it airs only once and then it's long gone. This was a learning experience for me, helping me understand that, at the end of the day, actors are a product of the writing and direction. It's not just about the actor. Many actors in the

industry think it's all about them, believing that their performance alone makes a movie or show a hit. But that's not true. It's teamwork that makes a project successful. TV has taught me humility as an actor. It made me realise that while an actor might attract the audience for the initial viewing, it's the combined effort of the entire team that makes a lasting impact.

You've seen the television industry evolve over the years. How do you think it has changed, and what are your thoughts on the current trends in TV shows and content?

Yes, definitely. The sensibility has changed. Audiences are now more open to rich subjects and they have a say in what they want to see. You can't disregard the audience today. You have to be very careful. People always try to bifurcate between whether a film is for villagers, town people or two-tier towns. I think that divide is disappearing. We have to ensure that the content generated is not just to cater to one segment, as the divide is reducing between these three categories, thanks to the internet. Everyone now has access to all sorts of content. So, as a content creator, you have to keep everyone in mind, not just a single type of audience.

Looking back on your time working with Sridevi, is there a specific scene or moment from *Malini Iyer* that stands out in your memory?

Sridevi Ma'am was and will always be a legend because she was one of the first heroines where movies were made if she said yes to a project, like



Chandni, Lamhe, and all these beautiful films she was a part of. No matter how much I say about her or praise her, it will always be less.

Recently, you are working on a project, *Aangan Aapno Kaa*. How has your experience been playing the father's role in this project?

I am playing the character of a dad, and it's great. As I said, you need a good team of actors, and we have a very good team here,

especially my daughter, with whom I am very close and interact with often. There are always lots of hugging scenes, giving love, and treating them like babies, so we have to get into a very comfortable zone. Even on the set, they call me Papa instead of Mahesh Ji, and I am good with that. They are very sweet co-actors.

What was your experience like working on *Dil, Dosti Dilemma*, especially considering the

fantastic team of women involved, from the director to the producer?

Dil, Dosti Dilemma was great fun because we had a fantastic team filled with women, from the director to the producer. It was nice seeing all the women coming into action and working so brilliantly as a team. I enjoyed my time in *Dil, Dosti Dilemma*, and it was shot beautifully. The story was one of the simplest out there on the streaming platform. You can watch it and have a great time with your loved ones. It was an extremely sweet story, and I just loved working on the project.

How do you approach acting in different mediums like films, television and web series? Do you have a preference among these mediums?

An actor is always an actor; they should not choose any medium. The only difference between TV and film is not that much. The major difference between working in front of the camera and on stage is significant. When you go on stage, there is a difference in working in front of the camera. In front of the camera, you have to take care of lights, know which dialogue to say and when and work with the cameraman, co-actors and director, so there are lots of things happening in one shot. It's pretty complicated for a person who starts straight in TV and film because lots are happening on sets. When you do a stage, it's all about you. You forget your line, you're supposed to carry on; you are not supposed to stand blank on the stage because you have a live audience watching you. So, that's more challenging,

I feel, for actors working on stage because it's all about dialogue delivery, trying to work on body language, so much is happening on stage that it's more of a challenge rather than working in the medium of TV and film. Acting on TV and film is also challenging but not as challenging as the stage. Also, if you're good on stage, it doesn't mean you can be good in front of the TV and camera because you have to control your expression and not go too loud because TV is a subtle medium. One thing I learned about the theatre is that in theatre, you have to pronounce your words; you cannot speak loudly. The last person sitting on the back bench in the auditorium should be able to listen to you. It's not about raising your voice; it's literally pronunciation which goes right up to the end.

Many actors look up to your career. What piece of advice would you give to someone just starting out in television acting?

To all the new actors, hang in there. Hanging in doesn't mean losing your patience, balance or giving up. This is one of the most difficult professions you could choose. If you have multiple choices, I would say let acting be the last one you go for. But if you are going for it, then be resilient. You have to be there because you never know when the right break will happen for you and when things will start working in your favor. Don't give up. If you are an actor, you should think about it as always being an actor; otherwise, you will never get anywhere. So, choose your profession wisely.

YOUR WEEK AHEAD

MADHU KOTIYA



ARIES March 21-April 19

This week promises a blend of prosperity and challenge. Financial gains are anticipated from multiple avenues, boosting your earnings. However, a busy schedule and possible travel for work might lead to stress. Expect a twist of sudden changes as the week progresses. Embracing a mindset of detachment from unproductive ties can enrich your life, leading to greater depth and fulfillment. Towards the week's close, you might find yourself driven by a strong urge to acquire wealth and possessions, although these might not hold substantial value. Caution is advised against starting new projects now, as impulsive actions could lead to setbacks. Staying optimistic will be a challenge, but maintaining a positive outlook is crucial to navigate through any negativity.

Lucky number 10 | **Lucky colour** White
Lucky day Monday



LEO July 23-Aug 22

This period heralds a time of divine favor and blessings, making you the focal point of your own narrative filled with joy, marvel, and revitalization. You will find harmony across your mental, spiritual, and physical states. Expect your standing to be positively influenced during this time. A surge of bravery, optimism, and creativity will infuse your days, and you'll find relief in concluding longstanding matters. You are on the brink of embracing new perspectives and opportunities that promise a brighter future. Anticipate changes that might include new routines, dietary plans, employment, or even acquiring a new vehicle. Embrace the possibility of novel experiences and ventures. The conclusion of the week promises familial happiness and the potential for significant commitments or collaborations, fostering a sense of fulfillment on both emotional and spiritual fronts.

Lucky number 6 | **Lucky colour** Black
Lucky day Sunday



SAGITTARIUS Nov 22-Dec 21

This week, delve into the profound realm of inner resilience. Rather than succumbing to the sway of emotions, you are invited to cultivate a grounded spirit and composed demeanor. This strength stems from the depth of your character and empowers you to navigate through complexities with a clear heart, stripping away any deceptions. During this period, you may find inspiration and guidance from a wise individual, often a woman known for her deep understanding and sharp intuition. Consider embracing her insights or emulating her approach as you chart your path forward. Additionally, this is an opportune moment for spiritual awakening. Engage in mindfulness practices such as meditation or yoga, and reconnect with your spiritual beliefs. Let go of mere fantasies and fleeting dreams; the journey ahead calls for your undivided focus and authentic presence.

Lucky number 17 | **Lucky colour** Off White
Lucky day Monday



TAURUS April 20-May 20

This week presents an excellent opportunity to harness your inherent creativity to generate income. You possess a unique strength bestowed upon you, allowing you to turn your visions into reality. Positive developments are expected from the decisions you make. Your diverse abilities to articulate every thought clearly will leave a lasting impression on those around you, signaling a prosperous period ahead. Mid-week, you may encounter some temporary constraints causing delays in your activities. However, your perseverance and resolve will guide you through, keeping you on track toward your objectives. Expect some encouraging news from abroad. By the end of this week, you will find both financial stability and emotional satisfaction.

Lucky number 3 | **Lucky colour** Red
Lucky day Wednesday



VIRGO Aug 23-Sep 22

This week, you'll find yourself making firm decisions regarding both your home life and career. Your resilient nature will empower you to tackle life's hurdles with bravery. You may encounter disagreements and personality clashes, which will require a thoughtful approach to resolve. It's a time for reevaluating outdated beliefs and customs, inviting transformation in various areas such as work, living arrangements, and personal relationships. You might face some health challenges or overwhelming stress. Feeling a pull towards deepening your inner life will be significant during these trying moments. As the week progresses, a shift towards positivity will occur. You'll start feeling more at ease, healthier, and financially stable, leading to an overall sense of satisfaction and a desire for a more comfortable lifestyle. Your compassionate nature will drive you to support those in need.

Lucky number 9 | **Lucky colour** Indigo
Lucky day Friday



CAPRICORN Dec 22-Jan 19

This week promises to be a whirlwind of activity, touching on every facet of your life. It kicks off with a focus on home-related matters. For those unattached, significant commitments loom on the horizon. As the week progresses, expect some travel opportunities to arise. Your professional life will consume much of your time as you strive for excellence in your craft, working tirelessly toward your aspirations. Additionally, a joyful family event, possibly welcoming a new member, may occur. By the week's end, the fruits of your labor will become apparent, with a notable improvement in your financial situation. Job seekers can anticipate receiving a promising offer from a prestigious company. It's a period to savor success and feel content.

Lucky number 1 | **Lucky colour** Jade Green
Lucky day Tuesday



GEMINI May 21-June 20

This week promises abundant reasons for joy. Life feels vibrant, and your journey is brightly lit by optimism. An uplifting energy seems to accompany you in all your endeavors, attracting others with your ability to spotlight the positive aspects of life and bring warmth to those around you. Midweek may bring a few challenges that could shake your composure, but rest assured, these are merely fleeting shadows. Soon, you will experience a renewed sense of fulfillment as if a benevolent force is aligning things in your favor. You'll likely notice significant advancements in your endeavors, marveling at the extent of your efforts towards achieving your goals. Expect improved outcomes in ongoing projects and a surge in recognition, possibly leading to opportunities that expand your horizons.

Lucky number 5 | **Lucky colour** Green
Lucky day Tuesday



LIBRA Sep 23-Oct 22

This week brims with opportunity and creativity. Your enthusiasm will surge, compelling you to embrace challenges with confidence. An inspiring thought or vision may captivate you, indicating you're on a successful trajectory, adept at managing both personal and professional obligations. Midweek brings moments of joy with family gatherings and celebrations, enhancing your emotional well-being. Significant achievements such as home renovations, celebratory events in honor of familial accomplishments, or exciting career developments like new roles or projects will contribute to your contentment. You'll find the environment charged with positive energy, making every moment enjoyable. By week's end, your resolve and strength serve as a beacon of inspiration, reflecting your successful endeavors.

Lucky number 11 | **Lucky colour** Yellow
Lucky day Wednesday



AQUARIUS Jan 20-Feb 18

This week, you will find yourself embracing life with grand enthusiasm and a sense of accomplishment. Expect to see substantial progress in your professional endeavors, accompanied by significant financial rewards that you might indulge in generously. Family demands will be met with your usual kindness and generosity, adding to your joy. Your partner may have some additional expectations during this period, yet you'll address these with openness and affection. Happiness within the household will be palpable, particularly through achievements or milestones reached by younger family members. However, some of you may experience a need for extra attention to your health, as emotional fluctuations or physical concerns could briefly disrupt your equilibrium. Remember to prioritize your well-being amidst the bustling activity.

Lucky number 14 | **Lucky colour** Mustard
Lucky day Friday



CANCER June 21-July 22

This period marks a crucial phase where your efforts lay the foundation for future outcomes. Progress might unfold gradually, yet your perseverance will ensure significant achievements. Harness your inner strength to tackle necessary tasks effectively, earning recognition and appreciation for your diligence. Your diverse skills will come to the forefront, drawing admiration for your resilience and drive. Your role as an inspirational force will uplift those around you. Effective communication will enhance your rapport with both peers and leaders, fostering a harmonious work environment. As the week concludes, a fresh wave of innovative thinking will enhance your projects, boosting your productivity in your professional pursuits. Additionally, you will experience a vibrant zest for life, enhancing both your personal joy and interpersonal connections. Embrace this time to relish and enrich your experiences.

Lucky number 12 | **Lucky colour** Lavender
Lucky day Thursday



SCORPIO Oct 23-Nov 21

Despite your consistent efforts across various fronts to secure a job, it seems that success remains elusive for now. Your dedication and drive are evident, but it appears financial gains might be challenging to come by this week. However, do not lose hope. As the days pass, promising opportunities are expected to emerge, potentially leading to significant achievements. You'll find support from influential figures in your life, such as family elders, who are eager to see you succeed. Remember, patience will be your greatest ally during this period. Maintaining a solid foundation in your endeavors will eventually lead to favorable outcomes. Stand firm as you approach the final steps towards your goal, for success is on the horizon, promising long-lasting benefits and broader opportunities.

Lucky number 16 | **Lucky colour** Purple
Lucky day Saturday



PISCES Feb 19-March 20

This week promises an increase in material well-being, inviting a deeper search for inner peace. You may find yourself drawn to reflective practices like yoga and meditation. Expect to devote time to hosting meaningful ceremonies that uplift the spirit. However, the week may also present challenges in your personal relationships, possibly causing friction or misunderstandings with a close partner. Such moments could lead to feelings of dissatisfaction and a sense of being emotionally drained. It's crucial now to clarify your aspirations and focus on the positive aspects of your circumstances. Viewing situations from a more optimistic perspective can prevent feelings of sadness and help you navigate through negativity with courage and resolve. Stay determined and use this period to strengthen rather than lose spirit.

Lucky number 15 | **Lucky colour** Brown
Lucky day Thursday

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Can we reshape our destiny?

We begin life with high hopes and aspirations, bubbling with energy, and carrying a mind-set that would know no limits, as if nothing is beyond reach. Like a free bird, free from any geographical limitations, unhindered, we all wish to make it to our dream destination. But when faced with hard realities of life, and not being able to make it to the desired destination, we realise that life does not necessarily move to our asking. We then come under pressure and often resign to fate. But a few among us, unfazed by such challenges, make history. The question now is: Were those who created history so destined? Or that they could make it because they sincerely worked towards that end? Well, it is difficult to digest that history can be created by choice. But then focused efforts by choice and discrimination could lead to making history. Provided, such an endeavour ends up serving a meaningful purpose for the society at large. Let us first examine how our destiny is formed. It needs to be appreciated here that human beings enjoy the

exclusive privilege to guide their action by choice and discrimination. That however, is something like a double edged sword, as it carries equal probability of use and misuse. And there is nothing like a free lunch in life. We shall have to bear with the consequences of the choices made. We, thus, get trapped into a circuitous web of cause-effect chain. Following this very script, every happening is the culmination of doings in the past. And how we negotiate with the callings of the present, sets the ground on which future stands. This is the premise on which the concept of destiny works. If we look at this scheme of things on its face value, it would mean that our life is fated. Naturally arises the question: How can we escape the consequences of our own doing? If, however, we look deep into the founding principle on which the concept of destiny stands, it will come out that we are not helplessly fated beyond the scope of reprieve. The choice option itself enjoins upon us with the freedom to make conscientious choice intended to not simply overcome the carryover effect



of past doing. Also raise our awareness level through fresh educative inputs, which in turn, may help reshape the course of destiny afresh. The paradox, however, is that

seldom are people found ever using this option. But those few who used their choice option in this very spirit, were the ones who could make history. For, even in the event of failure, they

did not lose their nerve. They rather maintained calm and poise, geared up afresh, reaffirmed their resolve, and then made a fresh bid in right earnest towards the designated task. But not without identifying their inadequacies, which they acknowledged and then strived to overcome. They then, explored beyond the known, and equipped themselves adequately to strike upon even uncharted territory. So said swami Vevekanand: "The history of the world is the history of few men who had faith in themselves. Faith calls out divinity within you; you can do everything. You fail only when you do not strive sufficiently to manifest infinite power within." Truth remains that in so far as a being's making is concerned, potentially we carry immense mind-power, which if unfolded in full, would know no limits. The irony, however, is that being bound by cause-effect chain, we carry a very strong legacy from the past, which includes previous birth. That preconditions our mind one way or the other, depending on what sort of individual specific experiences one would have had. The

imprints of these experiences that mind carries from the past, defines the unique character of a being. And that finds reflection by way of our inherent mental propensities – desire trends, likes & dislikes, prejudices and obsessions, habit & attitudes, and even virtues & attributes. That clouds our vision. Consequently, we fail to access full landscape of our mind. So, in effect, our mind-power gets compromised. It needs to be appreciated here that the choice option available with us very much enjoins upon us with the privilege to self-reflect and identify our inborn fault-lines. If we acknowledge them, and then consciously work upon to free our mind from all such limitations, the best in us will emerge. This is what swamiji's above quoted statement implies. Even astrology can prove handy in identifying our inborn traits and with a fair amount of precision. *The issue continues...*
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