EC's independence doesn't stem from judicial member's presence

In affidavit, Centre defends dropping CJI from selection panel

New Delhi

Defending the recent appointment of two new election commissioners (ECs) by a panel that excluded the Chief Justice of India, the Centre on Wednesday said that the independence of the poll body does not arise from the presence of a member of the judiciary in the selection committee.

The remark came in an affidavit filed by the Union Law Ministry in the Supreme Court against a batch of pleas, one of which claimed that the two election commissioners were hastily appointed on March 14 to "pre-empt" the orders of the top court the next day, when the matters challenging the 2023 law were listed for hearing on interim relief.

Retired IAS officers Gyanesh Kumar and Sukhbir Singh Sandhu were appointed as the two ECs last week under the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Terms of Office) Act, 2023.

"It is submitted that the case of the petitioners is premised on one fundamental fallacy that the independence can only be maintained in any authority when the selection committee is of a particular formulation. It must be noted that the independence of the Election commission, or any other organisation or authority, does not arise from and is not attributable to the presence of a judicial member in the selection committee," the affidavit said.

It further said that high constitutional functionaries are presumed to act fairly, and that their competence and eligibility cannot be questioned. It added that the

petitioners, which included Congress leader Jaya Thakur and the Association for Democratic Reforms, were trying to create a "political controversy".

Refuting the petitioners' claim that no list of probable appointees was shared with the Opposition, the Centre submitted that the names of short-listed persons were made available to Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury on March 13, after the search committee had finalised

six names for recommendation.

"It is, therefore, wholly wrong, misleading and malicious to suggest that the third member of the Selection Committee was given the shortlisted names as an act of premeditation on the mind of the two members of the Executive as all the members received the list simultaneously. Furthermore, the list of dates clearly brings out the fact that profiles of all eligible persons were shared with the leader of the single largest opposition party in the Lok Saba on March 13, 2024."

It may be noted that the persons finally appointed were from the list so shared. This belies the claim of the petitioners that no list was shared in advance of the meeting," the affidavit

said.

The Centre contended that a "political controversy" has been sought to be created only on the basis of "bare, unsupported and pernicious" statements about certain vague and unspecified motives behind the appointment.

It said the credentials of those finally appointed as election commissioners have at no point been called into question and no objection whatsoever has been raised about the fitness, eligibility or competence of any of the persons named in the list to serve as election commissioner.

"Where no question has been raised about the qualifications of candidates to hold a constitutional post nor has any material been brought on record to show that the candidates are unfit for office, no prima facie case can be said to have been made out. On that ground alone, the application for stay ought to be dismissed," the affidavit said.

Arguing that the the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Terms of Office) Act, 2023 is a significant improvement in the appointment process of election commissioners, the Centre said it provides for a more democratic, collaborative, and inclusive exercise.

The affidavit refuted the petitioners' claims of executive overreach and encroachment on the Election Commission's autonomy.

INDIA bloc leaders frustrated: CM Eknath Shinde

Mumbai

Maharashtra CM Eknath Shinde on Monday dubbed the INDIA bloc rally held in Mumbai a day before as the gathering of leaders rejected by voters who are frustrated over not being in power.

Leaders of the INDIA grouping launched the poll campaign at the mega rally, a day after the schedule for the general elections was announced by the Election Commission.

The Sunday rally of INDIA bloc leaders was nothing but a gathering of people who were rejected by voters. Their frustration over not being in power was visible on their faces. How can such rejected people even claim to remove PM Modi from power?" asked Shinde while speaking to reporters.

He said the Opposition bloc does not have any prime ministerial face against Narendra Modi. "Their hatred towards Modi was visible on their faces. This INDIA bloc is a political compromise that lacks confidence. You should have seen their faces when Rahul Gandhi was speaking," Shinde said.

He targeted Thackeray over his opening remarks. Thackeray had addressed the audience as his "deshbhakt and deshpremi brothers and sisters" instead of the traditional invocation of "Hindu brothers and sisters".

In Maharashtra, Congress likely to field 15 candidates

New Delhi

The Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) is learnt to have finalised the seat-sharing formula in Maharashtra for the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls. According to sources, Shiv Sena (Uddhav Thackeray) is expected to contest from 23 seats, Congress from 15, NCP (Sharad Pawar) from six and Prakash Ambedkar's Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) is likely to contest from four seats.

According to sources aware of the developments, a meeting of the Congress' screening committee for Maharashtra will be held on Tuesday. After this, the central election committee of the party is to be convened. A formal announcement on seat sharing in Maharashtra is likely to happen this week. There are 48 Lok Sabha seats in Maharashtra. While the Shiv Sena (Uddhav Thackeray) is said to have got almost all the seats on which it had contested in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the Congress, which had managed to win only from Chandrapur at that time, will again be contesting from there apart from 14 more seats, sources said.

The MVA is hoping to consolidate the Dalit vote with the inclusion of VBA in its fold, which sources said, will help in cutting into BJP-led NDA's vote bank in the state.

Meanwhile, the BJP-led Mahayuti is also learnt to have finalised its seat-sharing arrangement in Maharashtra. The BJP is likely to contest 30 seats, with Shiv Sena (Eknath Shinde) to fight from 13 seats and NCP (Ajit Pawar) to contest from five seats.

A united Shiv Sena had won 18 seats in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections in alliance with the NDA. Later, the party split into two factions after Eknath Shinde had broken ranks in June 2022.

Fake encounter: Bombay High Court hands life term to ex-cop and controversial encounter specialist Pradeep Sharma

Mumbai

The Bombay High Court on Tuesday convicted and sentenced former policeman and controversial encounter specialist, Pradeep Sharma, to life imprisonment, and upheld the conviction of 13 other accused in the 2006 fake encounter of Ramnarayan Gupta, an alleged close aide of gangster Chhota Rajan.

A division bench of Justices Revati Mohite Dere and Gauri Godse said the "prosecution has proved that Gupta was killed by the police, by trigger-happy cops, and the same was made to look like a genuine encounter".

The high court upheld the conviction and life sentence imposed on 13 other accused in the case -- 12 former policemen and a civilian.

The bench in its judgment said the "protectors/guardians of law cannot be permitted to act as criminals in uniform and if this is permitted then it would lead to anarchy".

The court noted that the prosecution has proved beyond reasonable doubt the kidnapping, wrongful confinement and killing of Gupta in a fake encounter with "credible, cogent and legally admissible evidence".

"We find that the prosecution has proved beyond reasonable doubt that Ramnarayan was killed brutally in cold blood by the accused when he was in their custody and that to cover up the same, they gave it the colour of a genuine encounter," the high court said.

The bench quashed the 2013 judgment passed by a sessions court acquitting Sharma due to lack of evidence.

The high court deemed the lower court's order as "perverse and unsustainable", highlighting glaring irregularities in the previous judgment.

"The trial court had overlooked the overwhelming evidence available against Sharma. The common chain of evidence unerringly proves his involvement in the case," the court said.

On November 11, 2006, a police team picked up Ramnarayan Gupta alias Lakkhan Bhaiya from the Vashi area in neighbouring Navi Mumbai, along with his friend Anil Bheda, and killed him in a staged encounter near Versova in western Mumbai the same evening.

'Not brand Modi, only brand Thackeray works in Maharashtra,' says Uddhav

Hingoli

Amid speculations of possible alliance between the BJP and the Raj Thackeray-led Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), Shiv Sena (UBT) chief and Raj Thackeray's estranged cousin Uddhav Thackeray Tuesday said that the developments show that only brand "Thackeray" can garner votes in Maharashtra and not brand "Modi".

Uddhav also termed the BJP a "gang of extortionists" and slammed the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) president Ajit Pawar for allegedly breaking away from the NCP led by Sharad Pawar and for "stealing the party name and poll symbol".

"They (BJP) have understood that they have nothing to show and get votes in the state. Hence they are trying to steal people from outside. They know that they would not get the votes in the name of (Prime Minister) Modi in Maharashtra. The voting takes place only to the brand Thackeray. Earlier they stole my father's photo and name but I think it was not enough so they are trying to steal another Thackeray (Raj Thackeray)," Uddhav said while reacting to the possible alliance between MNS and BJP.

He was addressing a public rally in Hingoli Lok Sabha constituency.

Shiv Sena (UBT) leader and party's Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Raut said the possible alliance would not make any difference. "Many 'Shahs' like these who tried to attack the state, have been taught a lesson by the people of the state. If anyone is trying to help those who are trying to attack Maharashtra, then the people of the state would not tolerate it."

Opposition Congress also on Tuesday asked whether the BJP will now have courage to seek votes from north Indians in Mumbai who were beaten up by the MNS workers.

"The BJP is including a party which opposed Chhat Puja, beat north Indians and spread hatred against the north Indians. Will BJP have courage to seek votes from north Indians after joining hands with the MNS?" asked Maharashtra Congress chief spokesperson Atul Londhe.

Londhe asked as to why a party which is claiming to be winning 400 plus Lok Sabha seats in general elections is seeking the entry of a party with a single MLA in its alliance. "The real reason for making MNS enter the alliance is that the BJP has accepted its defeat in Maharashtra," he said.

Welcoming the move, Maharashtra Minister and Shinde Sena leaer Shambhuraj Desai said that MNS's ideology is of Hindutva and it follows the thoughts of Balasaheb Thackeray. "If anyone is joining our fold to make Narendra Modi a prime minister for the third time then they are welcome," he said.

Meanwhile, in his address in Hingoli, Uddhav Thackeray termed Ajit Pawar as a "shameless child". "The Supreme Court gave its observation on the NCP split last week. He (Ajit Pawar) stole the party and the name of that party which Sharad Pawar had founded. He (Ajit Pawar) also used his (Sharad Pawar) name and photos," Thackeray said.

"The BJP has officially become a gang of extortionists. They steal people from other parties and break opposition parties," Thackeray added.

'Like medicines, relationships too expire': Ajit's brother on him leaving Pawar senior

Mumbai

Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar's younger brother Shrinivas Pawar's criticism over the former leaving the side of NCP(SP) chief and uncle Sharad Pawar has now led to party leaders going on to claim that the entire family had turned against Ajit over his decision to join hands with the BJP.

"When we spoke after the split, I told him, 'you continue to contest the Baramati assembly seat and the Lok Sabha elections from here will be contested under (Sharad) Pawar saheb's leadership'," Shrinivas Pawar was heard saying in an undated video from Baramati at a gathering of villagers. Shrinivas said Sharad had backed Ajit Pawar's decisions, made him Deputy CM four times and minister for 25 years, and that it was unworthy of someone to speak ill about such a benefactor's old age. While adding he was not ready to leave Sharad's side just because the latter was 83 years old, Shrinivas said that some of friends had advised him to side with Ajit as the future lay with him. "This thought that we are not at all sensitive about an elderly person is very painful for me. Anyone who has such a thought is an unworthy person," Shrinivas said in reference to Ajit Pawar's frequent criticism of his uncle's age and advice to retire.

Reacting to Shrinivas's video, another legislator from Pawar family, Rohit Pawar – grandnephew of Sharad Pawar – said that Shrinivas had taken a stand that every common citizen felt. "(Sharad) Pawar saheb gave an identity to the family and none in the family have liked the stand taken by Ajit Pawar. Family never abandoned him, but he stands alone because of his decisions," said Rohit Pawar.

Sharad Pawar supporter and NCP MLA Jitendra Awhad said the NCP(SP) chief always worked hard to keep the family united. "Ajit Pawar has been consistently speaking against Sharad and that is the reason why there is anger against him in the house," said Awhad.

Ex-Sena UBT corporator's murder: Kin say probe 'not in right direction', to move HC

Mumbai

The family members of former Shiv Sena (UBT) corporator Abhishek Ghosalkar, who was murdered during a Facebook live streaming, Tuesday alleged that the probe by police in the murder case is "not in the right direction" and decided that they will approach the Bombay High Court seeking the transfer of investigation to another agency.

Ghosalkar was allegedly shot dead in Borivali on February 8 by Mauris Noronha, who later died by suicide.

In a press conference held at Shiv Sena Bhavan Mumbai, Abhishek's wife Tejaswee alleged that she could have also been killed by Noronha as he had told Abhishek to bring her to his office on February 8 for a saree distribution function.

"Noronha had asked Abhishek to also bring me to the function where he was invited. Abhishek had also told me to come with him. But since I was getting late, he asked me to go to another function. This means the accused must have conspired to kill me as well…"

Tejaswee further alleged that the family members are not being given information about the progress of the investigation.

She claimed that the family had on March 4 requested to the Commissioner of Police to add Section 120 B and Section 34 of IPC in the FIR but it has not been accepted. "The investigation is not going in the right direction. The information gathered by us regarding the investigation was submitted to the investigating agency and the Commissioner of Police on February 28 along with the CCTV footage. At the time of the murder, there was a demand for an in-depth investigation into the activities of Amarendra Mishra (bodyguard of Noronha), and unknown persons at the said place. But the police does not seem to have done a thorough investigation in this regard so far," Tejaswee said.

"In view of all this, I am going to file a writ petition in the High Court through my lawyer Bhushan Mahadik requesting to transfer the investigation to another agency," she added.

Abhishek's father former Sena MLA Vinod Ghosalkar said that even 40 days after the incident, the probe was going "directionless" and in a "slow pace".

After this murder, the statements made by Home Minister (Devendra Fadnavis), Ministers Uday Samant and Chhagan Bhujbal are irresponsible and divert from the original issue and create confusion among the people. In the legislative council, the statement made by the Home Minister was political, heart-wrenching and painful. This has also changed the direction of investigation," Vinod Ghosalkar said.

Ghosalkar alleged that the accused had connections with high-ranking political leaders and had ambitions to enter in politics and took advantage of it to plot removal our family from politics."If the chargesheet is not filed within 90 days, it will benefit the accused. We will appeal to the HC. I am appealing to the people who made statements to provide the police with concrete evidence so that it will be easier for the investigating agency," Ghosalkar said.

Raj Thackeray meets Shah; BJP, MNS deal on the table

New Delhi

A pre-Lok Sabha election arrangement between the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) and BJP is on the cards with MNS chief Raj Thackeray meeting Union Home Minister Amit Shah in the capital on Tuesday.

Raj Thackeray was accompanied by BJP general secretary Vinod Tawde in the meeting with Shah. Although details of the alliance would be divulged later, it is learnt that MNS could get one Lok Sabha seat to contest and one Rajya Sabha seat.

In Mumbai, MNS leader Bala Nandgaonkar said talks were "positive".

Maha Vikas Aghadi allies Congress and NCP attacked the development saying BJP was "betraying" north Indians. Raj Thackeray's anti-north Indian remarks in the past have drawn ire from across quarters.

Shiv Sena (UBT) leader Uddhav Thackeray accused the BJP of trying to "steal a Thackeray" to win elections.

NCP-Sharadchandra Pawar leader Supriya Sule said MNS could have joined the Maha Vikas Aghadi.

Journalists covering poll-day activity, people in essential services can vote using postal ballots

New Delhi

Mediapersons covering "polling day activities" carrying authorisation letters of the Election Commission and those part of essential services such as metros, railways and health care can vote using postal ballots in the Lok Sabha and four state assembly polls.

The Election Commission (EC) has shared its notification with all state chief electoral officers regarding the categories of "absentee voters on essential service", identified for voting through postal ballots. While journalists on poll-day coverage and those involved in essential services have been using postal ballots during assembly elections, the facility has been extended for Lok Sabha polls. "Mediapersons to whom authorisation letters have been issued with the approval of the commission to cover polling day activities" are among the various categories identified for the use of postal ballots. An EC spokesperson said mediapersons in Delhi who are authorised by the commission for coverage on poll day can avail themselves of the option of casting their vote through postal ballots. They can collect Form 12D from the office of the respective district election officer of their parliamentary constituency where they are registered as a voter. They can also download the form from the website of the respective chief electoral officer. Besides absentee voters, postal ballots are also available to service voters. Service voters are personnel of the armed forces posted away from their hometowns, Central Armed Police Forces personnel deployed away from home and those on poll duty. Besides, state police personnel on election duty, polling personnel and embassy staff on postings abroad can also use this facility.

PFI man held in RSS leader's murder case

Kochi

The Indian Coast Guard said on Tuesday that it has successfully rescued eight people from a "sunken boat" in the waters off the Lakshadweep coast.

According to a statement from a Defence PRO on social media, the boat experienced a technical malfunction while on a routine inter-island voyage from Agatti island to Androth.

This malfunction caused the boat to drift, remaining untraceable for a duration of three days.

"The @IndiaCoastGuard has successfully carried out the rescue operation of 08 survivors from the sunken boat #MSVVararthaRajan (CLR 192)", the PRO said in a post on 'X'.

"As the boat had been overdue for over 72 hours, the #ICG promptly initiated an air-sea coordinated rescue operation on #18Mar24. With exceptional efficiency, all survivors of the sunken boat were swiftly located & safely rescued by the crew of #ICGSSaksham," it said.

The PRO further said following an initial medical examination, the eight people are now being handed over to the fisheries department.

Sangeeta Azad of BSP joins BJP

New Delhi

Nearly a month after BSP's Ambedkar Nagar MP Ritesh Pandey joined the BJP, his ex-party colleague Sangeeta Azad (Lalganj MP) also switched sides. Azad was inducted into the BJP here on Monday by BJP national general secretary Vinod Tawde, UP Deputy CM Brajesh Pathak and state BJP chief Bhupendra Singh.

Sangeeta was accompanied by husband Azad Ari Mardan, a former UP MLA, and Supreme Court lawyer Seema Kushwaha.

Kushwaha was the legal counsel for victim of the the 2012 Delhi gangrape and murder case that shook the nation and spurred amendments to criminal laws to make punishments for sexual assault severe and expand the definition of sexual assault.

Azad termed Prime Minister Narendra Modi "yug purush" and said she would do whatever she can to strengthen the BJP.

Indian Coast Guard rescues 8 from sunken boat off Lakshadweep coast

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BJP Will Win All 7 Lok Sabha Seats In Delhi, Says Sushma Swaraj's Daughter

New Delhi

Bansuri Swaraj, the youngest BJP Lok Sabha candidate in Delhi, said the Aam Aadmi Party-Congress alliance is based on "self-interest" and will not impact the prospects of her party which will retain all seven parliamentary seats in the city.

In an interview with Press Trust of India, the daughter of the late BJP veteran Sushma Swaraj, said the slogan "Abki Baar 400 Paar (This time, 400-plus seats)" is not just a catchphrase but a resolve that will be translated into reality with the help of dedicated BJP workers and the support of the people.

The 40-year-old BJP nominee for the New Delhi Lok Sabha constituency said, "There will be no impact of the AAP-Congress alliance in Delhi. We are running a very positive campaign, going among the people with a report card of 10 years."

"The Narendra Modi government did what it said. All promises made in the manifesto, be it removing Article 370, construction of Ram temple or bringing legislation for 33 per cent reservation for women in state assemblies and Parliament, were fulfilled," Bansuri Swaraj said.

She is one of the two women candidates fielded by the BJP in Delhi. The party is vying for a clean sweep on all seven seats in the national capital for the third time in a row.

Ms Swaraj claimed the "AAP-Congress alliance is based on self-interest".

"When there is politics of self-interest, both 'Rastradharma' and 'Rajdharma' are sacrificed. So, this alliance will not survive," she said.

The Aam Aadmi Party is fighting the New Delhi Lok Sabha seat as part of its seat-sharing deal with the Congress. It has fielded Somnath Bharti from the seat.

Ms Swaraj said that she has been receiving a lot of affection from the people while campaigning in the New Delhi constituency. The BJP candidate said that she does not like sitting on a stage and giving speeches.

"Instead go among the people and communicate with them," she told news agency PTI.

"I must have done good deeds in my past lives that I found a mother like Sushma Swaraj. I have imbibed the 'sanskar' I got from her. I believe that in this new chapter of my life, I have her blessings. The affection people have for her is showered on me when I go amidst them," Bansuri Swaraj said.

The BJP candidate said that while campaigning, she was witnessing Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity among the masses, his determination to fulfil promises and the vision of "Viksit Bharat".

"The unfathomable trust of the people in PM Modi can be seen surging now," she said.

About the chances of the BJP's victory in Delhi, Swaraj asserted people of the city have "absolute trust" in Prime Minister Modi's development policies and his guarantees. "It is an assurance of good governance. That is why the people of Delhi will give all seven seats (of the city) to the BJP."

Sharing her vision for the New Delhi constituency, Swaraj said she would make all possible efforts, including taking legal recourse, to ensure that the Modi government's welfare schemes such as Ayushman Bharat, stalled due to "selfish politics" of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, reach the people of Delhi.

"This is one important issue that I will raise after winning the election," she said, adding that she would try to set up a start-up hub in Delhi that will also aid in women's empowerment.

Ms Swaraj said the hub may also have a section for self-help groups of women and it would focus on entrepreneurship.

Reasons why BJP ceded equal share to Nitish Kumar despite 'falling popularity' in Bihar

New Delhi

In 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP and Nitish Kumar's JD-U both contested on 17 seats each and the then undivided Lok Janshakti Party headed by Ram Vilas Paswan on six of the 40 Lok Sabha seats in the state.

But that was a different day and much water had flown in river Ganga in Patna since then.

Kumar has done several somersaults, the last one being in favour of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP ahead of 2024 elections. Several reasons are being cited for his latest U-turn, one of which being 'his falling popularity and dwindling vote share of JD-U'.

However, the popularity of PM Modi and BJP has grown from strength to strength to emerge as a formidable political challenger. Observers, in fact, say the BJP could have won a much bigger number of seats had it gone without JD-U in Bihar this time.

In any case, the BJP was expected to play an upper hand this time and contest on a much larger number of seats than it had in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Instead, the saffron leadership chose to give Nitish Kumar almost

an equal share, just one less seat.

In 2019, BJP and LJP won all their seats and JD (U) 16.

In the seat sharing formula for 2024, BJP will contest in 17 Lok Sabha constituencies, JD (U) 16 and Chirag Paswan's LJP (Ram Vilas) five. The claims of the LJP faction led by Chirag's uncle and Union minister Pashupati Kumar Paras were ignored and other two NDA allies—Hindustani Awam Morcha and Upendra Kushwaha-led Rashtriya Lok Morcha—landed one seat each.

However, this is also the first time the BJP has got more seats than Nitish Kumar-led JD (U) in Bihar, which many believe, "underscores the change in equations after they joined hands a few months back".

Reason number one—scoring a perfect 40

There are various reasons why the BJP chose to give master acrobat Nitish Kumar more than his fair share, observers say.

The man has been in the top post for more than two decades, irrespective of who the people in Bihar vote for.

From 115 seats in 2010 to 71 in 2015 to 43 in 2020, JD(U)'s strength in the Assembly may have been on a slide but Nitish Kumar remains an important cog without which the wheel in Bihar cannot roll. According to state BJP leaders, Nitish Kumar and his party's 15 per cent vote share remains a valuable addition.

This is the primary reason why BJP—a powerful party with a government at the Centre and in several key states, including the biggest of them all Uttar Pradesh—gave in to Nitish Kumar's demands, say sources.

The BJP wants to score a perfect 40 in Bihar to achieve the target set by PM Modi—370 Lok Sabha seats by the BJP and 400 plus by the NDA—all of which would not have been possible without adding Nitish Kumar's share in the kitty of 40 in Bihar, they add.

Former Indian Ambassador to US Taranjit Sandhu joins BJP, to contest Amritsar Lok Sabha seat

New Delhi

Former Indian Ambassador to the US Taranjit Singh Sandhu on Tuesday joined the growing list of former bureaucrats, diplomats and cops opting for politics.

Flanked by saffron top brass, Sandhu, 61, joined the BJP at its national headquarters here, and said he had been encouraged by Union Home Minister Amit Shah to choose a new path for national service.

Sandhu will be BJP's Lok Sabha poll candidate from the Amritsar segment.

Dwelling on his 35 years of government service, capped by a highly successful last stint as the Indian Ambassador to the US, Sandhu said during the last four years, India's ties with the US had "transformed from the level of a relationship to a partnership with American investments in India at an all-time high across diverse sectors such as health, semiconductors, energy and IT".

"Development is the need of the hour. The development

being unleashed in other states of India under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi should reach Amritsar also," said Sandhu, who has been campaigning in Amritsar since early February immediately

after retirement from the Indian Foreign Service.

BJP national general secretaries Tarun Chugh and Vinod Tawde, who inducted Sandhu today, said he had a legacy advantage in the holy city.

The Golden Temple complex in Amritsar houses a hall dedicated to the memory of Sandhu's grandfather Teja Singh Samundri, one of the founders of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, and the only non-Guru to command the honour.

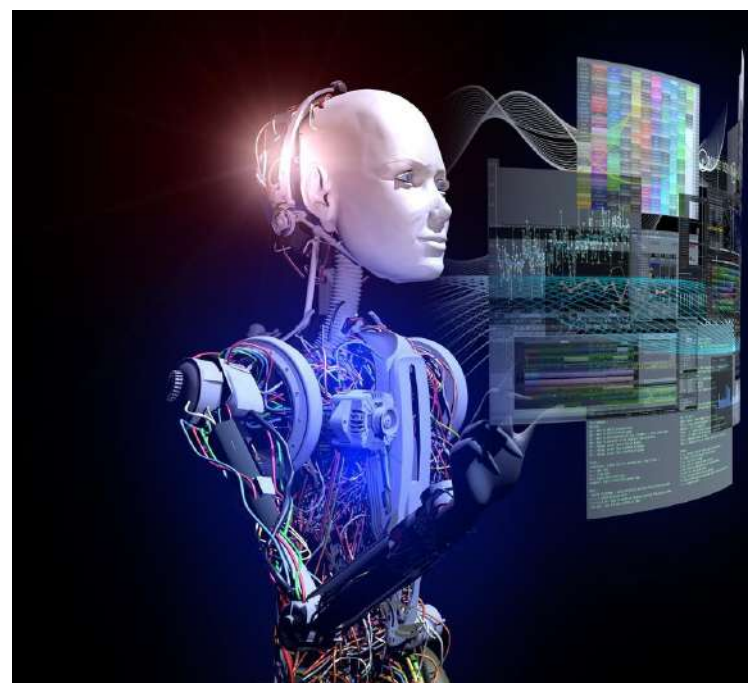# Indian workers with AI skills could see pay hikes of over 54%: Report

New Delhi

When artificial intelligence (AI) is fully harnessed, Indian workers with AI skills and expertise could see salary hikes of more than 54 per cent, with workers in IT (65 per cent), and research and development (62 per cent) enjoying the highest pay increases, a new report said on Tuesday.

According to Amazon Web Services (AWS), 97 per cent of workers in India expect their AI skills to have a positive impact on their careers, including increased job efficiency and career advancement.

"From financial services to construction and retail, industries are embracing AI at a rapid pace, which is why an AI-skilled workforce is essential to unleashing a culture of innovation and driving productivity in India," said Amit Mehta, head of AWS training and certification, AWS India.

The report surveyed over 1,600 workers and 500 employers in India. Moreover, the report mentioned that 95

per cent of Indian workers indicated a keen interest in developing AI skills to accelerate their careers.

About 95 per cent of Gen Z, 96 per cent of millennials, and 93 per cent of Gen X workers want to acquire AI skills, while 90 per cent of baby boomers said they would enrol in an AI upskilling course if it was offered.

Further, the report suggested that employers expect their organisation's productivity to increase by 68 per cent as AI technology automates repetitive tasks (71 per cent), encourages learning of new skills (68 per cent), and improves workflow and outcomes (64 per cent). Workers believe AI could raise their efficiency by as much as 66 per cent.

Ganges, Brahmaputra among major South Asian river basins to feel impact of climate change: Report

New Delhi

The alarming impact of climate change will be felt on South Asia's major river basins, including the Ganges, Indus and Brahmaputra, according to a new report.

It also noted that the critical intersection of anthropogenic activities and shifting climate patterns can spell dire consequences for about a billion people in the area.

According to the report—'Elevating River Basin Governance and Cooperation in the HKH Region'—on these three rivers, there is an immediate need for a climate-resilient approach to river basin management.

The Hindu Kush Himalayas (HKH) are the freshwater sources of South Asia and parts of Southeast Asia. Water originating from their snow, glaciers and rainfall feed the 10 largest river systems in Asia.

The Ganges basin, often regarded as sacred and essential to more than 600 million individuals across the Indian subcontinent, is facing mounting environmental threats. Rapid industrialisation, urbanisation and intensive agricultural practices have exacted a toll on the river's ecological health. The indiscriminate discharge of sewage and industrial waste has severely polluted the water, posing significant risks to both human health and the environment, the report said.

Alongside these anthropogenic activities, the impacts of climate change are exacerbating existing challenges, particularly in the form of escalating flooding and droughts, it said.

The monsoon season—critical for replenishing water resources—now brings devastating floods while dry seasons worsen water scarcity, especially in downstream areas such as Bangladesh.

These climate-related hazards disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, including women, people with disabilities and marginalised communities, the report added.

Similarly, the Indus river—a lifeline for more than 268 million people across Pakistan, India, Afghanistan and China—is under unprecedented stress due to climate change. Rising temperatures, erratic monsoons and environmental degradation are pushing the basin towards a crisis point.

The scale of climate change impacts in the Indus basin is overwhelming, undermining food security, livelihoods and water security, the report said.

Variations in the timing and intensity of monsoon rains are already having profound impacts on the health and sustainability of the basin.

On top of that, environmental degradation, including increasing agricultural and industrial pollution, is degrading the riverine environment, adversely affecting freshwater fisheries and eroding the ecological health of the river, the report said.

These challenges are compounded by existing socioeconomic vulnerabilities, further exacerbating the plight of marginalised communities, it added.

In the Brahmaputra basin, climate change—coupled with dams and development work—is poised to escalate flooding and droughts, particularly in its lower basin.

Glacial melt rates are expected to rise, impacting water availability across the region. While currently there are no major water diversions in the basin, upstream dam construction and climate change projections are likely to reduce dry season flows in downstream areas, affecting millions of lives, the report stated.

Nomination process for 1st phase of Lok Sabha election begins in 102 seats across 21 states and UTs

New Delhi

The nomination process for 102 parliamentary constituencies spread across 21 states and Union territories, where polling would be held in the first phase of the Lok Sabha elections on April 19, began on Wednesday with the issuance of a notification.

According to the notification issued by the Election Commission on behalf of the President, the last date for filing nomination papers is March 27.

However, due to a festival, March 28 is the last date for filing nominations for the Lok Sabha seats in Bihar going to polls in the first phase. Voting in four out of 40 seats in Bihar will be held in the first phase.

Nomination papers will be scrutinised on March 28. For Bihar, it would be done on March 30.

The last date for withdrawal of candidature is March 20 while for Bihar, it is April 2.

The elections to the 18th Lok Sabha will begin on April 19 followed by subsequent phases on April 26, May 7, May 13, May 20, May 25 and June 1. The counting of votes is on June 4.

The states where polling would be held in the first phase are Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Jammu and Kashmir, Lakshadweep and Puducherry.

Congress holds CEC meet, picks candidates for 9 West Bengal seats

New Delhi

The Congress is expected to release its third list of candidates for the Lok Sabha elections on Wednesday. Its Central Election Committee (CEC) met here on Tuesday under the chairmanship of party president Mallikarjun Kharge.

The party finalised candidates for nine West Bengal seats where it is set to contest 12 constituencies even as negotiations with its Left Front allies regarding three seats (Basirhat, Barasat and Purulia) have remained inconclusive. The Chandigarh seat also featured in the CEC meeting. Anandpur Sahib MP Manish Tewari, party's city chief HS Lucky and former Union minister Pawan Bansal are in the contention.

The CEC also discussed candidate selection for Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh. Karnataka CM Siddaramaiah, who was present at the meeting, told mediapersons that the names would be announced on Wednesday.

The Congress has already named candidates for seven of the 28 Karnataka seats. In case of Madhya Pradesh, the Congress has announced the names of 10 candidates.

Meanwhile, stating that the country was looking forward for a change, Kharge said the "guarantees" promised by the present government would meet the same fate as the "India Shining" slogan of the BJP in 2004. The party chief was speaking at a meeting of the Congress Working Committee (CWC) here.

Lok Sabha election crucial for India's democracy, says CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury

New Delhi

The Lok Sabha polls will be crucial in deciding whether the secular democratic character of the country will be maintained as the last 10 years have witnessed an "assault" on the fundamental pillars of democracy, CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury said on Wednesday.

He also asserted that the opposition INDIA bloc is gaining popularity among the people, but a lot will depend on whether all parties get a "level-playing field" in the polls.

In an interview with PTI, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) general secretary also termed the Lok Sabha polls as an "existential election" for the country.

The polls will decide "whether we are going to maintain our secular democratic character or not. The last 10 years have seen a serious erosion, I would call it in fact an assault on constitutional values

and the fundamental pillars of our Constitution.

Secular democracy is one pillar with economic sovereignty, social justice and federalism being the others," Yechury said.

"Are we going to safeguard the character, the secular democratic character of the Indian Republic? Or allow that to be further eroded? So that is why they are extremely important in the current juncture," he said.

Yechury said the INDIA bloc was formed with the intention of safeguarding the Constitution and democracy, and the parties

of the bloc are "deeply rooted" among the people.

"INDIA bloc was formed with this express intention that there is a need today to safeguard and further strengthen the Constitution, democracy, the human and civil liberties rights of the people guaranteed by our Constitution and the most important thing is the equality guaranteed by the Constitution and delivery of justice," he said.

"The parties which have come together are committed to that," he said. The INDIA bloc, which includes around 40 opposition parties, first took shape at an opposition meeting held in Patna on June 18, 2023.

While exit of parties like the JD-U in Bihar and RLD in Uttar Pradesh, and delay in seat sharing agreements has been seen as a setback for the bloc, Yechury said the seat-sharing talks are going on in a positive direction, and will be concluded soon.

India has world's third largest startup ecosystem; right decisions were taken at right time: PM Modi

New Delhi

India has emerged as the world's third largest startup ecosystem with over 1.25 lakh startups and 110 unicorns, and is charting a roadmap for becoming a developed nation with right decisions taken at the right time, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Wednesday.

Speaking at the Startup Mahakumbh event, Modi said India's startup ecosystem is not limited to metro cities. It has now become a social culture.

Modi vowed that he will make India the world's third largest economy in his third term, and asserted that startups will play a big role in India's progress.

The Startup India initiative gave platform to innovative ideas, and connected entrepreneurs and ventures to funding, he said.

India's youth has chosen the path of being a job creator rather than job seeker, Modi said, highlighting the changing mindset of people. He said women are leading more than 45 per

cent of Indian startups. India has democratised technology, and therefore the 'haves and have-nots' theory cannot work here.

The Rs 1 lakh crore fund announced for research and innovation in interim budget will help the sunrise sectors, Modi said.

DMK releases manifesto for Lok Sabha election; promises Rs 1,000 per month to women; vows to repeal CAA if INDIA bloc voted to power

Chennai

Tamil Nadu's ruling DMK, a key constituent of the INDIA bloc, in its manifesto released on Wednesday promised to repeal the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 if the opposition alliance wins the Lok Sabha polls.

Restoration of statehood to Jammu and Kashmir and holding polls there, scrapping the New Education Policy 2020, slashing fuel prices, annulling Article 361 of the Constitution that provides protection to Governors from legal action and appointment of Governors following consultation with Chief Minsters, were among the key promises made by the DMK.

The recommendations of the M S Swaminathan Committee will be adopted to ensure that MSP for agricultural products "is set at total production cost plus 50 percent," the DMK said.

Also, it announced that if voted to power, INDIA bloc will withdraw the Agnipath scheme and reintroduce "permanent recruitment service" in the Indian Armed forces.

"From now on, population censuses, including caste-wise censuses and censuses concerning people below the

poverty line, will be conducted by the Union government once every five years simultaneously."

The Congress party's ally in Tamil Nadu said that "new constraints" on States' borrowing capacity, imposed by the union government beyond the limits in each State's FRBM-equivalent Act will

be eliminated.

"A recommendation to share cess revenues with states will be made. It will be proposed that the Finance Commission increase the horizontal devolution of tax revenue (to all States together) from 42 percent to 50 percent."

The Union government's financial contributions to states will be based on the income tax and GST collected in those states. Thus, financial

contributions will be assured based on the taxes collected within each state. The finance provided to states will be permanently determined based on the 1971 population. A 33 per cent reservation for women in Parliament and legislative Assemblies will be implemented immediately. "DMK will insist that the Union government enact a law providing menstrual leave to women, emphasizing the journey towards gender equality."

Petrol and diesel prices "will be set at Rs 75, Rs 65 (per litre)" and cooking gas cylinder shall be made available at Rs 500 (per cylinder).

"The introduction of the Uniform Civil Code will be strictly prevented" to preserve India's secular nature as stated in the Constitution's preamble.

"The 2019 CAA law will be repealed, and all minorities will be treated equally without any discrimination. The recommendations of the Sachar Committee for the improvement of the lives of Muslims and other minority communities will be implemented."

North Korea claims progress in developing a hypersonic missile designed to strike distant US targets

Seoul

North Korea successfully tested a solid-fuel engine for its new-type intermediate-range hypersonic missile, state media reported on Wednesday, claiming a progress in efforts to develop a more powerful, agile missile designed to strike faraway US targets in the region.

A hypersonic missile is among an array of high-tech weapons systems that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un publicly vowed to introduce in 2021 to cope with what he called deepening US hostility.

Outside experts say Kim wants a modernised weapons arsenal to wrest US concessions like sanctions relief when diplomacy resumes.

On Tuesday, Kim guided the ground jet test of the multi-stage solid-fuel engine for the hypersonic missile at the North's northwestern rocket launch facility, the official Korean Central News Agency reported.

It cited Kim as saying the strategic value of the new missile with an intermediate-range is as important as intercontinental ballistic missiles targeting the US mainland and that "enemies know better about it".

It said that a timetable for completing the development of the new weapons

system was "set through the great success in the important test".

Intermediate-range missiles possessed or pursued by North Korea are the weapons systems primarily aimed at attacking the US Pacific territory of Guam, home to US military bases.

Those missile can also reach Alaska, and with a range adjustment they can be used to strike closer targets like US military installations in Japan's Okinawa island, experts say.

In recent years, North Korea has been pushing to develop more weapons with built-in solid propellants, which make launches harder to detect than liquid-propellant missiles that must be fuelled

before liftoffs and cannot last long.

The North's pursuit of hypersonic weapons is also meant to defeat US and South Korean missile defence systems, but it's unclear the North's hypersonic vehicles proved their desired speed and maneuverability during tests in recent years, analysts say.

In January, North Korea said it flight-tested a new solid-fuel intermediate-range ballistic missile tipped with a hypersonic, maneuverable warhead, in a likely reference to the missile mentioned in Wednesday's KCNA dispatch.

In November, North Korea said it had tested engine tests for an intermedia-range missile but didn't say whether it's designed to carry a hypersonic warhead.

While the North's missile test in January was likely related to the development of its first-stage rocket, this week's engine test appeared focused on the development of its second-stage rocket in part of the North's efforts to increase the weapon's flying speed, said Chang Young-keun, a missile expert at South Korea's Research Institute for National Strategy.

Chang said the latest engine test suggests North Korea could soon test-launch the new hypersonic missile.

After short-range tests with hypersonic weapons, North Korea would want to increase their ranges with maneuverable hypersonic warheads, Lee Choon Geun, an honorary research fellow at South Korea's Science and Technology Policy Institute, said. He said the capacities of the new missile can be assessed when it's test-flighted.

On Monday, South Korea, the US and Japan said they detected the multiple ballistic missile test-launches by North Korea in what was the country's first missile firings in about a month. The North said on Tuesday it performed a live-fire drill of what it called nuclear-capable "super-large" multiple rocket launchers designed to target South Korea's capital, Seoul. South Korea's military later said it views the North Korean weapons system tested as a ballistic missile.

North Korea has been engaging in a provocative run of missile tests since 2022. The US and South Korea militaries have responded by expanding their bilateral exercises and trilateral drills involving Japan. Observers say North Korea will likely intensify its run of missile tests ahead of the US presidential election in November.

China tells US to not take sides on South China Sea issue

Beijing

China said the United States must refrain from "stirring up trouble" or taking sides on the South China Sea issue, after US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said a security deal with the Manila extended to attacks on the Philippine coast guard.

Blinken called the US security commitment with the Philippines "ironclad", and said China's actions in the South China Sea had triggered a wider international reaction.

The Chinese embassy in Philippines said in a statement on Wednesday that Chinese activities in the South China Sea were "legitimate and lawful", adding that Blinken's remarks "ignore the facts, baselessly accuse China".

It also said Blinken has again "threatened China with the so-called US-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty obligations", which China firmly opposed.

The Philippines and United States are bound by a 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty by which they must support each other if there is an attack. Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr last year pushed Washington to make clear the extent of that security commitment.

On Tuesday, Blinken said the deal extended to armed attacks on the Philippine armed forces, public vessels and aircraft, and its coast guard.

China has said the United States threatens peace and stability in the South China Sea, is not a party to issues there, and has no right to intervene in maritime issues between it and the Philippines.

IMF reaches staff-level agreement with Pakistan on releasing last tranche of USD 3 billion bailout

Islamabad/Washington

The IMF has reached a staff-level agreement with cash-strapped Pakistan on the final review of a USD 3 billion bailout, paving the way for the release of the last USD 1.1 billion tranche from the lender.

The agreement is subject to the approval of the IMF's Executive Board, the global lender said.

An International Monetary Fund (IMF) team, led by Nathan Porter, visited Islamabad from March 14-19 to hold discussions on the second review of Pakistan's economic programme supported by an IMF.

The IMF Executive Board approved the USD 3 billion Stand-By Arrangement for Pakistan last year.

"The IMF team has reached a staff-level agreement with the Pakistani authorities on

the second and final review of Pakistan's stabilization program supported by the IMF's US$3 billion (SDR2,250 million)

SBA," the Fund said.

"The agreement recognises the strong programme implementation by the State Bank of Pakistan and the caretaker government in recent months, as well as the new government's intentions for ongoing policy and reform efforts to move Pakistan from stabilisation to a strong and sustainable recovery," the IMF said in a statement.

Pakistan's economic and financial positions have improved in the months since the first review, the global lender said but cautioned that the economic growth remains modest and its inflation was above the target level.

The IMF also said that Pakistan will further increase gas and electricity prices to keep the circular debt at the agreed level in this fiscal year.

"Given the timing of the Second Review mission, immediately following the formation of the new Cabinet, we expect the review to be considered by the IMF's Board in late April," the Fund said.

The IMF also announced that Pakistan has shown interest in taking a new medium-term bailout package and the discussions will begin in the coming months.

Putin's re-election

HAVING secured his fifth term with a landslide victory in the Russian elections, President Vladimir Putin has tightened his grip on power amid allegations of a rigged poll. Emboldened by the overwhelming mandate, Putin has warned the US-led NATO against the deployment of troops in Ukraine, saying that such a move would be one step shy of 'a full-scale World War III'. The West might have dismissed the elections as a sham, but the inescapable fact is that the US and its allies would have to deal with Putin for at least six more years. The 71-year-old has already ruled Russia as President or PM for the past two-and-a-half decades.

Most of Putin's domestic critics are either in jail or in exile, even as his staunchest political enemy, Alexei Navalny, died in an Arctic Circle prison last month. Navalny's widow Yulia Navalnaya has dubbed the President a killer and a gangster, but he remains stubbornly unfazed. His growing intransigence bodes ill not only for eastern Europe but also for

the world at large. It's obvious that the Ukraine war cannot be brought to an end anytime soon unless Putin is persuaded to do a climbdown. Also, the West needs to see the error of its ways.

Countries on good terms with Russia, such as India and China, have a greater role to play in de-escalating hostilities. According to a recent CNN report, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and some other leaders helped prevent a potential nuclear attack by Putin on Ukraine in 2022. Last week, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar admitted that India was involved in efforts to reduce tensions in the Russia-Ukraine war zone. New Delhi, which enjoys a strong relationship with both Washington and Moscow, is well placed to help in finding a peaceful solution.

// satyasya paramaṁ nidhānam //

We would like to hear from you. Please share your comments on editor.acrossstate@gmail.com

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Rescue op in the sea
Shining example of India's maritime prowess

THE joint efforts made by the Indian Air Force (IAF) and the Indian Navy to free the merchant vessel MV Ruen from pirates in the Arabian Sea recently are a shining example of effective maritime security measures and inter-service collaboration. The successful operation saw the IAF's C-17 heavy-lift aircraft execute a precision airborne drop of two combat boats and the Navy's MARCOS commandos. Despite the hostile conditions, the IAF's swift response and delivery played a crucial role in backing the Navy. This resulted in the surrender of 35 pirates and the release of the vessel and its crew. The proactive stance of the

Navy, supported by the deployment of warships like INS Kolkata and INS Subhadra, demonstrates India's readiness to

safeguard global trade routes.

This isn't the first time the Navy has showcased its capabilities in combating piracy. Over the years, it

has undertaken a number of successful operations, including the rescue of the MV Suez in 2011 and thwarting piracy attempts

in the Gulf of Aden in 2017. These actions not only protect the interests of the shipping industry but also contribute to international efforts towards maintaining

peace and security at sea.

The Navy's approach is in line with international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which provides the legal framework for combating piracy and ensuring the safety of navigation in international waters. By adhering to the UNCLOS and collaborating with global partners, India has reaffirmed its commitment to upholding maritime law and order and cemented its place as the first responder on the high seas. As piracy continues to pose a threat to shipping trade, India's timely operations serve as a model for other nations.

US criticism of CAA

Diplomatic calculations behind opposition

THE US was quick to weigh in on the Indian Government's notification of the rules under the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The Biden administration said it was worried about the development and would monitor the implementation of the Act. It unnecessarily interjected that respect for religious freedom and

equal treatment of all communities were fundamental democratic principles. India was quick to react on both counts. The CAA, it reminded America, was the country's internal matter and the Indian Constitution guaranteed equal rights to all its citizens.

Clearly, there are political calculations in notifying the CAA's rules on the eve of the General Election after it was in limbo for four years. But the American homily is

part of a recent pattern of diatribes against India over human rights. For the past three months, US religious freedom and human rights bodies have held hearings on transnational repression. Surprisingly, India figured in all of them, besides usual suspects Russia and China. There could be several triggers for this pressure, which emanates from the Western diplomatic toolkit. But even if there was no ulterior motive behind the US criticism, its concerns are off the mark.

The CAA does portray the BJP as a party keen on gaining from polarisation. However, the law does not apply to Indian citizens. Its notification, though, could prompt the next government to implement the National Register of Citizens (NRC) across the country. Notably, the majority of the 19 lakh people excluded from the NRC list in Assam in 2019 were Hindus. India and its Western allies need to repose faith in the Supreme Court, which will take up for hearing this week a bunch of petitions against the CAA.

Poll bugle sounded

Transparency in electoral funding a must

THE Election Commission of India (ECI) has announced the Lok Sabha poll schedule amid a verbal duel over the now-scrapped electoral bonds, whose details have been disclosed at the Supreme Court's insistence. The Opposition, led by the Congress, has accused the BJP of running an 'extortion racket', while the ruling party continues to defend the bond scheme as a

measure to combat black money. Indeed, the importance of transparency in electoral funding to ensure a level playing field cannot be overstated.

The poll arena is set to witness a surge in competitive populism over the next few weeks, with political parties vying with each other to woo voters with all kinds of promises. The BJP's organisational prowess and aggressive campaigning have put it in pole position, demonstrated by

its ability to win over leaders from other parties and mobilise its cadre effectively. The ruling party has managed to tick its core agenda boxes in recent months — the consecration of the Ram Temple, the rollout of the Uniform Civil Code in Uttarakhand and the implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act. Prime Minister Narendra Modi remains popular despite being at the helm for almost a decade, while the Opposition bloc INDIA doesn't have a leader of his stature. Moreover, the alliance is grappling with internal conflicts and lacks a unified narrative to counter the BJP.

As the ECI gears up to deploy 1.5 crore personnel at 10.5 lakh polling stations for the seven-phase Lok Sabha elections starting on April 19, upholding the sanctity of the democratic process becomes imperative. Concurrently, Assembly polls in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha are scheduled. With over 97 crore eligible voters poised to make their choice, the onus is on the electorate to separate fact from fiction amid misinformation, tall promises and fake news, and exercise its franchise responsibly.

Electoral bonds

Donor-recipient link must be probed thoroughly

THE list of entities which purchased the now-scrapped electoral bonds to make political donations expectedly includes several big names of the corporate world. What has raised eyebrows is the fact that the topper is a little-known lottery company, Future Gaming and Hotel Services. This Coimbatore-headquartered firm, whose director is lottery magnate Santiago Martin, purchased electoral bonds worth Rs 1,368 crore, according to data shared by the State Bank of India (SBI) with the Election Commission of India (ECI) and uploaded by the latter on its website. The second-biggest donor was Megha Engineering and Infrastructures Ltd, which bought bonds worth Rs 966 crore; this Hyderabad-based firm was involved in the Zoji La tunnel project in Kashmir.

The data has shown the electoral bond scheme in a dubious light as around half of the top 30 companies that donated to political parties were under the scanner of the Enforcement Directorate (ED), the

CBI and the Income Tax Department; for instance, the ED conducted a probe against Future Gaming in 2022. The disclosure has prompted the Opposition to reiterate its accusations of a quid pro quo between donors and recipients. The BJP has received the highest contributions through electoral bonds, amounting to Rs 6,566 crore or nearly 55 per cent, followed by the Congress and the Trinamool Congress, whose share is around 9 per cent each.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman

has claimed that the purported connection between the probe agency raids and firms purchasing electoral bonds is

based on 'huge assumptions'. However, the government should not evade its responsibility of ensuring that all details of the bonds are made public. The scheme was recently annulled by the Supreme Court as it ran counter to its avowed objective of bringing transparency in political funding. It is imperative that the cloak of secrecy is lifted completely so that various stakeholders, including political parties and the electorate, can draw their own conclusions ahead of the Lok Sabha elections.

Missile prowess

Agni-V enhances India's deterrence capabilities

INDIA's test-firing of the Agni-V ballistic missile with MIRV (multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicle) technology marks a significant leap forward for the nation's defence capabilities. Mission Divyastra, the culmination of years of dedicated efforts by the Defence Research and Development Organisation, showcases India's growing technological prowess in the global arena. The project, being helmed by a woman director, Sheena Rani, highlights the country's strides towards gender inclusivity in science and technology.

The strategic breakthrough has made India one of the six nations possessing the sophisticated MIRV technology. Wedged between nuclear-armed China and Pakistan, the nation has demonstrated its ability to develop cutting-edge defence systems that are on a par with those of major global powers. This technology enables the forces to deploy multiple warheads on missiles, introducing a new level of flexibility and resilience in India's nuclear arsenal. Such advancements are crucial in a world where security threats are evolving rapidly and maintaining a credible deterrence posture is essential. India's MIRV push can serve as a powerful deterrent against potential adversaries, reaffirming its resolve to defend its sovereignty and national interests.

Amid current geopolitical tensions, the country's enhanced deterrence capabilities can act as a counterbalance to emerging threats, thereby contributing to peace and security regionally as well as globally. However, it is imperative to recognise that with advancements in defence firepower come greater responsibilities. India must continue to leverage its technological expertise to safeguard its interests while upholding the principles of peace, stability and responsible nuclear stewardship on the world stage.

Paper for cash

Take action under stringent public exam law

THE leaking of the UP police exam paper to over 1,500 candidates at a farmhouse in Gurugram is a glaring indictment of systemic corruption that undermines the integrity of our public institutions. This brazen act — where aspiring cops were herded into buses, taken to a resort and handed over the paper for Rs 7 lakh each — highlights the lengths to which unscrupulous elements go to subvert the rule of law and gain an unfair advantage. From Delhi Police constables to local accomplices, the web of corruption spans states, pointing to an organised racket involved in this despicable act.

Serving as yet another grim reminder of the rampant malpractices plaguing our system is the Haryana School Education Board paper leak, which came to the fore in Nuh district recently. The fact that even teachers, entrusted with the responsibility of upholding academic integrity, have been found complicit in leaking exam papers underscores the pervasiveness of this malaise. Such incidents not only erode public trust in the recruitment and educational institutions, they also deprive deserving candidates of a fair chance to succeed.

In this context, the recent enactment of the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024, is a step in the right direction. By imposing stringent penalties, including imprisonment and hefty fines, on those found guilty of exam paper leaks, the new law sends out a strong message that such nefarious activities will not be tolerated. Effective enforcement of the law is imperative to root out corruption from our examination system. This requires collaborative efforts from law enforcement agencies, recruiters, educational institutions and policymakers to devise robust mechanisms for conducting all types of exams with integrity and transparency. Exemplary action must be taken against the culprits in the UP exam case under the new law.

Simultaneous polls

Panel report should spur Centre to build consensus

WITH the Lok Sabha elections set to be announced anytime now, a committee led by former President Ram Nath Kovind has submitted its report on 'One nation, one election'. The panel has recommended a two-phase exercise: first, hold simultaneous elections for Lok Sabha and state assemblies; second, conduct elections to municipalities and panchayats within 100 days. It has also recommended a common electoral roll and electoral photo identity card for use in the elections to all three tiers of governance.

In its manifesto for the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the BJP had affirmed its commitment to the idea of simultaneous elections for Parliament, assemblies and local bodies to 'reduce expenditure, ensure efficient utilisation of government resources and security forces and for effective policy planning.' The party had promised that it would try to build consensus on this issue among various stakeholders. According to the committee, 47 political parties submitted their views and suggestions, out of which 32 supported simultaneous elections.

'One nation, one election' is arguably the final big item on its agenda that the BJP has addressed before the General Election. A common voter list is undoubtedly a sound idea that will find acceptance across the board, but the same is not true for simultaneous polls. Parliamentary and Assembly elections have different dynamics and issues at stake. For instance, the BJP swept all seats in the Lok Sabha elections in Delhi in 2014 and 2019; however, it was AAP that recorded landslide victories in the 2015 and 2020 Assembly polls. Some Opposition parties and independent observers see 'One nation, one election' as a ploy to blur the lines and prompt the electorate to vote for the ruling party at the Centre in both cases. Armed with the panel report, the Centre must go all out to develop unanimity on this contentious matter.

Supreme Court rejects Adani firm's plea for Rs 1.3K crore LPS from discom

New Delhi

The Supreme Court on Monday dismissed a plea of Adani Power Rajasthan Ltd seeking over Rs 1,300 crore as late payment surcharge from the Jaipur Vidyut Vitran Nigam Limited, a Rajasthan Government-owned power distribution firm.

Imposing Rs 50,000 as cost on Adani Power Rajasthan Ltd (APRL), a bench comprising Justices Aniruddha Bose and PV Sanjay Kumar ruled that filing of a miscellaneous application was

not the proper legal recourse to late payment surcharge (LPS) by the Adani firm.

"Relief of this nature (claiming LPS) cannot be asked in a miscellaneous application which was described in the course of the hearing as an application for clarification," the Bench said.

The cost of Rs 50,000 imposed on APRL will be deposited with the Supreme Court Legal Aid Committee, Justice Bose said while reading out the operative portion of the judgement.

Indian Hotels Company Limited opens new hotel in Munnar

New Delhi

Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL) has announced the opening of Scenic Munnar in Kerala. This is Tata Group's first hotel in Munnar, a picturesque hill station in Kerala, which has nearly 600 km of Arabian Sea shoreline.

With the addition of this hotel, IHCL will have 20 hotels across Taj, Seleqtions, Vivanta and Ginger in Kerala, including six under development. Puneet Chhatwal, Managing Director & CEO, IHCL, said, "Having pioneered tourism in Kerala, IHCL has been steadfast in its commitment to the state."

Exports increase 11.9% to $41.4 bn in February

New Delhi

India recorded the highest monthly exports during the fiscal in February, registering an 11.9 per cent growth to $41.4 billion, mainly driven by increased shipments of engineering goods, electronic items and pharma products.

The trade deficit during February worked out to $18.7 billion, up from $16.57 billion in the year-ago month, as gold imports surged significantly.

Merchandise imports were valued at $60.11 billion, up 12.16 per cent compared to $53.58 per cent in February 2023. Gold imports rose 133.82 per cent to $6.15 billion during February from $2.63 billion in the year-ago period, according to the commerce ministry data.

Commerce Secretary Sunil Barthwal said that despite several difficulties, like the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war and recession in certain countries, the February exports surpassed all expectations.

Forex kitty expands $10.47 bn to $636 bn

India's forex kitty jumped by $10.47 billion to $636.095 billion for the week ended March 8, the RBI said on Friday. In the previous week, the overall reserves had risen by $6.55 billion to $625.626 billion.

Market valuation of 5 of top 10 firms tanks Rs 2.23 lakh crore; Reliance, LIC biggest laggards

New Delhi

Five of the top 10 valued firms faced a combined erosion of Rs 2,23,660 crore from their market valuation last week, with Reliance Industries and Life Insurance Corporation of India taking the steepest hit amid an overall bearish trend in equities.

Last week, the BSE benchmark tanked 1,475.96 points or 1.99 per cent.

While Reliance Industries, ICICI Bank, State Bank of India, Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) and Hindustan Unilever suffered erosion from their market capitalisation (mcap), Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), HDFC Bank, Bharti Airtel, Infosys and ITC were the gainers.

The mcap of Reliance Industries tanked Rs 81,763.35 crore to Rs 19,19,595.15 crore, the most among the top-10 firms.

LIC's market valuation tumbled Rs 63,629.48 crore to Rs 5,84,967.41 crore and that of State Bank of India plummeted by Rs 50,111.7 crore to Rs 6,53,281.59 crore.

The mcap of Hindustan Unilever dropped by Rs 21,792.46 crore to Rs 5,46,961.35 crore and that of ICICI Bank dived Rs 6,363.11 crore to Rs 7,57,218.19 crore.

However, the market valuation of TCS jumped Rs 38,858.26 crore to Rs 15,25,928.41 crore.

Bharti Airtel added Rs 11,976.74 crore to its mcap at Rs 6,89,425.18 crore.

The valuation of ITC climbed Rs 7,738.51 crore to Rs 5,23,660.08 crore and that of Infosys went up by Rs 7,450.22 crore to Rs 6,78,571.56 crore.

HDFC Bank's mcap surged Rs 4,443.9 crore to Rs 11,03,151.78 crore.

Reliance Industries continued to rule the chart of the most valued firms followed by TCS, HDFC Bank, ICICI Bank, Bharti Airtel, Infosys, State Bank of India, LIC, Hindustan Unilever and ITC.

Govt nod to 17% wage hike for 1.1L employees of LIC

New Delhi

The government has approved a 17 per cent overall hike in wages for more than 1.10 lakh employees of insurance giant Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC).

The wage hike approval has come days after the government cleared a similar raise for the employees of public sector banks. The wage hike for LIC employees is effective from August 1, 2022, the insurer said.

NPS contribution is enhanced from 10 per cent to 14 per cent of nearly 24,000 employees who joined after April 1, 2010, it said while thanking the government for the wage revision. A one-time ex-gratia payment to LIC pensioners was also made to more than 30,000 pensioners and family pensioners.

Centre clears policy to make India electric vehicles manufacturing hub

New Delhi

The Centre on Friday announced that a scheme has been approved to promote India as a manufacturing destination so that electric vehicles (EV) with the latest technology can be manufactured in the country. "The policy is designed to attract investments in the e-vehicle space by reputed global EV manufacturers", an official statement said.

The new policy mandates companies to invest a minimum of Rs 4,150 crore in the country and will allow them three years to set up local manufacturing for EVs with at least 25 per cent of

the components sourced locally, potentially bolstering Tesla's market entry plans.

Companies that meet these requirements will be allowed to import 8,000 EVs a year at a lower import duty of 15 per cent on cars costing $35,000 and above. India levies a tax of 70 per cent or 100 per cent on imported

cars depending on their value.

The move is expected to provide access to latest technology and enhance the EV ecosystem and support the Make in India initiative, the statement said. The duty waiver on EVs, which can be imported is capped at the annual PLI incentive (Rs 6,484 crore) or the investment made by the entity, whichever will be lower.

Attracting global players

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CCI orders probe against Google Play Store pricing

New Delhi

Fair trade regulator CCI on Friday ordered a probe against Google for alleged anti-competitive practices with respect to its Play Store pricing policy.

Passing the order, the Competition Commission of India (CCI) said the informants

are primarily aggrieved with Google's updated payment policies in relation to its proprietary app store — Google Play Store — which is alleged to be in violation of the competition law.

The order also comes less than two weeks after Google removed some apps from the

Play Store over payment issues. On March 1, Google removed some apps from its Play Store in India over a dispute on service fee payments and a few days later, it reinstated the apps in the wake of the government criticism. It is alleged that the payment policies are stated to be impacting stakeholders, including app developers, payment processors, and users alike.

The watchdog has ordered the probe after prima-facie finding that Google has violated Section 4 of the Competition Act that pertains to abuse of dominant position.

In its 21-page order, the regulator stated that Google has claimed that the service fee has been charged for a multitude of services provided by Play Store to app developers.

Wholesale inflation dips marginally to 0.2% in Feb

New Delhi

The annual rate of inflation based on all India Wholesale Price Index (WPI) for February stood at 0.20 per cent (provisional) as against 0.27 per cent in the previous month mainly due to increase in prices of food articles, crude and natural gas, electricity, machinery and motor vehicles, state an official news release.

Of the three major groups, the inflation rate in primary articles rose to 4.49 per cent as against 3.84 per cent in January, in fuel and power there was deceleration of minus 1.59 per cent as against minus 0.59 per cent in January, and manufactured products fell to minus 1.27 per cent from minus 1.13 per cent in January. In primary articles, the rise was mainly in prices of minerals, crude petroleum while prices of non-food articles declined. In the food index, the inflation rate was 4.09 per cent as against 3.79 per cent in January.

Hindenburg report aimed to defame India, says Adani

Mumbai

US short-seller Hindenburg Research's damning report against the Adani group was not just to destabilise the apples-to-airport conglomerate but to also politically defame India's governance practices, said Gautam Adani, chairman of Adani Group. In January last year, Hindenburg published a report alleging malfeasance by the Adani Group. "Despite the efforts to shake our foundations, we stood firm, not just safeguarding our reputation but also ensuring we remained focused on operations," he said.

RBI imposes fine on BoI, Bandhan Bank

The RBI on Wednesday said it has imposed a penalty of Rs 1.4 crore on Bank of India for non-compliance with regulatory norms. It also imposed a penalty of Rs 29.55 lakh on Bandhan Bank for non-compliance of certain directions.

Tata Motors to invest Rs 9K cr in Tamil Nadu

chennai: Tata Motors has signed an MoU with Tamil Nadu Government, committing an investment of Rs 9,000 crore to establish a manufacturing facility, Industries Minister TRB Rajaa said.

Petrol, diesel prices cut by Rs 2 per litre ahead of Lok Sabha election

New Delhi

Petrol and diesel prices were cut by Rs 2 per litre each as state-owned oil companies ended a nearly two-year-long hiatus in rate revision, just hours before the General Election schedule is announced.

The revised price will be applicable from 6 am on Friday, March 15, the oil ministry said on Thursday evening.

Petrol in the National Capital will now cost Rs 94.72 a litre compared to Rs 96.72 per litre currently, while diesel prices will be Rs 87.62 against Rs 89.62 at present.

The government had nearly a decade back freed petrol and diesel prices from its control and the rates till now were fixed and announced by oil companies.

But on Thursday, the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas took to X to announce the rate revision that came just hours before the schedule for the General Election was due to be announced that would set in motion a poll code, which bars making announcements that could lure voters.

The price cut came a week after a Rs 100 per cylinder reduction in cooking gas LPG price was announced. That reduction brought down the rates of LPG for common users to Rs 803 per 14.2-kg cylinder and that for the poor, who got free connections under the Ujjwala scheme, to Rs 503 after accounting for Rs 300 per bottle subsidy that the government gives.

"Oil Marketing Companies (OMCs) have informed that they have revised Petrol and Diesel Prices across the country. New prices would be effective from 15th March 2024, 06:00 AM," the ministry said.

Petrol in Mumbai will cost Rs 104.21 a litre from Friday, Rs 103.94 in Kolkata and Rs 100.75 in Chennai. A litre of diesel will be priced at Rs 92.15 in Mumbai, Rs 90.76 in Kolkata and Rs 92.34 in Chennai.

Rates differ from state to state, depending on the incidence of local taxes.

Local sales tax or VAT is the highest among metros in BJP-ruled Maharashtra and lowest in Delhi.

"Reduction in petrol and diesel prices will boost consumer spending and reduce operating costs for over 58 lakh heavy goods vehicles running on diesel, 6 crore cars and 27 crore two-wheelers," the ministry said.

Reduced petrol and diesel prices will benefit the citizens through more disposable income, boost for tourism and travel industries, control over inflation, increased consumer confidence and spending, reduced expenses for businesses dependent on transportation, enhanced profitability for logistics, manufacturing, and retail sectors, and reduced outgo for farmers on tractor operations and pump sets, it added.

International oil prices have been turbulent in the last couple of years. It dipped into the negative zone at the start of the pandemic in 2020 and swung wildly in 2022 - climbing to a 14-year high of nearly USD 140 per barrel in March 2022 after Russia invaded Ukraine, before sliding on weaker demand from top importer China and worries of an economic contraction.

But for a nation that is 85 per cent dependent on imports, the spike meant adding to already elevated levels of inflation and derailing the economic recovery from the pandemic.

So, the three state-owned fuel retailers - Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) froze petrol and diesel prices for the longest duration in the last two decades.

They stopped daily price revision in early November 2021 when rates across the country hit an all-time high, prompting the government to roll back a part of the excise duty hike it had effected during the pandemic to take advantage of low oil prices.

The freeze continued into 2022 but the Russia-Ukraine war-led spike in international oil prices prompted a Rs 10 a litre hike in petrol and diesel prices from mid-March 2022 before another round of excise duty cut rolled back all of the Rs 13 a litre and Rs 16 a litre increase in taxes on petrol and diesel done during the pandemic.

That followed the current price freeze, which began on April 6, 2022, and will end with a revision in rates effective Friday.

The three firms had till now resisted calls to revert to daily price revision and pass on softening in rates to consumers on grounds that prices continue to be extremely volatile - rising on one day and falling on the other - and that their past losses have not been fully recouped.

The three companies, which control roughly 90 per cent of India's fuel market, 'voluntarily' have not changed petrol, diesel and cooking gas (LPG) prices for almost two years now, resulting in losses when input costs were higher and profits when raw material prices were lower.

But the financial numbers of the first three quarters showed them reporting bumper profit totalling over Rs 69,000 crore.

The combined net profit of IOC, BPCL and HPCL in April-December FY24 was better than their annual earning of Rs 39,356 crore in pre-oil crisis year, regulatory filings by them showed.

They posted a combined net loss of Rs 21,201.18 crore during April-September 2022 despite accounting for Rs 22,000 crore announced but not paid LPG subsidy for the previous two years.

Subsequent softening of international prices and government giving out LPG subsidies helped IOC and BPCL post annualised profit for 2022-23 (April 2022 to March 2023) but HPCL was in the red.

5 public sector banks to reduce govt stake to meet Sebi norms

New Delhi

Five public sector lenders, including Bank of Maharashtra, IOB and UCO Bank are planning to reduce government stake to less than 75 per cent to comply with Sebi's minimum public shareholding (MPS) norms, Financial Services Secretary Vivek Joshi has said.

Of 12 public sector banks (PSBs), four were complying with MPS norms as on March 31, 2023. "As part of an ongoing effort, three more PSBs have complied with minimum 25 per cent public float during the current financial year. Remaining five PSBs have laid out action plans to meet MPS requirement," he said.

Currently, government holding in Delhi-based Punjab & Sind Bank is 98.25 per cent. It is followed by Chennai-based Indian Overseas Bank at 96.38 per cent, UCO Bank 95.39 per cent, Central Bank of India 93.08 per cent, Bank of Maharashtra at 86.46 per cent. As per the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi), all listed companies must maintain an MPS of 25 per cent.

However, the regulator had given special forbearance to state-owned banks. They have time till August 2024 to meet the requirement of 25 per cent MPS. Joshi said banks have various options to bring down the stake, including follow on public offering or Qualified Institutional Placement.

Depending on market condition, each of these banks will take a call in the best interest of shareholders, he added. Without giving a timeline, he said, efforts were on to meet the requirement.

Joshi said the finance ministry has directed all state-owned banks to review their gold loan portfolio as instances of non-compliance with regulatory norms have been noticed by the government.

The Department of Financial Services (DFS) in a communication addressed to heads of PSBs has asked them to look at their system and processes related to gold loan. A directive in this regard was issued last month advising them to fix anomalies relating to collection of fees and interest and closure of gold loan accounts.

Risks, Resilience, Response (3R): India-EU Cooperation on Russian and Chinese Disinformation and Propaganda

India and the European Union (EU), as two of the largest democratic entities, are particularly exposed to foreign manipulation and interference in the information domain. External developments such as Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and border clashes on the India-China border in 2017 have pushed the EU and India to pay more attention to foreign disinformation efforts and invest more in institutional, legal, and educational resilience to counter these challenges. As a consequence, while the EU regards Russia as a major source of disinformation, India focuses exclusively on Chinese activities.

Despite a growing awareness of a new major threat in the information domain, there is a lack of common understanding between the EU and India about what constitutes "disinformation" and a limited dialogue and cooperation on this issue. This creates space for more EU-India information and intelligence-sharing, exchange of best practices, and discussions about the nature of disinformation and effective countermeasures at both the official and expert levels.

This research project, implemented in 2023 by the Polish Institute of International Affairs and the Observer Research Foundation and funded by the European Union, aims at an examination and comparison of the approaches of the EU and India to disinformation from two key actors, Russia and China, in order to propose ideas for closer cooperation in this domain. The project team proposes a set of recommendations for the EU and India, including:

Launching an EU-India special dialogue on disinformation within the EU-India Cyber Dialogue mechanism or the EU-India Trade and Technology Council;

Inviting India to cooperate with the EU's Rapid Alert System (RAS) on disinformation to allow for regular exchange of information on foreign influence operations;

Strengthening the resilience of their respective societies to foreign information manipulation by supporting cooperation and dialogue on disinformation between European and Indian civil society, experts, academics, and journalists;

Engaging in shaping global regulations on disinformation, also by drawing some lessons from the European Digital Services Act;

The EU can establish a new special StratCom unit at the European External Action Service (EEAS) to better monitor disinformation threats in India and its region;

Supporting the creation of a Centre for Excellence for Countering Disinformation and Hybrid Threats in New Delhi (like the CoE in Helsinki) or a special EU-India Disinfo Lab platform as an academic hub for research and collaboration between Indian and European experts;

Extending the mandate of EUvsDisInfo to monitor disinformation threats to the EU coming from China;

Supporting the Indian government in developing an official body for monitoring and countering disinformation, and in raising social awareness and resilience to disinformation;

Preparing a public information campaign for the EU and India ahead of the spring 2024 election campaigns to raise awareness about disinformation and foreign interference in democratic processes and to boost the resilience of European and Indian societies.

Supporting further research and analysis on Russian and Chinese disinformation operations in India

In an increasingly competitive, unstable,

and interconnected international setting, the use of disinformation and propaganda as a tool of foreign policy to influence domestic politics and foreign policy choices in other states has been on the rise. These threats are especially acute in democratic, open, and pluralistic societies like India and European Union Member States. As the parliaments of both India and the EU are conducting elections in 2024, the risk of foreign interference in this democratic process is an impending challenge; therefore, engaging this phenomenon to counter it is an urgent necessity for both entities.

Yet, there is limited experience and literature on EU-India cooperation in this area. While expansion of the EU-India strategic partnership has attracted attention, there has been no comprehensive comparative study of the European and Indian understanding of the nature and approaches to disinformation threats.

This report is a result of a research project meant to help fill this gap. It was implemented by two teams of experts, one from Europe (Polish Institute of International Affairs, PISM) and the other from India (Observer Research Foundation, ORF), within the framework of the EU-India Think Tanks Twinning Initiative 2022-2023. It is based on an extensive literature review on the subject, desk research,

and interviews with key stakeholders and practitioners on disinformation in the EU and India. The main findings of the project were discussed and evaluated at a closed-door webinar with experts in November 2023. It helped to refine and sharpen the final conclusions and recommendations. The project focused on disinformation threats in Europe and India from two major external sources: Russia and China. It was designed to address six research questions:

How is disinformation and propaganda understood in India and the EU?

What are the EU's experiences with Russian and Chinese disinformation?

How does the EU deal with and minimise the risks of foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) campaigns from Russia and China?

How serious and well-recognised are Russian and Chinese information interference threats in India?

What are the strengths and gaps in Indian preparedness and the tools to deal with foreign disinformation?

Are the current EU-India cooperation mechanisms to counter disinformation sufficient to deal with foreign interference and how can they be improved?

In the following sections, we analyse the phenomenon of disinformation in India and the European Union to identify the gaps and vulnerabilities as well as the preparedness of the Indian and European structures dealing with this challenge. We also look at the prospects of India-EU cooperation in this area and suggest recommendations on how to move forward.

Note on Terminology

The first methodological challenge of the project was the lack of universally accepted definitions of "disinformation" and "propaganda". As politically sensitive terms, it is not always clear what "disinformation" consists of and who are the main culprits or victims of such activities. What some call "disinformation" or "propaganda" can be

"information" and "public diplomacy" for others. This dichotomy is highly relevant to the current study, as there is no mutually agreed definition of "disinformation" in use by the EU and India.

The EU proposes to understand disinformation as "verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented, and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm"[1]. However the Union has promoted and used a broader term of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), which describes "a mostly non-illegal pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures, and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner, by state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory"[2].

India, on the other hand, has no official definition of "disinformation". The closest description of it in the Indian legal system is contained in certain provisions of the Indian Penal Code, for example Section 124A, which refers to disinformation used against the workings of the government. Similarly, Section 505 deals with publishing rumours and fear-mongering. In addition, some elements in the Information Technology Act of 2000 refer to false or misleading information. Yet, thus far, no Indian government nor any other non-governmental or expert body has come up with a proposal close to that of FIMI in the EU.

While there are clear definitions that differentiate between misinformation, disinformation, malign information, and propaganda, the conceptual proximity and the frequent use of these terms interchangeably has resulted in a kind of merger of them. The key questions are when does a misinformed opinion become propaganda and how does propaganda take the shape of disinformation? While there are no easy answers to these questions—and these are critical concerns for the countries dealing with the issue—what is clear is that such misused information exploits the vulnerability of the intended audience to push forward a desired narrative in a way that sharpens differences in society and projects public cynicism, uncertainty, distrust, and, in some cases, paranoia.

Therefore, for the purpose of this study, we have used the basic understanding of disinformation as the spread of false or manipulated information or a narrative with the intent to influence people. It is close to the general understanding of the Indian experts and the EU's FIMI definition in the sense that it underlines the intentional, manipulative, and harmful character of certain kinds of information spread for some other party's benefit.

A Survey of India-US Defence Cooperation

India-US defence cooperation began during the 1962 Sino-Indian War, when the US supplied India with transport aircraft, weapons, and training. The two sides and the UK also conducted air exercises for a limited period. The US offered India about US$500 million in credit and grants for five years to purchase non-combat military equipment, but this never took off and ended when the US froze military ties with India and Pakistan in the wake of the 1965 war.

Current collaboration has its roots in the memorandum drafted by Lt. Gen. Claude Kicklighter in the 1990s. Lt. Gen. Kicklighter was the commander of the army component of the US Pacific Command (now the Indo-Pacific Command) headquartered in Hawaii. It is through this command that all subsequent Indo-US military cooperation has been channelled. At the time, aware of India's dependence on Russian military equipment, which was much cheaper than those available in the US and Europe, the US promoted the idea of collaborating in defence technology. It may be noted that Lt. Gen. Kicklighter's proposals were made possible by a thaw in Indo-US relations during the Reagan Administration and driven by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her successor Rajiv Gandhi over the 1982-89 period.

The Indo-US Memorandum of Understanding on Technology Transfer was signed in December 1984 after India assured that the US technology obtained would not be used for nuclear proliferation or missile production. The arrangement was based on the loosening of US export control restraints. One of the projects identified for the purpose was the light combat aircraft (LCA), now known as Tejas, for which the US agreed to supply the General Electric F404 engine and assist in developing several sub-assemblies.

Post-Cold War geopolitical developments were not easy for India, whose good friend, the Soviet Union, had come apart. It confronted American suspicion, manifested by the Pentagon's Defence Policy Guidance 1994-1999 document that spoke of India's hegemonic aspirations in South Asia. In addition, there were pressures on the non-proliferation front and Kashmir. For its part, India sought to assuage fears of its Soviet connection by holding a series of exercises involving the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the Andaman Seas and with the US off the west coast of India, now known as the Malabar Exercise.

There was a break in this trend in 1998 after India conducted its nuclear tests and the US imposed sanctions on India mandated by its Arms Export Control Act, including on the LCA collaboration. However, ties quickly normalised as a dialogue between US Deputy State Secretary State Strobe Talbott and Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh, which began in 1999, worked to iron out differences between the two countries on strategic issues and non-proliferation. Subsequently, India got waivers on the sanctions at various points in time.

In 2000, Condoleezza Rice, the then US Secretary of State, wrote in Foreign Affairs: "India is an element in China's calculation, and it should be in America's too. India is not a great power yet, but it has the potential to emerge as one."

In 2001, when the US began its so-called global war on terror and attacked Afghanistan, the Indian Navy provided escort to US vessels transiting through the Malacca Strait. When the US started its operations in Iraq in March 2003, one of the countries that it approached to send troops there was India. The ruling BJP coalition's number two, L.K. Advani, agreed to push the option during a visit to Washington, DC. But back home, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee deftly outmanoeuvred him and turned down the suggestion.

Subsequently, in 2004, the US and India issued the 'Next Steps in Strategic Partnership', which included negotiations to remove the export control regimes affecting India because it was not a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The US also agreed to collaborate with India on ballistic missile defence. This was when India-US security ties took a new turn, and the two countries announced a civil nuclear deal (in 2005), the eventual goal of which was strategic cooperation in all fields.

Another portentous event during this period was the cooperation following the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004, which killed over 200,000 people. The Indian Navy was active in humanitarian relief and found like-minded navies of the US and its allies Australia and Japan as partners in the endeavour. The US and its allies noted the Indian Navy's performance, and this partnership of countries—who all happened to be democracies—catalysed the idea of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad).

Guiding Principles and Documents

The origin of the current relationship lies in the Indo-US Memorandum of Understanding on technology transfer signed in December 1984, followed by the visit of US Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger to New Delhi in 1986. This was the first visit by any US Defense Secretary to India, which led to the US providing the GE 404 engine for the LCA project.

This was followed by the 'Kicklighter proposals' of 1991, brought to New Delhi by Lt. Gen. Kicklighter. This envisaged US-India cooperation on land, sea, and air. The proposals focused on establishing consultative mechanisms, joint training, and strategic dialogue between the two militaries. In 1992, US Chief of Naval Operations Frank Kelso and Lt. Gen. Johnny Corns, Lt. Gen. Kicklighter's successor, came to New Delhi for talks, and the two sides set up a military steering committee "to establish the basis for a long-term army-to-army relationship".

In 1992, India and the US held the inaugural Indo-US Malabar Exercise, the first time the two countries had worked together in a military exercise. Subsequently, India and the US participated in other exercises—the Yudh Abhyas in 2002, the Vajra Prahar (lightning strike; a Special Forces exercise held since 2010), and the Tiger Triumph (a tri-service exercise that began in 2019) and so on.

The 'Agreed Minute on Defence Relations' (1995) was the first document signed by the two defence ministries in the post-Cold War period. This led to further cooperation in the defence sector and increased exchanges of personnel and information between the two militaries. Under this Minute, the two sides created the Defence Policy Group (DPG), headed by the US defence undersecretary and India's defence secretary, to supervise bilateral defence ties. It also created a joint technical group, with the two groups holding their first meetings soon thereafter. The Minute became defunct following the US sanctions on India after the 1998 nuclear tests. The DPG process was only resumed after the Talbott-Singh dialogue in 2001. The 17th meeting of the group took place in May 2023 in Washington, DC, between India's Defence Secretary Giridhar Aramane and the US Undersecretary for Defense Policy Colin Kahl.

The US-India High Technology Cooperation Group (HTCG) was formed in November 2002 to provide a "standing framework" for issues relating to high technology between the two countries. It was co-chaired by the US Undersecretary for Industry and Security and the Indian Foreign Secretary. The idea was to steer strategic trade in controlled items and to create the environment for the development of such trade by shaping the legal and structural environment between the two countries. The HTCG helped US exports to India double from US$4 billion annually to US$8 billion between 2002-2005 and reduced the export license requirement by 25 percent.

In January 2004, the two countries signed the 'Next Steps in Strategic Partnership', the most unambiguous indication that the India-US relationship was moving in a new direction. This involved cooperation in civilian nuclear activities, civilian space programmes, high-tech trade, and a dialogue on ballistic missile defence. Subsequent talks involved working out procedures to make India compliant with US rules and regulations. The US announced the completion of the Next Steps in July 2005, enabling it to move on to the Indo-US nuclear agreement.

The US also began to press India to sign the four foundational agreements it felt were necessary to meet the American legal requirements to promote India-US military cooperation. India agreed to the first, the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), in 2002, a basic agreement aimed at ensuring the secrecy of communications between the two sides.

However, it took 20 years or so for India to sign the other three—the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA) in 2016, an India-specific version of the Logistics Support Agreement (LSA) the US signs with other countries; the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA) in 2018, an India-specific version of the Communication and Information Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA); and the Basic Exchange Cooperation Agreement (BECA) in October 2020, which involves sharing of information in space and undersea domains.

In June 2005, the two countries signed the 10-year 'New Framework for the US-India Defense Relationship'. This agreement set a roadmap for their future defence cooperation, which also involved collaboration in multilateral operations, expanded two-way defence trade, and increased opportunities for technology transfer and cooperation relating to ballistic missile defence. An Indo-US Defence Joint Working Group was created, and its first meeting was held in April 2007.

During Secretary of State Rice's visit to New Delhi in March 2005, she told her Indian interlocutors that the Bush Administration wanted a "decisively broader strategic relationship." As a senior US official accompanying her told the media, "its goal is to help India become a major world power in the 21st century," adding that "we understand fully the implications, including the military implications of that statement."

A few months later, in July 2005, US President George W Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh announced agreement on an 'Indo-US Civil Nuclear Deal', through which the US removed important non-proliferation sanctions on India in exchange for India's commitment not to conduct any more nuclear tests and place its civil nuclear facilities under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards. The deal was signed after all its conditions were fulfilled in 2008. More than civil nuclear trade, the agreement's goals were to clear the desk of the relationship cluttered by sanctions, upon which new strategic ties could be fashioned.

In June 2010, the 'US-India Strategic Dialogue' was launched to provide high-level guidance to the India-US relationship. The first meeting, held in Washington DC, was chaired by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Indian External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna. The dialogue set the stage for US President Barack Obama's first visit to India in 2010. This was elevated to the 'US-India Strategic and Commercial Dialogue' following Obama's visit to India as the chief guest at the 66th Republic Day celebrations in 2015.

In addition, during Obama's 2010 visit to Delhi, the waivers were extended, and India was provided with another set of exemptions on export controls and high-tech trade under the US Export Regulations and the International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR).

In 2012, the 'Defence Trade and Technology Initiative' (DTTI) was launched to encourage the co-production and co-development of military equipment. The aim was to ease bureaucratic hindrances from slowing down the process.

India and the US made a 'Joint Declaration on Defence Cooperation and Engagement' in September 2013 to reinforce the 2005 'New Framework for Defence Relations'. It laid out their common security perspective and noted that the defence technology transfer, trade, research, co-development, and co-production relationship would be at the same level as their closest partners.

The 'Framework for the US-India Defense Relationship' was renewed in 2015 during Obama's visit to India. There was also agreement on four "pathfinder" projects under DTTI, as well as cooperation on aircraft carrier and jet engine technology. It was during this visit—the first time a US President was the chief guest on Republic Day—that India and the US signed the 'Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean Region'. The word "Indo-Pacific" had not yet entered the two countries' strategic lexicon.

It was also during this visit that two government-to-government DTTI projects on mobile electric hybrid power sources and next-generation protective ensembles for chemical and bioweapons protections were signed.

During Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the US in 2016, the US declared India a 'Major Defense Partner'. This status is unique to India and signalled that the country would be treated at par with the US's closest allies and partners.

The 'Indo-US Strategic Dialogue' was replaced by the '2+2 dialogue' involving joint meetings of their foreign and defence ministers in September 2018. The inaugural meeting was attended by US State Secretary Mike Pompeo and US Defense Secretary James Mattis, as well as their Indian counterparts, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj and Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. With this annual format, the supervision of defence issues is now at the ministerial level rather than with the DPG.,

In August 2018, India was granted the designation of 'Strategic Trade Authorisation Tier 1' (STA-1) to enable US companies to export a greater range of dual-use and high-tech items to India. This status is available to NATO countries and close allies like South Korea, Australia, and Japan. The aim was also to link up to the Indian government's plans under the Innovations for Defence Excellence (iDEX) framework established in 2018 to foster innovation and technology development in the defence and aerospace sector.

Urban India's Parking Woes: An Overview

India's urbanisation is shaped by its overwhelming dependence on its metropolitan cities, home to 42.3 percent of its urban population. This has resulted in high human density in over one million cities, averaging 20,713 persons per sq. km. As urban populations grow and city economies expand, there has been a rise in the number of motor vehicles, primarily cars and two-wheelers, in urban areas. For instance, in 2020, Delhi had 11.89 million registered motor vehicles, Bengaluru had 9.64 million, Chennai had 6.35 million, Ahmedabad had 4.57 million, Mumbai had 3.88 million, Hyderabad had 3.24 million, and Jaipur had 3.17 million. This has also resulted in congestion because much of the road is used to park vehicles. As traffic congestion increases, obstructing mobility in cities, commuters spend more and more time on their daily commutes. This creates frustration from a sense of powerlessness over the situation and adverse economic and social consequences. While such situations have typically prompted public anger at the state of traffic in many cities, some citizens have also attempted to address the issue through public discussions. For instance, over the years, citizens' meetings on traffic-related challenges and solutions have been held in Vadodara (Gujarat), Ludhiana (Punjab), Pune (Maharashtra), and Mangaluru and Bengaluru (Karnataka).

Matters related to motor vehicles in India come under the purview of both the Centre and the states (and not city governments). Although vehicular congestion is an emerging problem for India's cities, the automobile industry is likely to remain unrestricted as, given its substantial economic and employment potential, it is vital for India. At the beginning of 2023, India surpassed Japan to become the third-largest automobile market in the world, logging 4.25 million new car sales. In 2021, the sector accounted for 8 percent of India's total exports, 7.1 percent of its GDP, and generated 37 million jobs. By 2023, India was also the world's largest manufacturer of two-wheelers, the third-largest manufacturer of heavy trucks, and the fourth-largest car manufacturer. The automobile sector is also valuable for India's states, with motor vehicle tax being one of their most healthy revenue sources. For instance, in 2023, the Delhi government collected INR 2,9160 mn, registering a 17 percent year-on-year growth. At the same time, there also appears to be no thinking towards imposing a cap on the number of cars in a city. As such, cities now have no alternative but to prepare to tackle the increasing traffic congestors operating within their geographical limits. Several cities have begun considering parking organisation as a tool to manage the worsening situations. This brief assesses the parking policy documents of Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Delhi, Pune, and Mumbai, and discusses the likely obstacles and potential solutions to alleviating the situation.

Parking Policies in Indian Cities

Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Delhi, Pune, and Mumbai are five of India's 10 largest cities. Four of these cities feature in the 2023 TomTom Traffic Index, which evaluates cities around the world by their average travel time, fuel costs, and CO2 emissions—Bengaluru and Pune are the sixth- and seventh-most congested cities globally (and the first and second in Asia), respectively, while New Delhi ranks 44 globally (and 12 in Asia), and Mumbai ranks 54 (14 in Asia). According to the index, the average traffic speed is 18 km per hour in Bengaluru, 19 km per hour in Pune, 24 km per hour in Delhi, and 23 km per hour in Mumbai. Although Ahmedabad does not figure in the TomTom Index, the city's traffic situation is equally problematic. According to a survey conducted by CEPT University's Centre of Excellence in Urban Transport, peak travel speed in Ahmedabad was 20-22 km per hour. As such, the city administrations' parking policies must be viewed—and implemented—as viable solutions to their traffic issues.

• Ahmedabad

Ahmedabad is India's seventh largest metropolis, with a population of 5.59 million (as per the 2011 Census). The city has a public bus service (Ahmedabad Municipal Transport Service), a bus rapid transit system, and a metro rail. In 2021, it had 3.9 million vehicles, 74.9 percent of which were two-wheelers, 4.3 percent three-wheelers, and 17.8 percent four-wheelers. In 2023, the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) notified its 'Revised Parking Policy 2023 Ahmedabad City'. According to the parking policy document, the city has inadequate on-street and off-street public parking facilities, available parking spaces are underutilised, parking for private buses is unorganised, and logistic facilities in and around the city are insufficient. Ahmedabad currently has parking provisions for 5,453 cars

and 26,758 two-wheelers. Parking in the city is generally free, and on-street parking is not clearly demarcated.

The new policy proposes making a shift from free to paid parking. The AMC aims to develop and manage parking based on functional quality, operational excellence, citizen satisfaction, and sustainable financial performance in line with city planning policies. The objectives, as stated in the parking policy document, are to discourage the use of personal vehicles, give preference to public and non-motorised vehicles, fix parking charges that reflect the cost of land, encourage short-term parking to achieve a high turnover, manage parking space through the use of smart technologies, and prepare parking bylaws and area-level parking plans. The policy stipulates the establishment of a separate Traffic and Parking Cell.

• Bengaluru

Bengaluru is India's third largest city, with a population of 8.4 million (as per the 2011 Census). As of 2020, it had 9.4 million vehicles, about 67 percent of which were two-wheelers and 21 percent were cars. Parking is unregulated across the city, and on-street parking is mostly free but not well-demarcated. Bengaluru's 'Parking Policy 2.0', announced in December 2020, proposed a shift from chaotic to well-organised parking, from free to paid parking, from government-driven to market-driven parking supply, and from the passive and weak enforcement of parking regulations to the active management of parking demand. The move towards market-driven parking aims to accelerate the development of off-street parking via private market sources. The policy also proposed preparing area parking plans. The zonal joint commissioner of the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike, the city's administrative body, will oversee parking through parking space management agencies.

• Delhi

The National Capital Territory of Delhi is home to 16.8 million people (as per the 2011 Census) and had 13.4 million registered vehicles in 2022. In September 2019, the government notified the 'Delhi Maintenance and Management of Parking Rules 2019'. The document stipulated that an apex monitoring committee review the implementation and compliance with the rules. It also mandated the preparation of area parking plans with due consideration given to pedestrians, cyclists, buses (including school buses), the metro, emergency vehicles, differently-abled access and parking facilities, vendor zones, pick-up and drop spots for cars, and overnight parking for transport vehicles. Notably, the document states that the plans must not impinge on the free movement of traffic. The apex committee should determine a base parking fee based on the recommendations of the base parking fee committee. The civic agencies should determine variations in parking fees. A dynamic pricing mechanism should be implemented, and on-street parking should be charged at least twice as much as off-street parking.

• Pune

Pune is India's seventh largest city, with a population of 3.11 million (as per the 2011 Census). In 2017, 23 villages were subsumed into the city limits, followed by 11 more in 2021, adding about one million more to the city's population. In 2022, the city had 3.2 million two-wheelers, 88,674 auto rickshaws, 36,946 taxi cabs, and 753,000 cars. The city's parking policy was released in 2016. The guiding principles of the policy are to move people and vehicles, make provisions for the parking of bicycles and intermediate modes of transport, reduce the use of personal modes of transport, encourage the use of sustainable transportation modes such as walking and cycling, rationalise parking spaces, price parking to encourage the efficient use of parking spaces, and have a revenue-generating parking management system. The policy aimed to shift 80 percent of motorised trips to public transport by 2031, achieve a 50 percent reduction in total vehicle kilometres travelled by the same year, and transform at least 10 percent of on-street parking spaces to public open spaces. It also proposed parking districts and new technologies for management.

• Mumbai

Mumbai, India's largest city, is one of the densest cities in the world ((with a population of 12.44 million, as per the 2011 Census) and also has the country's highest vehicle density. In 2020, Mumbai had 2.35 million two-wheelers, 220,000 three-wheelers, 1.13 million cars, and 3.95 million heavy vehicles. At present, almost all on-street parking is loosely regulated and mostly free. The city's Comprehensive Mobility Plan, released in 2016, calculated a parking demand of 2,84,575 equivalent car space (ECS). However, in 2022, the city was estimated to have substantially less available parking capacity—39,501 ECS with the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) and about 26,815 ECS with government, parastatals, and commercial establishments.

In 2022, the BMC released a parking policy for the city, but it is yet to be fully operational. The policy proposes that the Mumbai Parking Authority (MPA) will be responsible for parking in the city under the aegis of the BMC, but with an independent apex body comprising representatives from all government departments that deal with traffic and transport. The MPA would also have a chief executive officer and other functionaries to oversee its day-to-day affairs. The MPA will need to create and develop the Mumbai parking pool (on- and off-street parking spaces managed by the body),, organise and manage on- and off-street parking supply and demand and parking pricing, and manage abandoned and scrapped vehicles. The MPA will digitise parking infrastructure, allowing citizens to reserve parking spots in advance electronically. The MPA will also need to focus on reducing traffic congestion on the roads, especially during peak hours, through staggered timings, work from home, and other innovations.

The parking policies of all five cities appear to agree on certain significant aspects. They are unanimous that parking cannot be free and should be charged wherever public space is utilised since the concept of 'free parking' is not sustainable. There is also broad agreement that off-street parking must be optimised, and on-street parking should be rationalised (restricted and arranged to advance traffic flow) so that more road space becomes available to moving traffic. Policy aspects related to monitoring and implementation recommend decentralisation (area management, parking zones, and parking districts). The policies also agree that on-street parking must be costlier, and a demand-driven pricing escalation formula should be determined. All five policies favour using digital technologies. However, using and operating such technologies will require external expertise (from tech companies/personnel) since municipal corporations may not appear to have relevant resources to handle such infrastructure.

A significant way in which the five cities are trying to manage parking demand is through pricing. According to some transportation experts, reducing the market price for parking inflates parking demand, which is used to set minimum parking requirements. Eliminating minimum parking requirements will lower the cost of urban development, improve urban design, reduce automobile dependency, and restrain urban sprawl. Several cities worldwide, such as Singapore, London (the UK), Curitiba (Brazil), and Hong Kong, have successfully used the pricing tools. In Singapore, for instance, the Housing Development Board and Urban Redevelopment Authority manage parking services such as season parking and the purchase of parking coupons. The city enables the selection of real-time parking through a parking guidance system. Parking rates are determined area-wise, day-wise, and timewise, and can be chargeable per minute or hour. The charges are substantial and reflect components such as land cost.

Similar strategies are being tried in Indian cities such as Bengaluru, Srinagar, and New Delhi. These cities are experimenting with parking management on selected streets by hiring a contractor and splitting the revenue between the corporation, smart-city office, traffic police, and the contractor through a detailed policy. Proper pricing has the added advantage of generating substantial revenue for the local body, which can partially offset the cost of creating sustainable transport infrastructure. Furthermore, these cities have divided their territories into areas and created area-level parking management plans so each area can attempt to resolve parking issues separately. Parking management can be assisted by complimentary planning/design techniques such as efficient street design, identifying the roles and responsibilities of different government agencies through well-drafted policies or government resolutions, and deploying on-street and off-street parking regulations that use a progressive planning approach by moving the majority of on-street parking to off-street parking. These cities have also tried specific methods that can indirectly improve the parking situation, such as a more significant effort at pedestrianisation and improving walkability, cycling infrastructure, and public transport by incentivising people to make short trips on foot or take public transport rather than use private motor vehicles.

Navigating Carbon Pricing: The G20 Experience and Global South Prospects

Climate change is widely recognised as a consequence of both market and policy failures. The failure to account for the costs of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the prices of goods and services can be described as a fundamental market failure which has effectively allowed economic actors to exploit the atmosphere as a free resource, encouraging a continued link between fossil fuel consumption and economic growth. Another significant factor driving climate change is policy failure in the form of fossil fuel subsidies and a distortionary tax system that incentivises emissions over environment protection.

Carbon pricing is a well-established economic instrument which can internalise the cost of carbon dioxide emissions in goods and services and, by effect, optimally drive down the costs associated with reducing emissions. Carbon pricing is a cost imposed on units of carbon emitted, or a proxy for such emissions—in theory, it incentivises polluters to decrease the volume of carbon that they release into the atmosphere. Through this approach, carbon pricing aims to redirect both the production and consumption patterns towards activities with lower carbon intensity and stimulate advancements in technology. Carbon pricing can take various forms, typically, carbon taxes or carbon trading markets.

The concept of internalising externalities, first introduced by economist Arthur Pigou in The Economics of Welfare (1920), is underpinned by the argument that individuals and firms tend to disregard the costs imposed on others unless those costs are reflected in their own actions. In this context, a Pigouvian tax on carbon serves as a mechanism to ensure that the costs of emitting GHGs are included in the prices of goods and services. This approach was later popularised by Yale University economist William Nordhaus in the 1970s, who argued for assigning a monetary value to the environmental damage caused by GHG emissions, including carbon. Today, it is generally recognised that carbon pricing is important and potentially useful but not a silver bullet and should be complemented with other fiscal policy and mitigation instruments to address market deficiencies and foster innovation while facilitating the adoption of low-carbon technologies.

Potential Benefits of Carbon Pricing

Carbon pricing serves multiple purposes, each contributing to its importance as a policy tool.

The first aim is to correct market failures. By placing a price on carbon, businesses and individuals are incentivised to reduce their emissions, thereby enhancing economic efficiency. This incentive is based on an opportunity cost and is maintained throughout the operation of the carbon pricing system, whether a particular entity reduces its emissions to comply with a cap or decides to purchase allowances or credits to meet its obligation.

Additionally, carbon pricing mechanisms can play a vital role in stimulating investments in low-carbon technologies, renewable energy sources, and energy-efficient practices. Especially when carbon pricing mechanisms are designed to provide medium-term price signals, carbon pricing can promote investment stability and investor confidence, allowing finance to flow

towards emission-saving technologies or solutions and encouraging the development of new emission-reducing practices. This not only contributes to a more sustainable future but also fosters innovation, promotes job creation, and spurs economic growth in green sectors. Studies suggest that investments in sustainable industries have the potential to generate three times as many jobs compared to government spending in the fossil fuel sector. In the context of developing economies, such investments take on greater significance as they support vulnerable sectors and communities in adapting to climate change and achieving just transitions.

Furthermore, carbon pricing can generate substantial revenue for governments, which can be allocated to support climate-related initiatives and regional and social transitions or be redistributed to citizens through dividends or tax cuts, thereby fostering public support for emission reduction efforts. The World Bank's State and Trends of Carbon Pricing 2023 report highlighted that the heightened ambition and broader application of carbon pricing mechanisms have led to a fivefold increase mechanisms have led to a fivefold increase in government revenues over the past decade. Notably, this revenue surge has seen 40 percent of the funds being allocated to environment-friendly expenditures, while an additional 10 percent has been directed to compensating households and businesses. The European Union emissions trading system (EU ETS) has helped generate over 152 billion euros for the government while reducing emissions by 35 percent since 2005. Initially, revenue from the EU ETS was not allocated to specific ends, with only a general indication at the European level that member states should prioritise expenditure in social transition and innovation. Over time, this policy has changed, with increasing shares of revenues being committed at the EU level for innovation and social cohesion. At the national level, member states have equally tended to earmark revenue to specific policies, such as adaptation infrastructure, technological innovation, and socially just transitions.

Carbon Pricing in Action

Mandatory carbon pricing has been put into practice primarily through two mechanisms. The first is a carbon tax, in which the government imposes a tax on carbon emissions or a proxy thereof, such as the carbon content of fossil fuels. Scandinavian nations were among the pioneers in implementing these carbon levies. In 1990, Finland became the first country to introduce a carbon tax, followed by Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. In the last 30 years, several countries, including Argentina, Chile, Colombia, France, Germany, Japan, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, Singapore, South Africa, and Uruguay, have initiated carbon taxation policies in one or more economic sectors. Additionally, numerous regional entities, such as the Canadian provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Quebec, have implemented their own carbon taxation measures.

The second approach is through an emissions trading system (ETS), or carbon market, which imposes emission limits on economic agents and allows such entities to trade emissions allowances, thereby creating a market-based price for carbon. Trading allows entities within the ETS to decide whether to reduce emissions or to purchase emission allowances from other entities which may have a surplus or an overall lower cost to emission abatement. In this way, the overall cost of abatement is efficiently minimised across the participating economic actors, and emissions stay within the overall mandated limits. In 2005, the EU initiated the world's inaugural carbon emissions trading system, building on previous experience in the US in the control of criteria pollutants, in particular sulphur dioxide. This EU ETS market is characterised by annual emission caps and pricing determined by the interplay of supply and demand for allowances. Comparable emissions trading mechanisms have since been adopted in Canada, China, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and several states of the United States (US).

According to the World Bank, the percentage of global emissions subject to carbon taxes and emissions trading systems increased from 7 percent in 2005 to some 23 percent in 2023. The same report states that there are 73 carbon pricing instruments currently in operation covering 23 percent of global emissions.

In parallel with developments in these compliance instruments, the world has also seen the emergence of a global voluntary carbon market, wherein companies seeking to decarbonise in line with the objectives of the United Nations (UN) Paris Agreement commit to long-term reduction pathways and purchase carbon credits generated by emission reduction projects and activities.

Finally, companies have also increased their use of implicit (or shadow) carbon pricing in their decision-making. This implies incorporating a carbon price (usually related to the social cost of carbon or to a metric similar to the longer-term carbon price in the prevailing sector in which the company operates) into investment calculations. By doing so, a company can best align its internal investment and operational decisions with the goals of the Paris Agreement.

Prime Video unveils new series 'Matka King' starring Vijay Varma

After 'Dahaad', Vijay Varma is reuniting with Prime Video for 'Matka King', a new series directed by Nagraj Manjule of 'Sairat' fame.

Filmmaker Karan Johar and Aparna Purohit, head of India Originals in India and Southeast Asia, Prime Video introduced the show on Tuesday at the Prime Video Presents event here.

Johar asked Varma, who played a serial killer in 'Dahaad', whether there was a secret to playing great grey roles, an acting school perhaps.

Varma, an FTII graduate, said though he has been to an acting school, he learned more on the job.

"I learnt more from the masters who worked before me like Dilip Kumar sahab, Amitabh Bachchan sahab, Shah Rukh Khan sir, Salman Khan sir. I like what Javier Bardem once said, 'I don't believe in God, I believe in Al Pacino," the actor said.

According to the streamer, the 1960s-set 'Matka King' follows the story of an enterprising cotton trader in Mumbai who starts a new gambling game called Matka, taking the city by storm and democratising a terrain previously reserved for the rich and elite.

Manjule, who also serves as the creator of the upcoming show, has co-written its script with Abhay Koranne.

'Matka King' is backed by Roy Kapur Films, Aatpat and SMR Productions.

Siddharth Roy Kapur of Roy Kapur Films said he has been a fan of the content produced by Prime Video and he is looking forward to collaborating with the streamer.

"It's lovely to be doing a show together for the first time (with Nagraj). Since the time I saw 'Sairat', I was full blown by him (Manjule).

"Then to be able to get someone like Vijay to play the role of Matka King, he has always got fans excited. And, then to work with Abhay, who had written a wonderful script. So, it all came together," Kapur said.

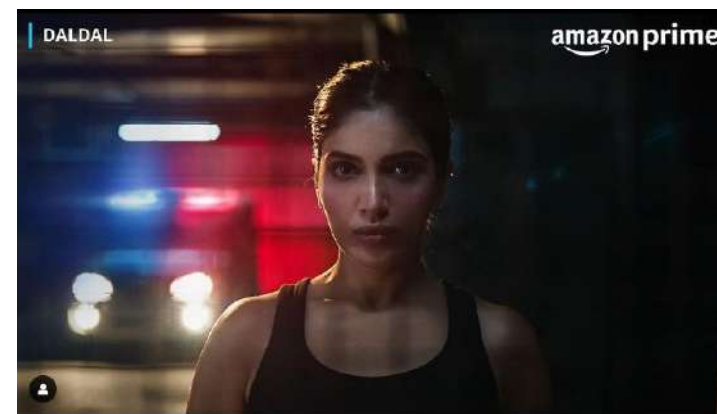# Bhumi Pednekar making her series debut with Prime Video 'Daldal'

Actor Bhumi Pednekar will make her series debut with 'Daldal', a Prime Video thriller drama which will see her as a cop hot on the heels of a serial killer in Mumbai.

Amrit Raj Gupta of 'Gullak' fame will direct the series, based on Vish Dhamija's book 'Bhendi Bazaar'. It is produced by Abundantia Entertainment.

In 'Daldal', Pednekar plays Rita Ferreira, Mumbai's newly appointed DCP who is haunted by the guilt of her part and dealing with demons of her present.

"She must embark on an investigation of a series of murders that puts her on a collision course with a cold-blooded serial killer, even as she has to save her life from falling apart," read the official synopsis.

Pednekar, who was recently seen in crime investigative film 'Bhakshak', said she has been fortunate to feature in projects that help her push boundaries as a performer.

"I love challenges... When the script of 'Daldal' came my way, I was thankful to the team, who thought I could do it. It is one of the most challenging parts, it's a genre that I've never done, I haven't really played in the thriller-drama space, but it has a lot of action and I've been prepping for it.

"There have been scripts that have come to me in the past where women are in uniform... The beauty of my character is that she is complex, conflicted, and layered. It's exciting to me to be able to portray that with all my conviction," the actor said at the Prime Video Presents event.

Vikram Malhotra and Suresh Triveni serve as executive producers on the series, penned by Sreekanth Agneeaswaran, Rohan D'Souza, and Priya Saggi. Sreekanth Agneeaswaran and Rohan D'Souza are credited for the screenplay which has dialogues by Hussain Haidry.

Actress Arundhati Nair on ventilator after tragic accident in Kerala

Tamil and Malayalam film actress Arundhati Nair is currently on a ventilator after being involved in a tragic accident in Kerala. Her sister Arathy took to Instagram to issue a statement urging fans to pray for Arundhati's recovery. The accident reportedly took place at the Kovalam bypass, resulting in Arundhati sustaining head injuries. She was travelling with her brother at the time of the incident.

SS Rajamouli attends 'RRR' special screening in Japan, receives gift from 83-year-old fan

Filmmaker SS Rajamouli, who attended a special screening of his blockbuster film 'RRR' in Japan, says he is grateful for the love the audience continues to shower on the movie even after almost two years of its release.

According to Japanese film distribution outlet Twin Company, the 'RRR' screenings were held on Monday at multiplex theatres Shinjuku Piccadilly Cinema and Shinjuku Wald 9 in Tokyo.

Rajamouli, who attended one of the screenings, shared a series of photos with an elderly Japanese woman who gifted him 1,000 origami cranes.

'In Japan, they make origami cranes & gift them to their loved ones for good luck & health. This 83yr old woman made 1000 of them to bless us because RRR made her happy. She just sent the gift and was waiting outside in the cold. Some gestures can never be repaid. Just grateful,' the filmmaker captioned his post on X.

Twin Company distributed 'RRR' in Japan on October 21, 2022, months after its release in India. The film, starring Ram Charan and Jr NTR, earned over 410 million yen (approximately Rs 23 crore) at the Japanese box office.

In an X post, the distribution studio said as Rajamouli was unable to interact with 'RRR' fans the last time he visited Japan due to infection control measures in the wake of the pandemic, they honoured his wish to watch the film with 'a cheering crowd'.

A PAN-India film, 'RRR' followed a pre-independence fictional story woven around two real-life Indian revolutionaries — Alluri Sitarama Raju (Charan) and Komaram Bheem (Jr NTR) — in the 1920s.

The film raised over Rs 1,200 crore at the global box office and went on to win the best original song Oscar for its track 'Naatu Naatu'.

Ananya Panday would love to play Maharani Gayatri Devi of Jaipur onscreen

Actress Ananya Panday is keen to portray the role of Maharani of Jaipur Gayatri Devi onscreen.

Asked if she had to portray a fashion icon onscreen, who would that be, Ananya said, "I think Gayatri Devi."

Tagged as one of the world's most stylish royal women, Gayatri Devi was one of India's most elegant and modern Maharanis. She passed away at the age of 90 in 2009, reportedly due to lung failure.

In just five years in Hindi cinema, Ananya has made it into the big league.

What does stardom mean to her?

"That is not true. I am still very hungry and I have miles to go," she said.

Ananya was walking the ramp as a show stopper for LFW x FDCI.

The actress is the ambassador for House of Lakme, a beauty brand.

Sharing details about her fashion sensibilities, Ananya said, "Anything I feel comfortable in, so I wear the same clothes every single day. I am just in my pyjamas all the time."

When it comes to beauty, she likes staying au natural but does enjoy experimenting when it comes to her job.

"All natural but I guess I am lucky because I get to experiment so much," she said.

Nick Jonas in Mumbai to spend quality time with wife Priyanka and daughter

Singer and songwriter Nick Jonas, who earlier performed in Mumbai as the headliner for the second edition of Lollapalooza India along with his brothers, Joe and Kevin, is back in the city to spend some quality time with his wife Priyanka Chopra Jonas and their daughter.

He was papped exiting the Mumbai airport dressed in a white shirt, matching pants and shoes.

Nick also carried a black sling bag. He smiled and waved at the paparazzi and fans gathered outside the airport.

The singer has come to India just a week before Holi. It remains to be seen if Nick and Priyanka would stay back in the country to celebrate the festival with their friends and family.

Priyanka landed in India with their daughter, days before Nick's arrival.

Meanwhile, on the work front, Priyanka will be seen in 'Heads of State' alongside John Cena and Idris Elba. She is also set to star in 'The Bluff', which will be directed by Frank E Flowers. The film will also star Karl Urban.

Malaika Arora Khan exudes femininity at LFW

Anushree Reddy showcased a collection called Bagh-e-Noor that drew inspiration from the opulence of the Nizami heritage and the natural beauty of the flora, fauna, and landscapes of its homeland.

Rakul Preet Singh

Anushree described the collection as the 'perfect ode to the summer bride'. Malaika Arora Khan walked as showstopper for Reddy. She said that it was 'fantastic to walk for Anushree again."

"It was such a beautiful collection. It feels like spring is here. Everything looks fresh and prettiness. All the pieces were timeless." Rakul Preet Singh walked for Ritika Mirchandani, where she looked drop-dead-gorgeous in a monochrome ensemble made with dyed queen of pearls.

History TV18's new docuseries Buddha Circuit explores Bihar's heritage

Exploring the rich tapestry of Bihar's spiritual heritage, a captivating four-part documentary series, Buddha Circuit will take viewers on an illuminating journey through some of the most sacred sites associated with the life and teachings of Lord Buddha. Premiered on Saturday, March 16 at 5 pm, History TV18's latest local production will explore the living bond between Bihar and the Buddha — one that goes beyond historical documentation. From Bodhgaya to the capital of Patna, this immersive journey delves into the essence of Buddhism, showcasing the timeless wisdom, artistry and serenity that permeate these spaces and gives them meaning.

The documentary takes audiences to Nalanda University, an ancient seat of learning where wisdom once flourished. The documentary shines the light on Nalanda's intellectual legacy, and its profound impact on the pursuit of knowledge. Vikramshila University in Bhagalpur is also unveiled, standing as a testament to the eternal quest for spiritual exploration and enlightenment.

Big B is all praise for Master Blaster

Megastar Amitabh Bachchan and batting maestro Sachin Tendulkar attended the Indian Street Premier League (ISPL) final between Majhi Mumbai and Tigers of Kolkata on Friday night.

Taking to X, Big B posted pictures from the finale. In several images, he and his son Abhishek Bachchan can be seen cheering for the players while being seated in the stands. The Agneepath star also praised Sachin for his knowledge of the sport.

"T 4951 - Humbled by the immense knowledge that the Great Sachin possess about the game of Cricket... spent such valuable time in the evening Finals of the ISPL ..," he wrote. Big B is associated with the Indian Street Premier League (ISPL) as the owner of team Mumbai.

WPL title is one thing, but what Kohli has achieved for India is remarkable: Smriti Mandhana

RCB skipper Smriti Mandhana feels it's not right for people to undermine Virat Kohli's achievements for the Bengaluru franchise in the wake of her side's Women's Premier League (WPL) title triumph here recently.

The Mandhana-led RCB defeated Delhi Capitals to lift the WPL trophy in only their second year, while their male counterparts, led by the charismatic Kohli for nearly a decade before he stepped down, haven't had success in the 16 years of IPL.

"The title is one thing, but what he (Kohli) has achieved for India is remarkable. So, I don't think that comparison is right in terms of where my career is and what he has already achieved," Mandhana told the media on Tuesday.

"The reason why I do not like the comparison is that what he has achieved is great; he has been an inspirational person. A title does not define a lot of things; we all respect him and I feel like the respect has to be right up there for Virat. So, there is nothing different from me as well," said the India vice-captain.

Both Mandhana and Kohli wear No. 18 jerseys and the left-handed batter said drawing comparison between the two based on that was unwarranted.

"I would not term it as an 18 comparison. The jersey number is just a personal choice; my birth date is 18 and I have 18 on my back... it does not define how he plays or (how) I play my cricket. He's been an inspiration to us in a lot of aspects, so I would not say title should define anything," she added.

Mandhana felt that the men's counterparts had always played good competitive cricket but an IPL title had eluded them.

"I think, to be fair, the men's team has also played good cricket in the last 16 years; it is not like they have not played well. I don't think the comparison is right. RCB is a franchise; let's treat the men's and women's teams separately because we don't want to be compared. "They are good at what they do. We are good at what we do," she added.

On how she scripted the team's super spell, where RCB grabbed nine Delhi Capitals wickets for just 43 runs, Mandhana said Sophie Molineux taking three wickets after the strategic timeout was the turning point.

"Especially that over after that strategic timeout when Sophie got those three wickets, that was pretty much the turning point. It was good to watch the way they (spinners) planned and executed. I think that was good to watch."

Mandhana praised the 'one tribe' culture in the side, saying it was something that each one in the group has adhered to and tried to build on in the last two years.

"Yeah, the team culture. There is one big thing we spoke about after (poor) last season with the management, and they were keen on building one. Because of course, we are just the first or second year into it, and if we do a few things right, it might set a few things right for a long time, and culture is something that is a big thing (in the side).

"One tribe, we are like one family and we are all there for each other. We backed each other up, and we did that a lot in the last season as well. Things didn't work out last year, but this year it was even more. Much better, the management was just there, celebrating each other's success."

Fans might have to wait for 'real' Pant

New Delhi

Rishabh Pant will find it "very difficult" to be at his fluent best at the beginning of the IPL but Sunil Gavaskar expects that his knees will react better once he starts batting more and more in match situations.

"It'll be very difficult. But the good thing is he (Pant) has played some cricket. So he has got some practice. To get fluency in batting is a little tough," Gavaskar said. "When you talk of a knee injury, the pivoting that takes place. Wicket-keeping is difficult as well, but even in batting, the knee is quite important. So, maybe, in the beginning, we won't see the real Rishabh Pant that we are used to," he said.

Rohit will be Pandya's right-hand man

Mumbai

Mumbai Indians skipper Hardik Pandya today said his predecessor Rohit Sharma will continue to be a guiding force for him during the IPL despite the unexpected change of leadership that the franchise announced ahead of the upcoming season, triggering a "backlash" from the fans.

Pandya, who led Gujarat Titans in the past two seasons, is back at Mumbai Indians as captain for the 2024 edition. Having led Mumbai Indians to five titles, Rohit was surprisingly replaced by Pandya going into the upcoming season.

"I don't think it will be any awkward or any different. It will be a nice feeling because we have been playing for 10 years. I have played my whole career under him and he is going to have his hand on my shoulder throughout the season," he added.

The star all-rounder will be making his comeback at the IPL, having undergone a lengthy rehabilitation for the ankle injury he suffered during the ODI World Cup at home in October.

"I have no issues with my body, I plan to play all the games. In the IPL, I have not missed many games anyway. Technically, I was out for three months. It was a freak injury. We pushed but it would have been an uphill task that I would be fit for the World Cup semifinals or the final. When we pushed, it kind of triggered the injury and my recovery took longer (than expected)," he said.

Meanwhile, MI head coach Mark Boucher said the team is waiting to hear from the Indian cricket board on the fitness status of star batter Suryakumar Yadav.

"We are awaiting updates on Suryakumar from the BCCI. We have always been under a cloud of fitness issues but we have a world-class medical team. We may lose one or two in terms of fitness but we have to move on as it is sport," Boucher said.

When Neeraj Chopra told Pakistan's Arshad Nadeem how to acquire a new javelin

New Delhi

Pakistan's Arshad Nadeem and India's Neeraj Chopra are javelin superstars in their own right and a symbol of perfect friendship. They have been known for their bonhomie and camaraderie off the pitch. They may be fierce competitors but have a healthy respect for each other.

Both Arshad Nadeem and Neeraj Chopra are getting ready for the upcoming outdoor season. While Chopra is currently training in Turkey, the 27-year-old Nadeem's preparations have hit a 'snag'.

The Pakistani recently said he is struggling to acquire an international standard javelin for many years and has been "using one for the past seven to eight years."

Chopra, the world and defending Olympic champion, is rather surprised to hear this.

In an exclusive chat with SAI Media recently, Chopra, who competed with Nadeem in the world athletics championships in Budapest last year, said, "It is hard to believe that he has been struggling to get a new javelin. Given his credentials, this should not be a big issue at all."

Arshad Nadeem, who finished second behind Chopra in Budapest, was recently quoted in the media, saying: "It has now got to a stage where the javelin is damaged and I have asked the national federation and my coach to do something about it before the Paris Olympics.

"When I started off in 2015, competing in international events I got this javelin ... for an international athlete aiming to win a medal in the Olympic Games, you need proper equipment and training facilities," Nadeem added.

Chopra, whose entire training and international tours are funded by the Indian sports ministry's Target Olympic Podium Scheme, feels that Nadeem is the pride of Pakistan and must be supported.

With a 90.18m throw, Arshad Nadeem created a new javelin throw record at the 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham to finish on top of the podium. It ended Pakistan's 60-year wait for a CWG gold medal.

"It can't be that he (Arshad) doesn't have the means to buy a javelin. He is a champion and must be doing some brand endorsements. I reckon he has earned a bit of money too. But having said that, his government can look at Arshad's needs and support him just like how my government is doing so," said Chopra. "Additionally, Arshad is a top javelin thrower and I believe that the javelin makers will be more than happy to sponsor him and provide what he wants. This is a piece of advice from my side," the CWG medalist added. If all goes well, the javelin competition at the upcoming Paris Olympics could see a strong Asian field. Chopra and Kishore Jena will spearhead India while Nadeem, who finished fifth in the Tokyo Olympics, will hope to replicate another 90 metre-plus throw in Paris and pose a serious threat to a sport usually dominated by Europeans. In December 2022, the Pakistani had a serious elbow operation in the UK.

Last year, Nadeem had a niggling knee operation done and skipped the Hangzhou Asian Games where Chopra won the gold. The outdoor javelin season starts with the Doha leg of the Diamond League in May.

Indian Wells: Well, Alcaraz does it again

Indian Wells

Carlos Alcaraz successfully defended his Indian Wells crown with a 7-6(5) 6-1 win over Daniil Medvedev in the final on Sunday.

In a rematch of last year's final, Alcaraz started sloppily, spraying errors around the court to fall 0-3 down but raised his level and captured the first set when his Russian opponent's forehand went wide in the tiebreak.

The Spaniard romped through the second set, raising his arms in the air and letting out a roar when Medvedev missed another forehand wide on match point. Second seed Alcaraz smacked 25 winners to Medvedev's 11 and was especially effective against his opponent's second serves.

"I enjoy playing these kind of matches with you," Alcaraz told Medvedev during the trophy ceremony. "Hopefully more finals ahead."

World No. 1 Iga Swiatek dominated ninth seed Maria Sakkari to win the final 6-4 6-0 and claim the title for a second time.

In a rematch of the 2022 showpiece, Swiatek's precise serving and speedy defence proved too much for her Greek opponent and the Pole reeled off the final eight games to close out a tournament where she never dropped a set. "I'm really proud of myself, I'm super happy," she said.

Sarfaraz Khan, Dhruv Jurel get central contracts; Ranji matches unlikely to be held in north in December-January

New Delhi

India's newest batting star Sarfaraz Khan and wicketkeeper Dhruv Jurel were inducted into Group C of BCCI's central contract with an annual retainership fee of Rs 1 crore, having fulfilled the criterion of playing three Tests in a current season.

Their names were ratified during BCCI Apex Council meeting which was held on Monday.

Sarfaraz, a domestic heavyweight for Mumbai, scored three half-centuries in three Tests against England while Agra man Jurel, with scores of 90 and 39 not out in a tricky chase at Ranchi, won the Player of the Match in only his second game.

Ratification of central contract was on the agenda and both have made the cut.

Ranji Trophy scheduling

The BCCI is likely to revisit the Ranji Trophy calendar for the next season and will not schedule any matches in the northern part of India during December and January, when fog and bad light often play spoilsport.

While the detailed domestic calendar will be announced later, the BCCI Apex Council did discuss the tentative schedule of 2024-25, which was one of the primary items in the eight-point agenda of the Apex Council meeting on the day.

For the past few seasons, the Ranji Trophy has been starting in January and ending in second week of March and in north Indian cities like Delhi, Chandigarh, Kanpur, Meerut, Jammu and Dharamsala, most matches are being affected by bad light and fog during peak winter months.

"No decision has been taken yet but Ranji Trophy, like earlier years could start from mid or end October after the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy, which serves as an IPL auction platform. Some states are losing crucial points in do-or-die games because of inclement weather from mid-December to mid-February," a senior BCCI source told PTI.

It has been also learnt that the BCCI will form a committee, which will decide whether union territory Daman & Diu gets associate membership.