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VOL. 9, ISSUE 147, MUMBAI | FRIDAY, MARCH 11, 2022 I₹5 I PAGE 08

PUBLISHED SIMULTANEOUSLY FROM MUMBAI, BHOPAL AND NEW DELHI

NATION >02

Strongly propose reservation for girls in legal education: CJI

HOLLYWOOD > 06

Kim Kardashian pours her curves into crotchless sheer catsuit as she...

SPORTS > 07

Jhulan becomes joint leading wicket-taker in Women's...

BJP SET TO RETAIN POWER IN UP, UTTARAKHAND, GOA & MANIPUR; AAP SWEEPS PUNJAB

THE MODI DIVIDEND

UTTAR PRADESH: TOTAL 403

BJP-273
SP+-125
INC-02
BSP-01
Others- 02

UTTARAKHAND: TOTAL 70

BJP- 48
INC - 18
AAP -00
Others - 04

GOA: TOTAL 40

BJP - 20
INC - 12
AAP - 02
Others - 04

MANIPUR: TOTAL 60

BJP -32
INC -04
Others - 24

PUNJAB: TOTAL 117

INC -18
AAP -92
SAD+ -04
BJP+- 02
Others - 01

GORAKHPUR, LAKHIMPUR, AGRA -- ALL VOTE BJP BACK TO POWER

Lucknow: Gorakhpur, Lakhimpur and Agra were termed as trouble spots for the BJP, but the results of the Assembly elections out on Thursday clearly indicate that for the people, the incidents in these cities did not affect their decision to vote for the saffron party.Gorakhpur hit the headlines last year when Manish Gupta, a businessman from Kanpur, died, allegedly after being beaten up by the police during a raid in his hotel.The opposition was quick to use the incident as an example of 'law-and-order' situation in the state.However, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath promptly handed over the case to the CBI and gave compensation and a job to Gupta's widow. The matter died a natural death, and Gorakhpur has now given a clean sweep to the BJP with Adityanath winning his first Assembly election with an appreciable margin.The Lakhimpur incident in October last year, when an SUV, owned by Union minister Ajay Mishra Teni's son Ashish Mishra, mowed down four farmers who were returning from a protest.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is all set to retain power in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Goa and Manipur while the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) secured a landslide victory in Punjab. The AAP is the first regional party which will form a government in another state apart from New Delhi. According to the Election Commission's counting update at 8 p.m., the ruling party BJP has won 171 seats in Uttar Pradesh and is leading in 82 Assembly constituencies, while the Samajwadi Party (SP) has won 63 seats and is leading in 50 constituencies.

Rashtriya Lok Dal, which contested the Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections in alliance with the SP, has won seven Samaj Party (BSP) is limited to just one seat from where it is leading so far.

The Congress has won only two seats while the Jansatta Dal (Loktantrik) has managed two seats in Uttar Pradesh.

The state-level Nishad Party (Nirbal Indian Shoshit Hamara Aam Dal) won two seats and is leading in five constituencies, whereas another local party, Suheldev Bharatiya Samaj Party, won two seats and is leading in four constituencies.

In Uttarakhand, the BJP has won 40 seats and is leading in seven others, while the Congress has managed only 16 seats and is leading in three constituencies.

The BSP won a single seat in the state and leads in one constituency, Independent candidate.

In Goa, the ruling BJP is short of the majority mark by just one seat as it bagged 20 seats in the 40-member Assembly. The Congress has been confined to 11 seats, AAP won two seats, Goa Forward Party one, Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party two, Revolutionary Goans Party won one, while three seats were won by Independent candidates. In the 60-member Manipur Assembly, the ruling BJP retained power by winning 32 seats, while the Congress could bag only five seats. Surprisingly, the Janata Dal(United) won six seats in Manipur, whereas the Kuki People's Alliance won two, Naga People's Front five, National People's Party six and three seats went to Independent candidates.

AAP'S OATH-TAKING OF PUNJAB CABINET IN BHAGAT SINGH'S ANCESTRAL VILLAGE

Chandigarh: *After the historic victory of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in Punjab, Bhagwant Mann on Thursday said the oath-taking of the state's new cabinet would be held in martyr Bhagat Singh's ancestral village. Addressing the people outside his house in Sangrur, Mann thanked all the Punjabis, and said: "You have fulfilled your responsibility very well, now it is my turn to fulfil the responsibility." "We have good intentions and that is why the people of Punjab have trusted us. Trust me, change will be visible in a month. Now you will not have to go to offices of government employees. Government officers won't hinder your works by making excuses. Now the public servants will come to your houses and localities to do their job." Taking a jibe at the opposition parties, Mann said they abused "us, tried to defame us. But we have forgiven everyone, provided they start respecting the three and a half crore Punjabis now".*

UP RESULTS AS VICTORY OF '80-20': OWAISI

Hyderabad: AIMIM President Asaduddin Owaisi on Thursday termed the results of Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections "victory of 80-20" and predicted that this atmosphere will continue in Indian democracy for many years. The Hyderabad MP, whose party contested 100 Assembly seats but drew a blank, was obviously referring to Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's remark of "80 per cent versus 20 per cent". Owaisi said though the results were not to the party's expectations, it would continue to work in the state.

POLL MANDATE STAMP OF APPROVAL FOR BJP'S PRO-POOR GOVERNANCE: MODI

"We are blessed to get the blessings of women voters. It is the women voters who ensured BJP's win across seats... They are the drivers of our victory."

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SHAH THANKS VOTERS FOR REPOSING FAITH IN BJP

"The BJP's grand victory in Uttar Pradesh is the victory of the unshakeable faith of village, the poor and farmers in Prime Minister Modi's welfare for the poor. Voters have re-affirmed in Yogi Adityanath government's fearless and corruption free governance. I thank people from the bottom of my heart for this massive victory."

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HUMBLY ACCEPT PEOPLE'S VERDICT: RAHUL

Rahul Gandhi tweeted in the afternoon: "Humbly accept the people's verdict. Best wishes to those who have won the mandate. My gratitude to all Congress workers and volunteers for their hard work and dedication. We will learn from this and keep working for the interests of the people of India."

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OPPN VOTE-SPLIT HELPED BJP DEFEAT CONG IN GOA: CHIDAMBARAM

"We accept the verdict of the people of Goa. Our candidates fought a good election, fought bravely, fought against several obstacles and 11 of our candidates and one of our ally Goa Forward party won. People have voted the BJP to power and we accept that and we wish the people of Goa very well."

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I'M NOT A TERRORIST, THANK YOU PUNJAB: KEJRIWAL

"The people of Punjab have now spoken. I love you Punjab. Sukhbir Singh Badal has lost, Captain Sahab has lost, Channi Sahab has lost, Parkash Singh Badal has lost, Navjot Singh Sidhu has lost and Bikram Singh Majithia has lost. This is nothing but a revolution."

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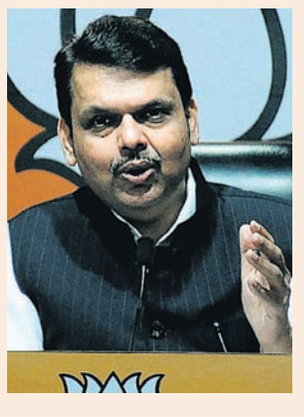

WON'T POACH GOA CONGRESS MLAS: FADNAVIS

"Three independent candidates have extended support to the BJP. We had said yesterday that even if we win 21 seats, we will take some more people along with us. In keeping with the assurance, these three independents and the MGP have given letters of support to the BJP. They are going to be with us. We are thankful to the MGP and the three candidates and we will form a government with a good majority of 25."

KIEV, MOSCOW AGREE TO SEEK SOLUTION TO HUMANITARIAN ISSUES: UKRAINE FM

Antalya: Following a meeting with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in Turkey's Antalya, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dymtro Kuleba said on Thursday that the two nations have agreed to continue efforts to seek a solution to humanitarian issues as Moscow continues its war on Kiev. This was the first face-to-face meeting between the two diplomats since Russia began its invasion of Ukraine on February 24. Addressing a press conference, Kuleba said: "I'm ready to continue this engagement with the purpose of ending the war in Ukraine, stopping the suffering of Ukrainian civilians and liberating our territories from the Russian occupying force," the BBC reported.

The Minister also highlighted two tasks of priority -- organising a humanitarian corridor from Mariupol and reaching a 24-hour ceasefire. In his remarks at a separate presser, Lavrov said the discussions with his Ukrainian counterpart were mostly focused on the "initiative of our Turkish friends regarding humanitarian issues".

He however, repeated Russian claims that "civilians are being used as hostages" by what he described as "so-called territorial defence forces". Lavrov added that Russia was continuing to operate humanitarian corridors for civilians to escape the besieged cities of Ukraine.

OVER 5 RAPES A DAY IN GUJARAT IN LAST TWO YEARS: GOVT

Gandhinagar | Agencies

The Gujarat government on Thursday disclosed during the ongoing budget session of the assembly that the state saw over five rapes a day in the last 2 years, with over 60 cases of gang rape during 2020 and 2021. A total of 3,857 cases of rape were registered by the Gujarat police during the two years.Replying to a series of questions by Congress legislators, the Minister of State (MoS), Home, Harsh Sanghavi informed the House that during the period of two years a total of 3,857 cases of rape were registered, including 61 cases of gang rape. The maximum cases were registered in the financial capital of Gujarat, Ahmedabad - 729, followed by 508 in Surat, Vadodara- 183, Chhota Udaipur- 175, Kutch- 166, Rajkot -145.

The minister said that out of the 61 gang rapes, the maximum were registered in Ahmedabad 16, 7 were registered in Rajkot, 5 in Surat and 4 each in Vadodara, Bhavnagar and Kutch.

20 SUICIDES, 2 MURDERS DAILY

Gandhinagar: The Gujarat government on Thursday informed the House during the ongoing budget session of the assembly that an average of 20 suicides, 25 thefts, five kidnappings and two murders occurred every day in the state in the last two years. Informing the House in response to the questions raised by Congress MLAs during Question Hour, the Minister of State (MoS), Home, Harsh Sanghavi, said that during the period of two calendar years of 2020 and 2021, 1,893 murders, 1,679 incidents of attempt to murder, 3,911 incidents of abduction and over 15,000 cases of suicide were reported in different parts of the state. Moreover, 18,658 incidents of theft and 1,024 incidents of loot were also reported. While the maximum number of 308 murders took place in Surat district, Ahmedabad topped the charts in loot (288) and theft (5,343), he disclosed. Ahmedabad witnessed the highest number of 536 kidnapping cases in these two years.

Covid-19 pandemic 'far from over': WHO

Geneva: The last two years of Covid-19 infection has seen more than 500 million cases and over six million deaths globally, yet the pandemic is "far from over", warned the World Health Organisation even as several countries have eased restrictions and opened borders over declining cases.

"Although reported cases and deaths are declining globally, and several countries have lifted restrictions, the pandemic is far from over," said WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Gebreyesus, during a media briefing.

"It will not be over anywhere until it's over everywhere," he added even as many countries in Asia and the Pacific are facing surges in Covid cases and deaths.

"The virus continues to evolve, and we continue to face major obstacles in distributing vaccines, tests and treatments everywhere they are needed," the WHO chief said.

The global health body is also concerned that several countries are drastically reducing testing. The WHO recommends countries to offer self-tests in addition to professionally-administered testing services. Meanwhile, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres also supported the WHO chief's assessment. In a statement, he warned that it would be "a grave mistake" to think the virus was now in the rear-view mirror. Guterres reiterated that the distribution of vaccines remains "scandalously unequal".

THE 'RISE AND RISE' OF AAP IN PUNJAB

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Two former Chief Ministers Parkash Singh Badal and Capt Amarinder Singh along with incumbent CM Charanjit Singh Channi and several other heavyweights of the Punjab politics, unbudgeable for decades, were trampled under the winning chariot of the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP).

It was not just a simple victory. In fact, the AAP trounced the 2022 Assembly polls this time by winning over 90 seats in the 117-seat Punjab Assembly. It is the first time that the party has expanded its political footprint beyond Delhi. But how was a 9-year-old party able to achieve this momentous feat? After the AAP formed a government in the national capital for just 49-days in December 2013, it immediately caught the national attention. The party's image was carried by the image of its national convener Arvind Kejriwal, an anti corruption crusader at that time. Not even one month had passed, the AAP, portraying a clean image, started reaching out to the people out of Delhi. It was then in January, 2014, a senior advocate of Delhi High Court, known for spearheading the legal battle to gain justice for the victims of 1984 anti-Sikh riots -- HS Phoolka -- joined the Aam Aadmi Party. However, in 2019, he quit the party. Two months later, in March 2014, comedian-turned-politician Bhagwant Mann also joined the party factions. It was Mann who completely turned the tables for the party. With just two months remaining for the General elections, Mann started visiting several villages and making people to people contact which finally fetched results as just a year old party managed to get 4 MP seats in the May 2014 parliamentary polls that was dominated by the Narendra Modi wave. All four seats were from Punjab. The darkhorse Mann trounced the polls by defeating the Akali Dal's senior leader Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa and that too by over 1 lakh votes. A year later in 2015, the AAP also formed a government in Delhi with an overwhelming majority of 67 seats in the 70-member Assembly, with its opponent BJP reduced to just three seats and the Congress drawing a blank. Mann, 48, started rising day by day, prominently through his powerful speeches in Parliament on a range of issues. In 2019, the party, though it was talk of the town and also got media attention, yet was able to win only 1 constituency in the General Elections. That one seat was also of Bhagwant Mann from Sangrur, Punjab. Then came a year of massive farmers' protests where the AAP and its leaders lent extensive support to the farmers. Pertinent to mention that it was the Delhi government that first notified one of the three contentious farm laws. The year 2021 also saw massive infighting within the ruling Congress party in Punjab which 'directly or indirectly' boosted the prospects of AAP winning the Punjab Assembly polls. And finally on Thursday, the 48-year-old comedian-turned-politician scripted history with a thumping victory in Punjab.

GOA CONGRESS CHIEF OFFERS TO RESIGN FOLLOWING POLL DRUBBING

Panaji: In face of a drubbing at the hands of the ruling BJP, Congress' Goa President Girish Chodankar on Thursday offered to resign from the post taking responsibility for the defeat.
"I accept the responsibility for the results. I feel that I have failed as the Goa Pradesh Congress Committee President and the time has come for the party to replace me," he told here.
"We lost seven to nine seats because of a split in votes between other non-BJP parties," he also added. The BJP won 20 out of the 40 seats which went to polls on February 14, while the Congress won 11 and its alliance partner Goa Forward one.

Candidates who dominated UP Assembly polls

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Even as the Bharatiya Janata Party emerged victorious in the Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections, there were several prominent candidates, including its own, who dominated the polls with a victory margin of near or over one lakh votes.

In Noida, BJP candidate Pankaj Singh won by a margin of 1,81,513 votes. He secured 2,44,091 votes while his nearest rival, Samajwadi Party's Sunil Choudhary got 62,722 votes. In Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath's home turf, Gorakhpur Urban, counting was still in progress at the time of filing this report. However, the lead margin was huge and it is very likely that Adityanath will win by a margin of close to 1 lakh votes as the counting process was nearing the end.In Dadri, BJP's Tejpal Singh Nagar defeated the Samajwadi Party's Rajkumar Bhati by a margin of 1,38,218 votes. Samajwadi Party president Akhilesh Yadav also registered a win with a high margin of 67,504 votes. Akhilesh's uncle Shivpal Yadav who was fielded from Jaswantnagar also managed to secure a thumping victory with a margin of 90,979 votes. His nearest candidate BJP's Vivek Shakya secured 68,454 votes while Shivpal himself got 1,58,531 votes.

Strongly propose reservation for girls in legal education: CJI

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Chief Justice of India, N.V. Ramana on Thursday said the dream of fair and equitable society will come true when women, from all backgrounds, have a say and he strongly proposes reservation for girls in legal education.

In his address on the occasion of 'International Day of Women Judges', he said there are numerous factors behind the under-representation of women in judiciary and the primary reason is deeply ingrained patriarchy in our society. "Now we are having 4 women judges in the Supreme Court which is the highest ever in its history. In near future, we shall be witnessing the first ever female Chief Justice of India. But, I think, we are still far away from ensuring at least 50 per cent representation of women in our judiciary," he said. "The recognition of 10th March as 'International Day of Women Judges' is an important step to create awareness and mobilise political will. I am a strong proponent of affirmative action. To enrich the pool of talent, I strongly propose reservation for girls in legal education. The data proves such a provision has yielded encouraging results in appointing women judicial officers at the district level." The Chief Justice emphasized that every woman's struggle and experience is unique to herself. "Growth in jurisprudence will occur only when our Bar and Benches have diverse voices. he added. He added that injustices faced by women are compounded by intersectional issues of socio-economic conditions. "Therefore, we need women from all classes and sections to find a place within the judicial system. The dream of fair and equitable society will come true when women, from all backgrounds have a say," he added.

After Dhami's loss, MoS Ajay Bhatt frontrunner for CM's post?

Team Absolute | New Delhi

With incumbent Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami losing the Assembly elections from Khatima, the BJP leadership has started looking for a suitable CM candidate for the hill state after retaining power with a comfortable majority on Thursday.

Among the several names that are doing the rounds in Uttarakhand's political circles, Union Minister of State for Defence, Ajay Bhatt, has emerged as a frontrunner for the coveted post.

Bhatt, a Lok Sabha member from Nainital-Udhamsingh Nagar, is a senior BJP leader who was a member of the Uttar Pradesh Assembly before the formation of Uttarakhand. He was elected twice to the Uttarakhand Assembly -- in 2002 and 2012 -- and became a member of the Lok Sabha in 2019. In July last year, he was made the Minister of State for Defence. A senior BJP functionary in Uttarakhand said that search for the next Chief Minister has started and several names are doing the rounds after Dhami's loss. "The next Chief Minister of Uttarakhand will be decided by the Central leadership of the party, and names of a few leaders have already started doing the rounds. Right now, Bhatt is leading the race," he said. Names of former Chief Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank and Rajya Sabha member Anil Baluni are also doing the rounds in the party circles. Baluni, however, has an edge over Nishank, who was dropped from Narendra Modi's Cabinet last year. "The party's central leadership has to take a call on whether the Chief Minister will be from outside, or from among the MLAs. If the leadership decides to make a non-MLA the new Chief Minister, Bhatt and Baluni are the possible choices," a party insider said. Among the MLAs, the names of ministers in the previous Uttarakhand government -- Satpal Singh Maharaj and Dhan Singh Rawat -- are also doing the rounds. "Satpal Maharaj's past association with the Congress can weaken his case, while Rawat is always a probable candidate for the CM's post whenever the party has selected one name," a BJP source said. The party leaders, however, do not rule out the possibility of a surprise.

10 B'LURU COPS INJURED IN HONEY BEE ATTACK, 2 IN ICU

Bengaluru | Agencies

Around 10 policemen, among others, sustained injuries after they came under an attack by honey bees at the Freedom Park in Bengaluru on Thursday.

The impact was such that two policemen had to be admitted to the intensive care unit (ICU) of a nearby hospital. The police personnel were deputed in large numbers at the Freedom Park as a number of organisations were staging a protest there. Suddenly, thousands of honey bees came from nowhere and attacked the policemen and others. According to the police, the incident took place before the protests started at the Freedom Park, else it would have been a disaster as the premises can accommodate thousands of people. Recently, the Karnataka High Court had taken the police department and the state government to task for allowing protest marches in the city. The court had directed to limit the protests to the Freedom Park premises and ensure that no trouble is caused to vehicle riders. DCP (West), Sanjeev Patil, said that honey bees attacked the 'bandobast' staff, including lady police officers. One inspector and eight other police personnel have been admitted to the hospital. It is yet to be ascertained whether the honey bees attacked naturally or it was a deliberate act by some miscreants, Patil said.

Terrorist killed in Srinagar encounter identified

Srinagar | Agencies

A terrorist killed in an encounter between terrorists and police at Hazratbal on the outskirts of Srinagar has been identified, police said on Thursday.

The slain terrorist was a Pakistani national associated with the LeT. "The terrorist identified as Manzoor alias Haider alias Hamza, a Pakistani national, affiliated with proscribed #terror outfit LeT/TRF. He was associate of top LeT/TRF commander Mehran. His killing is a big success," Jammu and Kashmir police quoting Inspector General Police Kashmir zone Vijay Kumar tweeted. The firefight between terrorists and police took place after security forces cordoned off the area and launched a search operation on the basis of specific information about presence of terrorists. As the police zeroed in on the spot where terrorists were hiding they came under a heavy volume of fire that triggered the encounter.

RAJIV ASSASSINATION CONVICT PERARIVALAN'S MOTHER PLANNING HIS WEDDING

Chennai: After the Supreme Court granted bail to Perarivalan, convicted in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case and serving a jail term since 1999, his mother Arputhammal is now planning his wedding. The Supreme Court, amid stiff resistance from the Central Government, had granted bail to Perarivalan on March 9. A petition for remission of his life imprisonment is pending before the President of India for approval. Arputhammal, who had been running from pillar to post to secure bail for her son, while speaking to the media in Chennai said, "My son had earlier said that he was not interested in marriage and that I was already running between prison and home and he didn't want one more woman to go through it, but now the situation has changed and hence it will be the next step." Perarivalan's mother had met Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin on May 28, 2021, immediately after he assumed office, and told him that her son was suffering from bladder infection and requested 30 days' leave for him. The leave was granted which was extended every month for another 30 days.

Why SP-RLD could not paint a picture perfect

Lucknow | Agencies

It seemed to be a picture perfect till the results started tumbling out on Thursday.

The Samajwadi Party-Rashtriya Lok Dal alliance came a cropper in western UP, upsetting all calculations.

According to sources, one of the main reasons for the below expectation performance of the alliance in an area that was the focal point of the famers' agitation against the ruling BJP, was faulty candidate selection and swapping of candidates."The Samajwadi Party made RLD 'adopt' some of its candidate and gave its own party symbol to some RLD followers.

"This created confusion in the minds of voters who did not like SP's conduct. Jats voted for RLD only on seats where it had candidates on its own symbol but did not go for SP candidates. They also did not vote for RLD leaders who contested on SP symbol. We though that the voters would not realise this but we were wrong," said a RLD leader who spoke to IANS on condition of anonymity.

Moreover, another factor that made Jats hostile to SP were the memories of Muzaffarnagar riots that were repeatedly raked up by BJP campaigners. For Jayant Chaudhary, the stakes were high in these elections because it was his first election after the death of his father Ajit Singh. He had the onus of proving himself by bringing the party back into reckoning by winning as many seats as possible and this is why he is left no stone unturned in the polls.

However, Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav made it a point to convey to voters in every election meeting that he was visibly a junior partner and this did not go down well with those who were rooting for the RLD. The RLD's electoral history shows that its best ever performance in terms of number of seats won in the UP Assembly elections, was in 2002 when it won 14 of the 38 seats when it contested in alliance with the BJP.

Its vote share in the seats contested was also the highest at 26.82 per cent in 2002 though the vote share against the total valid votes polled was only 2.48 per cent, which was lower than the vote share of 3.70 per cent the party had got in 2007 elections when it won 10 of the 254 seats on its own.

The party went solo in 2017 Assembly polls and could manage to win only one seat, that is, Chaprauli in Baghpat but lone MLA Sahendra Singh Ramala later joined the BJP in 2018.

A senior RLD functionary said that the party leadership would discuss the election results threadbare to identify where it went wrong in convincing people.There has been no reaction from the Samajwadi Party yet.

ECONOMY RECOVERS, SET TO GROW BY 12.1% IN 2021-2022

The Maharashtra economy is in the pink of health and slated to grow by 12.1 per cent in 2021-2022, surging ahead from the -8 per cent (minus-eight per cent) recorded in 2020-2021 at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, as per the state Economic Survey.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

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The state's Gross State Domestic Produce (GSDP) growth will be higher than that of the Indian economy at 8.9 per cent, with the services sector set to grow from 13.50 per cent (against 9.0 per cent previous year), followed by industry sector at 11.90 per cent (against -11.3 per cent), and agriculture & allied sectors to grow by 4.4 per cent (against 11.7 per cent).

As per the advance estimates, the nominal GSDP for 2021-2022 is expected to be Rs 31,97,782 crore (at current prices) and real GSDP would be Rs 21,18,309 crore (at constant prices of 2011-2012 prices).

As per the revised estimated, the nominal GSDP for 2020-2021 is Rs 27,11,685 crore (against Rs 27,34,552 crore in 2019-2020), the real GSDP is Rs 18,89,307 crore for 2020-2021 (against Rs 20,43,983 crore for 2019-2020).

The state's per capita income for 2020-2021 is Rs 193,121 against Rs 196,100 during 2019-2020, which is expected to touch Rs 225,073 for 2021-2022, according to advance estimates, said the Economic Survey.

The state's revenue receipts stood at Rs 3,68,987 crore for 2021-2022 (Budget Estimates) against Rs 2,89,498 crore during 2020-2021 (Revised Estimates).

The tax and non-tax revenue including central grants are Rs 2,85,534 crore (BE-2021-2022) and Rs 83,453 crore. Respectively, and the actual revenue receipts during April-November 2021 were Rs 180,954 crore (49 per cent of BE).

The state's revenue expenditure is Rs 379,213 crore (2021-2022 BE) against Rs 335,675 crore (2020-2021 RE).

According to the BE (2021-2022), the share of capital receipts in total receipts is 23.8 per cent and capital expenditure in the total expenditure is 21.7 per cent, and the share of development expenditure in the revenue expenditure is 68.1 per cent (2020-2021 RE).

The percentage of fiscal deficit to GSDP is 2.1 per cent and debt stock to GSDP is 19.2 per cent (2021-2022 BE).

The state's average share in the All-India nominal GDP is 14.2 per cent, the highest among all states in the country.

Till December 31, 2021, as many as 1,485 Shiv Bhoja Thali Centres are functioning in the state and from inception, over 8.24 crore plates have been sold at Rs 10 since the launch on January 26, 2020, then sold for Rs 5 during the pandemic and later distributed free to the poor people till September 2021.

Till January 19, 2022, 3.11 crore accounts were opened under the Prime Minister Jan Dhan Yojana, of which 56 per cent were in rural/semi-urban areas.

The state ranks at No. 2 in India (22 per cent) in terms of organic farm production after Madhya Pradesh and exported 1.26 tonnes of organic farm produce in 2020-2021.

Till December 2021, under the Mahatma Jyotirao Shetkari Karjamukti Yojana 2019, a total of Rs 20,243 crore was distributed to 31.71 lakh farmers.

Till February 2022, under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi Scheme, a total of Rs 18,120.23 crore was credited in the bank accounts of 109.33 Lakh small-marginal farmers.

Despite Covid, Maha attracts huge investments across sectors

Continuing to top the chart as the most favoured investment destination, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Maharashtra attracted investment proposals worth Rs 1.88 lakh crore with 3.34 lakh new jobs to be created under the 'Magnetic Maharashtra 2.0' from June 2020-December 2021, as per the state Economic Survey 2021-22.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

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The Economic Survey came on the eve of the State Budget 2022-2023 which is due to be tabled before the Maharashtra Legislature by Deputy Chief Minister and Finance Minister Ajit Pawar on Friday.

As per the document, the state's FDI inflows between April 2000-September 2021 amounted to Rs 959,746 crore, or 28.2 per cent of the total FDI at the national level.

The state has reported 10,785 startups till October 2021, and the internet subscriber stood at 10.22 crore (September 2021) and mobile phone numbers at 12.66 crore (December 2021).

The state has boosted electric vehicles in a big way with the Maharashtra Electric Vehicle Promotion Policy, 2018, and proposals have been received from five EV

manufacturers and one battery producing unit for investments worth Rs 8,420 crore and creation around 9,500 new jobs.

Under the state's Udyam, the number of MSMEs registered till November 2021 was 10.31 lakh, comprising 9.86 micro, 39,000 small and 6,000 medium units, with an employment generation of 61.85 lakh.

On the infra front, the state is pushing ahead with big-ticket ventures like the Mumbai Trans Harbour Link at Rs 17,843 crore, Mumbai Coast Road Project (South) costing Rs 12,721 crore with 40 per cent completion till September 2021, the Thane-Diva railway Lines 5 and 6 operational under MUTP-II.

The Mumbai Metro Rail Projects from Dahisar-DN Nagar (Line 2A) and Andheri-Dahisar East (Line 7) are completed and due for public operations soon, the Colaba-Bandra-SEEPZ (Line 3 - cost Rs 33,406 crore), Wadala-Thane (Line 4 - cost Rs 14,549 crore), Kasarwadavli-Gaimukh (Line 4A - cost Rs 949 crore), Thane-Kalyan (Line 5 - cost Rs 8,417 crore), SS Nagar-Vikhroli (Line 6 - cost Rs 6,716 crore, Dahisar East-Mira Bhayander-Andheri (Line 9 - cost Rs 6,607 crore) are in progress at various stages.

The state has given a fillip to tourism with the Caravan Policy in March 2021, Adventure Tourism Policy in August 2021, signed MoUs for funicular railways/ropeways at Shri Ekvira Devi Temple at Karla in Lonavala and Rajgad Fort in Pune, and entered into understandings in November 2021 with Bangladesh and Oman to boost medical and wellness tourism.

After the liberalisation policy from August 1991-November 2021, the state has approved 21,216 industrial projects with investments of Rs 15,09,811 crore, and till November 2021, as many as 258 projects with investments of Rs 74,368 crore were registered in Maharashtra, as per the State Economic Survey.

MVA will prevail in Maharashtra: Pawar

"If someone is saying that 'abhi Maharashtra baki bai' (now Maharashtra remains) then let me say only one thing: 'Maharashtra bhi taiyar hai' (Maharashtra awaits the challenge)," Pawar said.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

With the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) emerging victorious in the Assembly elections in four out of five States, Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) chief Sharad Pawar on Thursday rubbished speculation over the impact of the results on politics in Maharashtra and said the ruling Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) alliance was ready to take on the saffron party.

"If someone is saying that 'abhi Maharashtra baki bai' (now Maharashtra remains) then let me say only one thing: 'Maharashtra bhi taiyar hai' (Maharashtra awaits the challenge)," he said.

Speaking to reporters on the election results , Pawar said that the change in Punjab was a shock to the Congress party. "The AAP (Aam Aadmi Party) is a new party which has won twice in Delhi. It has won the people's mandate by the manner in which it governed that State. Punjab being the neighbour of Delhi, people in Punjab opted for the AAP based on its work. This change isn't good for the BJP and a shock to the Congress," he said. Pawar said that a common minimum programme can be the basis of any discussion for an Opposition front. "The Parliament session will begin from March 14 and all party leaders will be in Delhi for the same. There will be talks," he said.

Assembly polls impact

MVA anticipates an aggressive BJP in Maharashtra

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) success in the assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Goa and Manipur may lead to the party trying to corner the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi (MVA) regime in Maharashtra, according to leaders in the ruling alliance.

As votes are being counted for elections to 5 states on Thursday, the BJP is set for victory in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand and is ahead in Manipur and Goa.

The BJP's sweep in Uttar Pradesh has indicated that the North Indian voter is firmly with the party and these straws in the wind show that the Hindi-speakers, who have substantial numbers in Mumbai, Thane and neighbouring areas, may choose to support the BJP in the civic polls due this year.

MVA leaders admit that buoyed by its success, the BJP may try to tap into disgruntled elements in the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), the Congress and the Shiv Sena, or try to precipitate a situation wherein even President's rule may be imposed in the state, followed by mid-term elections. "The BJP may make a serious effort to destabilise or corner the MVA government. They may try to wean away disgruntled elements from the Shiv Sena and the NCP. These parties are gradually being weakened from the inside. However, whether they will make any headway is doubtful as the MVA has the numbers. The BJP may also look at imposing President's rule and return to power after calling fresh elections," said a senior Congress leader.

"The results are not very surprising, except in Goa, where the Congress was expected to return to power," said a Shiv Sena leader. Mumbai has a sizeable chunk of voters, both Hindus and Catholics, from Goa and also from areas bordering Goa like Sindhudurg and Kolhapur. "The present players in the opposition cannot stand up to Prime Minister Narendra Modi. There is a general lack of strategy," the leader explained. The Shiv Sena leader said that the substantial non-Maharashtrian voters in Mumbai and other areas were likely to stand by the BJP in the civic polls, while the Shiv Sena could see a challenge in keeping its core and auxiliary vote base intact considering the inroads made by the BJP in upper class and upper caste Marathi speakers.

The Shiv Sena has controlled the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) for 5 unbroken terms since 1997. The richest civic body in Asia is crucial for the party's control over Mumbai.

BJP spokesperson Prem Shukla said that the BJP-ruled states have returned the party to power. "Even in Maharashtra, the mandate was in favour of Devendra Fadnavis... So, in the forthcoming elections in Maharashtra, the BJP will surely win," he added. However, NCP spokesperson Clyde Crasto said the results will not affect the fate of the Maharashtra government. "These results don't matter. The government is doing well," he added. "The BJP is just adept at marketing and event management... The results will not have any impact on the MVA government," said Shiv Sena legislator and spokesperson Manisha Kayande.

Malik Urges Court To Quash Arrest Citing Rights Violation

Nawab Malik's counsel argued that provisions of Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) had been applied in the present case against the NCP leader retrospectively.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Maharashtra minister and Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leader Nawab Malik on Tuesday urged the Bombay High Court to set aside his arrest by the Enforcement Directorate claiming it violated his fundamental right to life and liberty.

Malik's counsel, senior advocate Amit Desai, told the High Court the NIA was trying to connect the minister with gangster Dawood Ibrahim and cases related to the fugitive, even though his client had nothing to do with them.

"My remand paper deals all with the Dawood gang even though I am not related to it. They (ED) have tried to suggest that on Feb 3, 2022, they had registered an FIR against Dawood Ibrahim Kaskar. It goes into folklore around Dawood and into incidents going back to 30 years ago," Desai said.

"They say they registered an ECIR on February 14 this year, and two other FIRS of 2017 with which I (Malik) am not concerned. But they are trying to suggest that there is a predicate offence with which I am concerned," Desai told court.

Desai also argued that provisions of Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) had been applied in the present case against Malik retrospectively.

Additional Solicitor General Anil Singh, who appeared for the ED, told the High Court, economic offences were continuing offences and the central agency was correct in imposing PMLA sections.

Besides, the issue of retrospective application of PMLA in cases of economic offences was also being considered by the Supreme Court, Mr Singh said.

Desai, however, told court the ED had itself conceded in its affidavit that it was undecided on the issue of retrospective application of the law.

"They (ED) themselves are confused on the point whether the law is retrospectively applicable or not, then a person's liberty cannot be taken away (till SC decides those questions)," Desai said.

ELECTION FOR MAHARASHTRA ASSEMBLY SPEAKER LIKELY NEXT WEEK

The post of the Assembly Speaker has been lying vacant since February last year after Nana Patole resigned from the post to take charge as the state Congress president.

Mumbai: Election to the post of the Speaker of the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly is likely to be held next week, sources said on Thursday.

The state government will write another letter to Governor Bhagat Singh Koshiyari urging him to approve the fresh date set by it to conduct the election, they said.

The post of the Assembly Speaker has been lying vacant since February last year after Nana Patole resigned from the post to take charge as the state Congress president.

The government amended the rules, where the election will be held through voice vote. Leaders of the ruling Maha Vikas Aghadi, comprising the Shiv Sena, NCP and Congress, met the governor earlier this week to discuss the date for the Assembly Speaker's election during the ongoing budget session.

Maharashtra To Probe Devendra Fadnavis' allegations: Pawar

Team Absolute | Mumbai

NCP chief Sharad Pawar on Wednesday said the Maharashtra government will definitely probe the authenticity of video footage submitted by BJP leader Devendra Fadnavis, who has alleged that the ruling alliance is hatching conspiracies against its political opponents.

Talking to reporters, Sharad Pawar also said his name was being mentioned "directly/indirectly" in connection with the alleged conspiracy, but he was nowhere related to it.

Fadnavis on Tuesday submitted a pen drive containing video recordings to Deputy Speaker Narhari Zirwal, saying the footage showed how conspiracies were hatched by police and members of the ruling MVA to frame BJP leaders, including himself and Girish Mahajan, in false cases.

Pawar laughed at the suggestion that he wanted to finish Mr Fadnavis and BJP leader Girish Mahajan politically. "So, it seems there is also some comic information in it (the material submitted by Fadnavis). One cannot get finished like this," he said. "If it is true that the recording (submitted by Fadnavis) is of 125 hours, then the use of a powerful agency cannot be ruled out...and such agencies are only under the Government of India," he said. It is praiseworthy that Fadnavis or any of his colleagues succeeded in capturing the nearly 125-hour video footage, Mr Pawar said sarcastically. "...It first needs to be proved whether it (the recording) is authentic or not. The state government will definitely probe that...the veracity needs to be confirmed. My name also seems to have been dragged directly/indirectly. There is no reason, I am not related to it," he said.

Pawar said the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA), comprising the Shiv Sena, NCP and Congress, was not misusing power to target its opponents.

"One thing has to be noted though that all the power of the Centre and all its agencies are in the hands of the people who follow the same ideology as Devendra Fadnavis," he said.

Pawar claimed that efforts to destabilise the MVA government in the state have not succeeded and hence, "such options" are being explored to bring it down.

The NCP chief also said he hopes Prime Minister Narendra Modi will probe the complaint raised before him by Shiv Sena MP Sanjay Raut in connection with the alleged misuse of central agencies. "Let's hope he probes it and takes precautions to control the misuse of the agencies," he said. He said the Maharashtra government will examine the materials submitted by Fadnavis and will keep facts before the people at the right time. Pawar, however, without naming anyone, said it is true he had asked Fadnavis to look into a serious complaint he received about one of the BJP leader's colleagues "sometime in the past six months or a year".

"I told him it is not right to make public comments if complaints are made against a person representing the public and hence, I will not talk about it publicly, but you (Fadnavis) look into it," he said. "Later, I was told by him that he was looking into the complaint I had sent to him and care will be taken to see that such things will not happen. The issue was over for me then and there. Except this, I am nowhere personally related to this," he said. He reiterated that central agencies were being "misused on a big scale" against the MVA leaders in Maharashtra and also in the TMC-ruled West Bengal to discourage BJP's opponents. Pawar also cited the example of former Maharashtra home minister Anil Deshmukh, who, the NCP chief said, was "jailed after a police complaint by a police official". "Deshmukh's is a fitting example of how probes are carried out by misusing agencies," he said.

The NCP chief said as per his information, 95 people close to Deshmukh, including his family, relatives, staff, private secretary and chartered accountant, were raided by central agencies. The statements of at least 200 people were recorded in Deshmukh's case, he added. There were 90 raids, including 50 by the ED, 20 by the CBI and 20 by Income Tax Department. "I had never heard something of this sort," Pawar said.

"They are not succeeding in destabilising the government here and hence, some or the other option is being explored. This does not behove parliamentary democracy," he said.

Meanwhile, Maharashtra Minister of State for Home Satej Patil also hit out at Fadnavis, saying, "Such claims are being made (by Fadnavis) because the Shiv Sena, NCP and Congress are in power and the BJP is not.

Our Home Minister Dilip Walse Patil will respond to it properly." "We are also aware that IPS officer Rashmi Shukla tapped the phone calls of members of (the then) opposition parties when Fadnavis was Maharashtra's chief minister. Thanks to our government that such a matter came to light," Patil said.

The Mumbai police have claimed in an FIR registered last week against Shukla and some other officials that they illegally tapped the phones of Sanjay Raut and NCP leader Eknath Khadse in June 2019 for "vested political interests."

EDITOR'S SPECS

The party is over for BSP in UP

Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a Dalit-centric party that had a Brahmin as its most visible face in the 2022 assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, has come up with its worst ever performance and not quite unexpectedly either. With Mayawati making a very restricted appearance in the election campaign, it was left to BSP MP Satish Chandra Mishra, a Brahmin, to carry the campaign on his shoulders. Kanshi Ram, who had founded the BSP in 1984, had formed it to represent Bahujan -- referring to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes (OBC), along with religious minorities. After 2012, Mayawati gradually promoted Mishra as the new face of the party and expelled or marginalized all Dalit leaders in the party. The BSP now has no second rung leadership and even Jatavs, who had stood behind Mayawati during all her politically turbulent years, now seem to have deserted her. Jatavs, the sub-caste to which Mayawati belongs, hold a 14 per cent share in the scheduled caste category. The BSP, till now, has managed to secure only 12.7 per cent votes which clearly shows that even Jatavs have moved away from the BSP. This implies that the party has lost nearly 10 per cent of its vote share. In 2017, the BSP had got 22.2 per cent votes and 19 seats. The party, as of now, is leading only on two seats. Political pandits, meanwhile, say that the BSP's conflicting stand during the campaign has almost eradicated it from the political centre stage in Uttar Pradesh. The BSP will now have negligible presence in the state assembly and will be in no position to support or oppose the ruling BJP. Sources within the party, meanwhile, claim that the party president is no longer interested in electoral politics and is eyeing the post of President of India.

INDIA MUST WORK FOR DIRECT DIALOGUE BETWEEN BIDEN AND PUTIN TO END THE UKRAINE WAR

Baladas Ghoshal

The Ukraine war brings into light once again the irrelevance of the UN charter and all the noble principles and values that powerful states swear by in their conduct of international and state-to-state relations and how they are sacrificed at the altar of their self-perceived national interests and security. Right or wrong, powerful states can present their narratives in a manner that can justify their invasion of a weaker country and can get away. The US has done it in Iraq in the past, and now the Russians are doing it in Ukraine. The US called Saddam Hussein an abominable dictator with his WMD posing a threat to the regional security and the Russians calling the regime in Kyiv neo-Nazis and drug addicts who must be overthrown even at the cost of pulverizing the country with rockets and missile carpet bombing.

The victims are always innocent people including women and children. When two elephants fight with each other, it is the grass that suffers, so the saying goes. Behind the intensification of the conflict and the cause of war lies Western obsession with Russia trying to expand its empire and restore the past glory of the Soviet Union, on the one hand, and President Putin's determined mission to retain its dignity as a major super power in the face of the Western design to reduce it to an insignificant country by incorporating one after another the old Warsaw Pact countries into the fold of NATO, on the other. Russians feel betrayed by the West in reneging on their assurance not to expand NATO to its borders and wants Ukraine to be a buffer state between it and NATO.

By the same logic, however, Russians can also be blamed for reneging its own assurances to Ukraine in 1994 to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity when the latter surrendered its nuclear weapons. Surely, if Ukraine had retained its nuclear weapons, Russians would not have dared to invade the country as it is doing today. Incidentally, the plight of Ukraine in the face of Russian invasion might impress upon some of the aspiring countries the importance of nuclear weapons for their security and hasten the process of further proliferation.

But when the invasion did take place, the expected support did not arrive in time for Ukraine to be able to carry out greater resistance. This is evident from Zelensky's current outburst against the West and NATO for ditching him. He had asked the West to impose a 'no fly zone' on the skies of Ukraine which was flatly rejected, for that would have forced them to shoot down Russian planes coming over the Ukrainian sky, which in turn, would have converted the war into a war between Russia and NATO. With Putin's order to keep nuclear weapons on alert and his talk of a World War III to be a nuclear one, the West has also become cautious not to provoke Russia and engage in a direct conflict between NATO and Russia. The West's priority now is to secure the Baltic States and therefore focussing on it. On the day thirteen of the Russian invasion, most parts of Ukraine looks devastated, properties destroyed, many lives already lost, people fleeing their homes to save themselves from the bombing and missile attacks. More than a million Ukrainians have already taken shelter in neighbouring countries, the figure might reach even 2 million soon, creating a refugee and humanitarian crisis. Some civilians have stayed back to fight against the advancing Russian army but their chances of survival against the Russian juggernaut are remote, even though they are fighting heroically in the midst of rising nationalism and patriotism in the country. Most of the important Ukrainian cities are devastated beyond recognition. The capital city Kyiv is still under the control of the Ukrainians but its outskirts have been reduced to rubble. And it is a question of time when the Russians will take control of the capital city though with much damage and destruction and heavy losses of life.

After phone calls from some world leaders, including Prime Minister Modi, to Putin the Russians have now reportedly declared a ceasefire in four cities, namely Kiev, Kharkiv, Mariupol and Sumy for allowing evacuation of civilians from those cities, but pounding of other areas are continuing. One doesn't know whether the ceasefire will actually be followed or the operations in those cities will continue or not. Most of the important infrastructures of the country have been destroyed. Despite all the destruction and imminent fall of Kiev, the Ukrainian leadership refuses to cave in and offers relentless resistance to the advancing Russian forces. The circumstances and the history that brought this catastrophe reminds one of life in the Hobbesian state of nature- nasty, brutish and short, the last one applicable more for the Ukrainians. The Russians have not hesitated even to bomb the nuclear plant. Fortunately fire has been extinguished in the plant and as of now there is no radiation from the smoke. Another path to catastrophe would have opened if there were radiation leaks which would have been disastrous not only for Europe but also for Russia.

For saving innocent people, women and children perishing under the Russian bombing and missile attacks, there is an immediate and urgent need to stop the war and take recourse to dialogue and negotiation, for the war will not lead to the ultimate victory of any of the conflicting parties. Even if the Russians succeed in demilitarizing and demolishing Ukraine for the time being, Moscow will be entangled in Ukraine for a prolonged and protracted conflict. Even if their stated goal succeeds in overthrowing Zelensky and installing a pro-Russian government in Kyiv, it will not survive for long.

Keeping an occupation force in such a large country as Ukraine is not practical. Even if it is a question of territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine involved, Zelensky should also stop grandstanding and opt for a negotiated settlement. The West's strategy to keep Russia bogged down over a long period of time and slowly bleed Moscow through a plethora of sanctions would also result in disaster not only for Russia and themselves but also for the rest of the world. The West has a major responsibility in this conflict and it must rise to the occasion to speak directly to Putin and come for a mutually amicable settlement whereby Russian security concerns and Ukraine's sovereignty can be assured through declaring Ukraine as a neutral country. The West must give up its obsession with Russia and must absorb it as a major stakeholder in European security. Ukraine's security concerns vis-a-vis Russian attempts to nibble at its territory also have to be factored in any future negotiation and dialogue. Ultimately all will have to recognize that war does not help any, as all the conflicting parties will be affected by its collateral damage, particularly its economic fallout. The world has not come out from the economic fallout of Covid-19 as yet. On top of an already declining world economy, the war in Ukraine will further throw the world economy into a tailspin. While New Delhi has a large stake in maintaining friendly relations with Russia for its dependence on Moscow for defence equipments and spares, it has also a large stake in maintaining close strategic relations with the United States and other Western countries for both security and economic reasons. Prime Minister Modi has kept himself in touch with both President Putin and President Zelensky and in his own way asking them to exercise restraint and go for dialogue and diplomatic solutions to their problems. Modi is also in touch with Washington and other two of the Quad virtual meeting. It will go a long way in India's role as a major global power if Modi can use his personal relations to impress upon the West and Russia for direct talks between Presidents Biden and Putin in bringing the war to an end and go for a settlement that takes care of the security concerns of all the countries involved in the conflict.

international

SITUATION AT CHERNOBYL NUKE PLANT DANGEROUS: UKRAINE

Kiev | Agencies

Ukraine's Presidential Office on Thursday warned that the situation at Chernobyl was "very dangerous" after an emergency power outage was reported at the now-defunct nuclear power plant.

"The situation in Chernobyl is overall very dangerous. It is critical that certain elements of the plant receive a consistent supply of electricity," the Ukrayinska Pravda newspaper quoted presidential adviser Mykhaylo Podolyak as saying.

The adviser warned that since "these elements have been cut off from stable access to power", it posed a "threat to the whole of Europe. And, of course, to Russia itself".

Podolyak added that not only has the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) stopped receiving crucial data from the safety monitoring system, no one currently understood what was going on at the Chernobyl power plant. According to the presidential advisor, Russia is targeting the nuclear plants in Ukraine to "subdue its neighbours".

According to Ukrenergo, the state energy company of Ukraine, the plant suffered the power outage on Wednesday due to which on site emergency diesel generators were turned on to provide power systems important for safety. The company said that the supply of diesel fuel on diesel generators will be enough for 48 hours. It added that repair work to restore the energy supply was impossible due to Russian combat operations in the region. Although operations stopped at the plant after the catastrophic nuclear disaster in 1986, Chernobyl was never fully abandoned and still requires constant management, the BBC said, adding that spent nuclear fuel is cooled at the site. The IAEA on Thursday morning said the power outage "would not have a critical impact on essential safety functions at the site". IAEA Director GeneralMariano Grossi however, said that the outage was likely to create additional stress for around 210 technical experts and guards currently stuck at the plant which was seized by Russia on the first day of its war on February 24.

Moscow's forces move within a few miles of Kiev outskirts

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The battle for Kiev is already underway as Russian tanks push to within just a few miles of the city outskirts, analysts and witnesses have said, though initial assaults to the west and east of the capital were repelled as Vladimir Putin's forces face a long and bloody campaign to take the capital, Daily Mail reported.

Kremlin troops launched two attacks on Kiev on Wednesday - one via the besieged western city of Irpin and another through the eastern district of Brovary, with video showing how a column of Russian tanks was bombarded with artillery in a devastating ambush and forced to turn back. Intercepted radio chatter suggested the column took heavy losses with the regimental commander killed, though that could not be verified.

Vadym Denysenko, adviser to Ukraine's interior ministry, said Ukrainian forces had managed to stop the attack in Irpin and were counter-attacking on Thursday morning with battles now underway.

"The night was quite difficult, but in general we can say that the Ukrainian army counter attacked near Kiev," he said. "There is no further detailed information yet."

It means the Russian mission to assault the Ukrainian capital is now underway, analysts at the Institute for the Study of War said, amid fears that devastating airstrikes on the city of Mariupol - which struck a maternity hospital killing three including a six-year-old girl - and Kharkiv could soon be seen in the capital, Daily Mail reported.

RUSSIA LEAVES COUNCIL OF EUROPE

Moscow: Russia has left the Council of Europe, the continent's leading human rights organisation, the Foreign Ministry in Moscow announced on Thursday.

In a statement, the Ministry said that the European Union and NATO countries "are using their absolute majority in the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers to continue the destruction of the Council of Europe and the common humanitarian and legal space" on the continent, reports Xinhua news agency.

The Ministry stressed that Russia will not tolerate actions by the West to impose its own "rules-based order" and trample on international law.

The country will not participate in efforts to turn the organization "into another platform for preaching about Western superiority and for grandstanding", it added.

"Let them enjoy each other's company without Russia," the statement added.

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation with 47 member states.

Twenty-seven members are from the EU. Russia joined the council in February 1996 as its 39th member.

3 KILLED, 17 INJURED IN MARIUPOL HOSPITAL BOMBING

Kiev | Agencies

Authorities in Mariupol on Thursday said that at least three people were killed and 17 others injured after a maternity and children's hospital in the besieged Ukrainian city was hit by a Russian strike the previous day.

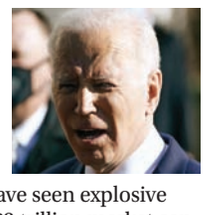
In a social media post, the Mariupol City Council said the victims included one girl child, while doctors and women were among the injured. At around 4.30 p.m. on Wednesday, Russian planes dropped several powerful bombs on the hospital. Some hospital buildings were razed to the ground following the strike.

Mayor of Mariupol Volodymyr Boychenko declared the attack as "an act of genocide perpetrated by Russia". "Russian troops are purposefully and ruthlessly destroying the civilian population of Mariupol. The whole world should know about Russia's crime against humanity, against Ukraine and against the people of Mariupol," the post added. Sergei Orlov, the Deputy Mayor of Mariupol, told the BBC that he was "absolutely sure they (Russians) know about this facility and this is their third hospital that they are destroying in this city". He added that a 300-bed hospital dedicated to treating Covid patients had been destroyed by artillery shelling on Tuesday, along with a blood-collection centre in Mariupol. "I'm absolutely sure (these are their) targets," Orlov added. According to the World Health Organization, at least 18 different attacks on health facilities in Ukraine since the invasion began. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has termed Wednesday's attack on the maternity hospital as an act of "war crime".

In his nightly video, the President said that "everything that the invaders are doing to Mariupol is beyond atrocities already". "What kind of a country is Russia, that it is afraid of hospitals and maternity wards and destroys them?" he asked. The attack has triggered widespread condemnation. While the White House termed the attack as a "barbaric use of force against innocent civilians", UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Twitter that "there are few things more depraved than targeting the vulnerable and defenceless".

Mariupol has been surrounded by Russian forces for several days, and repeated attempts at a ceasefire to allow civilians to leave have failed, the BBC reported. According to Deputy Mayor Orlov, at least 1,170 civilians have been killed in the city since Russia began its war on February 24.

BIDEN SIGNS EXECUTIVE ORDER ON CRYPTOCURRENCIES



Washington: US President Joe Biden has signed an executive order calling on the government to examine the risks and benefits of cryptocurrencies, placing great urgency on the research and development of a possible digital American dollar. "Digital assets, including cryptocurrencies, have seen explosive growth in recent years, surpassing a $3 trillion market cap last November," the White House said in a fact sheet, adding around 16 per cent of adult Americans, approximately 40 million people, have invested in, traded, or used cryptocurrencies. "The rise in digital assets creates an opportunity to reinforce American leadership in the global financial system and at the technological frontier, but also has substantial implications for consumer protection, financial stability, national security, and climate risk,"protection; financial stability; illicit finance; US leadership in the global financial system and economic competitiveness; financial inclusion; and responsible innovation, Xinhua news agency quoted the White House as further saying. Meanwhile, the order directs the American government to assess the technological infrastructure and capacity needs for a potential Central Bank Digital Currency (CBDC), and encourages the Federal Reserve to continue its research, development, and assessment efforts for a CBDC.

STATE'S PLAYERS HAVE ADDED TO STATE'S GLORY AT GLOBAL LEVEL: CHIEF MINISTER

- CM OPENS 32ND NATIONAL CANOE SPRINT NATIONAL COMPETITION
- CHOUHAN'S LEADERSHIP HELPING UPGRADE PERFORMANCE OF SPORTS TALENTS: SCINDIA
- COMPETITIONS WILL RUN TILL MARCH 13 FOR 285 MEDALS

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has said that efforts are being made to upgrade sports in Madhya Pradesh. The players of the state have increased the glory of the state in national and international competitions as well as in the Olympics. The country is progressing continuously under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Boats for canoeing, stand-up paddling etc. will also be manufactured in the country soon in the resolve for Atmanirbhar Bharat and Atmanirbhar Madhya Pradesh.

Chouhan, was addressing the launch programme of the 32nd National Canoe Sprint, 15th Para Canoe, 1st Standup Paddling National Competition 2021-22 at Lower Lake, Bhopal organized in the memory of Late Shri Sanjeev Kumar Singh. Chief Minister inaugurated the national competition by releasing balloons amidst fireworks and melodious tunes played by the police band. Sports Minister Yashodhara Raje Scindia, Director General of Police Sudhir Kumar Saxena, Director General of Police Home Guard Pawan Jain, Former Director General of Police Vivek Johri, Jyoti Singh, along with players of national and international competitions were present. Row march and presentation of various boats participating in the competition was held in front of Chouhan. Cap and mementoes of the event were presented to Chief Minister. International player Namita Chandel administered the oath to the players. 750 players from 27 states are participating in this competition, which will continue till March 13. There will be competitions for a total of 285 medals through which there will be a process of selection of the national team, which will participate in the Beijing Asian Games. Kayaking Canoeing is an Olympic sport and Bhopal has an important place in this sport in the country.

Chouhan paid tribute to IPS Late Sanjeev Kumar Singh. He said that Singh will always remain in our memories. Chief Minister Shri Chouhan said that sports is an important part of our life and it is also necessary to have sportsmanship in life.

Scindia said that under the leadership and guidance of Chief Minister Chouhan, sports activities are expanding in the state and the performance and capacity of sports talent is constantly being upgraded. Players of the state have recorded achievements in various sports at national and international level. In the Atmanirbhar Madhya Pradesh, work will also be done in the field of manufacturing of sports goods. Director General of Police Home Guard Pawan Jain also addressed on the occasion.

CM Pays Homage to Late Madhavrao Scindia, Uma Pandey and Savitri Bai Phule

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan remembered former Union Minister Late Madhavrao Scindia on his anniversary by garlanding his portrait in the auditorium at his residence office today. MLA from Jaitpur district Shahdol Manisha Singh and MLA from Vijaypur district Sheopur Sitaram Adivasi were also present.

Late Madhavrao Scindia was born on March 10, 1945 in Mumbai. He was educated at Scindia School Gwalior and Oxford University. Apart from being a Lok Sabha MP, Scindia was also the President of the Board of Control for Cricket in India in the year 1990-1993. Madhavrao Scindia passed away in a plane crash on 30 September 2001.

Chouhan, while remembering Late Scindia, tweeted that - "Your incomparable contribution in the development of the state will always be unforgettable."Chouhan has honored the eminent doctor Dr. PK Pandey's revered mother, on the death of Dr. Uma Pandey, paid floral tributes at her portrait in the tribute meeting organized at Manas Bhawan. Chouhan said that Pujya Mataji was a scholar of philosophy and was associated with the Chinmaya Mission. Her successful life was devoted not only to herself, but to the welfare of others. Member of Parliament VD Sharma and other dignitaries were also present.

Chouhan paid homage to the great social reformer Savitri Bai Phule on her death anniversary. Chouhan paid floral tributes by garlanding her picture in the auditorium at his residence office. MLA Manisha Singh and Sitaram Adivasi also paid floral tributes. Savitri Bai Phule was born on January 3, 1831. She was the first principal of India's first girls school and the founder of the first farmers' school. Savitri Bai lived her life as a mission. Her aim was to get widow remarriage, eradicate untouchability, women's emancipation and educate Dalit women. Along with her husband, she established a girls school for nine girl students of different castes in Pune on January 3, 1848. At a time when there were social restrictions on the education of girls, then Smt. Phule not only studied herself but also made arrangements for the education of girls. She passed away on March 10, 1897.

EIGHT SHOPS OF DEFAULTER ELECTRICITY CONSUMERS SEALED

Bhopal: Taking strict action against the defaulter electricity consumers of Datia city for not depositing electricity bills on time, shops of eight consumers have been sealed by Madhya Kshetra Vidyut Vitran Company. It is worth mentioning that in order to fulfil the target given by the Managing Director of Madhya Kshetra Vidyut Vitran Company Ganesh Shankar Mishra, efforts are being made continuously by the field officers of the company to recover the electricity bills from the electricity defaulters.

Company's General Manager Datia Vinod Bhadauria has informed that in the month of March, 30 teams have been formed for recovery from electricity defaulters to achieve the target. During the process of sealing the shops by the company's staff, the establishments of four defaulting consumers were not sealed after they deposited bills of Rs 4 lakh immediately. The company has said that the process of recovery and attachment from the defaulting consumers will continue in the month of March.

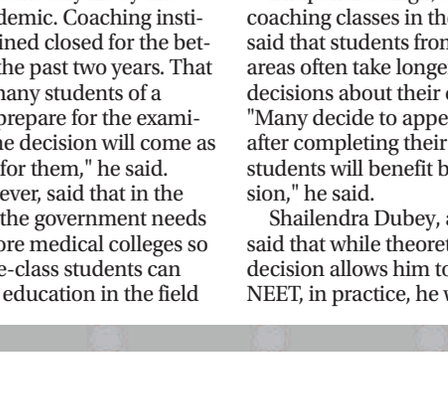
The Managing Director of Madhya Kshetra Vidyut Vitran Company Ganesh Shankar Mishra has appealed to the electricity consumers of the company's jurisdiction to pay the outstanding amount before the due date. The company has directed the field officers to make arrangements to open the cash counters on holidays and for extra time after the scheduled time for collection of revenue in city divisions and transmission-maintenance divisions. According to the decision of Madhya Kshetra Vidyut Vitran Company, cash counters located in all the divisional offices of the capital are being opened by Bhopal region on Sundays and holidays to serve the consumers. Similar arrangement has also been made in Gwalior city.

Rapid Transformation of MP Red Cross State Branch Bhopal Taking Place

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Under the direction of Governor Mangubhai Patel, Red Cross Bhopal is undergoing rapid transformation. New works worth more than Rs 267 lakh are in progress in the hospital premises.

Additional Secretary to the Governor and General Secretary of Red Cross Manoj Khatri informed that the diseases are being examined and treated at concessional rates in the hospital. He informed that the restoration work of the drain in Red Cross State Branch premises with an amount of more than Rs. 2 crore 47 lakh 30 thousand is in progress. Similarly, a service road is being constructed in the campus at a cost of Rs 10 lakh. With a view to make special arrangements for the cleanliness and safety of the hospital, a high mast light worth about Rs 10 lakh has been



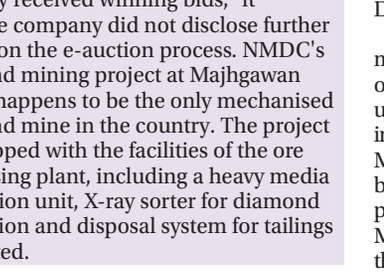
installed. On the walls of the premises, the pictures related to Covid protocol and health, cleanliness have been painted free of cost with the courtesy of Municipal Corporation.

CM CHAIRS MEETING OF BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF NARMADA BASIN PROJECTS

- Agreement with Financial Advisor E&YLLP cancelled
- Audit committee of Board of Directors will be reconstituted
- Approval for nomination of Independent Director

Team Absolute | Bhopal

A meeting of the Board of Directors of Narmada Basin Project Company Limited was held at the Chief Minister's residence under the chairmanship of Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan. It was informed in the meeting that as per the decision taken in the meeting chaired by the Chief Secretary on October 2021, the loan of Narmada Basin Projects Company Limited has to be kept within the limit of loan already sanctioned by NABARD. In pursuance of the decision taken in the meeting, the agreement with Financial Adviser E & YLLP for this purpose has been terminated. Chief Secretary Iqbal Singh Bains, Principal Secretary Finance Manoj Govil and members of the Board of Directors were present.



According to Section 149-150 of the Companies Act, it is mandatory to nominate independent director for every company, the share capital of which is 10 crores or more. Keeping in view the provisions of Narmada Valley Development Department's order dated January 13, 2022 and its provisions, the Government of Madhya Pradesh approved to nominate Abhay Kumar Chhajed as an independent director. About the reconstitution of the audit committee, it was informed that after the nomination of Chhajed in the board in place of Arun Daga, the independent director of the company, the audit committee constituted by the company is to be reconstituted.

With regard to the accounting procedures, it was stated that in view of the nature of the projects funded by the Narmada Basin Project Company, their joint ownership does not seem appropriate. The ownership of the projects will be decided by the Madhya Pradesh government after completion. The entire expenditure on the projects till completion will be accounted in the company's account in the form of advance payment in the name of Narmada Valley Development Authority.

NURSES, PARAMEDICS, DENTISTS WELCOME DECISION ON NEET AGE LIMIT

Team Absolute | Bhopal

The government's decision to remove the age bar for appearing in NEET-UG is a welcome development as it will give more opportunities to the aspiring doctors, especially to students from rural areas and to paramedics to pursue their dreams.

This was the broad reaction of the students, directors of coaching institutes, dentists, pathologists and nurses Free Press talked with to the decision. However, some said that it would not be practically possible for them to join MBBS courses at an advanced age as they can't afford the required money and time.

The National Medical Commission (NMC), on Wednesday, announced that the upper age limit for all candidates appearing in the undergraduate medical entrance exam NEET (National Eligibility cum Entrance Test) has been removed. Till now, 25 years was the upper age limit for general category candidates appearing in NEET.

Director of Quantum Classes, MP Nagar Zone II, Aastik Udenia, said that students work very hard for NEET. They are extremely disappointed when they become ineligible due to their age. Moreover, he said, the education sector was seriously hit by the Covid pandemic. Coaching institutes remained closed for the better part of the past two years. That deprived many students of a chance to prepare for the examination. "The decision will come as a big relief for them," he said.

He, however, said that in the long term, the government needs to open more medical colleges so that middle-class students can acquire an education in the field of medicine at an affordable cost. "It will solve the problem of shortage of doctors in the country and also, our youngsters will not be forced to travel abroad for enrolling in MBBS courses," he said. "There are just around 88,000 MBBS seats in the country at present, which are likely to go up to 1.5 lakh by 2025. Many of these seats are in private medical colleges, which charge very high fees," he said.

Bhupendra Singh, who runs coaching classes in the Old City, said that students from the rural areas often take longer to make decisions about their careers. "Many decide to appear in NEET after completing their B.Sc. Such students will benefit by the decision," he said.

Shailendra Dubey, a dentist, said that while theoretically the decision allows him to appear in NEET, in practice, he won't be able to do it. "I am 30 now. Can I afford to spend another five years studying for MBBS? Where will I get the money to pay the fees from?" he said.

Smriti Pedia, a nurse at Hamidia Hospital said that while she would definitely like to become a doctor, but "I have my job and I have my family responsibilities. Where is the time to prepare for the entrance?" she says.

Arunesh Singh, 26, however is very happy. "Hamko to doctor banna hi hai," he says. Singh has done BMLT (Bachelor in Medical Laboratory Technology) and is running a small pathology lab.

In the same vein, Nilesh Dhakad, 27, who had made two unsuccessful attempts at NEET said that now he will be able to pursue his dream. "I made the decision to become a doctor quite late. Now my age will not be a bar," he said.

NMDC CONDUCTS E-AUCTION OF 8,337 CARATS ROUGH DIAMONDS FROM PANNA MINES

Bhopal: State-owned NMDC on Thursday said it has conducted an e-auction of 8,337 carats rough diamonds produced at its Panna diamond mines in Madhya Pradesh. In a statement, the state-owned miner said the e-auction process received an overwhelming response from Diamond merchants of Surat, Mumbai and Panna."NMDC conducted an e-auction for sale of rough diamonds produced at its Panna Diamond mines located in the state of Madhya Pradesh. About 8,337 carats of rough diamonds, produced prior to December 2020, were offered in the auction and almost 100 per cent of the quantity received winning bids," it said.The company did not disclose further details on the e-auction process. NMDC's diamond mining project at Majhgawan Panna happens to be the only mechanised diamond mine in the country. The project is equipped with the facilities of the ore processing plant, including a heavy media separation unit, X-ray sorter for diamond separation and disposal system for tailings generated.

Governor addresses "Placement Day ceremony"

Smart and strong methodology along with target guarantees success : Patel

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Governor Mangubhai Patel has said that smart and strong working along with target is the guarantee of success. No goal is unachievable if you work with determination, dedication, truthfulness and positivity. He said that satisfaction in life is not in achievements but in continuous efforts. Patel was addressing the "Placement Day ceremony" of the Technocrats Group of Institutions. Governor said that the work of inclusive development is being done by Prime Minister Narendra Modi with everyone's trust, everyone's support and everyone's efforts. Everyone's cooperation is essential for inclusive growth. Referring to the example of becoming a tree from a seed, he said that just as if a seed is planted in the right place and taken care of, it becomes a big tree and benefits the whole area with its fruits, in the same way society expects successful students to behave. Never forget the sacrifice and penance on the part of your parents along with the happiness, facilities you will get in the future. Practice of knowledge and values is necessary in conduct. Union Minister of State for Steel and Rural Development, Faggan Singh Kulaste said that effective work is being done by the central government to encourage the education sector through the new education policy. He said that getting good placement in career is an important stage of life. He wished all the students a bright future.Minister of Science, Technology and Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Omprakash Sakhlecha said that the state government has created a new eco-system for startups and information technology. Immense possibilities and facilities are available for business and trade. 40 percent grant is being given by the government for building and other facilities in the field of information technology. A provision of 50 percent has been made for women entrepreneurs. He said that efforts should be made to move ahead in the field of new technologies like artificial intelligence in the state. Congratulating the students who got placement, he said that the students who could not get selected, should focus on their efforts for skill upgradation.

Experts from various fields addressed the students in the programme. Students selected in reputed companies and their parents were also felicitated.

CM PLANTS SAPLINGS OF KARANJ AND TECOMA

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan along with Vishwanath Sharma, Abhilash Tiwari and Dali Bhaguria of Pratham Education Foundation planted saplings of Karanj and Tikoma in Smart Udyan today. Chouhan is planting saplings every day as a part of his resolve.

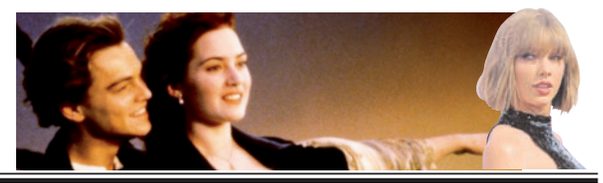
The Foundation is engaged in various works for environment and cleanliness along with running education and skill upgradation programmes in the country. In Bhopal, training workshops are being conducted to assist street vendors understand the importance of cleanliness, finance, digital marketing and documents required in Pradhan Mantri Swanidhi Yojana, and to upgrade their business. Presently 12 centers are being operated by the Foundation in Madhya Pradesh, in which employment assistance is being provided to more than 30 thousand youths every year after training. At present, health care, electrical, automobile courses are being run in these centres. Also, Entrepreneurship Development Programme is being conducted for the last three years. Karanj is considered important in Ayurvedic medicine. It is also used for religious purposes. Tecoma is known for its bright yellow trumpet-shaped flowers.

ALL GOVERNMENT CANTEENS WILL BE OPERATED BY SELF-HELP GROUPS: CM

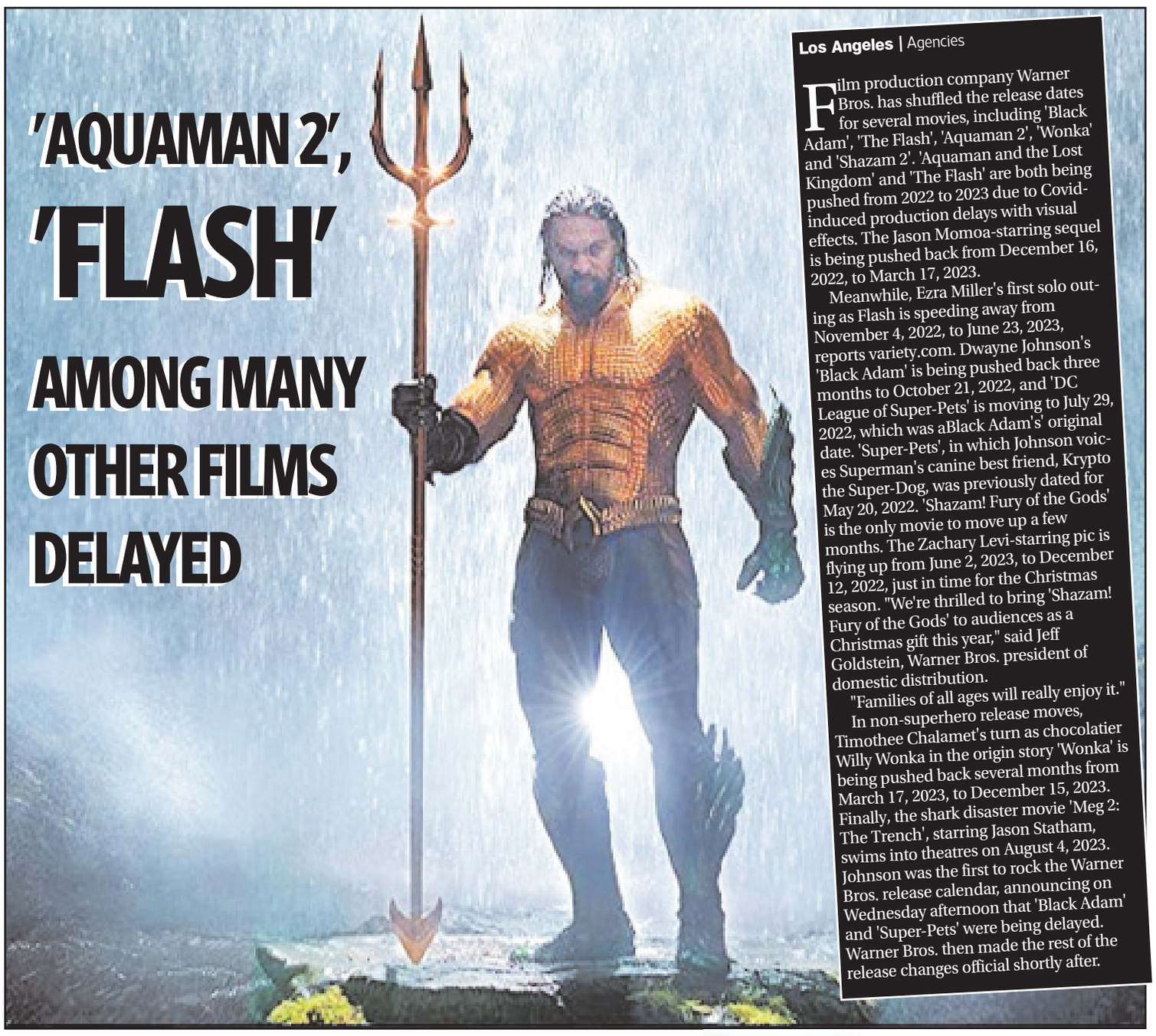
Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has said that the state government has decided that all government canteens in the state will be run by self-help groups. To achieve this goal, 127 Didi Cafes have been inaugurated in the state today. Chouhan was launching "Didi Cafe" built under Madhya Pradesh State Rural Livelihood Mission at Mantralaya. He also visited Didi Cafe.

Chouhan said that it is a moment of joy and pride that our sisters are making an unprecedented contribution in building Atma-nirbhar Madhya Pradesh besides becoming self-reliant. The progress and growth of Madhya Pradesh also lies in the success of the sisters of self-help groups. He said that you keep moving forward like this, the government is always ready for all possible help.Chouhan extended good wishes to the sisters of self-help groups. He said that sisters prepare tea and snacks with such affinity and love that its taste automatically increases. It is our wish that our sisters also reach new heights of success with this cafe. The Chief Minister said that our government has taken a resolution that the monthly income of the sister of every self-help group should be at least Rs. 10,000. He said that it is a matter of joy that today with the opening of 127 Didi Cafes, thousands of our sisters have joined employment in a single day.



'AQUAMAN 2', 'FLASH' AMONG MANY OTHER FILMS DELAYED



Los Angeles | Agencies

Film production company Warner Bros. has shuffled the release dates for several movies, including 'Black Adam', 'The Flash', 'Aquaman 2', 'Wonka' and 'Shazam 2'. 'Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom' and 'The Flash' are both being pushed from 2022 to 2023 due to Covid-induced production delays with visual effects. The Jason Momoa-starring sequel is being pushed back from December 16, 2022, to March 17, 2023.

Meanwhile, Ezra Miller's first solo outing as Flash is speeding away from November 4, 2022, to June 23, 2023, reports variety.com. Dwayne Johnson's 'Black Adam' is being pushed back three months to October 21, 2022, and 'DC League of Super-Pets' is moving to July 29, 2022, which was aBlack Adam's' original date. 'Super-Pets', in which Johnson voices Superman's canine best friend, Krypto the Super-Dog, was previously dated for May 20, 2022. 'Shazam! Fury of the Gods' is the only movie to move up a few months. The Zachary Levi-starring pic is flying up from June 2, 2023, to December 12, 2022, just in time for the Christmas season. "We're thrilled to bring 'Shazam! Fury of the Gods' to audiences as a Christmas gift this year," said Jeff Goldstein, Warner Bros. president of domestic distribution.

"Families of all ages will really enjoy it."

In non-superhero release moves, Timothee Chalamet's turn as chocolatier Willy Wonka in the origin story 'Wonka' is being pushed back several months from March 17, 2023, to December 15, 2023. Finally, the shark disaster movie 'Meg 2: The Trench', starring Jason Statham, swims into theatres on August 4, 2023. Johnson was the first to rock the Warner Bros. release calendar, announcing on Wednesday afternoon that 'Black Adam' and 'Super-Pets' were being delayed. Warner Bros. then made the rest of the release changes official shortly after.

'Bridgerton' Season 2 trailer highlights Anthony, Edwina and Kate love triangle

Los Angeles | Agencies

Streaming giant Netflix has released a full trailer for the upcoming second season of the romantic drama series 'Bridgerton'.

The trailer focuses on the love triangle between Anthony Bridgerton (Jonathan Bailey) and sisters Edwina (Charithra Chandran) and Kate Sharma (Simone Ashley). Anthony begins to court Edwina after she arrives from India, spurring a protectiveness in Kate that ends up bringing herself and Anthony closer together, reports variety.com.

"What happens when duty is in conflict with the heart's true desire?" Julie Andrews' gossip-chronicling narrator Lady Whistledown questions in the teaser. "Then there is potential for a considerable scandal indeed."Beyond the romantic trio, the new footage also features teases of a Pall Mall game, horse racing and the expected "Bridgerton" sprinkles of nudity.

The series also stars Adjoa Andoh, Lorraine Ashbourne, Harriet Cains, Bessie Carter, Shelley Conn, Nicola Coughlan, Phoebe Dynevor, Ruth Gemmell, Florence Hunt, Martins Imhangbe, Claudia Jessie, Calam Lynch, Luke Newton, Golda Rosheuvel, Luke Thompson, Will Tilston, Polly Walker and Rupert Young.

Shonda Rhimes serves as executive producer for the series under her Shondaland banner, alongside Betsy Beers, Tom Verica and Chris Van Dusen. Van Dusen also serves as creator and showrunner.

Though it's already been over a year since the first season of "Bridgerton," Rhimes told Variety that she expects 'Bridgerton' to go on for years: "There are eight Bridgerton siblings, and as far as I'm concerned, there are eight 'Bridgerton' seasons," she said. "And maybe more." The second season of 'Bridgerton' will premiere all episodes on March 25.

'Gotham Knights' pilot casts Olivia Rose Keegan, Oscar Morgan

Los Angeles | Agencies

The "Gotham Knights" pilot at has added three new cast members -- Olivia Rose Keegan, Oscar Morgan and Navia Robinson.

Rose Keegan, Robinson and Morgan have all joined the pilot. Variety exclusively reported earlier this week that Fallon Smythe and Tyler DiChiara are also set to star.

Based on characters created for DC by Bob Kane with Bill Finger, the one-hour drama takes place in in the wake of Bruce Wayne's murder. His rebellious adopted son forges an unlikely alliance with the children of Batman's enemies when they are all framed for killing the Caped Crusader. And as the city's most wanted criminals, this renegade band of misfits must fight to clear their names.

But in a Gotham with no Dark Knight to protect it, the city descends into the most dangerous it's ever been. However, hope comes from the most unexpected of places as this team of mismatched fugitives will become its next generation of saviors known as the Gotham Knights. Keegan will play Duela. Described as abrasive, unpredictable and a little unhinged, Duela is, above all, a survivor. Born in Arkham Asylum and abandoned by her father - the most dangerous man in Gotham - Duela forged herself into a brutal fighter and skilled thief, reports variety.com.

Showing her range...

Kim Kardashian pours her curves into crotchless sheer catsuit as she showcases the latest sexy addition to her SKIMS range

Los Angeles | Agencies

Kim Kardashian brought the sex appeal as she showcased the latest addition to her SKIMS collection.

The reality star, 41, poured her curves into the sheer mesh mock neck catsuit, a crotchless jumpsuit with long sleeves now available on the SKIMS website for $108.

The beauty stunned as she struck a variety of poses, including one of her resting on the floor with her legs slightly splayed open. She rocked a head full of long, sleek and straight raven tresses which cascaded close to the floor. And a full polish of makeup accented her radiant complexion.

In another pose, Kim appeared to be crawling on the floor as she clutched a shiny red heart. The sheer mesh mock neck catsuit is now available on the SKIMS website in sizes XXS-4X, reports dailymail.co.uk.

'Black Panther' director Ryan Coogler mistaken to be bank robber, detained

Los Angeles | Agencies

The celebrated 'Black Panther' director, Ryan Coogler, who has been on the 'Time 100' list of the most influential people of 2018, was detained by the police in Atlanta back in January after he was mistaken for a bank robber at a Bank of America branch.

The director confirmed the incident to 'Variety'. "This situation should never have happened," he said, adding that "Bank of America worked with me and addressed it to my satisfaction and we have moved on." The news was broken by TMZ, based on a police report. It said Coogler was detained after he went to Bank of America to make a transaction. The 35-year-old director, who was wearing a hat, sunglasses and a COVID face mask, went to the counter and handed the teller a withdrawal slip with a note written on the back that reportedly read, "I would like to withdraw $12,000 cash from my checking account. Please do the money count somewhere else. I'd like to be discreet." The teller, however, misinterpreted the situation as an attempted robbery when the amount of the transac-

'Pinocchio' first look shows scruffy, white-haired Tom Hanks as Geppetto

Los Angeles | Agencies

The first look of Tom Hanks-starrer live action film 'Pinocchio', a remake of the 1940 animated Disney film of the same name, was released recently, reports 'Variety'.

The 1940 animated film is itself adapted from Carlo Collodi's children's novel 'The Adventures of Pinocchio'. The film features Hanks in the role of Geppetto, a childless woodworker desperate for a son. The image shows a scruffy, white-haired Hanks admiring a not-yet animated Pinocchio on his workbench.

The film is directed by Robert Zemeckis with whom Hanks has worked in the 1994 classic, 'Forrest Gump'. The screenplay for the film has been written by Robert in association with Chris Weitz, who has produced the film with Andrew Milano.

The design for Pinocchio in the film is a close recreation of the original film's character design, rounded up with a yellow hat with a red feather and a nearly identical face to the animated movie.

Disney Plus' 'Pinocchio' is not the only upcoming movie centered around the famous puppet. On March 22, Lionsgate Entertainment will release "Pinocchio: A True Story," an animated film starring Pauly Shore in the title role. 'Variety' also states that in December, Netflix is expected to release a stop-motion animated Pinocchio film starring Gregory Mann, Ewan McGregor and David Bradley, with Guillermo del Toro and Mark Gustafson attached to direct.

ABSOLUTE PIC OF THE DAY

Khloe Kardashian

WOMEN'S WORLD CUP

TAHUHU, KERR STAR AS NEW ZEALAND CRUSH INDIA BY 62 RUNS

Hamilton | Agencies

Lea Tahuhu and Amelia Kerr took three wickets each as New Zealand crushed India by 62 runs at Seddon Park in the eighth match of ICC Womens Cricket World Cup, here on Thursday.

India, who had opted to bat second in the hope of dew aiding them, were all out for 198 in a chase where nothing went right for them, barring Harmanpreet Kaur's 71.

Chasing 261, Frankie Mackay's off-spin and pace from Jess Kerr kept India on a tight leash from the word go. The duo were bang-on with their line and length and didn't offer Smriti Mandhana and Yastika Bhatia any width. Smriti, whose shots were mostly going to the fielders, tried to break the shackles off Jess in the sixth over. But Jess, who came in from round the wicket, got Smriti to mistime a loft to cover. New Zealand's relentless pursuit of building the dot-ball pressure as Deepti Sharma was trapped lbw on last ball of power-play off Lea Tahuhu. The on-field umpire gave it lbw but New Zealand took the review and got to reverse the decision in their favour. India's too slow a start and New Zealand's disciplined bowling meant they never got the chance to break free and rotate the strike. Post-power-play, Yastika went for the push early, giving mid-off a catch off the leading edge. Mithali Raj, dropped by cover off Lea early in the knock, stitched a laborious 47-run stand off 63 balls with Harmanpreet Kaur. But Amelia Kerr, the leg-spinner introduced from 25th over, made double strikes in the 30th over to dent India's chances of making an improbable comeback in the match. Mithali, expecting a googly from Amelia, was stumped off a leg-break outside off-stump which she attempted to sweep.

On the very next ball, Amelia bowled Richa Ghosh for a golden duck with a googly that turned in and hit top of off-stump. bounced her out with a well-directed short ball which took the glove edge to Katey. Amidst all the ruins, Harmanpreet was waging a lone battle, pulling and sweeping hard even as Pooja Vastrakar holed out to mid-off off Hannah Rowe. After Harmanpreet got her fifty in 54 balls, she slog-swept Hannah for two sixes over deep mid-wicket and two fours swept through square leg and fine leg to take 20 runs off the 43rd over. Harmanpreet's late surge came to an end at 71 when she miscued a slog to long-off off Amelia. Hayley Jensen then yorked Jhulan Goswami and got Rajeshwari Gayakwad to nick behind on successive deliveries to seal a comprehensive win for New Zealand.

Brief scores :

New Zealand 260/9 in 50 overs (Amy Satterthwaite 75, Amelia Kerr 50; Pooja Vastrakar 4/34, Rajeshwari Gayakwad 2/46) beat India 198 all out in 46.4 overs (Harmanpreet Kaur 71, Mithali Raj 31; Lea Tahuhu 3/17, Amelia Kerr 3/56) by 62 runs

Benzema's hat-trick steals Mbappe's thunder as Real Madrid beat PSG

Madrid | Agencies

Karim Benzema scored a second-half hat-trick in just 16 minutes to inspire Real Madrid to a 3-1 win over Paris Saint-Germain to see his side through to the UEFA Champions League quarter-finals 3-2 on aggregate. All the pre-match talk centered on PSG striker Kylian Mbappe's likely summer move to Real Madrid, and the Frenchman's first-half goal put PSG 1-0 up on the night and 2-0 ahead on aggregate. However, on the hour mark, Benzema took advantage of an error from PSG keeper Gianluigi Donnarumma, who made a complete mess of a ball at his feet to gift Madrid a way back into the tie. 15 minutes later, Benzema leveled the aggregate score after neat work from Vinicius Jr and Luka Modric, slamming home from the right-hand side of the area. VAR checked to see the second goal was onside, and just 12 seconds after the restart Benzema completed his hat-trick after PSG gifted Madrid the ball from the kick-off, allowing Vinicius again to feed Benzema to net the decisive goal, reports Xinhua. Benzema had been magnificent, but PSG only had themselves to blame for a series of disastrous errors when they looked to have the tie completely under control. Real Madrid, with Toni Kroos, who passed fit to play, started strongly, creating a couple of half-chances, but PSG were able to weather the storm and after 15 minutes they began to take control. Neymar Jr saw a shot saved by Thibaut Courtois, and the attacking trio of Messi, Neymar, and Mbappe began to combine well, although Donnarumma did well to tip away a curling effort from Benzema at the other end. Benzema headed just wide and straight at Donnarumma before Mbappe put PSG ahead on the night after being set up by Neymar, who won a loose ball, before threading him through on goal. The French international then dummied Courtois, and will no doubt be delighted if he does join Real Madrid in the summer, which after the second half looks more likely than ever.

League, Real Betis lost 2-1 at home to Eintracht Frankfurt, who took the lead through Filip Kostic after 14 minutes, and although Nabil Fekir equalized on the half-hour, Daichi Kamada netted the decisive goal two minutes later as the German side showed their threat on the break. The result would have been worse for the Spanish side had goalkeeper Claudio Bravo not saved a second-half penalty.

Jhulan becomes joint leading wicket-taker in Women's Cricket World Cup history

Hamilton | Agencies

Veteran India pacer Jhulan Goswami on Thursday became the joint leading wicket-taker in the history of ICC Women's World Cups. Jhulan, through her figures of 1/41 against New Zealand at Seddon Park, equalled the tally of 39 wickets taken by Lyn Fullston of Australia from 1982 to 1988.

In India's opening match of the ongoing World Cup against Pakistan at Bay Oval, Jhulan took 2/26 in ten overs in the 107-run win to stretch her scalps to 38 across five Women's Cricket World Cups since 2005. Now, with the wicket of New Zealand keeper-batter Katey Martin through a yorker, Jhulan is now equal to Lyn in the leading wicket-taker across all Women's Cricket World Cups. Earlier, on Wednesday during the pre-match virtual press conference, when quizzed about being on the verge of a big milestone, Jhulan was more focused on making an impactful contribution for the team.

Nkrumah Bonner, Jason Holder keep West Indies in contention with England

Antigua | Agencies

An unbeaten fifth-wicket partnership of 75 runs between Nkrumah Bonner and Jason Holder helped West Indies recover from a mini collapse and advanced to 202 for four on the second day of the first Test against England on Wednesday. West Indies will resume 109 runs behind and with six wickets in hand in reply to England's first innings total of 311 on the second day of the first Test at the Sir Vivian Richards Stadium in Antigua.

England's reshuffled bowling attack served up a mixed bag on a tricky day in Antigua, after Jonny Bairstow and co. added 43 to the overnight score to post 311 in the first innings - more than England had managed in any of the five Ashes Tests in their defeat to Australia.

A wayward start with the ball from England's new opening pair of Chris Woakes and Craig Overton helped the West Indies openers build a stand of 83 from just 19.3 overs as the reply got off to a rapid start.

Mark Wood, Ben Stokes and Jack Leach bowled tidily, and four quick wickets in the afternoon session threatened to swing the momentum back in England's favour.

But a stand of 75 after Tea between Nkrumah Bonner and Jason Holder helped West Indies to 202/4 by the close, 109 runs behind against a bowling attack who failed to immediately justify England's unorthodox selection policy for the Caribbean tour. England had resumed on 268/6 and picked up where they'd left off on the first evening, with Jonny Bairstow and Chris Woakes looking largely untroubled early on.

Brief scores :

Brief scores: England 311 all out in 100.3 overs (Jonny Bairstow 140, Ben Stokes 36, Ben Foakes 42, Chris Woakes 28; Jayden Seale 4/79, Kemar Roach 2/86, Jason Holder 2/24, Alzarri Joseph 2/70) vs West Indies 202/4 in 66.5 overs (Kraigg Brathwaite 55, John Campbell 35, Nkrumah Bonner 34 not out, Jason Holder not out 43; Chris Woakes 1/54, Craig Overton 1/58, trail by 109 runs.

GERMAN OPEN 2022

PV SINDHU BOWS OUT AFTER LOSING TO ZHANG YI MAN

Mulheim (Germany) | Agencies

Ace Indian shuttler P.V Sindhu crashed out of the 2022 German Open Super 300 badminton tournament, losing to China's Zhang Yi Man in the second round, here on Thursday.

Two-time Olympic medallist Sindhu lost to the 2021 World Championship bronze medallist Zhang Yi Man 14-21, 21-15, 14-21 in a match that lasted 55 minutes.

Former world champion Sindhu, who is currently ranked World No. 7, started the match on expected lines and dominated early exchanges. However, the Chinese shuttler, ranked 34 in the world, took eight consecutive points after trailing 3-5 and maintained her lead to clinch the first game. The Indian mounted a comeback and took the next game to bring the contest on level terms. The see-saw battle continued in the deciding game but Sindhu's younger opponent chipped in regularly with successive points to win the match, an olympics.com report said. Later in the day, Saina Nehwal will take on the eighth seed Ratchanok Intanon from Thailand. Apart from Saina, top Indian men's badminton players Kidambi Srikanth, Lakshya Sen and H.S Prannoy will also be in action in their second-round matches.

Djokovic Withdraws from Indian Wells & Miami Open

Indian Wells | Agencies

World No. 2 Novak Djokovic withdrew from the BNP Paribas Open and the Miami Open, organisers confirmed on Wednesday.

The 20-time Grand Slam champion tweeted on Wednesday that the Centers for Disease Control in America "confirmed the regulations won't be changing so I won't be able to play in the U.S."

Djokovic, who recently dropped to No. 2 in the ATP rankings, has played in only one tournament so far in 2022 because he has not received any shots to protect against Covid-19. He was deported from Australia in January and was not allowed to try to defend his title at Melbourne Park. "While I was automatically listed in the @BNPPARIBASOPEN and @MiamiOpen draw I knew it would be unlikely I'd be able to travel," Djokovic tweeted. "The CDC has confirmed that regulations won't be changing so I won't be able to play in the US. Good luck to those playing in these great tournaments." Since Thursday's order of play has not yet been released, Grigor Dimitrov will become the 33rd seed and be moved to the last line in the draw, Djokovic's spot. He will play Belgian David Goffin or Australian Jordan Thompson in the second round. If the Bulgarian faces Goffin, it will be a rematch of the 2017 Nitto ATP Finals championship match. A qualifier or lucky loser will replace Dimitrov on Line 93, where he will challenge American Tommy Paul.

Andy Murray donates prize money to Ukrainian children

London | Agencies

Three-time Grand Slam champion Andy Murray has pledged to donate his 2022 prize money to help children in Ukraine.

Earlier, women's World number 18 Elina Svitolina announced she will donate all of her prize money directly to the Ukrainian war effort. Similarly, Ukrainian refugee and Lyon Open finalist Dayana Yastremska joined her compatriot and will do the same. Murray also highlighted how the war in Ukraine is disrupting children's schooling. "I'm going to be donating my earnings from my prize money for the rest of the year, but anyone in the UK can support UNICEF's humanitarian response by donating to our appeal by following this link - ttps://unicef.uk/am_ukraine." "Children in Ukraine need peace - now!" "It's vital education continues, so UNICEF is working to enable access to learning for displaced children, as well as supporting the rehabilitation of damaged schools, together with replacement equipment and furniture," he said. As the war between Russia and Ukraine rages into its second week, the tolls, displacement and damage done looks set to continue and even increase. Murray revealed that he will donate the rest of the prize money he earns this year to help rebuild damaged chools, provide medical supplies and other broken equipment.

I-league: In-form Punjab target another three points against bottom side Aizawl

Kolkata | Agencies

In-form RoundGlass Punjab FC will be aiming to extend their unbeaten streak to the season when they take on Aizawl FC, who lost all three of their matches so far, at the Kalyani stadium, here on Friday.

RoundGlass Punjab had a perfect outing in Gameweek 3, thumping newly-promoted Kenkre FC 4-0, with a brace from Kurtis Guthrie. "Against Kenkre, we managed to get some young players on the pitch like Freddy and Maheson. We've used 21 players across our three games so far, which is important in a congested campaign," said coach Ashley Westwood.

Coming on as a substitute, striker Robin Singh was back among the goals against Kenkre. "It was a happy moment for me as I scored after a long wait, but that's gone now. More than myself, I want Punjab to win. We're focusing on the next game against Aizawl."

Despite their position on the table, coach Westwood isn't taking Aizawl lightly. "We're expecting a tough game from a tricky and possession-based side like Aizawl. They have a lot of north-eastern players who I've always been a fan of since I came to India. I think they've been unfortunate with their results. On another day, they could have more points on the board."

Former Hero I-League winners Aizawl were beaten 1-0 by newly-promoted Rajasthan United on Tuesday, which left them rock bottom of the standings with no points in three matches.

"We were really unlucky against Rajasthan. We controlled the game and created a lot of chances but just failed to convert," said Aizawl coach Yan Law. "We're in a situation we don't want to be in. I haven't had training sessions with the full squad due to a number of reasons. It's really difficult to have numbers for match-day and training," he added.

NUSHRRATT BHARUCCHA'S LATEST INSTA POST RECOUNTS HER JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Nushrratt Bharuccha recently shared her thoughts on discovering herself on a journey called life as the actress put up a video celebrating her joy and freedom in the beauty of traditional temples in the background. Taking to her Instagram, Nushrratt wrote a beautiful note along with a picture as she wished everyone a 'Happy Women's Day'. She wrote in the caption, "Found myself somewhere along this journey of ups & downs. I know who I am, who I aspire to be."She further added in the caption, "More importantly, I know who I am not who I can never be. And just like that, having that clarity gives me so much peace...and so much joy, just being Me! I celebrate me! Hope You find You and celebrate You! Happy Women's Day! (sic)."

On the work front, she has been confirmed for the sequel 'Chhorii 2' as the lead. In addition, Nushrratt will be seen in 'Ram Setu', 'Hurdang' and 'Janhit Mein Jaari'.

'Turning Red' star Maitreyi Ramakrishnan on growing up tough

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Canadian-Indian actress Maitreyi Ramakrishnan, who has voiced the Indian character Priya in the soon-to-be-released coming-of-age fantasy comedy 'Turning Red', recently shared a message for her Indian fans.

In the social media video, the actress can be heard saying, "Growing up can be a beast! But it can be easier when you have the most amazing bunch of friends around you and your amma, appa, thatha, paati, mama, mami, basically your whole big noisy Kudumbam (family)."

She then goes on to greet her Indian fans and talks about the upcoming movie and her role, in the video.

The actress feels glad that the film industry is moving towards a more inclusive space, "It is really nice to see how films and TV are moving in a direction that has authenticity diversity in a natural way. It's not just show and tell. Younger audiences watching 'Turning Red' are going to accept this reality as their new normal and have a well-deserved expectation for representation."

Talking about her character, she adds, "Priya is too cool for school, mysterious, middle school dweeb that personally I can totally relate to and I'm sure many others can as well! She helps Mei on this journey that she goes through by being a supportive friend who loves unconditionally."

JUBIN NAUTIYAL WANTS TO REWORK HINDI CLASSICS LIKE 'EK PYAAR KA NAGMA HAI'

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Playback singer Jubin Nautiyal would like to rework some of the Hindi music classics like 'Ek Pyaar Ka Nagma Hai' and 'Badi Door se Aaye Hain'.

The multi-talented artiste, who can deftly play various musical instruments like the guitar, piano, harmonium and drums, has been recently crowned MTV Beats Artist of The Month for March 2022.Elaborating on the melodies that he would like to rework, Jubin said, "There are many songs I'd have loved to compose. Some cult classic songs that have stayed with me since the beginning of my career are 'Ek Pyaar Ka Nagma Hai'. 'Badi Door se Aaye Hain Pyaar Ka Tofa Laye Hain' is another song I'd have loved to compose because of its lyrics, it is absolutely beautiful and out of the world."

Shedding light on the first song he ever learnt, he said, "I performed 'Yeh Jeevan Hai' when I was very young and didn't even know the composer of the track and how the process of music works. I used to jokingly tell people that I have conceptualised the track (sic)."

The singer earlier had an extensive set of goals but, given his good work that resonates with masses at large, the singer has been able to accomplish most of them.

Speaking about his bucket list, Jubin Nautiyal shared, "My goals used to be very extensive, but I have been blessed by God and audiences to have covered most of them. My U.S. tour which I'll be doing in June was perhaps the only remaining bit. I really wanted to go and play music across the globe. I'm very lucky, I have everything that I wanted."

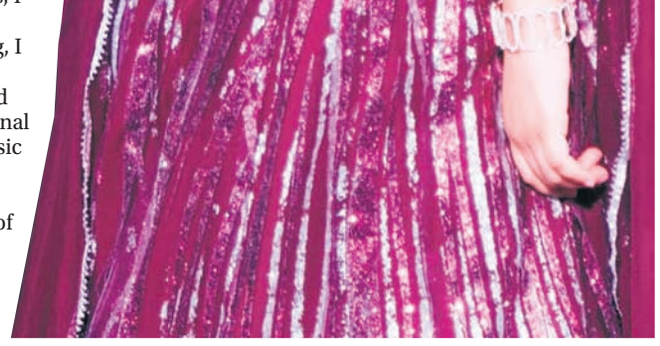
NEELANJANA RAY: MUSIC REALITY SHOWS GIVE US MORE THAN JUST POPULARITY

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Neelanjana Ray, the winner of 'Sa Ra Ga Ma Pa 2022', says even though reaching out to a larger audience through social media and viral videos is easier, reality TV shows still hold relevance for newcomers like her.Post winning the show, the Kolkata-based 19-year-old singer feels happy and overwhelmed at the same time.

Talking to reporter while she expresses her gratitude for the win as a result of the love from the audience, she also explained, why such reality shows hold relevance for her.Considering the fact that these days liking of the audience has become quite unpredictable as non-musical content like 'Kacha Badam' goes viral and Bhuban Badykar becomes famous, the question naturally arises that how much importance a young musician should give to the judgment of the audience.Neelanjana told reporter: "Well, I think when it comes to the liking of our audience, good singers always find their validation from the audience, and it stays in their mind. Yes there are social media and using that people can become an overnight star, but in a reality shows, we get huge professional grooming."She went on adding, "In a music class, I can learn music and sharpen my talent but if I want to become a professional musician, along with my singing, I need to learn how to present my work, how to talk to media, grooming etc. All of us participants have learned how to conduct ourselves in public and other professional behaviour. I believe that is why the relevance of TV music reality shows will always remain the same for us."

Neelanjana has won the trophy of 'Sa Ra Ga Ma Pa Music Ka Tyohaar', on Zee TV as well as received a lot of praises from music icons like Udit Narayan, Kavita Krishnamurthy, Shankar Mahadevan. Aditya Narayan teamed with music director Shreyas, lyricist Prashant Rangoli, to create an original song for her.



Farah Khan gushes over 'very sporty and agile' SRK

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Ace film director, producer and choreographer Farah Khan, who will be seen hosting 'The Khatra Khatra Show', is all praise for Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan's agility.

On the show, Farah will make the guest participants involved in rib-tickling pranks, dares, and games.

Farah thinks that superstar Shah Rukh Khan will nail all the challenges. She said: "Shahrukh is very sporty and agile."

She added: "He will undoubtedly ace all the Khatra Khatra games but apart from Shah Rukh Khan, if I had to choose it would be Akshay Kumar and Prabhudeva. They would probably do the stunts." 'The Khatra Khatra Show' is starting from March 13 at 7:00 pm on Voot.

AFTER RAKHI, RAHUL, NOW MIKA GETS HIS OWN 'SWAYAMVAR'

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Singer Mika Singh is all set be on the reality show 'Swayamvar - Mika Di Vohti' in which he will be searching for his life partner and plans to get married on it. As he says: "Over the years my songs have been a part of millions of weddings. I have sung solo and I have sung duets."

"Ab tak singing mein toh solo hi chalta hai lekin life mein ab duet karne ka mann karta hai. Kyunki maza toh apne ke saath hi aata hai!" (Till now solo continues in singing but want duet in life, as enjoyment is possible with our own people only).

Mika confirms that he is all set to get married and is looking forward to starting this new chapter with 'Swayamvar - Mika Di Vohti'.

'Swayamvar - Mika Di Vohti' will be airing soon on Star Bharat.

INSTAGRAM PIC OF THE DAY

Sonali Raut

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