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Doctors warn of rise in heat-related health risks

UN CLIMATE REPORT

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Even as the UN issued a red alert on climate change, doctors on Wednesday raised alarm over the significant health risks associated with increasing global temperatures. The latest report from the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), showed record-breaking "greenhouse gas levels, surface temperatures, ocean heat and acidification, sea level rise, Antarctic sea ice cover and glacier retreat" in 2023.

The report warns of a 'high probability' that 2024 will be another record-hot year. Climate reports have shown January 2024 already to be the warmest on record.

"Climate change poses significant health risks, particularly in the realm of respiratory health. Climate change exacerbates air pollution, which worsens conditions of people who already have respiratory ailments like asthma, pneumonia, lung cancer, etc.," Dr Vikas Maurya, Director and HoD Pulmonology, Fortis Shalimar Bagh, told reporter.

"Climate change also includes worsened air quality due to an increase in ground-level ozone and particulate matter pollution, triggering respiratory problems," said Dr Kuldeep Kumar Grover, Head of Critical Care and Pulmonology, CK Birla Hospital, Gurugram.



The experts further noted that a short winter season and an early onset of summer will have an impact on the viruses' behavioural patterns leading to a spike in infectious diseases. "Climate change alters the geographic distribution and seasonality of vector-borne diseases such as dengue fever and Zika virus, which

can have respiratory manifestations in some cases," Dr Vikas said. 2023 was not only the Earth's hottest year ever recorded, but it was also the first year in which the world was close to 1.5 degrees Celsius (1.48 degrees C) hotter than the pre-industrial average (1850-1900). But the year 2024, many scientists believe to be humanity's first year

beyond the UN-mandated 1.5 degrees C. Dr. Kuldeep told reporter that the increase in global temperatures will also spur heatwave events, which will become more frequent and intense. "This can lead to an increased incidence of heatstroke, dehydration, and the worsening of cardiovascular and respiratory diseases".

India will become the world leader in AI: PM Modi

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Wednesday said that he was convinced that India will become the world leader in AI with its young innovators emerging as a driving force to take the nation ahead.

Addressing the Startup Mahakumbh at the Bharat Mandapam here, the Prime Minister said, "India will have the upper hand in AI and we will not let the opportunity go."

He exhorted the young startup founders to find solutions that will not only help India solve its problems and achieve the goal of Viksit Bharat but also create a better future for the world.

PM Modi said tried and trusted innovations that were successful in India with its diverse geography would work anywhere in the world.

He said that India had now become the third largest startup ecosystem in the world, and the government had for the first time introduced the chapter of Startups as an Engine of Growth in the G-20 agenda this year bringing the coun-



try's innovative talent on the world map. PM Modi pointed out that India's startup ecosystem had come a long way since he first launched the Startup India and Stand up India movements at a small gathering in Vigyan Bhavan attended by a few experts. "Today the ecosystem has grown with over 1.25 lakh registered startups in the country and with which over 12 lakh youngsters are linked. The startups are

providing employment on a large scale and the young founders have turned out to be job creators instead of mere job seekers as was the case earlier in the country," he added. He pointed out that over 45 per cent of the startup founders were women and this showed how the daughters of the country were playing an important role in nation building after the technological empowerment.

MeitY-supported startups interact with potential investors

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Emerging entrepreneurs supported by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) funding programme on Wednesday interacted with established investors and explored potential collaboration opportunities.

The startups met investors at the one-day 'Startup-Investor Connect Programme' organised jointly by Startup Incubation and Innovation Centre (SIIC), IIT Kanpur and MeitY Startup Hub.

"By creating a platform for meaningful connections between innovative startups

and experienced investors, we have taken a significant step towards empowering entrepreneurs and driving the growth of India's vibrant startup ecosystem," Ankush Sharma, Professor in-charge, SIIC, IIT Kanpur, said in a statement.

"This event not only facilitated access to potential funding opportunities but also equipped startups with valuable insights and strategies to navigate the complexities of the entrepreneurial journey," he added. The programme brought together a diverse array of startups and prominent investment organisations, including IvyCamp, RTAF, HPCL,

SIDBI, BIORX, Sanchi Connect, Cummins India, Indian Angel Network, Danazir Wealth Management, Singhania & Co, Lawsikho, and Skill Arbitrage.

The startups showcased their ideas and business models, while the investors shared valuable insights into market trends, investment opportunities, and scaling strategies. In addition, the programme facilitated productive dialogue and insightful exchange, helping startups gain a deeper understanding of the business landscape and the potential for financial growth.

NEET aspirant wanted to go abroad with friends, wasn't kidnapped: Kota police

Jaipur | Agencies

In a surprising turn of events in the alleged kidnapping of a NEET aspirant, the police in Kota, Rajasthan, said on Wednesday that the girl was not kidnapped, but wanted to travel abroad with her 'friends', and hence she demanded Rs 30 lakh from her father.

Kota SP Amrita Duhan said during a press conference that the narrative of kidnapping has been proven false by the police investigation.

Duhan said the student and her 'friends' wanted to go abroad, hence they made a demand of Rs 30 lakh from the girl's family after cooking the 'kidnapping' story.



Photographs of the student, who was reportedly kept 'hostage' in a room in Indore, were sent to her father demanding Rs 30 lakh as ransom for her 'release'.

According to the SP, the case became clear during the interrogation of the 'missing' student's friend, whom the police have detained. This youth is a resident of Indore, the offi-

cer said, though she did not reveal his identity due to security concerns.

Duhan also said the boy revealed that the girl was in Indore till Tuesday night. Her pictures were clicked in the kitchen with her legs and hands tied, which were later shared with her father. According to the youth, the girl student and her two friends wanted to go abroad. She did not want to study here and hence they hatched the kidnapping theory.

The SP also clarified that the student had not been admitted to any coaching centre in Kota.

The officer also appealed to the student and her friends to immediately contact the police.

Pappu Yadav's induction in Congress creates fissures in party, Bihar unit chief deeply upset

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Jan Adhikar Party (JAP) chief Pappu Yadav's induction into the Congress has created deep fissures in the party and also left the party's Bihar chief Akhilesh Prasad Singh deeply displeased and miffed over the move.

Pappu Yadav was welcomed into the Congress fold by the party's national spokesperson Pawan Khara and other leaders on Wednesday, however, state President Akhilesh Prasad Singh was conspicuous by his absence, thus giving credence to the reports of differences and rift within the state unit over the induction of 'Bahubali'-turned politician.

Top sources in the Bihar Congress reveal that the decision to induct Pappu Yadav was taken by the



high command, overruling the state leadership. Akhilesh Prasad Singh was reportedly disinclined towards allying with tainted faces and those with a criminal past and he also conveyed his displeasure to the party high command, when his opinion was

sought on the likely deal with the JAP.

Since he was appointed Bihar unit President in December 2022, Akhilesh Prasad Singh has infused fresh energy into the rank and file of the party, the result of which was visible in the party's recent rallies and gatherings. Political watchers say that Pappu Yadav's gushing praise for Rahul Gandhi has earned him a place in the grand old party. As per sources, Pappu Yadav is likely to be allotted a Lok Sabha ticket from Purnea constituency, where Uday Singh was a highly probable candidate till now. Uday Singh had been an MP from the BJP but switched to the Congress in 2014. His family is closely related to former Bihar Chief Minister Satyendra Narayan Singh. His mother, sister, and brother-in-law had also been Congress MPs.

India successfully test-fires indigenous 1500 HP engine for Main Battle Tanks

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Ministry of Defence on Wednesday said that it has successfully test-fired the first indigenous 1500 Horsepower (HP) engine for Main Battle Tanks at BEML's Engine division in Mysuru complex.

The MoD said that the first test-firing of the 1500 HP engine signifies the completion of Generation One, focusing on technology stabilisation. Generation Two will see BEML producing engines for various trials

at Combat Vehicles Research and Development Establishment, a DRDO laboratory, and their integration into actual vehicles for user testing. The project is slated for completion by mid-2025. The 1500 HP engine represents a paradigm shift in military propulsion systems, possessing cutting-edge features such as high power-to-weight ratio, and operability in extreme conditions including high altitudes, sub-zero temperatures, and desert environments. Equipped with advanced technologies, the engine

stands on par with the most advanced engines globally. Inaugurating the Test Cell, the Defence Secretary Giridhar Aramane described the achievement as a transformative moment which will enhance the capabilities of the Armed Forces. CMD of BEML Shantanu Roy stated that the accomplishment solidifies BEML's position as a key contributor to defence production in the country, underscoring its commitment to serving the nation's needs in this critical sector.

NORTHERN RAILWAYS SLASH FARE IN KASHMIR VALLEY BY 50 PC

Srinagar: As a major relief to commuters, Northern Railways on Wednesday decided to reduce the train fare in the Kashmir Valley.

"Railways have reinstated second class ordinary fare on passenger trains in the Valley," the officials said.

The charges have dropped from 40 to 50 per cent. Before the relief, the fare was Rs 35 from Sadura station (Anantnag district) to Srinagar. It has now come down to Rs 15.

"This relief is applicable across the Valley in Kashmir and travelling by train has become highly affordable and cheap after the relief," officials said. The rail services are presently operating from Baramulla town in the north of the Valley to Sangaldan in Ramban district of the Jammu division.

By the end of April, rail service will be operational from Udhampur to Baramulla thereby connecting the Valley with the rest of the country through railway services.



Independence of EC not attributable to presence of CJI in selection committee, Centre tells SC

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Centre has defended the fresh appointments to the Election Commission of India, made under the legislation which excludes the Chief Justice of India from the selection process, saying that the independence of the poll body does not arise from, and is not attributable to, the presence of a judicial member in the selection committee.

Before the enactment of the Chief Election Commissioner and the other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Condition of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023, from 1950 till 2023 - for 73 years, the appointment of the Election Commissioners was being made by the executive exclusively, said a preliminary affidavit filed by the Union government to the pleas filed

in the Supreme Court seeking to restrain the Centre from filling the vacancies in Election Commission.

"It should be kept in mind that the Election Commission of India has been able to function neutrally and effectively even during the era of full executive discretion in appointment," it added. The affidavit stated that the legislation introduced by the Parliament, providing that the CEC and ECs will be appointed by the President on the recommendation of a Selection Committee consisting of the PM, the Leader of the Opposition (or the largest opposition party) in the Lok Sabha, and a



Union Cabinet Minister (to be nominated by the PM) is a significant improvement on the status quo and provides for a far more democratic, collaborative and inclusive exercise for appointment of Election Commissioners in line

with the spirit of the Constitution Bench's March 2023 verdict. Further, it said that the judgment of the apex court requiring the appointment to be done by the President on the advice of a panel comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition (or largest party in the LS), and the CJI provided for a "stop-gap" arrangement, until the constitutionally envis-

aged process of the Parliament "stepping in" takes place. "It is submitted that where the Constitution itself specifically vests Parliament with the power to decide upon the appointments of the Election Commissioner and Parliament exercises this power, no question of 'legislative overruling' could arise," the affidavit said. Contending that a "political controversy" is sought to be created and no material has been brought on record to show that the candidates are unfit for constitutional office, the Centre said that the credentials of the persons finally appointed to the post of Election Commissioner have, at no point, been called into question or no objection whatsoever has been raised about the fitness, eligibility or competence of any of the persons named in the list to serve as Election Commissioner.



ANDHRA: TDP ALLEGES PHONE TAPPING OF OPPOSITION LEADERS

Amaravati | Agencies

The opposition Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh has alleged that Jagan Mohan Reddy-led government in the state is resorting to tapping of phones of the State Election Commission, TDP chief N. Chandrababu Naidu, Jana Sena leader Pawan Kalyan, and state BJP president D. Purandeswari.

Former MLA Bonda Umamaheswara Rao claimed that both Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Jagan Mohan Reddy and former Telangana K. Chandrababu Naidu purchased Pegasus spyware for tapping mobile phones.

He referred to the arrest of a police officer, Praneeth Rao in Telangana for alleged phone tapping.

Bonda Umamaheswara Rao stated that the Jagan Mohan Reddy-led government is continuously engaging in phone tapping.

The former MLA said that the IPS officers in Andhra Pradesh are acting as volunteers of YSR Congress by following 'YPS' rules instead of IPS rules.

He alleged that the YSR Congress had tasked Chittoor SP, Rishanth Reddy, with distributing alcohol and money in the constituency, while Kolli Raghunath Reddy, serving as vigilance and enforcement IG, was targeting TDP leaders.

Despite national channel surveys suggesting that



YSR Congress will lose in the upcoming elections, these officials are still working under the orders of YSRCP leaders, he said.

Slamming YSR Congress for attempting to win the elections through illegal activities to secure all 175 seats, he urged the Election Commission to remove the officers who defy the rules from their positions.

He claimed that state minister Peddi Reddy had made statements confirming that phones were

being tapped. Meanwhile, TDP official spokesperson Nagul Meera has alleged that 600 people belonging to SCs, STs, BCs and minorities were killed in five years of YSRCP rule.

He said that in most of the cases, the victims were killed with axes.

He urged the Election Commission to revoke the axe symbol and replace it with the axe symbol for the YSRCP.

Referring to recent incidents such as the axe attack on Imam Hussain in Chagalamarri, Kurnool district, and the hacking to death of Munaiah, a tribal youth, in Giddalur, he expressed concern over the rising violence. Nagul Meera emphasised that the state's development is only possible under the leadership of N. Chandrababu Naidu.

He lamented that Andhra Pradesh, once ranked first in ease of doing business under TDP governance, now ranks first in crime, including murders and robberies, under YSR Congress' rule. He recounted a recent incident where YSRCP activists attacked a Muslim youth in Dachehalli during daylight, underscoring the deteriorating law and order situation. Nagul Meera also criticised the YSR Congress government for disabling the SC, ST, BC, and Minority Corporations.

He revealed some SPs and local police are acting as activists for the YSR Congress and urged the Election Commission to remove such officials from their positions for violating the law.

Chirag Paswan to contest LS election from Hajipur

Patna | Agencies

Lok Janshakti Party Ram Vilas (LJPR) President Chirag Paswan on Wednesday announced that he will contest the Lok Sabha election from the Hajipur constituency.

He said that the decision was taken during the meeting of the party's Parliamentary Board held in Patna.

"During the meeting, the board members of the party unanimously finalised my name as an NDA candidate to contest the Lok Sabha election from Hajipur. It is the workplace of my father Ram Vilas Paswan. I will contest the Lok Sabha election 2024 from this seat," Paswan said. He said that the members of the Parliamentary Board also gave him the full authority to take decisions on behalf of the party. "We are contesting on the five seats in Bihar and the names



of other candidates will be announced in the next few days," he said.

On Pashupati Kumar Paras who is also claiming to contest from Hajipur seat, Chirag Paswan said: "I am ready to take every challenge in the

coming days. My uncle (Pashupati Kumar Paras) always said that he would stay with Prime Minister Narendra Modi till his last breath. So, this is the time to prove that he is with PM Modi."

Trinamool-BJP clash: Detailed police report on Dinhat violence submitted to ECI

Kolkata | Agencies

The West Bengal Police on Wednesday submitted a detailed report to the office of the state Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) on the clashes between the supporters of the ruling Trinamool Congress and the opposition BJP at Dinhat in Cooch Behar district on Tuesday night.

The office of the CEO has forwarded the report to the Election Commission of India (ECI), sources said.

Udayan Guha, the Trinamool MLA from Dinhat who's also the North Bengal Development

Minister, and BJP's Cooch Behar MP and Union Minister Nisith Pramanik were present during the clash, with both accusing each other of instigating violence.

Sources in the CEO's office said the poll panel is taking serious note of the matter considering its gravity, as the two senior ministers from opposing camps were seen dashing toward each other in the middle of the clash.

An FIR has been lodged against Pramanik and 44 BJP workers in the case.

"The matter was brought to the notice of the poll panel on Tuesday night itself. The

District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police, Cooch Behar district, were also directed to keep a close watch on the developments. On Wednesday, a comprehensive report was forwarded to the Election Commission in Delhi," said a source in the state CEO's office.

Earlier on Wednesday, West Bengal Governor C.V. Ananda Bose also sought a detailed report from the newly-appointed DGP, Sanjoy Mukherjee, in this matter.

The Governor also visited Dinhat in the afternoon to inspect the ground situation.

SUSPENDED BSP LEADER DANISH ALI JOINS CONGRESS IN DELHI

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Suspended Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) leader and Lok Sabha MP Danish Ali joined the Congress on Wednesday in the national capital Delhi. Danish Ali is a member of Parliament from Uttar Pradesh's Amroha constituency.

Ali met Sonia Gandhi at her 10 Janpath residence in Delhi on March 14 and sought 'blessings' from the Congress parliamentary party chief.

"Honoured to get blessings of epitome of sacrifice, Sonia Gandhi for my second Lok Sabha Election from Amroha. Her heart beats for India's poor," Danish Ali posted on X after the meeting. "It was National Advisory Council (NAC) headed by her that piloted landmark pro-poor AND transparency laws like MNRE-



GA, RTI, Right to Education, Food

Security Bill," he added. Notably, the Congress had bargained for Amroha in its seat-sharing talks with the Samajwadi Party and could field Danish Ali from the con-

stituency.

Ali had earlier joined the Rahul Gandhi-led Nyay Yatra at its starting point in Manipur, saying he would be failing in his duty as a politician if he

did not be a part of the "biggest drive for unity and justice". The incumbent Amroha MP also joined the Nyay Yatra while it passed through his constituency.

Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) had suspended Danish Ali for indulging in alleged "anti-party activities" after he walked out of the Lok Sabha proceedings along with other Opposition members to protest against the decision to expel TMC member Mahua Moitra for "unethical conduct". Other Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) members remained seated in the House.

The Mayawati-led BSP has maintained distance from the ruling alliance as well as the opposition INDIA bloc as the Lok Sabha battle heats up. Ali however remains a vocal critic of the ruling coalition, actively joining opposition ranks in attacking the BJP and its policies.

Caste census every 5 years if INDIA bloc voted to power in LS polls: TN CM Stalin

Chennai | Agencies

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister and DMK President, MK Stalin said on Wednesday, that if the INDIA bloc was voted to power in the Lok Sabha polls, a caste census would be conducted once in every five years.

CM Stalin also promised that if voted to power at the Centre, 33 per cent reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies would be implemented.

He was speaking on Wednesday after releasing the election manifesto of the DMK for the forthcoming Lok Sabha polls.

CM Stalin said that the DMK was for amendment to the Constitution of India to accommodate relevant recommendations of expert committees on Centre-state



relations in order to grant more autonomy to the latter.

The DMK leader also said that the party was for appointment of governors after duly consulting the chief ministers of states.

He said that the DMK wants Article 356 (On President's Rule) to be abolished and also wants the removal of Article 361 (Protection of President of India and governors of states) from the

Constitution.

The DMK wants the establishment of a branch of the Supreme Court in Chennai; statehood for Puducherry and slashing of prices of LPG, petrol and diesel to Rs 500, Rs 75 and Rs 65, respectively.

CM Stalin promised that if the INDIA bloc comes to power, there would be a separate budget for the Railways and recommendations of the Sachar

Committee to improve the livelihood of Muslims would be implemented.

The proposed 'One Nation, One Election' policy would be abolished and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) would be repealed.

He said that Tamil Nadu would be exempted from the National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test (NET) and all toll booths on National Highways would be removed.

The DMK leader said that prevention of the implementation of the Uniform Civil Code and a monthly entitlement of Rs 1,000 for all women in the country would be executed.

The manifesto also featured the conduct of exams for Union government jobs, both written and oral, in Tamil and official languages of other states.

RBI DIRECTS ALL AGENCY BANKS TO REMAIN OPEN ON MARCH 31

Mumbai | Agencies

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) on Wednesday issued an order for all branches of banks dealing with government receipts and payments to remain open on March 31, which is a Sunday.

"The Government of India has made a request to keep all branches of the banks dealing with government receipts and payments open for transactions on March 31, 2024 (Sunday) so as to account for all the government transactions relating to receipts and payments in the FY 2023-24 itself," the RBI order states.

"Accordingly, Agency Banks are advised to keep all their branches dealing with government business open on March 31, 2024 (Sunday)," the order states. The RBI has also asked banks to give due publicity about the availability of these banking services on this day.

No decision yet on BJP-BJD alliance: Amit Shah

Team Absolute | New Delhi/Bhubaneswa

Union Home Minister Amit Shah said on Wednesday that no decision has been taken yet on the issue of an alliance between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in Odisha.

"No decision on an alliance has been taken yet. The party president will take the final call. However, it is certain that we are going to significantly increase our strength in Odisha. Our workers feel and accept the love and affection of the people of Odisha towards Prime Minister Narendra Modi," the Home Minister said while responding to a question on the issue of alliance during a programme in Delhi.

The Union Minister also said that the BJP's tally in the Lok Sabha seats in Odisha as well as state Assembly will increase several times more than what is being predicted by political observers.

"If an alliance happens, then we will contest elections as partners under the leadership of (Odisha Chief Minister) Naveen Patnaik. If we have to fight alone, then we will contest to



form the government," Home Minister Amit Shah added.

Notably, Odisha CM Naveen Patnaik's close aide and 5T Chairman, V.K. Pandian had earlier said that both parties (BJP and BJD) are in talks about an alliance.

JOLT TO SP AS APNA DAL (K) ANNOUNCES TO FIELD CANDIDATES IN THREE SEATS IN UP

Lucknow: In a significant development, the Apna Dal (K) has announced that it will field its candidates in Phulpur, Mirzapur, and Kaushambhi for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections in Uttar Pradesh.

The Apna Dal (K) has been an ally of the Samajwadi Party, and its leader Pallavi Patel became an MLA on a Samajwadi symbol.

Apna Dal (K) President Krishna Patel said that her party would remain a member of the INDIA bloc. However, she refused to take questions about her ties with the Samajwadi Party.

Fissures within Cong govt in Himachal; Pratibha Singh refuses to re-contest LS poll

Shimla | Agencies

Fissures within the Congress government in Himachal Pradesh surfaced once again on Wednesday as state party chief Pratibha Singh refused to re-contest from the Mandi parliamentary seat, saying elections cannot be fought merely by distributing MP discretionary funds and by disappointing party activists.

Pratibha Singh, wife of six-time chief minister late Virbhadra Singh and mother of state Cabinet minister Vikramaditya Singh, reached Shimla from Delhi after attending the screening committee meeting in Delhi on Tuesday.

Without mincing words, she said she would have to give importance to the by-elections to six assembly seats to save the government. "We will work to save the government," she said, adding, "no active worker is visible who will work for the party".

Voting for the four Lok Sabha seats -- Kangra, Mandi, Hamirpur and Shimla (reserved), currently held by the BJP, will be held in a single phase on June 1. By-elections to six Assembly seats, all held by the Congress, will be held simultaneously.

The seats -- Dharamsala, Lahaul-Spiti, Sujampur, Barsar, Gagret and Kutlehar -- fell vacant after the Congress disqualified its sitting MLAs -- Rajinder Rana, Sudhir Sharma, Inder Dutt Lakhnupal, Devinder Kumar Bhuttoo, Ravi Thakur, and Chetanya



Sharma -- on the ground that they abstained from voting on the Budget, defying the party whip.

Citing reasons for not re-entering the poll fray, Pratibha Singh said, "Had the people I had recom-

mended were given responsibility in time, they would have come out and worked for the party. Today, I do not see any worker who will actively work for the party." "I have been out in the field and have seen the

ground situation. I don't think we will be able to achieve much success, so I have decided to withdraw my name," she explained.

Pratibha Singh, who lost the Mandi seat in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, defeated BJP's Brigadier Khushal Thakur (retired), a decorated officer who played a crucial role in the 1999 Kargil war, in bypoll in 2021 by a slender margin of 8,766 votes.

The seat fell vacant with the death of two-time BJP MP Ram Swaroop Sharma. Notwithstanding the drubbing in the 2022 Assembly polls, the BJP leadership in Himachal Pradesh is once again banking largely on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'charisma' in the Lok Sabha polls as it believes that it equals the ruling Congress' vote share in the state.

Also as the principal Opposition, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is aggressively grilling the government on its policies ranging from closing 920 offices and institutions, comprising schools and colleges, to political vendetta to the appointment of Chief Parliamentary Secretaries and chairman on board and corporations, which it says is a drain on the exchequer and against ruling by courts.

The BJP aims to retain all four Lok Sabha seats -- Mandi, Hamirpur, Kangra and Shimla -- with record margins as it did in 2019 when the party contested under the leadership of first-time Chief Minister Jai Ram Thakur, who is currently the Leader of Opposition.



1990-batch IAS officer Bhushan Gagrani named new BMC Commissioner

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The Election Commission of India (ECI) on Wednesday directed the Maharashtra government to appoint Bhushan Gagrani, a 1990-batch IAS officer currently serving as the Additional Chief Secretary in the Chief Minister's Office (CMO), as the new Commissioner of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC). With this order, incumbent BMC Commissioner Iqbal Chahal will be transferred. The ECI also directed the state government to appoint IAS officers Saurabh Rao and Kailas Shinde as the Commissioners of Thane and Navi Mumbai Municipal Corporations, respectively. In its compliance report submitted to the ECI on Tuesday, the state government suggested three names -- Gagrani, Anil Diggikar, and Sanjay Mukherjee -- for the post of BMC chief. This came after the ECI expressed displeasure over the state



government not acting upon its previous orders to transfer Iqbal Chahal, who has already completed three years in office. Chahal may be appointed as the Additional Chief Secretary in the CMO. The government's compliance was necessitated as the ECI in its directive issued on March 18 had

asked the state government to transfer Chahal, while expressing serious displeasure for not doing it earlier despite its previous orders. In a scathing letter to Chief Secretary Nitin Kareer dated March 18, ECI Secretary S.K. Das reminded that "the Government of Maharashtra did not comply with the order dated

December 21, 2023 saying that no officer connected directly with elections shall be allowed to continue in the present district (revenue district) or in her or his home district or if he or she has completed three years in that district during the last four years or would be completing three years on or before June 30". He also said that while calculating three years, promotion to a post within the district is to be counted. Das said the ECI's instructions shall cover the officers deputed in municipal corporations. "The Government of Maharashtra did not comply with the order and instead through a letter dated January 15, 2024, sought clarification if these instructions are also applicable to the divisional commissioners, municipal commissioners, additional commissioners, and the chief executive officer of Zilla Parishad," Das added. The ECI said that it has already clarified its position in this regard through a letter dated December 22, 2023.

Despite BJP's all-out efforts, Praniti will never join BJP: Sushilkumar Shinde

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Veteran Congress leader and former Union Home Minister Sushilkumar Shinde came to his daughter and Congress legislator Praniti Shinde's defence on Tuesday, saying that despite all-out efforts by the BJP to induct her into the party fold, she has not joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). He added that Praniti will never join the BJP as she is committed to Congress' ideology and thoughts. "Praniti has always been honest with her thoughts. The BJP will keep trying till the end to take her into its fold. They are eyeing the Solapur seat. So far, the BJP has tried hard to get Praniti on its side. But Praniti doesn't think like that. The thoughts of (Mahatma) Gandhi and (Jawaharlal) Nehru will always remain with her. There are many workers who are honest with Gandhi-Nehru's views. Praniti is also one of them. She does not want to leave the party and the people who



have elected her on three occasions," said Shinde, who had lost the Lok Sabha elections from Solapur to the BJP in 2014 and 2019. Shinde's statement came at a time when Praniti and the Vanchit

Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) have criticised each other over their role in politics vis-a-vis the BJP. It all started after Praniti, who is also an invitee to the Congress Working Committee, recently announced that she would contest the Lok Sabha elections from Solapur (reserved seat), adding that the announcement of her candidature was just a formality. What angered the VBA was Praniti's statement that in the previous elections, the votes bagged by the Congress had decreased to some extent due to some parties, because of which the party suffered a big blow in many constituencies in Maharashtra. "A party which reduces the votes of the Congress or divides the votes in this way helps the BJP. Secular views are divided due to some political parties. As a result, leaders from the Congress or those pursuing secular ideas do not get elected," she said during her speech at a recent rally. However, the Congress MLA did not name the VBA or any other political party or leader.

NCP leader threatens to confine Shiv Sena's wannabe Baramati candidate to Maval



Team Absolute | Pune

In a new twist to the ongoing battle for Baramati, a NCP leader on Wednesday threatened to 'confine' a Shiv Sena leader if he insists on contesting the prestigious Lok Sabha seat. NCP's Vice-President, Babu J Bhegade, a former municipal Corporator, warned that he would confine Shiv Sena's Vijay Shitvare to the Maval area of Pune and not allow him to travel to Mumbai if the latter (Shitvare) decides to stand for the Baramati constituency. The NCP led by Deputy

Chief Minister, Ajit Pawar, is planning to nominate his wife Sunetra Ajit Pawar against his cousin and three-time sitting Baramati MP, Supriya Sule, the NCP (SP) Working President. Nursing an old political grudge against Dy CM Ajit Pawar, the ruling ally Shiv Sena's Shitvare has vociferously staked claim to the seat, sparking conflict in the MahaYuti alliance. If denied a party ticket, Shitvare has even declared plans to stand as an independent and trounce Sunetra A. Pawar, embarrassing the ruling alliance

and even Dy CM Ajit Pawar's supporters. Earlier in the week, Chief Minister Eknath Shinde summoned Shitvare twice, including on Monday, to pacify him, but the latter remained non-committal while saying he would announce his final decision in three-four days. After Bhegade's sudden outburst on Wednesday, a grim Shitvare dared "anybody in the NCP" to try and touch or stop him from moving around anywhere and reiterated his intention to throw his hat in the Baramati ring.

30 persons injured as bus falls off bridge in Parbhani

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Nearly 30 passengers were injured after a state transport bus they were travelling in fell from a bridge in Maharashtra's Parbhani district on Wednesday morning, a police official said. The vehicle was heading from Jintur in Parbhani to Solapur when the accident took place. The bus driver lost control over the wheels

following which the vehicle fell from a bridge at Akoli in Parbhani's Jintur taluka, located nearly 500 km from Mumbai, the official said. "Around 30 passengers received injuries. They all are undergoing treatment in hospital," Parbhani's Superintendent of Police Ravindrasing Pardeshi said. The injured persons were initially taken to a medical facility in Jintur and later shifted to a government hospital in Parbhani city, the police said.

Roof, wall of house collapse as electric motorbike battery explodes; 3 injured

Team Absolute | Thane

Two women and a man were injured after an electric motorbike battery exploded in a house in Thane district of Maharashtra, civic officials said on Wednesday, reported news agency. Due to the impact of the explosion which occurred on Tuesday night, the roof of the Thane house and its common wall with an adjoining house collapsed, Thane Municipal Corporation's disaster management cell chief Yasin Tavdi said. The battery was kept in the Thane house located at a chawl (row tenement) in Shanti Nagar locality of Kalwa area. At around 10.30 pm, the battery exploded, the official said, adding that it was not yet known if it was kept in the Thane house for charging



purpose. A 28-year-old woman residing in the house where the battery collapsed, and a 66-year-old man and a woman aged 56 staying in the neighbouring house were injured, he said. Local firemen and the disaster management cell team rushed to the spot after being alerted. The three injured persons were admitted to the civic-run Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Hospital in Kalwa, the official said. A probe was on to ascertain the cause of the blast, the official said.

Congress, NCP (SP) criticise BJP amid speculations of alliance with Raj Thackeray

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The Congress and Nationalist Congress Party (SP) have expressed their displeasure with the BJP following a meeting between Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Raj Thackeray, calling into question the ruling party's trust and potential appeal to north Indian voters if it aligns with the MNS leader. Raj Thackeray, head of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS), met with Amit Shah in Delhi, indicating the possibility of a BJP-MNS alliance for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections 2024. MNS leader Bala Nandgaonkar, according to a report in a news agency, had said that the talks have yielded "positive" outcome. and said details will be shared soon. In response to this development, Maharashtra Congress spokesperson Atul Londhe questioned the BJP's ability to win votes among north Indian people after partnering with Raj Thackeray, given his previous



problematic remarks about this demographic. Londhe argued that the BJP's pursuit of partnerships with diverse parties reflects their desire to win enough seats in the Lok Sabha elections, implying a likely defeat for the ruling party, the report added.

"How will the BJP seek the votes of north Indians after allying with Raj Thackeray? The BJP did not just break the trust of north Indian voters, but has also hurt their pride by 'rubbing salt' on their wounds," Londhe claimed. "The fact that the BJP has to

forge an alliance with Raj Thackeray means they are staring at a defeat. The BJP toppled the Uddhav Thackeray-led Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government and then hijacked the Shiv Sena party along with its symbol. It also broke Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party (NCP). Despite doing all this, winning the Lok Sabha elections in Maharashtra has become difficult for the BJP. Its defeat seems inevitable," Londhe claimed according to the news agency report. Similarly, NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar) state president Jayant Patil questioned the BJP's need for new allies despite its majority, implying a lack of confidence in the incumbent party. Patil asked, "Why does the BJP feel the need for new partners?" Meanwhile, MNS vice president Vageesh Saraswat confirmed Raj Thackeray's meeting with the BJP leadership and announced plans for MNS leaders and office bearers to consider the coalition proposal in Mumbai, the report added.

Maha bank unions plan 'voter awareness' campaign, to quiz LS candidates

Team Absolute | Mumbai

In a unique move, major bank unions shall initiate a 'voter awareness' campaign next month among the masses and question Lok Sabha candidates of all political parties on critical issues pertaining to the banking sector, officials said here. The crusade will kickstart under the auspices of the Maharashtra State Bank Employees Federation (MSBEF) and then would be taken up in all other states going to elections in different phases over April-May 2024. "We shall launch the 'voter awareness' drive in Maharashtra from April 8 after a key meeting in Mumbai, and subsequently it is expected to be taken up in other states by various banking unions of this stressed sector of the Indian economy," MSBEF General Secretary Devidas Tuljapurkar told correspondent. It will comprise public meetings by bank unions, through audio-visual shows, distributing multi-lingual pamphlets, social and traditional media campaigns, put-



ting up banners/posters, etc., explained MSBEF Organising Secretary N. Shankar. Besides creating awareness of the challenges confronting the banks which are the custodians of public wealth, the unions shall pose tough and searching questions to candidates irrespective of their party affiliations, the duo added. They added that as banking has reached almost every household in the past 15 years, the unions will directly or indirectly address crores of citizens and voters across the state. Presently, there are more than 80,000 branches of various public and private sector banks in India, (not counting the cooperative banks) and the MSBEF or its affiliated

domain nearly 20 years ago and how banks are exposed to a political-corporate nexus, particularly the bad debts, selective write-offs with huge hair-cuts, lack of accountability and posing a risk to the hard-earned money of the ordinary masses. "Through TUJAC, we plan to spread awareness among all other important sectors of the economy which are getting directly affected on account of the ills plaguing the banking sector, like the Electoral Bonds which were introduced in India through a finance bill (2017) which we had opposed," Utagi told correspondent. The MSBEF said its leaders and activists shall reach out to all political parties and their candidates, and demand a clarification from them on the (above) issues hurting the banking sector. "If they do not stand by the banks and the people at large, then we shall appeal to the public to defeat such parties and their candidates," warned the MSBEF flatly to all, the ruling establishment and contending Opposition political groups, all vying to grab power in 2024.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

head of the Holi colours bash, the food delivery major Zomato has 'changed' its colours from green to red even for rushing vegetarian deliveries to its customers across India, sparking a colourful debate on social media. The Zomato Founder-CEO Deepinder Goyal made the announcement - with a lengthy justification - on the move that has evoked a mixed reaction from different quarters. Henceforth the company said it will paint its dedicated fleet of 'green' vehicles to red even for the veggie customers', making them unidentifiable on the ground - though they would serve only vegetarian orders. All the riders - the regular fleet and the vegetarian fleet - shall also sport the red colour, doing away with the on-ground segregation, said Goyal. Justifying the decision, he said that this would ensure that Zomato's red uniform delivery partners are not wrongly associated with non-veg food and get blocked by

Zomato uniform colour changes from green to red, sparks debate



resident welfare associations or housing societies that could pose risk to the riders' physical safety. In some cases, even its customers could face trouble with their landlords which the company would not relish, enabling the non-vegetarian customers to now safely use Zomato to order their favourite meaty cuisine. Defending the move for a separate 'green fleet', Goyal said that while this feature strictly served a dietary preference irrespective of caste-religion, despite best efforts earlier, occasionally the (non-veg) food spilled onto the delivery boxes, carrying the smell to the next order, irking customers. Reacting to the colour-change, the Telangana Gig and Platform Workers Union President Shaik Salauddin

of Indians are 'pure vegetarians', plus women (25 per cent) outnumber men (13 per cent) in consuming greens. In the state/UT-wise percentage rankings for vegetarians, Rajasthan and Haryana are tops (56 per cent each), Gujarat (51), Punjab (47), Madhya Pradesh (42), Himachal Pradesh (35), Uttar Pradesh (32), Delhi (21) Maharashtra (19), Uttarakhand (18), Dadra & Nagar Haveli (17), Karnataka (13), Chhattisgarh (11) and Bihar (10 per cent). In the single-digit list is: Jammu & Kashmir (25 per cent), Sikkim (9 per cent each), Ladakh (6), Jharkhand (4.7), Odisha (3.9), Goa (3.5), Andhra Pradesh and Telangana (2.7 each), Tamil Nadu (2.3), Puducherry (1.5) and Kerala (1.1 per cent). The remaining states/Uts are in fractions: West Bengal (0.7 per cent), Assam (0.5), Tripura, Meghalaya and Andaman & Nicobar Isles (0.3 each), Arunachal Pradesh (0.2), Mizoram, Manipur and Nagaland (0.1 each), while Lakshadweep is 100 per cent non-vegetarian.



EDITOR'S SPECS

Voting from home

The process for home voting has been initiated in the Lok Sabha elections for the first time in the state as per the instructions of the Election Commission, confirmed officials on Wednesday. The facility will be available for senior citizens above 85 years of age and specially-abled voters with more than 40 per cent disability category, they added. The work of registration of eligible voters willing for home voting will be done by Booth Level Officer (BLO) in all the areas and after the names of the candidates for the Lok Sabha constituencies are finalised, door-to-door voting will be done. Chief Electoral Officer Praveen Gupta said the Election Commission has taken this initiative in the direction of inclusive elections. This innovation was successfully implemented in Rajasthan recently during the Assembly General Elections-2023, in which approximately 99 per cent of the 61,022 eligible registered voters availed the facility of voting at their homes. Now this facility is being provided for the first time in the state also during the Lok Sabha general elections-2024. Praveen Gupta said that this facility was an option and the eligible voters will fill Form 12-D and give it to the BLO to select the facility. The work of registration of voters for home voting has started for the first phase of polling and will continue till March 26. The voting process for home voting will start from April 5 and continue till April 14. If for some reason the voter is absent or deprived of home voting, the second round will be held between April 15 and 16, said the officials.

Estranged couple now contestants spicing up poll battle at Bishnupur

The poll battle at Bishnupur (SC), once a Red bastion in Bankura District of West Bengal will be an interesting watch this time, not merely for political reasons. The BJP this time has re-nominated its sitting MP from the constituency Saumitra Khan. On the other hand, the Trinamool Congress has fielded Saumitra Khan's estranged wife Sujata Mondal Khan. Also in the fray is the CPI(M)'s Shital Kaibarta, a veteran Marxist in Bankura District, who had till recently been concentrating on the party's networking activities rather than being engaged in electoral politics. The political circles in West Bengal were shocked after Sujata Mondal Khan, who had played the most active role in campaigning for her husband in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, joined the Trinamool Congress just a few days before the 2021 West Bengal Assembly elections.

On the same day, Saumitra Khan, at an emotional press conference, announced his decision to sever matrimonial ties with her and also issued an appeal to her not to use the surname 'Khan' anymore.

Now, since the beginning of her poll campaign



Sujata Mondal Khan has been resorting to a potent mix of both "political" attacks against the BJP as well as "personal" attacks against her competitor.

At times she makes subtle allegations of alleged domestic brutalities and at times she refers to how she took the entire responsibility of campaigning on behalf of her husband in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, when he was barred from

entering areas under the jurisdiction of the Bishnupur constituency then.

However, till date, Saumitra Khan has refrained from similar personal attacks and is just seeking votes in the name of Prime Minister, Narendra Modi.

BJP insiders said that Khan has been strictly instructed by the state leadership to refrain from making counter-personal attacks on his

estranged wife.

On his part, the CPI(M) candidate is concentrating on local issues and claimed that the people of Bishnupur, bogged down with their own problems, are not interested in the tiffs between the estranged couple.

Bishnupur has been a traditional Red bastion since 1971, gifting CPI(M) with victories for 11-consecutive terms from 1971 to 2009.

Even in the midst of the Trinamool Congress wave in 2009, the CPI(M) candidate Susmita Bauri got elected from the constituency with a comfortable margin of over one lakh votes.

However, the pattern changed in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections when the sitting BJP Lok Sabha member Saumitra Khan, got elected from there as the then Trinamool Congress candidate.

Before the 2019 Lok Sabha polls he joined the BJP and got elected again.

The constituency is popular globally as a handicrafts hub of West Bengal and has over 14 lakh voters. Besides handicrafts, a large portion of the population is dependent on agriculture for their livelihood.

Hopes run high for BJP in UP's first phase of polls

Hopes run high for the BJP in the first phase of elections in Uttar Pradesh. With Rashtriya Lok Dal as its ally, the BJP is confident of winning all seats here. "The BJP-RLD combine will sweep in the first phase. The public mood is in our favour and so are the electoral combinations," said the party functionary. In 2019 elections, SP-BSP combine had won five seats -- Saharanpur, Bijnor, Nagina went to the BSP, and Moradabad and Rampur to the Samajwadi Party (SP). This time BJP has given Bijnor to ally Rashtriya Lok Dal but is treading cautiously in other three constituencies. RLD has fielded its Meerapur MLA Chandan Chauhan, a Gurjar, against SP candidate Yashveer Singh, a Dalit in Bijnor. The BSP has fielded Bijendra Singh, a Jat, who left RLD to join Mayawati's party. In Rampur, BJP has fielded Ghanashyam Lodhi who had defeated SP's Asim Raja in 2022 bypoll when the seat fell vacant after the disqualification of SP leader Azam Khan who was convicted in a criminal case. SP, which has tied-up with Congress, is yet to name its candidate for Rampur but the Azam Khan factor will continue to play a role even though his entire family is missing from the elections this time. The BJP is trying to wrest back Saharanpur where BSP's Haji Fazlur Rehman had defeated its candidate Raghav Lakhani Pal by 24,000 votes in 2019. In Moradabad, which was won by SP's S.T. Hasan in 2019, is also on BJP's bucket list this time. However, both BJP and SP-Congress combine, are yet to name the candidates for these two seats. Kairana is also a keenly watched seat which hit headlines ahead of



2017 UP elections amid reports of exodus by Hindu families. BJP has repeated sitting MP Pradeep Chaudhary, a Gurjar, against SP's Iqra Hasan, sister of SP's Kairana MLA Nahid Hasan. A postgraduate in international law from the school of Oriental and African Studies, London University, Iqra had campaigned extensively for Nahid during the 2022 Assembly polls. Incidentally, it was the tussle over Kairana that made RLD sever its ties with SP because Akhilesh Yadav was keen on Iqra contesting the seat. BSP is yet to name a candidate though speculations are rife that Mayawati may pick a Muslim to cut SP's Muslim votes. In Muzaffarnagar, BJP is banking on its sitting MP and Union Minister Sanjeev Baliyan, a Jat, who had defeated the then RLD chief Ajit Singh by a slender

margin of 6,500 votes in 2019. He is pitted against SP's Harendra Malik, also a Jat. The BSP, on the other hand, has played the OBC card by fielding Dara Singh Prajapati. The reserved seat of Nagina was won by BSP's Girish Chandra in 2019 by defeating BJP's Yashwant Singh, and will now see a change of candidates. The BJP has opted for MLA Om Kumar, a Jatav, instead of Yashwant Singh. He is up against SP's Manoj Kumar. BSP has yet to announce its candidate. Speculation is rife that Dalit leader and Azad Samaj Party chief Chandrashekhar Azad will also throw his hat in the ring from Nagina and if he does, it will make the contest increasingly interesting. The focus, however, in the first phase, is on the Pilibhit seat because the BJP is yet to decide on fielding its sitting MP Varun Gandhi who has been openly critical of his own party since the farmers' protest against agricultural laws in 2021. The Samajwadi Party has already said that it is 'open' to the idea of fielding Varun Gandhi in Pilibhit if he does not go with BJP. His mother Maneka Gandhi, MP from Sultanpur, too has been keeping a low profile in the party, after the BJP dropped the mother-son from the national executive committee in 2021. Whether or not the BJP names Varun Gandhi as its candidate, there is little doubt that the contest in Pilibhit will remain in public focus.

international

'Can't be my way or highway': India slams UFC model on UNSC reforms

United Nations | Agencies

India on Tuesday slammed the Uniting for Consensus (UFC) model on UNSC reforms, citing that it won't empower Africa or Global South nations or change permanent seat membership.

The UFC, which comprises 12 countries and two observers, including a P5 nation, stands against the idea advocated by a majority of the UN member states -- which is an expansion in the permanent and non-permanent categories of an expanded Security Council.

Some of the countries in the group -- nicknamed the Coffee Club -- include Mexico, Pakistan, Canada, Turkey and China as one of its Observer members.

"How does the model represent Africa, Latin America, and Asia?... When Africa itself is asking for an expansion in both categories of membership, isn't it uncalled for to do just what Africa was subjected to in perpetuity in the past, which is deciding on their behalf?" India's Permanent Representative at the UN, Ruchira Kamboj,



asked.

Africa, a 54-member group, has called for an expansion in both categories of an expanded United Nations Security Council.

When Africa itself is asking for an expansion in both categories of membership, is not it uncalled for to do just what Africa was subjected to in perpetuity in the past, which is deciding on their behalf?

While espousing the principle of sovereign equality, India also asked why the "UFC model is content to relegate the delegations of the Global South to the category of non-permanent seats.

Speaking on behalf of G4 -- which

includes Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan -- Ambassador Kamboj said that the expansion of the council in both categories is "absolutely essential".

The recent events, she said, have indicated that the Security Council has not been able to effectively address its primary mandate of the maintenance of international peace and security.

The model, with 22 non-permanent members, including the present E10, does not provide the checks and balances to the issues related to P5 E10 dynamics, she added.

"We do not operate on the basis of vetoes in the United Nations General Assembly. Thus, when asking for an impossible consensus preceding text-based negotiations, isn't the UFC just vetoing the whole process and suggesting a my-way-or-the-highway approach," Kamboj asked.

India has maintained that in a multipolar world, there needs to be a new logic to the permanent category composition if it were to continue.

Seven killed after South Korean tanker capsizes off coast of Japan

Tokyo | Agencies

Seven people died after a South Korean-flagged tanker capsized on Wednesday in waters off the Japanese prefecture of Yamaguchi, local media reported. There were 11 non-Japanese crew on board the tanker, the Keoyoung Sun. Nine crew members were rescued, but seven of them were later confirmed dead, public broadcaster NHK reported, citing the Japan Coast Guard. The local



coast guard station said it received an emergency call at around 7:05 a.m. local time on Wednesday (2205 GMT on Tuesday) from the tanker in waters west of Mutsure Island off Shimonoseki,

Yamaguchi Prefecture, saying: "The ship is tilted due to bad weather. We need rescue," NHK reported. The coast guard and others are continuing the search and rescue for the two remaining crew members, the report said, Xinhua news agency reported.

The coast guard said the tanker had been at anchor due to rough weather. Warnings about strong winds and high waves had been issued at the time of the incident, according to a local observatory.

Ready to work with China to seek common interests: Australian PM

Canberra | Agencies

Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese on Wednesday said differences and disagreements should not define the Australia-China relations, and both countries should seek common interests as far as possible.

Anthony Albanese made the statement while meeting with visiting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Canberra, Xinhua news agency reported.

Wang Yi, also a member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, is currently on a tour from March 17 to 21 for an official visit to New Zealand and to Australia.

The Australian side is pleased to see that in the past two years, Australia-China relations have returned to the right



direction, and Australia is willing to keep close high-level exchanges with China and deepen mutually beneficial cooperation in various fields, Anthony Albanese said.

Anthony Albanese stressed that Australia always has and will adhere to the One-China policy.

Noting the obstacles encountered in China-

Australia relations have been overcome one by one, and the outstanding cases are being properly resolved, Wang Yi said China-Australia relations have realised a second important transformation after the current Australian Labor government came to power.

China is willing to work with Australia to promote high-level exchanges, resume the dialogue mechanism between the two countries, and deepen mutually beneficial cooperation in various fields, Wang said.

Calling for efforts to manage and transcend differences in a spirit of mutual respect, Wang said the two countries should jointly promote the building of a more mature, stable and fruitful China-Australia comprehensive strategic partnership.

Biden's campaign, Democratic Party freeze \$340K donation from Indian American businessman: Report

New York | Agencies

US President Joe Biden's reelection campaign and a Democratic Party outfit are freezing donations totalling about \$340,000 from an Indian American businessman amid controversies, local media reported.

Politico quoted Joe Biden's campaign official as saying that the Biden Victory Fund (BVF) was putting Gaurav Srivastava's donation of \$50,000 on hold because of concerns about the "legality and source" of the funds.

The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) was setting aside donations of almost \$290,000 from a man identifying Gaurav Srivastava out of an abundance of caution, its spokesperson was quoted by Politico.

The Los Angeles-based businessman who runs a charitable organisation named for himself and his wife, the Gaurav and Sharon Srivastava Family Foundation, has been snagged by controversies.

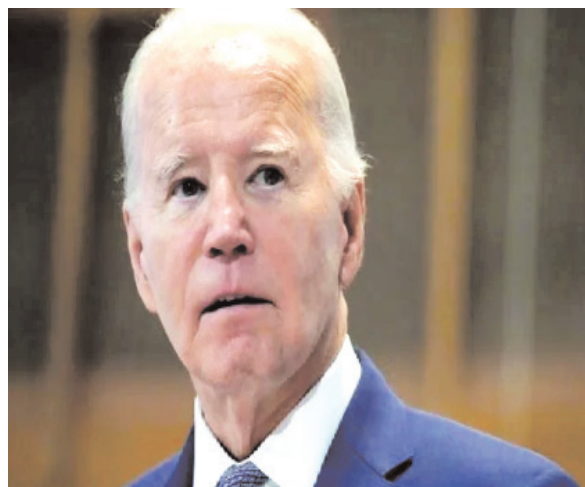
Politico had earlier reported that the think tank Atlantic Council had cut ties to him after receiving almost \$1 million from him and his wife for a world food security forum in Bali in 2022.

Under the US election laws, direct contribution to a candidate is limited to \$3,300 by an individual, but give a way around it by allowing more to be donated to campaign committees that meet certain legal requirements.

The BVF splits the contributions it gets between the direct Biden campaign, the Democratic National Committee and state party units.

The DCCC works to elect party members to the House of Representatives.

Both donations attributed to Srivastava were made last year. Politico reported that a representative and a senator, both Democrats, said that they had received contributions from the Gaurav Srivastava but were donating them to charities.



Two senators and two representatives had also received contributions from the Foundation, according to Politico.

His personal website opens with, "Hi. I am a philanthropist", but does not give any details about him.

The foundation website says that the couple has "backgrounds in international community service and solving financial and security related challenges" and was dedicated to "securing food and energy access for families across the globe".

Politico reported that in the donation to the BVF, he identified himself as an "urban designer" with AECOM, but a spokesperson for the consulting firm said that no one with that name works for it in the US.

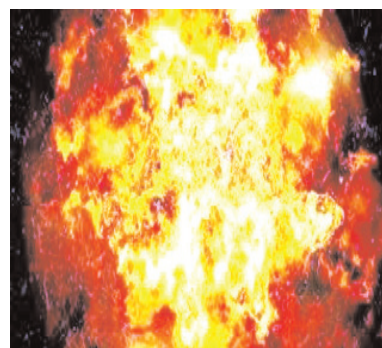
In the donation to the DCCC, he identified himself as the chairman of Unity Resource Group (URG), Politico said.

Islamabad | Agencies

Twelve labourers were killed and eight others injured in an explosion in a coal mine in Pakistan's Balochistan province, officials said on Wednesday.

The explosion occurred on Tuesday night as toxic gas accumulated inside the cave in Harnai district of the province, Abdul Ghani Baloch, chief inspector of mines of Balochistan, told Xinhua.

He said that 12 labourers were working inside the mine when the blast happened and eight more laborers entered the mine



trying to rescue their trapped colleagues, Xinhua news agency reported.

"Unfortunately, further collapsing of the coal mine trapped them as well," he added.

The rescue teams have completed the operation and recovered 12 bodies and eight injured from the mine, he added.

The injured people have been shifted to a nearby hospital.

In a statement, Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif expressed deep sorrow and grief over the loss of precious lives in the incident.



MANDLA LARGEST & CHHINDWARA SMALLEST LS SEATS IN MP

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Mandla, one of the Lok Sabha constituencies in Madhya Pradesh reserved for the Scheduled Tribes (STs), is the largest parliamentary seat (area wise), which has 2,624 polling booths while Chhindwara is the smallest Lok Sabha constituency, which has the lowest number (1,934) of polling booths, a top Election Commission official said on Tuesday.

Indore Lok Sabha seat has the highest number of voters in Madhya Pradesh. Overall, the state has 5.64 crore voters, of which there are 2.90 crore men and 2.74 crore women voters, Madhya Pradesh Chief Electoral Officer (CEO), Anupam Rajan said.

Bhind Lok Sabha seat has lowest proportion (gender wise) voters -- (male 1,000 and female 854) while Balaghat stood at first position with highest number of women voters in gender proportion -- (male 1,000 and female 1,014).

Rajan told that 74,826 voters are



...serving in army and other central forces, while 118 are overseas voters. "If we merge these two categories of voters with actual numbers, the

total number of voters rose nearly 5.65 crore, which is the 64 per cent population of Madhya Pradesh," he said.

Rajan also added that voters above 85 years will be facilitated with casting their votes from home.

"During the recent Madhya Pradesh Assembly election, this facility was given to the voters above 80 years, but now the age limit has been extended to 85 years. Forty per cent persons with disabilities will also be allowed to vote from home," the CEO said briefing the press on Tuesday.

Before addressing the media, CEO Rajan chaired a meeting with all the parties' representatives and gave them instructions related to the Lok Sabha elections to comply with.

Voting for 29 Lok Sabha seats in Madhya Pradesh will be held in four phases, beginning from April 19, followed by the second and third phase on April 26 and May 7.

Voting for the fourth and final phase is scheduled on May 13, while the counting for all 29 Lok Sabha seats will be held on June 4.

Screening committee formed under the chairmanship of Chief Secretary

► COMMITTEE WILL EXAMINE PROPOSALS TO BE SENT TO THE ELECTION COMMISSION OF INDIA

Team Absolute | Bhopal

A screening committee has been constituted under the chairmanship of the Chief Secretary to examine/recommend the proposals of the departments to be sent by the State Government to the Election Commission of India through the Chief Electoral Officer.

Principal Secretary, General Administration and Additional Chief Secretary/Principal Secretary/Secretary related to the departments presenting the proposal will be members in the committee. During the Code of



Conduct issued in the context of Lok Sabha Elections-2024, now no department will send its proposal directly to the Chief Electoral Officer or the Election Commission of India before the examination/recommendation of the Screening Committee. Before presenting the proposal to the Screening Committee, the Administrative Department will properly study and examine the instructions/clarifications of the Election Commission of India and refer to the relevant instructions/orders of the Election

Commission of India. The administrative department will also have to justify in its proposal why the proposal is of utmost importance and why it cannot be stopped until the election process is completed.

The proposal to be sent to the Election Commission of India will be sent in the form of a self-contained note. Before sending the proposal, special consideration should be given to the possible time taken by the Election Commission of India for its decision.

Election Commission engaged in efforts to increase voting percentage in Madhya Pradesh

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Electoral Officer Anupam Rajan flagged off 75 special campaign vehicles prepared for voter awareness from Nirvachan Sadan, Bhopal on Wednesday. Rajan said that in the Assembly Elections-2023, the voting percentage in 75 assembly constituencies of 26 districts of the state was less than 75 percent. These special awareness vehicles have been prepared to increase the voting percentage in these 75 assembly constituencies.

Voters will be motivated to exercise their franchise by showing banners, posters, slogans, voter awareness songs, reels, videos etc. through Plasma TV in these vehicles. These campaign vehicles will stay in the respective assembly constituencies during the



next one month (Lok Sabha Elections-2024) and reach out to the maximum population and motivate them for voting.

It has been told that in the identified 75 assembly constituencies, voters will be made aware through awareness campaign vehicles for one month. Through short films, slogans and posters, voters will be informed about the importance of vot-

ing and the value of their vote in democracy.

Voter Awareness Campaign Vehicle Morena, Bhind, Gwalior, Datia, Guna, Sagar, Chhatarpur, Damoh, Panna, Satna, Rewa, Sidhi, Singrauli, Shahdol, Katni, Jabalpur, Bhopal, Dewas, Khandwa, Barwani, Alirajpur, Jhabua, Dhar, Will reach the assembly constituencies of Indore, Ujjain and Ratlam districts.

Nomination begins for six parliamentary constituencies in the first phase in Madhya Pradesh

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Voting is going to be held in six parliamentary constituencies in the first phase of Lok Sabha elections in Madhya Pradesh. Filling of nomination papers has started in these parliamentary constituencies from Wednesday. There are a total of 29 parliamentary constituencies in the state, where Lok Sabha elections are to be held in four phases.

In the first phase, elections will be held in Lok Sabha constituencies Sidhi, Shahdol, Jabalpur, Mandla, Balaghat and Chhindwara. The process of filling nomination papers started in these parliamentary constituencies from Wednesday.

The last date for filing nomination papers is March 27. Scrutiny of nomination papers will take place on March 28. As per the scheduled schedule, candidates who have filed nominations will be able to withdraw their names till March 30.

Voting for the first phase will be held on April 19. Counting of votes in all phases will take place on June 4. Nominations have started for six parliamentary constituencies of the first phase of elections to be held in the state in four phases.

Whereas in the second phase, voting will be held in seven parliamentary constituencies on 26th April, in the third phase in eight parliamentary constituencies on 7th May and in the fourth phase on



13th May, voting will be held in eight parliamentary constituencies. At present there are 5 crore 64 lakh 76 thousand 110 voters in Madhya Pradesh. This

includes 2 crore 90 lakh 13 thousand 307 male, 2 crore 74 lakh 61 thousand 575 female and 1,228 other (third gender) voters.

RUCKS OVER FIELDING BIG LEADERS IN MP CONGRESS

Team Absolute | Bhopal

The process of filling nomination papers for the first phase of elections in Madhya Pradesh has started, but Congress has not yet been able to finalize the names of candidates for all the seats. The main reason for this is the war within the party regarding senior leaders contesting the elections.

There are 29 Lok Sabha seats in the state, out of which Congress has to decide candidates for 28. One Khajuraho parliamentary seat has been given to Samajwadi Party in a mutual agreement. Out of these 28



seats, Congress has been able to decide candidates only on 10 seats and it is yet to decide the names of candidates on 18 seats. If sources are to be believed, according to the feedback Congress has received from

the grassroots level, veteran leaders like Digvijay Singh, Ajay Singh, Arun Yadav, Umang Singh, Jaivardhan Singh, Priyavrat Singh, Jitu Patwari, Vivek Tankha have talked about contesting the elections.

There are many of these leaders who have said that they are not interested in contesting the Lok Sabha elections.

Sources said, due to the ongoing discussion within the party regarding fielding veterans and the reluctance of veterans to contest the elections, the list of candidates could not be finalized.

Not only this, the party is also planning to field many MLAs. There is also a possibility that the party high command will talk directly to the senior leaders and only then the names will be approved in the next meeting of the Central Election Committee.

NATIONAL STOCK EXCHANGE IN INDORE GETS BOMB THREAT; POLICE TERM IT 'HOAX CALL'

Bhopal: A call to blow up the National Stock Exchange (NSE) office in Indore was received on Wednesday, the police said, adding it turned out to be a "hoax call". According to the police, the call was received by an employee of NSE in Indore. Subsequently, the NSE staff informed the police.

A police officer said that the caller, who is yet to be identified, said he would blow up the NSE building "if shares of American companies were not purchased". Additional DCP Rajesh Dandotiya said that upon receiving a complaint from the NSE staff, an investigation was launched into the matter.

"The caller had made a voice call to NSE staff on the basis of which, an investigation was started. It turned out to be a hoax call. The investigation is underway to identify the caller," Dandotiya added.

BANSAL GROUP DIRECTORS DENIED BAIL

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Anil Bansal and his son Kunal, both directors of Basal Group, have approached the High Court for bail in the bribery case of Rs 20 lakh. During the hearing on the bail plea before the single bench of High Court Justice Vishal Ghagat on Monday, the CBI counsel told the single bench that he had received the case diary today itself and the CBI counsel requested the court to give one week's time. Accepting the request, the single bench has scheduled the next hearing for March 21.

The CBI had arrested a total of eight people, including the General Manager, DGM of the National Highway Authority of India and two directors of Bhopal-based Bansal Construction Company in the bribery transaction case. CBI had also recov-

ered a total of Rs 1.10 crore including the bribe amount. According to CBI, bribes were being paid for NOCs and bills for road construction including taking tenders. CBI had made two directors of Bansal Group, Anil, Kunal Bansal and other employees accused in this case. Besides, CBI had also arrested six other people in this case. It is alleged that Bansal Construction Works Limited employees C Krishna and Chhattar Singh contacted Anil Kale, General Manager and Project Director, PIU, Nagpur of NHAI for payment of pending bills of Lodhi Outer Ring Road Project and issuance of project completion certificate.

The bribe amount to be given to project director Arvind Kale was Rs 25 lakh. Out of this, both the employees gave Rs 20 lakh to NHAI officers. CBI had caught both of them after delivery of the bribe amount.

Workers add 370 new votes at every booth by taking Prime Minister's message to every house :- Mr. Vishnudatt Sharma

Panna/Bhopal | Agencies

State President and Khajuraho MP Vishnudatt Sharma said that in the last Lok Sabha elections, when the candidate was made from Khajuraho, we had only 12 days to go to the public. But the godlike workers of Khajuraho Lok Sabha constituency had worked so tirelessly by becoming candidates at every booth that a record of victory was created. Today Prime Minister Narendra Modi also says the same thing that our candidate is a lotus flower.

Party workers should contest elections as candidates at the booth. State President Sharma said that the role of a worker in BJP is decided by the organization. I used to do organization work. This time again the party has made me its candidate from Khajuraho Lok Sabha constituency. All of you have to contest this election as candidates and all of you should campaign in reality considering yourself as a candidate



so that this time we can win this Lok Sabha constituency with a large majority of votes.

He said that we all have to add 370 more lotus flowers at each booth in the form of votes, and also the message of Prime Minister Narendra Modi ji has to reach every home. State President Sharma said that the Congress Party has not done anything for the country. Today, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the wheel of development in the country is moving forward rapidly. There is

a need to work harder on the booths that were lost in the last Lok Sabha elections.

We have to win every booth in this Lok Sabha election and make every booth a Modi booth. To make every booth a Congress-free booth, we have to give two hours of time every day to every worker at his booth under the Booth Vijay Abhiyan. We will register a historic victory in all the 29 Lok Sabha seats of the state and at all the booths, with this resolve the workers should go to the Lok Sabha elections.

FIREWOOD SALES CENTERS WILL BE SET UP FOR HOLIKA DAHAN IN BHOPAL CITY

Bhopal: With the objective of the Forest Department to provide easy access to firewood for Holika Dahan to the residents of Bhopal on the festival of Holi, sales centers at discounted rates will be available at various places in the city on March 24, 2024.

Forest Conservator and ex-officio Forest Divisional Officer, General Forest Division, Bhopal, Alok Pathak said that fuel is available at concessional rates in Ahmedpur Depot, Vithal Market, Kolar Journalist Colony, Sarvadhama Colony, Govindpura, Jahangirabad, Bairagarh, Mangalwara, Mayur Vihar and Imam Bada of Bhopal city.

Wood will be made available at the rate of Rs 8.16 per kg from 10 am to 3 pm. Temporary depots will be set up for one day only.

Those who rejected Ram, now the public will reject them: CM Dr. Mohan Yadav

Sidhi | Agencies

Congress people raised questions on the existence of Lord Ram in the Supreme Court. He used to ask- Where was Lord Ram born? Even after the Supreme Court's decision, they did not agree. He also raised questions on the foundation stone laying of Lord Ram's temple in Ayodhya. He rejected the invitation to consecrate Ram's life. Now the people of the country and state will teach them a lesson. They rejected Ram, now the public will reject their candidate.

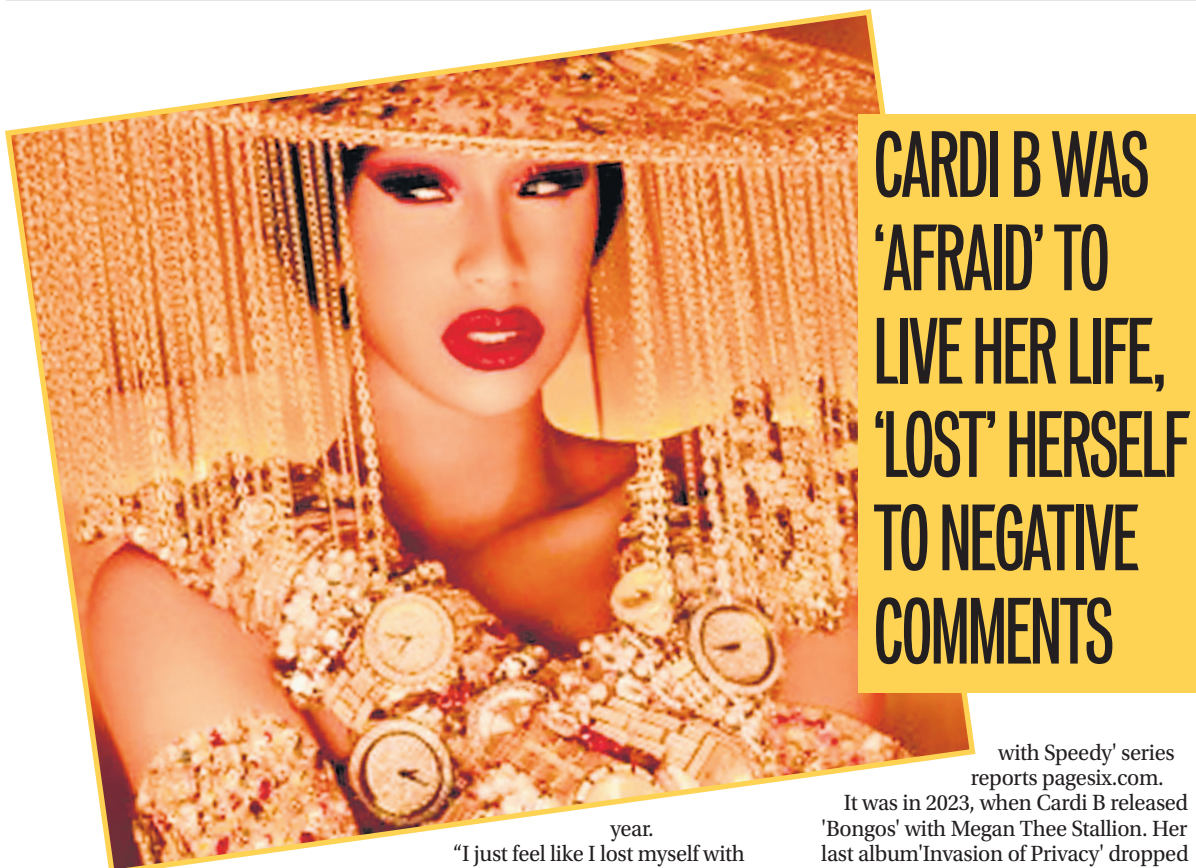
Chief Minister Dr. Mohan Yadav said this while addressing the nomination meeting of the party's Lok Sabha candidate Dr. Rajesh Mishra in Sidhi. The meeting was also addressed by Deputy Chief Minister Rajendra Shukla, State Government Minister Prahlad Patel, Reeti Pathak and other leaders. After the meeting, Chief Minister Dr. Yadav attended the nomination rally and submitted the



nomination of party candidate Dr. Rajesh Mishra. Chief Minister Dr. Mohan Yadav addressed public meetings in Sidhi, Dindori and Jabalpur. Chief Minister Dr. Mohan Yadav said that there is almost a two-party system in the entire country and Madhya Pradesh and only one or the other Congress candidate has been coming in front of the BJP. Today we are having a grand launch in Sidhi and party candidate Dr. Rajesh Mishra is submitting his nomination with the

blessings of Lord Shri Ram. But no Congress candidate came into the fray. Chief Minister Dr. Mohan Yadav said that if the whole world knows India, it knows it because of its philosophy, because of India's policies based on humanity. Therefore, on the basis of our goodness and truth, people have been looking at India as a world leader for thousands of years. We all are the children of the divisive sages, who always did good to the world. But in this election,

there are people doing good on one side and people doing loot on the other side. On one side there are people who distribute goodness and on the other side there are people who hide the truth. On one side, all those people who deny the goodness of India, who deny our culture, who know how to make brother fight with brother, for whom chair is everything. On the other hand, there are those people who are working to spread the eternal tradition of India on the global stage.



CARDI B WAS 'AFRAID' TO LIVE HER LIFE, 'LOST' HERSELF TO NEGATIVE COMMENTS

Los Angeles | Agencies
Grammy-winning raptress Cardi B said that she was "afraid" to live her life after a barrage of negative comments on social media last

year.
"I just feel like I lost myself with everything," she said.
"A lot of music commenters and everything and a lot of people just be like, 'She's afraid to drop an album, she's afraid to drop music,'" Cardi recalled.
"Like last year, I barely dropped music. It's just like I was just afraid to do everything," she told Complex's '360

with Speedy' series reports pagesix.com.
It was in 2023, when Cardi B released 'Bongos' with Megan Thee Stallion. Her last album Invasion of Privacy' dropped in 2018. But her singles such as 'Up' and 'WAP' kept her in the news.
"I was afraid to go live, I was afraid to post a picture, I was afraid to go to the club, and then the next day seeing people, what they going to say about me, and everything," Cardi said.
"I was afraid to do everything."



Japanese girl group XG share details of their first-ever world tour

Los Angeles | Agencies
Popular hip-hop/R&B-inspired girl group XG have announced details of their eagerly awaited world tour, which will commence on May 18.
Starting the tour with performances at the Osaka Castle Hall on May 18-19,

and at K Arena Yokohama, Japan, on May 25-May 26, the tour will move to various countries and places across Asia including Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Seoul, Taipei, Bangkok and Manila.
The tour will move to North America in October, Europe in November, as well as other regions.

During a live stream on Instagram and on XG's official fanclub app, ALPHAZ, the XG girls commented: "The title came about because through this, we want to meet ALPHAZ from all over the world! We plan to perform in other places not announced, so stay tuned!"
"There's still so much we

want to do as XG, and we want to achieve that together with our ALPHAZ and go intergalactic!"
The announcement of the world tour coincides with an early lottery reservation for tickets to the performances. Priority will be given to members of the XG Official fanclub, ALPHAZ.

Ewan McGregor says intimacy coordinator was 'necessary' to shoot with wife Mary



Los Angeles | Agencies

Actor Ewan McGregor spoke about working with his actress-wife Mary Elizabeth Winstead on 'A Gentleman in Moscow', and shooting a risqué scene with her.
McGregor shared that he and Winstead had an intimacy coordinator on set while filming sex scenes for the new drama series.
"It's still necessary, because it's also about the crew," McGregor told Radio Times cover story, reports variety.com. "And it's odd to be naked in front of people, it's odd to be inti-

mate in front of the camera."
"If you were doing a dance scene, you'd have a choreographer," he added.
"It's an important part of the work now, because it's somebody that the director and actors meet in the middle." McGregor essays the role of Count Alexander Rostov in 'A Gentleman in Moscow', while Winstead plays Anna Urbanova, described as "a glamorous, independent and self-made film actress, at the height of her fame."

BTS band member Jungkook serves as cook as part of military service



Los Angeles | Agencies

K-pop supergroup BTS member Jungkook is currently serving as a cook while in military service.
Industry insiders and concerned authorities have confirmed, reports allkpop.com.
Recently, Jungkook took to Weverse, a fan communication platform, to update fans on his well-being and said: "How are you, ARMY? I'm doing well. I've been exercising diligently."
He added: "We've been doing thorough cleaning, even up to the ceilings."
Moreover, Jungkook hinted at his role as a cook by adding: "I'm cooking well."
It has been reported that Jungkook flaunted his culinary skills in the past by sharing his own recipes, including perilla oil makguksu, ramen porridge, bulgogi, and cup noodle fried rice, through Weverse and personal broadcasts.



Los Angeles | Agencies

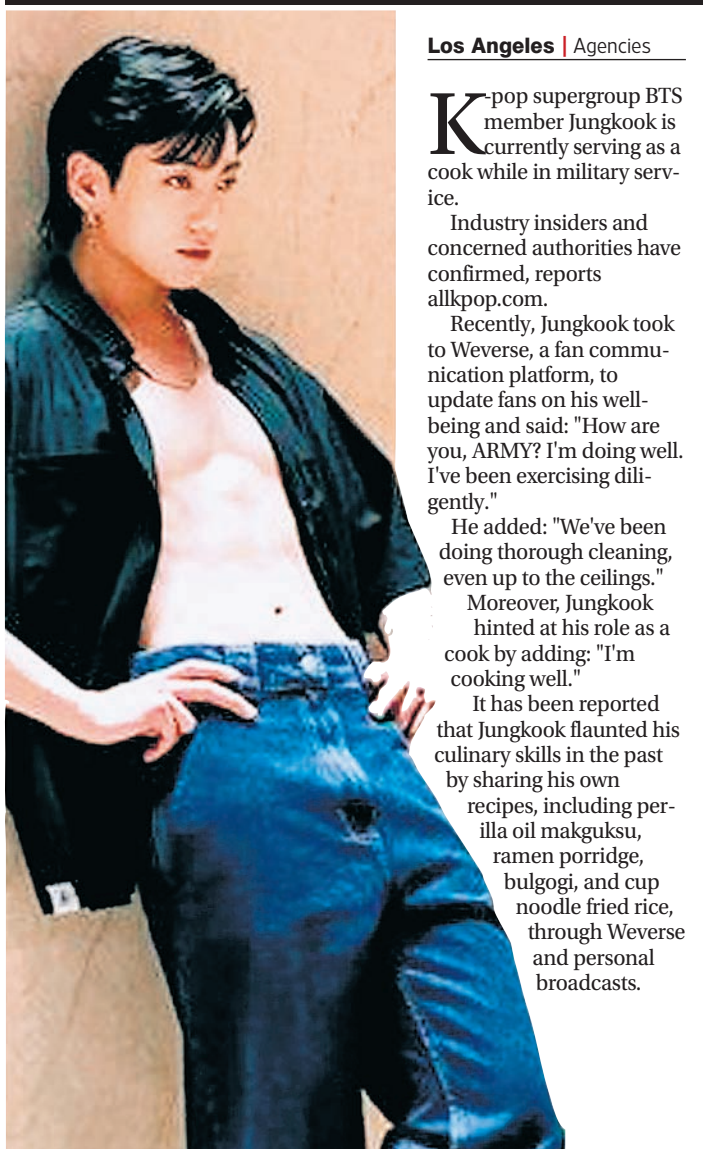
Johnny Depp responds to 'Blow' co-star accusing him of verbal abuse

Hollywood star Johnny Depp has responded after his 'Blow' co-star Lola Glaudini spoke about being mistreated by the actor on the sets of the 2001 film.
An episode of the podcast Powerful Truth Angels from January 30 resurfaced, where Glaudini spoke about verbal abuse she faced by Depp.
A representative of Depp said: "Johnny always prioritises good working relationships with cast and crew and this recounting differs greatly from the recollection of other members on set at the time."
The actress had said that the film's director Ted Demme told Glaudini to "burst out laughing" while Depp delivered a monologue, reports deadline.com.
"I hear the cue, and I go haha, I do a big laugh or whatever," Glaudini said.
"Johnny Depp, when they say cut, walks over to me, comes up to me, sticks his finger in my face and he goes, 'Who the ... do you think you are? Who the ... do you think you are? I'm out here, and I'm trying to say my lines and you're pulling focus. You idiot. Oh, now, oh now it's not so funny? Now you can shut up? The quiet that you are right now, that's how you stay."
Glaudini said this happened on her first day on the set and had not met Depp before adding: "This was my first studio movie, I'd just done indies until then. And I have the star who I have idolised, who I am so excited to work with, reamed me in my face. The only thing going through my head was, 'Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry.'"
The actress then jogged her memory and said that Depp approached her later and gave her "a non-apology apology."
Glaudini also noted that Demme, who died in 2002, didn't apologise to her after the incident: "He didn't come over and say anything," making her feel she was "totally hung out to dry." "When we wrapped, I was like a pariah," she added.
"No one wanted to talk to me, because I am the bitch who he railed at."



For Meghan Trainor, working with T-Pain was a 'dream come true'

Grammy winner Meghan Trainor and T-Pain recently dropped a new collaboration, 'Been Like This', the singer's upcoming sixth album.
For her, working with the rapper was a "dream come true." Trainor thanked the rapper via a full-page Atlanta newspaper advertisement.
The 'All About The Bass' hitmaker spoke about her excitement for the collaboration and how it came together. Initially, Trainor made the song on her own before sending it to T-Pain, who "didn't respond" for some time, reports People.
He finally heard 'Been Like This', Trainor recalled, while talking on Live with Kelly and Mark.
"He was like, 'I love it, whoa!' And I was like, 'Are you going to do a verse?' And he's like, 'For sure.' And then like, never responded. I was like, 'He hates me.'"
Trainor shared that T-Pain is her "favourite artist," so she felt compelled to ask about the collaboration once again.
"Then finally, on my 30th birthday, he came and surprised me at my house. (He) was like, 'Happy birthday. I did the verse. I'm sorry I ghosted you. Boom!'"
And played it," she said.
The result felt like a product that'd been a lifetime in the making for the 'Me Too' star.
"I've been very aggressive about how much I love T-Pain for the past 10 years in every interview. They're like, 'Who do you love?' I'm like, 'Carole King and T-Pain!'," she said.
"People think it's so cute."
After getting in touch via social media, Trainor and T-Pain "finally started texting a year ago" before discussing a collaboration.
"I was like, 'This is it, man. We're going to collab.' I kind of forced it," she said.
Just to thank the rapper, Trainor took out a full-page advertisement in The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, circulated in T-Pain's native city, to thank him.
She credited T-Pain for "changing the game and how songs are made," thanking him "for being the kindest, most humble hero."
During her interview, the 'Dear Future Husband' singer talked about the newspaper advertisement and teased an upcoming music video for 'Been Like This.'
"He saw it, and he loved it. It's not enough, I got to thank him for the rest of my life because he truly made my dreams come true," said Trainor.
"He did a music video with me that's coming out soon where he is the greatest dancer. I think we all forgot because we were like, 'Oh, he's so talented at singing and writing lyrics,'" she said.



ABSOLUTE PIC OF THE DAY

India Reynolds



Badosa halts Halep's comeback in Miami; Venus Williams loses

Florida | Agencies

Two-time Grand Slam champion Simona Halep on her comeback was halted by Paula Badosa, who prevailed 1-6, 6-4, 6-3 in the Miami Open first round.

This was the Badosa's first win since Doha, in February. The World No. 80 has been struggling with injuries. She's now 5-5 for the year.

Halep, however, returned from an 18-month absence from the WTA Tour.

Two weeks ago, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), the top court for global sport, reduced her ban from tennis to nine months -- essentially, time served. After the ruling, Halep accepted a wild card from Miami Open tournament director James Blake.

Meanwhile, Diana Shnaider ended Venus Williams' record 22nd appearance at the Miami Open in the first round, defeating the three-time champion 6-3, 6-3 in 1 hour and 19 minutes.



The contest was one of many contrasts. Williams, 43, is the oldest player in the 2024 main draw; Shnaider, 19, is one of six teenagers contesting it this year.

Williams was playing her 85th main-draw match in Miami, another tournament record (this time, joint with sister Serena); Shnaider was playing her first, having fallen in the first round of qualifying to Laura Siegemund on her debut last year, according to WTA.

On the other hand, 2018 Australian Open winner Caroline Wozniacki of Denmark was the only one of the three former Grand Slam champions, who advanced to the second round of the Women's Singles draw.

The Danish Wild Card needed only 1 hour and 17 minutes to defeat France's Clara Burel 6-1, 6-4, and she now faces Ukraine's Anhelina Kalinina for a spot in the third round.



IPL unveiled star-studded lineup for opening ceremony

Team Absolute | Chennai

The Indian Premier League (IPL) unveiled the glittering lineup of the star casts -- Akshay Kumar, Sonu Nigam, AR Rahman and Tiger Shroff to name a few -- who would perform in the opening ceremony at the MA Chidambaram Stadium, here on March 22.

The 17th season of the cash-rich league will

begin with Chennai Super Kings taking over Royal Challengers Bengaluru.

Before the match, Bollywood actors Akshay Kumar and Tiger Shroff, singer Sonu Nigam along with musical maestro AR Rahman will be seen performing at the opening ceremony. The ceremony will be telecast from 6:30 PM on Star Sports, while the match starts from 7:30 PM.

'Moment of my life': Shreyanka Patil meets Virat Kohli

Team Absolute | New Delhi

2024 Women's Premier League (WPL) title-winning team member Shreyanka Patil expressed her delight after meeting stylish batter Virat Kohli at the Royal Challengers Bengaluru (RCB) unbox event that took place at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium.

Shreyanka was part of the RCB women's team that won their first WPL title after beating Delhi Capital (DC) in the final by eight wickets. Shreyanka finished with a figure of 3.3-0-12-4 claiming key wickets of Meg Lanning, Minnu Mani, Arundhati Reddy and Taniya Bhatia. Shreyanka shared a picture of her with Virat Kohli on social media X (previously Twitter) calling it the "moment of her life."

"Started watching cricket cos of him. Grew up dreaming of being like him. And last night, had the moment of my life. Virat said, 'Hi Shreyanka, well bowled, he actually knows my name,'" Shreyanka wrote on Instagram. Shreyanka also won the Purple Cap for her exceptional performance throughout the season. In 8 matches, the off-break bowler picked up 13 wickets at an economy rate of 7.30 with 2 four-wicket hauls to her name. Shreyanka also picked up the Emerging Player of the WPL award.



Former Pakistan Test captain Saeed Ahmed passes away aged 86

Karachi | Agencies

Former Pakistan Test captain Saeed Ahmed passed away at the age of 86, on Wednesday. Saeed represented Pakistan in 41 Test matches, scoring 2,991 runs with the help of five centuries and 16 half-centuries. He also took 22 wickets with his right-arm off-spin bowling.

He made his Test debut against West Indies in 1958 and played his last Test for Pakistan in Melbourne during the 1972-73 tour.

He was Pakistan's sixth Test captain and had replaced Hanif Mohammad as skipper of the side during England's tour of the nation in 1969.

However, his tenure as captain lasted for only three Tests.

PCB chairman Mohsin Naqvi expressed condolences and said, "The PCB is saddened over the demise of former Test captain and expresses deep condolences to the family of Saeed Ahmed. He served Pakistan with all his heart and the PCB honours his record and services for the Test team."



T20Is: ACB urges Australian govt not to impose its policies on cricket boards



Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Afghanistan Cricket Board (ACB) has expressed disappointment over Cricket Australia's (CA) decision to postpone the scheduled three-match T20I series against Afghanistan.

Australia on Tuesday announced that they postponed the men's T20I series against Afghanistan scheduled for August this year, citing the deterioration of human rights for women and girls in Afghanistan.

To this, the ACB responded, "ACB advocates for keeping cricket distinct from political influence, considering the game's significance in Afghanistan and its connection to the happiness and joy of the Afghan Nation."

"ACB acknowledges the pressures faced by Cricket Australia from the Australian Government and emphasises on the importance of addressing such issues through collaborative efforts between the two cricket boards. The ACB also urges the Australian government not to impose its policies on cricket boards and instead focus on supporting the development of cricket across regions."

"ACB's top management had previously negotiated with Cricket Australia and pro-

posed exploring alternative solutions instead of publicly announcing withdrawals. ACB expresses disappointment over CA's decision to withdraw from Afghanistan for the third time," it added.

The three-match T20I series was a part of Afghanistan's FTP for the ICC 2023-2027 international calendar, which was confirmed by the ICC in front of the CA delegation.

This was the third time in as many years that CA decided to postpone a series against Afghanistan. In 2021, they had cancelled a one-off Test against them. This was followed by the CA's decision to pull out of a three-match ODI series in 2023.

"ACB urges Cricket Australia to respect and understand its position as a Full Member nation and look for alternative solutions rather than succumbing to external pressures and/or political influences."

"The Afghanistan Cricket Board remains committed to negotiating with the International Cricket Council, Cricket Australia, & other full member countries and adhering to ICC principles to ensure cricket remains free from political influence and supported by all parties involved," it concluded.

'I didn't cheat': Simona Halep hits back at Caroline Wozniacki's wildcard remark

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The two-time Grand Slam singles champion and former World No.1, Romanian Simona Halep lashed out at Caroline Wozniacki for her "players tested positive for doping should not be awarded wildcards" comment.

Halep, who returned to action from an 18-month absence from the WTA Tour, received a wild card to the Miami Open after her CAS reduced her four-year ban from tennis to nine months.

The former grand slam winner suffered a 1-6, 6-4, 6-3 loss at the hands of Paula Badosa in the opening round on Wednesday.

On Halep's being awarded a wildcard, Wozniacki highlighted her stance on doping and said players tested positive for doping should not be awarded wildcards afterwards.

"I've always liked Simona. We've always had a good relationship. I've been very outspoken in the past about how I feel about doping and all of that," Wozniacki said in her post-match press conference. "I think my view on doping is the same. I have always wanted a clean sport, fair for everybody. I think it's definitely still my opinion," she added.



"Again, this is not directly at Simona, but if someone purposely cheats, if someone has tested positive for doping... I understand why a tournament wants a big star in the tournament, but it's my personal belief, and it's not a knock on anyone, but it's my personal belief that I don't think people should

be awarded wildcards afterwards.

"If you want to come back, and it's been a mistake, I understand, you should work your way up from the bottom. That's my personal opinion on things," Wozniacki further said.

Halep argued back to Wozniacki's comment in her press conference and said, "I didn't do anything wrong. I didn't cheat. I didn't dope. So it's better if we read the decision from Cas that it was a contaminated supplement, it wasn't doping."

"I never had something to do with doping. I never doped, so I'm not a cheater. Thank you to the tournament for giving me a wildcard... Only one person being negative about me is not that important because I have hundreds of people that giving me love, so I will take that," she added.

The 32-year-old Halep was handed a four-year ban last September after testing positive for the use of roxadustat - an anti-anaemia drug that stimulates the production of red blood cells in the body.

She filed an appeal to the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) and later the highest tribunal for global sport reduced her four-year ban to nine months, making her eligible to return to the WTA tour.

Dhoni understood a long time ago, cricket is important but it's not everything: Zaheer Khan

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Former India fast bowler Zaheer Khan has expressed his views on Chennai Super Kings (CSK) skipper Mahendra Singh Dhoni's interests beyond cricket, and said that the World Cup winning captain understood a long time ago that "cricket is important but it's not everything."

Dhoni is all set to lead CSK in the 17th edition of the Indian Premier League (IPL), starting from March 22. The 42-year-old has been leading the side since the league's inaugural edition in 2008.

"When you're playing, switching off (from the game) is very important. Cricket is not everything. Every cricketer has to face this eventually. When you step away from the game, you may not have a lot of options. We've seen many athletes struggle after retiring because they gave everything to the game, and when they left it, they didn't know what to do," Zaheer said on the episode of JioCinema's Legends Lounge.

"In this sense, MS Dhoni understood a long time ago that he is passionate about cricket and it is an integral part of his life. But it couldn't be everything. He keeps doing things outside of the sport. For example, his interest in bikes. He's always researching them," he added.



Under Dhoni's captaincy, CSK made it to the IPL playoffs twelve times in fourteen seasons they

played, which solidified their status as a consistent challenger for the IPL trophy. The Dhoni-led side shares a record of most title victories (5 times) in the tournament's history with the Mumbai Indians (MI).

Meanwhile, former cricketer Suresh Raina, while speaking on succession planning at CSK, said that he would love to see Dhoni play in the IPL for another five years.

"The biggest question is who'll be their next captain? Even if Dhoni stepped away as captain, he'll be in the dugout whether it's as a mental toughness coach or just for his presence. But the question is, who is he going to nurture? This is a pivotal year for CSK. Who does MS have his eyes on? Ruturaj Gaikwad is a good option," said Raina.

"This year is a very important year for CSK, more than for MS Dhoni. Because we'll see who he is going to select as his deputy and probably say: 'You handle this now, I've been looking after the team since 2008. You take care of the yellow, I will wear the jersey and sit in the dressing room.'"

"It's important now to see how he plans for the future. He's 42 years old. I would love to see him play for five more years, or at least two or three more years," he added.



Sara Ali Khan declares she loves 20th-century Russian history

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Bollywood actress Sara Ali Khan, has shared that she loves Russian history of the 20th century and Russian literature. The actress, who has been a student of history, recently shared that she finds it very interesting how landmark moments in Russia from the rise of Vladimir Lenin to the fall of the Soviet Union happened within a span of 100 years.

She told: "I like 20th-century Russian history a lot. I think it's very interesting how they went from Vladimir Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev, and Mikhail Gorbachev to the fall of the Soviet Union, ye sab 100 salon mein hua hai. It's very interesting to observe it that way."

In fact, Nikita Khrushchev was the one who denounced his predecessor Joseph Stalin's crimes and brought in the policy of de-Stalinisation.

She also spoke about her love for Russian literature and mentioned her favourite authors with Fyodor Dostoevsky topping the list. She said: "I also like Russian literature a lot. Fyodor Dostoevsky, his 'Crime and Punishment' is my favourite, the novel 'Anna Karenina' Alexander Pushkin is one of my favourites as well. So, Russia I have a special spot for as a student of history."

PANKAJ TRIPATHI REVEALS HOW HE FORGOT HIS DREAM OF 'TAKING A HOLIDAY BREAK'

Team Absolute | Mumbai

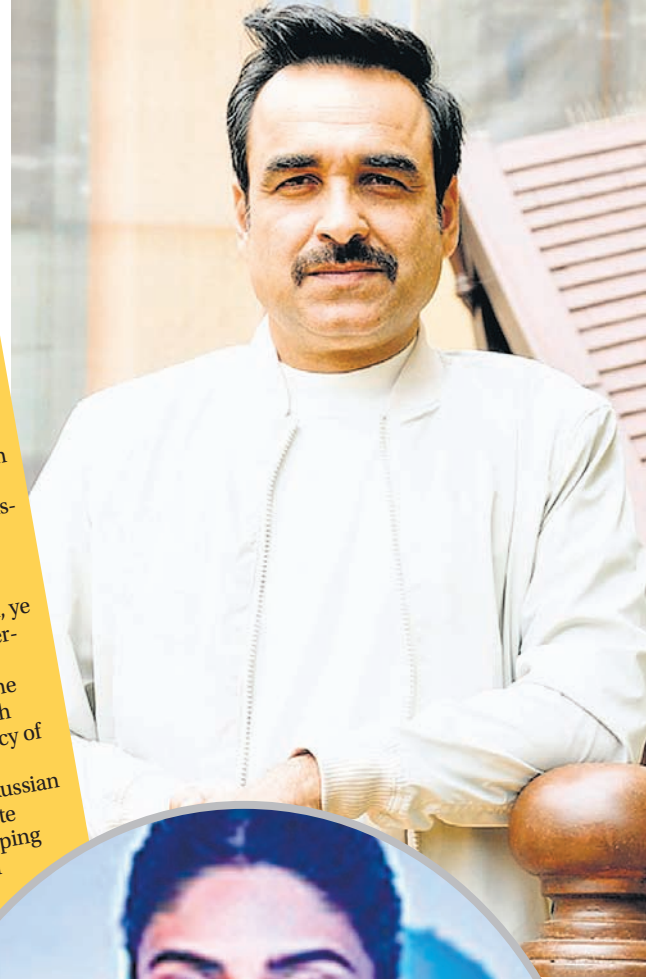
Aclaimed actor Pankaj Tripathi said that after working in many good projects he had dreamt of, he has another wish which he completely forgot about - a good holiday.

Pankaj, one of the best in Indian cinema at present, has worked in projects such as 'Gangs of Wasseypur', 'Fukrey', 'Newton', 'Bareilly Ki Barfi', 'Mimi', 'Ludo', 'Main Atal Hoon', 'Stree', 'Mirzapur' and 'Murder Mubarak' among many others.

Is Pankaj living his dream? He told: "No. After doing so much work I have realised that along with that dream, I had one more which I had completely forgotten about. It was taking a holiday and doing absolutely nothing. I got so busy that I realised that I am not taking a break."

Pankaj, a National School of Drama alum, agreed that he is living his dream of working in good content.

He added: "But along with that dream I had another dream to work a little less, pay attention to quality and focus on health as that is also important. Work life balance is very important."



Bhumi says it is 'amazing' to be working at a time when a woman can headline a series

believe that we are in the age of content and actors can really shine bright with these opportunities."

She said that Daldal is that perfect project for her to show a completely new side to her performance.

"It presents me in a whole new way and I love pushing my boundaries."

Talking about her character in the series, Bhumi said: "I love that in Daldal, I play a woman who has shattered the glass ceiling by being appointed as the DCP of Mumbai. She is a super achiever in a man's world and I loved that layer of the show along with all the beautiful complexities that the role and the script has to offer. I think a character like this will resonate with the times that we live in because a woman is no longer shackled down and is ambitious and independent."

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actress Bhumi Pednekar, happy that women actors are being empowered to headline projects on top global streaming platforms.

Bhumi said: "It feels amazing that I work at a time when a woman can headline a series on a global streaming platform, and feel supremely empowered that she can command such a massive mounting."

She added: "I'm honestly humbled by this realisation and it motivates me to work so hard that I deliver powerful performances that are remembered by people."

About her next big challenge to play a cop in 'Daldal', Bhumi said that she is naturally drawn to challenges.

"That's my core. Have always done this right since my debut."



JIMMY SHERGILL WENT TO GULZAR TO BECOME AN AD, GOT HIS ROLE IN 'MAACHIS' INSTEAD

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actor Jimmy Shergill, who is known for films like 'Tanu Weds Manu', 'A Wednesday', 'Special 26' and others, revealed that for his debut film 'Maachis', he had gone to filmmaker Gulzar to get a job as his assistant director. But, as luck would have it, the veteran filmmaker-lyricist offered him a role in the film.

The actor said that during a recent podcast, that his classes with acting coach Roshan Taneja were about to wrap up and he didn't want to go back to his town. So he was looking for jobs in the film industry as an assistant director as he was aware that getting a break as an actor won't be a cakewalk. The actor said in the IEP podcast: "I went to him to get a job as an assistant because my classes with Roshan Taneja were coming to an end. I didn't want to go home at that time because I was afraid that if I went home my family would not allow me to come back. I met someone at a dinner and they were discussing that Gulzar sahab is starting his film. I requested the person to fix my meeting with Gulzar sahab saying that I want to assist him." "A few days passed and I also forgot about it but, then I received a message that my meeting has been fixed with him. I met Gulzar sahab, we spoke and he offered me a small part in the film," he added.



Karan Kundrra opens up on Tejasswi: 'Have changed a lot for her'

Mumbai: Actor Karan Kundrra, shared that he has changed a lot for his lady love Tejasswi Prakash.

Talking about the craziest thing that he has done for Tejasswi, Karan said that with her, it's always the little things that matter the most.

He said: "With Tejasswi, I don't have to do crazy, massive things. She's about the little things. And I think I've changed a lot for her. So, you know there are these little things she likes; her idea of romance and love are very different."

Erica Fernandes said: "I've seen him in different phases of his relationships. So, I can speak."

The actors also shared interesting anecdotes about the series, their time working together, some funny incidents from the sets, and much more.

When asked to describe a scene from the sets of film where the actors had a lot of fun behind the scenes, Kundrra replied: "There was this one part where we were walking in a jungle. And we started the scene, it was fantastic, beautiful, and we were alone, and the jungle was massive. Suddenly, there were these two buses full of people, at least 150-200 people. All these people who were there, they were all nodding. The jungle, which was totally empty, suddenly had these 200 people, loud music, children, and three tables set up. There were massive utensils of biryani, and we were like, 'what just happened and how?'"

Erica added: "Just imagine, now when you watch this show, you will go back to that scene. It's a beautiful scene, but then you will think of the chaotic scenario we had."

Which reality show, out of the ones he hosted, would Kundrra want to go on as a contestant? The actor answered: "I would definitely do Roadies because of the tasks, and that competitiveness, that 'no guts, no glory' kind of madness, adventure, travel, fun."



Rakul Preet shares her look in one-piece dress with intricate patterns

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actress Rakul Preet Singh, who recently tied the knot with producer-actor Jacky Bhagnani, is amping up the glam quotient albeit with a bit of drama.

On Wednesday, the actress took to her Instagram and shared a string of pictures of her latest look in her cream-coloured outfit.

In the picture, she can be seen donning a one-piece dress with intricate patterns. She tied her hair neatly in a bun, wore shimmery stilettos.

She wrote in the caption, "Drama only when we shoot".

The actress tied the knot with Jacky Bhagnani on February 21 in Goa. It was a two-in-one wedding with two ceremonies -- first, the 'Anand Karaj' in the Sikh tradition, and the second, a Sindh-style ceremony -- reflecting both Rakul and Jacky's cultural backgrounds.

The intimate wedding was attended, among others, by her family and close friends, including Shilpa Shetty, Raj Kundra, Aditya Roy Kapoor, Ananya Panday, Arjun Kapoor and Bhumi Pednekar.



INSTAGRAM PIC OF THE DAY



Kiara Adwani