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# SummitTIMES

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## BAISAKHI PARVA CELEBRATED AS EKTA DIWAS

# No one can touch Sikkim if we are united: CM

## TEEKA UTSAV TO GO ON TILL APRIL END

**SUMMIT REPORT  
GANGTOK, 14 APR:**

Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang today said that Sikkim will remain strong till the Nepali, Bhutia, Lepcha and business communities of Sikkim stay united in communal harmony. He asserted that if there is communal harmony, no one can touch Sikkim and violate the rights of Sikkimese people.

The CM was speaking as the chief guest of the state-level celebration of Baisakhi Parva 2078 here at Manan Kendra on Wednesday. This year Baisakhi Parva was celebrated as Ekta Diwas by bringing all 21 communities of Sikkim together. It has to be mentioned that the celebration committee was formed as an initiative of Nepali Sahitya Parishad by taking representatives from all 21 communities of Sikkim.

In his address, the CM stated that it is a unique and historic moment for the State to witness all 21 communities together for the first time under one roof to celebrate Ekta Diwas. He congratulated the celebration committee for bringing all communities together for a celebration. This would not only give a strong message to the Sikkimese society but to the nation as well, he added.



The CM said that if the people are not united, then others will take advantage of the disharmony. He stated that immediately after forming the government in the state, the SKM government has started working to again unify the divided society of Sikkim.

"SKM party came to power with the slogan to unify the divided Sikkimese society, to take it forward and we have been working as per our slogan and we have also been re-

ceiving the support of the people of Sikkim in this mission," he said.

Without taking anyone's name, he alleged that political leaders of Sikkim in the past used different communities for their political benefits and to get the people's mandates. He further alleged that organizations of different communities were used for political gain by the earlier government in the State.

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## Govt to police office attendance as well

**SUMMIT REPORT**

**GANGTOK, 14 APR:**

Punctuality and attendance are expected of employees. They don't need to be spelled out, and when abided by, are not virtues or signs of excellence, but the expected basic conduct. Unless, of course, you are a pampered government servant in Sikkim where you can thumb your collective noses at these basic "rules of conduct" to such an extent that it takes a tongue-lashing from the Chief Minister to get the head babu to devote an entire day and draft a "standard operating procedure" to ensure "Punctuality and Attendance in Government Offices."

Social media was abuzz all of Wednesday with a video of the Chief Minister inviting dilettante government officers who saunter in late and leave early to apply for voluntary retirement if the very basics of their job requirements were becoming difficult to abide by.

While some commentators scoffed at the sudden realisation of rampant incompetence, most people on Facebook welcomed the attitude, sharing in the CM's frustration with getting the steel frame to perform.

Be that as it may, despite Wednesday being a holiday, the Office of the Chief Secretary released an ambitiously titled, "Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for Ensuring Punctuality and Attendance in Government Offices."

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Among the announcements is one which informs that the Chief Secretary will depute "Inspecting Officers" who will be policing attendance in departments other than the ones they are posted in. This is probably to counter the cronyism which hamstrings seniors at the same department from "taking action" against even juniors given to habitual absenteeism.

The Chief Secretary goes over the basics in most of the points. Heads of Departments, for instance, are reminded that they should "institutionalise" a system to carry out periodic inspection of their offices by "designated" officers at 10AM and then again at 4:30PM.

HoDs should also themselves carry out surprise checks periodically, the CS directs further.

Clearly accepting that this approach will not deliver the required punctuality, the CS goes on to inform that he will be deputing Inspecting Officers "from other Departments/Offices for checking the attendance/punctuality in any Department or government office."

The CS also appears to understand that these Inspecting Officers will not be very popular when they carry out their inspections so the "concerned" Superintendents of Police have been directed to provide these officers with the "requisite police personnel... for assistance during the checking."

## CBSE exams for Class 10 cancelled, class 12 postponed: Education Minister

**NEW DELHI:** The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) exams for Class 10 have been cancelled and the exams for Class 12 postponed in view of the exponential spike in Covid-19 cases across the country, Union Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank announced on Wednesday.

The decision was taken in a high-level meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi here amid demand from students, teachers, parents and other stakeholders to cancel it.

The CBSE Board exams were scheduled to be held from May 4 to June 7 and the results were to be announced by July 15.

"The Board Exams for Class Xth to be held from 4th May to June 14th, 2021 are hereby cancelled. The results of Class Xth Board will be prepared on the basis of an objective criterion to be developed by the Board," Nishank tweeted.

"Any candidate who is not satisfied with the marks allocated to him or her on this basis, will be given an opportunity to sit in an exam as and when the conditions are conducive to hold the exams," the Minister said.

Nishank further said that the Class 12 exams will be held later and the situation reviewed on June 1 by the CBSE, and the details will be shared subsequently. "A notice of at least 15 days will be given before the start of the examinations."

The Minister mentioned that the decision was taken after Prime Minister Modi chaired a high-level meeting to review the examinations to be held at various levels in view of the developing Corona situation.

The chorus for cancellation of upcoming board exams for class 10 and 12 grew louder on Tuesday in the wake of the exponential rise in COVID-19 cases.

## 193 active COVID cases in Sikkim with 21 new cases

### NO COVID PATIENT IN ICU

**SUMMIT REPORT**

**GANGTOK, 14 APR:**

The number of active cases of coronavirus has increased to 193 in Sikkim with 21 new cases reported in the last 24 hours although there is no one in the ICU of the Covid wing of STNM Hospital. The state's tally of confirmed cases of COVID-19 has now reached 6456. With no new recovery, the figure of recovered cases of COVID-19 in Sikkim stands still at 5990.

In his daily health bulletin on Wednesday, Health Department State IEC Officer, Sonam Gyaltsen Bhutia informed that 21 samples returned positive for COVID-19 during the testing of 413 samples on Tuesday. He added that 15 cases were detected in RT-PCR testing of 364 samples, while

six more persons were found positive in the rapid antigen testing of 49 samples.

While giving details of new cases, he mentioned that two persons from government quarter, Shyari, one from near Barpipal, Sichey, one from Paljor Namgyal Girls School Road, one from Arithang, two from Tadong, one from near TV Tower and one from near Lal Bazaar have tested positive for the virus.

Likewise, one person from Majhatir, two from Mamring, one from Majhigaon, Rangpo and one from IBM Rangpo in East District and one from Jorethang and two from Namchi in South District also reported positive for COVID-19, Mr Bhutia said.

He added that two

from Army Hospital also tested positive and they are following COVID protocols of the army. He said that one 26-year-old tourist, who reported positive at Central Referral Hospital, has gone missing after getting the test report and is not answering any phone calls.

On the other hand, 9,486 persons [8950 first dose & 536 second dose] have received vaccination for COVID-19 in different parts of Sikkim on Tuesday. In category-wise vaccination details, 61 healthcare workers [23 first dose & 38 second dose], 443 frontline workers [178 first dose & 265 second dose] and 8,982 persons in age group of 45 years & above [8749 first dose & 233 second dose] were vaccinated for COVID-19.

## 130TH AMBEDKAR JAYANTI CELEBRATION

### CM expresses displeasure over low attendance of Govt officers

### GOLAY WANTS OFFICERS TO DELIVER OR QUIT

**GANGTOK, 14 APR (IPR):** The 130th Birth Anniversary of Bharat Ratna Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was observed at a function held at Sikkim Legislative Assembly complex today.

The programme was chaired by Chief Minister, Prem Singh Tamang and was also attended by Deputy Speaker SLA, Sangay Lepcha, Cabinet Ministers, MLAs, Advisors, Chairpersons, Chief Secretary, SC Gupta, Principal Secretary Home, Additional Chief Secretaries, Special DGP Law and Order, Heads of Departments, officials and dignitaries.

Chief Minister Tamang paid rich tribute to the Architect of Indian Constitution by garlanding to the statue at Sikkim Legislative Assembly complex, which was followed by the Deputy Speaker, Cabinet Ministers and other dignitaries. The function began with the lighting of ceremonial lamp.

Ambedkar Jayanti is an annual programme observed on 14 April every year, to commemorate the memory of Dr BR Ambedkar, who was an Indian jurist, economist, politician and social reformer.



The Chief Minister in his address added that Ambedkar Jayanti is celebrated with devotion in the State, the country and in many parts of the world for his selfless contribution for the Nation. Dr Ambedkar was a well-known statesman, who

fought for the rights of the socially backward classes. He is also regarded as a renowned social reformer, who spoke unequivocally against the inequality, injustice and discrimination faced by the members of the backward classes, he added.

The Chief Minister stated that Babasaheb Ambedkar worked tirelessly towards a society where everyone is treated as equals and added that truest tribute to the tallest figure would be to imbibe in our daily lives his values and beliefs till it becomes a habit.

The Chief Minister also showed his disappointment on low attendance of the Heads of Government Departments in the National function. He also directed the Heads of Departments to strictly maintain scheduled office timing from 10.00am to 4:30pm and asked them to strictly follow work ethics.

The society will only be flourished and empowered with the progress of mindset, work culture and value, he added.

On the occasion, the Chief Minister Tamang and other dignitaries also released magazine titled 'Bhim Smarika' published by 130th Bhim Jayanti Celebration Committee, All Sikkim Scheduled Caste Welfare Association.

The Celebration committee also felicitated the Chief Minister for his relentless contribution to the society.

## Gorkhaland demand takes backseat as factions fight for political supremacy

**DARJEELING, 14 APR [PTI]:** With the two factions of the GJM one led by Bimal Gurung and the other by his former deputy Binay Tamang fighting for supremacy in the Darjeeling Hills, the imbroglio over Gorkhaland has taken a back seat this election, as key stakeholders pitch for development amid the COVID-19 crisis.

Over the past three decades or more, the demand for a sepa-

rate state of the Gorkhas and the implementation of the Constitution's sixth schedule which provides for the creation of autonomous councils in certain tribal areas had been the two major poll planks of Hill parties.

Bimal Gurung's return from hiding after a span of three years and his fight with Binay Tamang for control over the region, however, has changed political equa-

tions.

Add to that, the pandemic has crippled the tea and tourism sectors -- the financial backbone of the Hills -- and left many jobless, with voters in Darjeeling realising well that they need infrastructural development and employment opportunities more than anything else to stay afloat.

The three assembly seats in the picturesque hills - Darjeel-

ing, Kalimpong, Kurseong is up for a four-cornered contest this time, with the BJP and the Congress-Left-ISF alliance in the fray along with the TMC's "two friends from the Hills" GJM factions led by Bimal Gurung and Binay Tamang.

The sparring entities have fielded candidates, who would be contesting as Independents from the seats.

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# Barfung Jarrong GPU observes Child Empowerment Day

**BIKASH CHETTRI  
NAMCHI, 14 APR:**

Barfung Jarrong GPU observed Child Empowerment Day on 14 Apr although Bal Panchayats were not asked to attend the event due to the surge in COVID-19 cases in the state.

On the day, FF SIRD & PR, Panchayat President, Vice President, members of VLPC and GPU staff also celebrated Dr BR Ambedkar Jayanti on the same day.

The Gram Panchayat has also decided unanimously to initiate construction of Child

Empowerment Centre at the earliest. The said work will be completed in convergence with MGNREGA.

Action plan for the next financial year was also developed on the day. They are as follows:

- 1.March 2021-1st Child Empowerment Day observed
- 2.April 2021-Observation of Dr Ambedkar Jayanti.
- 3.May 2021-Menstrual hygiene programe in Deythang JHS.
- 4.June 2021-Observation of World Day against Child Labour
- 5.July 2021-Awareness programe on Human



- |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| Trafficking.   | 10 . N o v e m b e r                           | ership Development & Public speaking training.                     |
| 6.August 2021-Sports/Competitions converging school.       | 2021 - Awareness programe on Cyber Crime.      | 12.February 2022-Field visit to Schools & ICDS.                    |
| 7 . S e p t e m b e r                                      | 2021-Awareness programe on Suicide prevention. | 13.March 2022-Awareness on water quality & source to mouth survey. |
| 2021-Awareness programe on POC SO Act/ Girl Child related. |  |  |
| 8.October 2021-Counseling on Juvenile Justice Act.         | 11.January 2022-Leadership Development         |  |

# Cleanliness drive at STNM on Ambedkar Jayanti



**SUMMIT REPORT  
GANGTOK, 14 APR:**

On the 130th birth anniversary of Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar, the Manav Utthan Seva Samiti, East Sikkim, Gangtok Tehsil conducted a day-long cleanliness drive at the new STNM Hospital, Gangtok, today, a press

release informs.

The drive was conducted in the presence of Director General of Health, Dr KB Gurung, from 9:00am to 12:00noon.

According to Praveen Gurung from North-East Zone of the Human Upliftment Ser-

vice Youth Committee, the committee had accepted the invitation of Dr KB Gurung and participated in the cleanliness drive. He also informed that the committee has launched cleanliness campaigns in most of the states.

# ATMA organizes pickle and chips making training for SHGs

**SUMMIT REPORT  
GANGTOK, 14 APR:**

ATMA, South Sikkim, conducted capacity building training on pickle and chips making for two Self Help Groups viz., Marygold SHG and Sunflower SHG from Ruchung under Namthang block and Sikkip block, respectively.

Resource person, Alina Rai and Madhu Khaling explained and demonstrated the chips



as well as pickle making process to the SHG mem-

bers. The SHG members were satisfied with the training and assured that they would make pickles and chips and sell it to the local market.

During the programme, Block Technology Manager and Assistant Technology Manager highlighted the schemes of ATMA and Agriculture department along with organic technical practices of agricultural and horticultural crops.

# Fire Martyrs Day observed at Ravangla fire station

**SUMMIT REPORT  
GANGTOK, 14 APR:**

Fire Martyrs Day was observed at the fire station, South Sikkim, today with the theme, 'Fire loss is National Loss- Let us adopt fire safety measures', a press release informs.

The program was attended by SFO, NT Pradhan, Advisor SMPB, Dichen Phigu Bhutia and



other office bearers.

The day is observed to

pay tribute to the firemen who died on duty from 14 Apr, 1944 till today.

The program was held in accordance with the guidelines from the Ministry of Home Affairs that proposed to observe 'Fire Service Week' from 14 to 20 April to enhance general public awareness about the necessity of minimising losses due to fire.

# Gorkhaland demand takes backseat as...

Sources in the TMC said senior leaders of the party are in a quandary over who should they support during campaigns or on the day of polling, as most of the activists seemed to have sided with Bimal Gurung.

"Statehood is not an issue for us this assembly polls. We are more concerned about the development of the Hills, jobs, administrative overhaul. We have come up with a 52-point manifesto," Binay Tamang told PTL.

Bimal Gurung, who returned to the hills last year and crossed over to the TMC from the BJP, maintained that Gorkhaland will always be the "most pertinent" issue for his outfit, while also clarifying that the overall development of the region is dominating the poll narrative this time.

"The tea, timber, and tourism industries have faced a major setback due to the COVID-19 pandemic. People now want jobs, development, and a better standard of living," he said.

The BJP, which has now emerged as a challenger to the supremacy of both the GJM factions, stressed that the party if voted to power, will offer a "permanent political solution" in the region.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah has also allayed fears over NRC implementation and asserted that Gorkhas and their identities would never be harmed.

"We haven't really said anything about statehood. The party, however, has plans to chalk out a permanent political solution for the Hills. Apart from development, especially in remote areas, generating jobs is also important," BJP Darjeeling district president and GJM turncoat Kalyan Dewan said.

Roshan Giri, the Bimal Gurung faction's general secretary, claimed that the BJP was making "false promises".

"Since 2009, they had been making similar promises but nothing changed in the Hills. The TMC has promised a permanent political solution. We have full faith in Didi (Mamata Banerjee)," he told PTL.

Asked if the fight between the two GJM factions will give the BJP an advantage, both the parties replied in the negative.

"Binoy Tamang is not a factor in the hills. It's "only Bimal" that matters," Bimal Gurung stated. Darjeeling often referred to as the "Queen of the Hills", draws thousands of tourists from across the globe every year. The place, also known for its world-class tea, is ethnically dominated by the Gorkhas.

Lepchas, Sherpas, and Bhutias also make for a significant part of its population.

Several tea gardens, however, have closed down owing to a paucity of funds, and many workers went out of jobs. Also, the labourers had long been seeking a revision in daily wages.

"We are fighting for the rights of tea garden workers and revival of the tourism sector. The TMC, GJM, and the BJP are fooling the masses," CPI(M) leader Ashok Bhattacharya said.

Senior TMC leader in North Bengal and minister Gautam Deb feels the statehood demand has caused a lot of bloodshed in the Hills, and the region has not progressed well all these years.

"People in Darjeeling have suffered enough over this separate statehood demand. But, it has not yielded any result. We would fight for the growth and betterment of the region," he said.

The demand for Gorkhaland was first made in the 1980s, with the Subhas Ghisingh-led GNLF launching a violent agitation in 1986, which dragged on for 43 days, resulting in the deaths of hundreds.

The movement led to the formation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council in 1988, following the intervention of the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and former West Bengal chief minister Jyoti Basu.

The Council administered the Hills for 23 years with a certain degree of autonomy.

In 2007, however, the statehood demand gained momentum again after the formation of the GJM, under Bimal Gurung's leadership, who was once a trusted aide of Ghisingh.

After the TMC took over the reins of Bengal in 2011 by ending the 34-year Left rule, the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) was formed with Bimal Gurung as its chief. But peace was short-lived in the region as Bimal Gurung, unhappy with the current state of affairs, rekindled the agitation in support of Gorkhaland in 2013, and engineered a 104-day-long strike in 2017, accusing the TMC government of trying to "wipe out" Gorkha identity.

The three-month-long strike changed equations in the Hills and Bimal Gurung was forced to go into hiding as several cases, including some under UAPA, were slapped on him.

The agitation led to a split in the GJM, with Binay Tamang, his deputy, emerging as the leader of one of the factions with the help of the TMC.

Bimal Gurung, subsequently, joined hands with the BJP and helped it bag the Darjeeling Lok Sabha seat for the third consecutive time in 2019 and also the assembly segment in a by-poll.

In October last year, making a dramatic appearance in Kolkata, he quit the BJP-led NDA and aligned with the TMC, underscoring that the saffron party has "failed to find a sustainable solution" for the Hills.

The Mamata Banerjee camp, which already enjoyed the Binay Tamang faction's support, welcomed Bimal Gurung in its fold, with her government going slow on the criminal cases filed against him.

According to a GJM source, who did not wish to be named, the elections this time will actually be a test of strength for the two GJM factions.

Polling for the three assembly seats in the Hills will be held on April 17.

# Awareness on Teeka Utsav in West Sikkim



**GYALSHING, 14 APR (IPR):**

With regard to 'Jan Andolan Campaign for Covid-19' and 'Teeka Utsav' in the State, today Information and Public Relations Department West, geared its third day extensive miking on mas-

sive vaccination drive and Covid-19 and its prevention.

The extensive miking started from Tikjuk covering Pelling, Darap, Shimpheng, Rimbi, Khechuperi, Yuksom, Melli, Kasturba Gandhi School (lobing), Chon-

grang, Tashiding, Legship, Meyong, Ringchenpong, Kaluk, Bermiok, Hee-Bermiok, Dentam, Bega, Bangten, Changu, Lungic, Sardung, Kherong, and many more places around Gyalshing.

During the miking it was also informed that

the citizen belonging to the age group of 45 years and above compulsory has to complete the dose of vaccine provided by Government of Sikkim.

The same will continue for few more days targeting to cover entire West Sikkim.

# Orientation training of VDC at Thekabong Parakha

**SUMMIT REPORT  
GANGTOK, 14 APR:**

Citizens Foundation Souls Sikkim has commenced the orientation training (Capacity Building) for Village Development Committee today at Thekabong Parakha GPU, a press release informs.

Supported by HDFC Parivartan, the objective of the training is to strengthen the community collective to make interventions sustainable and impactful. This training programme comprises of several modules starting from visioning exercises through various games and making the VDC members convinced on their roles and responsibilities to appli-



cation of different types of PRA techniques e.g. resource mapping, social mapping etc.

At the beginning of the programme, Sangita Dahal, Project Manager - SOULS briefed about the objective of the programme and its importance in the success of

the project. Suman Ghimiray, APM- Agriculture demonstrated the roles and responsibilities of VDC and performed some visioning exercises through various games.

Robin Acharya, Deputy Project Manager - SRLM Sikkim and the resource person of the

training programme, delivered several training modules e.g. PRA exercises, demonstration on Institutional Building and Capacity Building etc. in a participative manner. The VDC members performed the PRA exercises in groups and presented in front of the trainer.

# Lakhs ignore Covid rules for Shahi Snan in Haridwar

**DEHRADUN, 14 APR [PTI]:**

Throwing caution to the wind amid rising cases of coronavirus, thousands of seers gathered on Wednesday at Har ki Pairi in Haridwar to take a dip in the Ganga during the third Shahi Snan of the Kumbh Mela. The Shahi Snan marked Mesh Sankranti and Baisakhi. With large number of devotees taking the holy dip, Covid protocols like social distancing appeared almost impossible. By noon between eight to 10 lakh people had taken a bath in the Ganga, Uttarakhand police chief, Ashok Kumar, who was supervising the arrangements at Haridwar, said.

According to the senior officer, crowds at the Ganga ghats were much smaller than expected at the third shahi snan - considered the most



important. He attributed this to the Covid restrictions in place. Police personnel were seen distributing masks among people in the Kumbh Mela area.

Social distancing norms were violated openly by the seers and their followers at Har ki Pairi. No masks were worn by a large number of them. The seers from the akhadas took the dip along with their revered deities in palanquins at the Har Ki Pairi. Lakhs of common devotees bathed at the other ghats in Haridwar and Rishikesh.

Seers and Naga sanyasis of the Niranjani Akhada, led by Acharya Kailashanand Giri, were the first to bathe in the river along with Anand Akhada seers. They were followed by the Joona Akhada, which has the highest number of sadhus led by Swami Avadheshanand. The Mahanirvani Akhada seers came next. The batches followed one another according to their allotted time slots.

All akhadas have to finish taking a dip at Har Ki Pairi before sunset so time management is very important, Mela In-

spector General, Sanjay Gunjyal said. The Shahi Snans and the Kumbh Mela, have raised concerns over their role in possibly adding to rising coronavirus cases in the country.

Uttarakhand recorded its highest single-day spike in Covid-19 cases on Tuesday with 1,925 people testing positive. Dehradun with 775 cases and Haridwar with 594 were the biggest contributors to the day's case-load.

During the initial hours of the third Shahi Snan, the Director General Police said, there were no disorder anywhere. He said this was because of the expansion of infrastructure in Haridwar over the past few months, including the addition of more ghats, which has helped in better crowd management.



# Bimal and TMC hold final campaign rally in Darj, accuse BJP of being obsessively communal

**SMRITA KHAWAS  
DARJEELING, 14 APR:**

Gorkha Janmukti Morcha [Bimal faction] and Hill Trinamool Congress organised a public meeting today at the motor stand here today jointly addressed by the TMC spokesperson NB Khawas, former president of Hill TMC Rajen Mukhia and GJM chief Bimal Gurung along with his faction's candidate, PT Ola. Today was the last day of campaigning. The Hills are scheduled to go to polls on Saturday. Addressing to the meeting, Bimal Gurung said, "Today is the last day for campaigning and I just want to appeal to all to vote for our candidates and make them

victorious and prove that we are still united. We still have a long way to go and even if someone usurps our ideas along the way, we have the resolve to stay the course."

As for his former ally, the BJP, Bimal Gurung contended that the saffron party knows only communal politics, something he cannot be associated with anymore because for him the people of the Hills cannot be divided into communities.

BJP's communal position against minorities is also reflected in the candidates it is backing in the Hills, he pointed out.

"I want to ask why Ajay Edward did not get BJP-GNLF ticket from



Darjeeling this time? It is obviously because he is a Christian. Even Kalyan Dewan, president of BJP Darjeeling, is a Christian and even he will never get the party ticket. For those who wonder how I can make these claims - it

is because I had appealed to the BJP at one time to give the ticket for John Bala, they initially refused on the grounds of his faith and only after I insisted did they relent," he said, while admit-

ting that Ajay Edward was the ideal candidate and that GJM would have faced a tough fight if he was in the fray.

The TMC spokesperson in turn pointed out that the Mamata Banerjee respected regional

parties which was why she had left the three assembly seats in the Hills for the GJM.

As for the recent allegations levelled by the Union Home Minister that the TMC government had unleashed violence on the Gorkhas in 2017, he contended that the Aandolan was intensified on BJP's instigation when then went on to deploy central forces and "godli media" to spin the story.

As for the TMC, he claimed that their party chief issued clear directions to the party cadre not to confront the people of Hills and directed them to stay in Siliguri instead of heading home and forcing a situation.

## Gauhati High Court upholds bail order of Assam activist Akhil Gogoi

**GUWAHATI, 14 APR [PTI]:** The Gauhati High Court has upheld the bail order of activist Akhil Gogoi by a Special National Investigation Agency (NIA) Court in relation to his alleged role in violent protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act in Assam in 2019.

Dismissing an appeal by the NIA, a High Court bench comprising Justices Suman Shyam and Mir Alfaz Ali said any act aimed at creating civil disturbance will not come within the purview of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 unless committed with the requisite intention.

"Upon going through the impugned judgement and order dated 01.10.2020 in the light of materials placed before us, we are of the considered opinion that the views expressed by the learned Special Court, NIA leading to granting of bail to the respondent is a possible view in the facts and circumstances of the case," the High Court said in its order on April 9.

"Therefore, we do not find any error in the

approach of the learned court below while exercising discretionary jurisdiction and granting bail to the respondent," the court added.

On October 1 last year, the Special NIA court had granted bail to Gogoi after submission of chargesheet by the investigating agency.

"...unlawful act of any other nature, including acts arson and violence aimed at creating civil disturbance and law and order problems, which may be punishable under the ordinary law, would not come within the purview of section 15(1) of the Act of 1967 unless it is committed with the requisite intention," the HC order said.

By "Act of 1967", the bench referred to the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967.

The High Court also noted that the bail order by the lower court was passed after submission of the chargesheet on June 26, 2020 and no formal charge has yet been framed against Akhil Gogoi.

"The materials submitted along with the chargesheet are basically

statements of the witnesses recorded under section 161 of the Cr.P.C. which obviously do not have any evidential value," it added.

During the peak of anti-CAA movement in 2019, the Chabua police station on December 10 registered a case under Sections 120(B), 147, 148, 149, 336, 307, 383 and 326 of the IPC along with sections 15(1)(a) and 16 of the UA(PA).

While the matter was under investigation by the Assam police, the Union Home Ministry on December 14, 2019 ordered to shift the case to the NIA, which re-registered it.

Akhil Gogoi was rejected bail in another case related to anti-CAA violence and is being investigated by the NIA, which took his custody in December 2019.

He was last year admitted at Gauhati Medical College and Hospital (GMCH) for treatment of COVID-19 and he remains there for other ailments.

Akhil Gogoi contested the Assam Assembly polls this year from Sib-sagar constituency.

## "PM busy campaigning, must follow Raj Dharma": Congress attack over Covid

**NEW DELHI, 14 APR [PTI]:** With COVID-19 infections spreading rapidly in the country, the Congress on Wednesday accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of being negligent, careless and callous in tackling the virus and jeopardising the lives of Indians, and asked him to follow "raj dharma".

Congress general secretary and chief spokesperson Randeep Surjewala said the Modi government has been completely careless and cruel when it comes to ensuring life-saving drugs, providing oxygen and vaccines to Indians, and has proved incompetent in controlling the spread of the virus.

India reported a maximum of around 1.85 lakh cases and 1,027 deaths due to COVID-19 on Wednesday and now has the second highest number of infections after the United States.

Mr Surjewala said while there is an acute shortage of vaccines across the country, the government is busy abusing state governments raising the issue with baseless and sense-



less allegations.

He also demanded that the government agree to the requests of students by postponing or cancelling the CBSE board exams and not risk their lives by making them sit for the exams physically when infections are spreading fast.

"The prime minister is negligent, careless, cruel and callous in tackling COVID-19. The Modi government has jeopardised the lives of Indians by its negligent conduct," he said at a press conference.

"The government has been completely careless and cruel when it comes to ensuring life-saving drugs, oxygen and availability of beds, ramping up health infrastructure and ramping up vaccine production. It has proved incompetent in handling

COVID-19," he told reporters.

Mr Surjewala asked how can the government export vaccine when it is in acute shortage in the country and when there is no vaccine for Indians.

He said when Congress leaders Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi gave the suggestion to grant emergency approval to foreign vaccines, the government agreed but union ministers Ravi Shankar Prasad and Smriti Irani attacked them with baseless and senseless allegations.

"This is a national emergency happening and we know that the prime minister is busy campaigning, but the prime minister must follow raj dharma. There is no "you versus us" debate. It is "we versus corona"," he said.

## Kumbh Mela to continue, no discussions on early close: Officials

**NEW DELHI, 14 APR [NDTV]:** The mega Kumbh Mela at Haridwar will continue till April 30 and there has been no discussion to close it early on account of surging Covid infections, officials said today as they denied any move to wrap up the event two weeks early.

"The Kumbh Mela used to begin in January, but looking at the Covid situation, the state government decided to start it in April this time. The centre's SOP said because of the situation, the duration would be reduced. I have no information of it being curtailed," said Deepak Rawat, District Magistrate, Haridwar, and Kumbh Mela officer.

Earlier today, there were reports of discussions between the Uttarakhand government and religious leaders who have so far remained unconvinced about cancelling the event.

But officials said this evening no discussions took place and the Kumbh gathering would continue uninterrupted.

Hundreds of thousands of devotees have been gathering for the annual event on the banks of the river Ganga for a holy dip, escalating concerns about an exponential rise in Covid cases amid a countrywide spike in infections.

This morning, large crowds of Sadhus and devotees went for the "Shahi Snan" or "royal bath" to the main ghat, Har Ki Pauri, on the third

major bathing day of the weeks-long festival.

The state government said till 2 pm, a staggering 9,43,452 devotees had taken a dip on what is considered one of the most auspicious days of the Kumbh.

"People are being fined for not following social distancing in non-crowded ghats, but it is very hard to fine people in the main ghats, which are very crowded," police officer Sanjay Gunjyal told Reuters.

The next significant Kumbh day is set for April 27.

There has been nationwide criticism of the decision not to call off the religious gathering this year; the event usually sees record crowds and critics see it as a potential super-spreader. The powerful akhadas or seer groups have, however, refused to call off the Kumbh Mela.

There was no distancing and hardly any masks as seers and their followers walked down the steps at Har Ki Pauri today and waded into the river for the ritual dip. Even policemen tasked with managing the crowds and ensuring compliance with Covid rules were seen joining in.

Uttarakhand recorded its highest single-day spike in Covid-19 cases on Tuesday with 1,925 people testing positive. Haridwar has reported 1,000 cases in two days.

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## BAISAKHI PARVA CELEBRATED AS EKTA DIWAS...

There was always pressure from the ruling party in such organizations in the past and there was no place for opposition parties or its members in functions such as this, said the CM.

He stated that the SKM government has provided an independent environment to every organization to work freely in the interest of its members. He asserted that it was important for the people of different communities to choose leaders and representatives of organizations wisely who can lead the organization towards development and keep members of the community in unity instead of persons who only have a good rapport with the government.

Accusing the previous government of spreading hatred through personal attacks using anonymous leaflets and posts on social media, Mr Tamang said that the SKM government has ended such trends and practices.

Speaking to students, the CM stated that they should not forget their roots even after reaching great heights of success and urged them to work to preserve and promote their language, identity, tradition and cultural heritage.

He also appreciated the efforts and initiative of NSP for the preservation of language, tradition and cultural heritage. He suggested that NSP and intellectuals of Sikkim should work towards documenting the oral history of Sikkim from the elderly. He assured that the government would provide all support in this initiative.

The Chief Minister announced that the Government has already started the process of rectifying names of places which have been distorted over a period of time. He said that the original names of the places of Sikkim would be restored to preserve their cultural and historical significance.

Speaking on the issue of tribal status to twelve left-out communities and LT seat reservation, the CM alleged that the earlier government used these issues as political weapons by raising it only during election time to get the people's mandate. He added that the SKM government has been working on these issues sincerely in the interest of the people without seeing any political benefits.

The CM also urged government employees to be punctual and perform their duties sincerely from 10 AM to 4:30 PM in the interest of the people.

Speaking on the second wave of COVID-19, he appealed to the people to seriously follow all guidelines and protocols. He added that the vaccination programme (Teeka Utsav) will continue in the State throughout the month of April at all the designated health centres. The Indoor Gymnasium Hall of Paljor Stadium will continue to cater to the people of Gangtok and surrounding areas, he added.

Earlier, the procession of cultural troupes of various communities of Sikkim started from Sikkim Legislative Assembly complex and culminated at Manan Bhawan. The CM also participated in the procession. He was joined by Deputy Speaker, Sangay Lepcha, Cabinet Ministers, MLAs, and other dignitaries.

At Manan Bhawan, the Chief Minister was accorded a warm welcome by the Celebration Committee. He then visited the stall where various traditional musical instruments, artefacts, and other traditional items on display.

At Manan Bhawan auditorium, the audience was greeted with a synchronized presentation by artists depicting the dance forms of various communities of Sikkim. The entire performance was choreographed by Komal Gurung, Director, Tapashree Dance Academy, Gangtok, while the music was provided by Manoj Rai, Director, Reeyaz Sangeetalya. Subsequently, artists from local dance troupes performed the Bhutia, Lepcha and Nepali dance.

The Chief Minister also launched a book titled "Sikkim Ka Bhasha: Dasha Evam Disha, edited by Dr. Tek Bahadur Chettri and published by Nepali Sahitya Parishad.

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### Govt to police office attendance as well ....

These Inspecting Officer shall, with the assistance of security personnel, will then close the entry gates at offices they are inspecting at 10.15AM and then prepare a list of all officers and staff present in the office at the time. The HoDs will be required to assist the Inspecting Officers in this task.

The list will then be "immediately submitted" to the office of the Chief Secretary and the concerned HoD/ HoO. The HoD/ HoO will then prepare a list of officers not present the office without prior permission or sanctioned leave or approved tour programme.

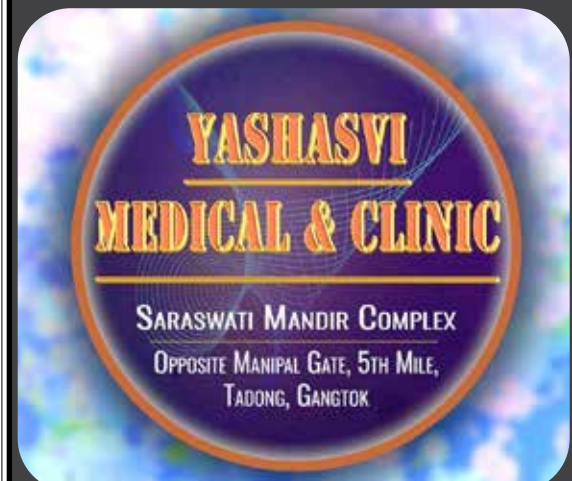
"Such absence will be treated as unauthorised absence amounting to misconduct," the SOP puts on record, adding that an order for Leave Without Pay for the period of such unauthorised absence shall be passed by the HoD/ HoO "the very same day" and a copy of such orders shall be endorsed to the Home Department on the very same day.

The HoDs have been reminded that they will be "personally responsible for observance of punctuality, maintenance of discipline and decorum in their offices."

"The SOP is being issued so that the matter receives special attention at the highest level in respective Department/office and the procedure is followed without exception," the SOP adds.

This is not the first time that such measures are being adopted. The fact that such directions continue to be spelled out means that previous attempts have not met with the desired results.

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## Habituated is Not the Same as Prepared

*Preparedness does not mean only post-disaster drills*

The South-West Monsoon this year, experts at private forecaster Skymet Weather have predicted, will be 103 per cent (907 mm) of the Long Period Average rains for India, ranging between “normal and above normal”, with a model error of five per cent. This is the third year in succession that India may see “above normal” rains during the season. The last time it happened was in 1996, 1997, and 1998, Skymet has pointed out. Anyone who has been in Sikkim long enough knows the horror that the rains of 1997 had perpetuated. What should also offer pause is the prediction that the Eastern parts of the country, where Sikkim is also located on Met Maps, are expected to see some deficiency during initial parts of the season, but above normal rain in August-September. Expect the monsoon months to be slightly wetter than last year. This is also an El Nino year, a weather phenomenon associated with deficient rain, but that system, we are told, is already waning and even if it sets in, will do only after September and hence not affect monsoon in the country.

So much for the science of meteorology.

Moving on, irrespective of what the South-West Monsoon has in store for the rest of the country, Sikkim, the Gangtok ridge and its attached mountain features, have hosted pre-monsoon showers of substantial intensity, and just these rains have been enough to start scratching at the hill sides. The drainage has taken a hit, site excavations have collapsed and the water supply teetering. You can now begin shuddering with speculations of what the four “official” months of monsoons have in store by way of damage and connectivity disruptions, because, the nor’westers teasers are already unleashing what the monsoon months have always been pregnant with in Sikkim. This will not take much imagination for anyone who has been in Sikkim for any length of time; we are habituated for it. Unfortunately, and surprisingly, Sikkim has still not developed preparedness for it.

Sikkim hills might be young and prone to crumbling, but even a superficial observation will bear out that there are just too many scars on its hills now. Go up to the Ridge and look towards Tsomgo and a monster slide gashes the hill face there. The vision should be shocking, but one does not hear of it having generated any concern. Construction site excavations poke out more than just the marked out sites and the entire stretch from Deorali to Tenzing & Tenzing on the national highway in Gangtok spills muck and slush every time it rains. Neither however appear to have attracted any long-term interventions. The Indra Bypass has seen a rash of constructions in the recent years, and the road surface sinks in ugly reminders of amiss planning. The shoulder of the road has already caved in some sections, retaining walls have given up at others and potholes the size of craters ambush from innocent looking puddles.

The general disinterest towards precautions is dangerous, because the out of sight, out of mind attitude is misplaced. Gangtok is not a very big hill, and when any part of it starts slipping, it leaves the monster above standing on wobbly legs as well.

By now, Sikkim should have mapped all its natural and manmade drainage channels and their carrying capacities, installed rain gauges at least at all disaster-prone locations, worked out a way by which realtime information could be shared so that the moment inundation neared the carrying capacity limit of any jhora or drain, warnings could be sent out and disaster drills put into effect. On ground, however, this has not been explored even for Gangtok. Hence, the administration prepares for post-disaster scenarios, which, while necessary, should not be the only component of preparedness. And, without the deployment of available technology and science, which the policy makers in Sikkim are yet to discover, post-disaster scenarios are all that it can build preparedness for. What that means is that Sikkim begins another blind date with monsoon now. All the best...

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# As India’s COVID Crisis Worsens, Leaders Play the Blame Game While the Poor Suffer Once Again

SUJEET KUMAR  
THECONVERSATION.COM

India is witnessing a sharp spike in COVID-19 cases after months of declining numbers had given the country hope it had made it through the worst of the pandemic relatively unscathed.

On March 1, India recorded just 12,286 new cases, but since early April this figure has skyrocketed to over 100,000 every day. Earlier this week, it hit a record of 168,912 cases in a day — the highest in the world.

As the health crisis escalates, the poor are once again fearing a return to lockdown and economic hardship. Migrants have started fleeing from cities to their home villages in order to avoid the pain and trauma they went through a year ago when Prime Minister Narendra Modi enacted a nationwide lockdown. Many cities, including Mumbai and Delhi, have already announced nightly curfews.

For now, the Indian government has just asked the states to focus on “stringent containment and public health measures”, including testing, tracing and inoculations. Modi has also appealed to people to get vaccinated during a four-day “Tika Utsav” (special vaccination drive), which began on Sunday.

However, the situation remains grim. Even though India is one of the world’s biggest coronavirus vaccine manufacturers, some states are experiencing vaccine shortages. At the same time, experts fear a lack of social distancing and new variants of the virus are causing infections to potentially spiral out of control.

HOW THE POOR SUFFERED DURING LAST YEAR’S LOCKDOWN

When COVID-19 first appeared in India last year, the Modi government was quick to bring the country together.

In a speech to the nation last March, he announced a 21-day nationwide lockdown

of 1.3 billion people with only four hours’ notice. All means of transportation were suspended. The rich and affluent started hoarding food and medicines, while the poor worried about their livelihoods.

A mass migration ensued as hundreds of millions of migrant workers headed from the major cities back to their home villages on foot. This was the most visible face of the humanitarian crisis. Others, however, suffered out of the public eye, such as the street vendors, waste pickers, domestic maids and shopkeepers in slums, who were all forced to stop working.

As part of a study last year, I helped conduct a series of six rounds of telephone surveys in 20 diverse slums in the city of Patna, the capital of the northeastern Bihar state from July to November.

Nearly all slum residents we spoke with — except the rare few with protected formal sector jobs — were cut off suddenly from their sources of income after the lockdown was announced. And more than 80% of slum households in Patna lost their entire primary source of income.

Economic recovery since the lockdown has also been slow. By mid-November, one-third of respondents had still not fully recovered their pre-pandemic incomes. Many had been hired back at their old jobs on a part-time basis or at a fraction of their former pay. Many jobs simply disappeared.

The poor survived by cutting back on their food, borrowing money and helping each other.

Given these struggles, there is now a sense of anxiety in these slum communities and a mistrust of the government, especially Modi. Says Ajay, 35, a street vendor who lives in the Kankarbagh slum, “The government finds it is easy to lock us down but not to provide financial and livelihood support. PM is busy campaigning for an election

where thousands of people come without masks and are violating social distancing norms.”

THE GOVERNMENT’S FAILED LEADERSHIP

Undoubtedly, Modi still remains popular among most ordinary people. When he says something, India listens carefully. It worked well last year, and his appeal compelled people to wear masks and maintain social distancing, helping to flatten the curve and limit the loss of lives.

However, making public speeches will not be enough during this second wave. The prime minister needs to be seen adhering to these practices in his own daily life, but this is not happening on the ground.

In the ongoing elections in West Bengal, Assam, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, as well as the election in Bihar last year, Modi and other party leaders have addressed several rallies without paying much attention to COVID restrictions. Modi himself has addressed more than 20 rallies attended by thousands of unmasked people.

When leaders are seen addressing mass gathering without masks and social distancing, the public will not only assume everything is normal, they will lose their fear of COVID.

Modi has also insisted he would not politicise the pandemic, but he has done exactly that. In states like Maharashtra, Punjab and Chhattisgarh, which are facing a spike in cases, Modi’s party is pointing the finger at the state leaders, who come from opposing parties. The states, meanwhile, are blaming Modi’s government for failed leadership.

Another concern is the Modi government’s decision to allow a major festival, Kumbh Mela, to take place in Uttarakhand state, which is ruled by his party, the BJP. Several million people gathered at the Ganges River for an auspicious bathing

day this week, flouting social distancing practices.

Uttarakhand’s chief minister said the “faith of devotees will overcome the fear of COVID-19”, at a time when infections are skyrocketing.

WHO WILL HELP THE POOR?

As the numbers of COVID-19 cases are rising every day, the fear of a return to lockdown is ever-present, haunting the poor. Many have yet to recover from their previous debts, and COVID-19 is now threatening their livelihoods again.

Last year, several not-for-profit, grassroots organisations came forward to help the migrants and urban poor dwellers, but this is going to be more challenging this year.

Not only have their funds been depleted, but recent changes brought by the government have stopped the flow of foreign aid money to many organisations. Amnesty International announced in September it would halt its operations in India after its bank accounts had been frozen.

One NGO volunteer, Prabhakar, who works with slum dwellers in Patna, told us, “if the government is going to announce the complete lockdown like last year, many people will run out of food, as parent NGOs have stopped sponsoring the small organisations which work with the slum dwellers.”

This is the time for Modi to show decisive leadership in not only controlling the surge of the virus, but also providing financial assistance to millions of urban poor and helping them reach their home villages with their dignity intact. This is what is needed to instill trust in the prime minister again.

*[the writer is Senior Research Fellow, Centre for the Study of Law and Governance, Jawaharlal Nehru University]*

## How a radical interpretation of the Great Depression became the orthodoxy behind solving the COVID economic crisis

MARY O’SULLIVAN  
THECONVERSATION.COM

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, US Federal Reserve System governor Jerome Powell made an extraordinary declaration: “We’re not going to run out of ammunition.” The central bank stood ready to take any action necessary to stem the mounting economic crisis. Three months later, the Fed injected nearly US\$3 trillion dollars of liquidity into the US economy.

Such radical action by central banks – quantitative easing (QE) – has its critics on the right and left. Just as striking is that many prominent economists and economic historians have rallied in support of QE in responding to the threat of economic crisis. Their remarkable certainty reveals a story about how our understanding of present crises came to be dominated by lessons drawn from past crises, and in particular the Great Depression in the 1930s and its interpretation by economists, Milton Friedman and Anna Schwartz, in their 1963 book, *A Monetary History of the United States*.

Friedman and Schwartz claimed that the Federal Reserve System was responsible for turning an ordinary economic downturn into the Great Depression. When a massive financial crisis led to a sharp decline in the stock of money in the US economy, the Fed failed to take action to mitigate the problem.

By the end of the 20th century, their interpretation of the Great Depression had become sufficiently dominant in economics and economic history to qualify as the orthodoxy. When the global financial crisis struck in 2008, the Federal Reserve System proposed aggressive policies of monetary expansion to avoid its supposed mistakes during the Great Depression.

That flood of liquidity into capitalism’s financial system is remarkable in historical perspective, surpassing all previous records for monetary interventions, outside of wartime, since the beginning of the 20th century. It defines our economic reality to such an extent that the fictional story of a mysterious “Professor”, who meticulously plans a raid on the Royal Mint of Spain to print billions of euros, became the basis for the wildly popular television series, *La Casa de Papel*. As the Professor explained: “In 2011, the European Central Bank made €171 billion out of nowhere. Just like we’re doing. Only bigger ... ‘Liquidity injections’, they called it. I’m making a liquidity injection, but not for the banks. I’m making it here, in the real economy.”

The Professor made these remarks long before central banks responded to the coronavirus crisis with an even greater flood of liquidity.

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS AS ECONOMIC HERESY

The onset of the Great Depression coincided with “a golden age” of theoretical and empirical research on business cycles and crises. Although they did not agree on the causes of cycles, economists tended to look for explanations of the recurrent fluctuations in economic activity in the internal dynamics of the economic system. This emphasis is readily apparent in the work of Wesley Clair Mitchell, an American economist in the early 20th century who was the foremost global authority on business cycles.

Mitchell began his career as a monetary economist at the University of Chicago where he met Thorstein Veblen and was inspired by the unconventional economist’s criticisms of orthodox economic theory and, in particular, its neglect of the process of “evolutionary” economic change.

To Mitchell, it was the “precarious dependence” of material wellbeing on an economy organised for profit-seeking that generated business cycles: “Where money economy dominates, natural resources are not developed, mechanical equipment is not provided, industrial skill is not exercised, unless conditions are such as to promise a money profit to those who direct production.” He looked to the dynamics of enterprises’ profit-making to explain the recurrent phases of business activity and how they “grow out of and grow into each other” in a process of cumulative change.

The depth and persistence of the Depression, especially in the country that seemed to embody capitalism in its most sophisticated form, reinforced the importance of understanding fluctuations in economic activity. A novel perspective proposed by John Maynard Keynes attracted particular attention: Keynes looked to the internal dynamics of the economic system for the roots of cycles, echoing other economists’ scepticism about its capacity for self-adjustment, but identified a significant new role for government in ensuring economic stability.

The significance of the interpretation of the Great Depression that Friedman and Schwartz laid out can be appreciated only by understanding the continuity and rupture it marked in economists’ analyses of business cycles. Their book was based on a combination of theory and history that bears an uncanny resemblance to Mitchell’s distinctive methodological approach to the study of cumulative change. But just as Mitchell had used historical annals and statistics to challenge the economic orthodoxy of his day, Friedman and Schwartz employed their historical research to confront not only what Mitchell and Keynes believed but what many economists believed about the inherent instability of a capitalist economic system.

In a Monetary History, Friedman and Schwartz conceived of the norm in capitalism as stability, as characterised by a harmonious covariance of money and income, interrupted only by aberrant cycles. It was during these unusual historical moments, they claimed, that money mattered a great deal. Insofar as the Great Depression was

concerned, they posited that it was the drop in money that caused income to fall. While they acknowledged the monetary collapse originated in the waves of banking crises that ravaged the US financial system in the early 1930s, they blamed the US monetary authority for failing to inject enough liquidity into the system to counter the collapse. In doing so, they held government responsible for what seemed to most people to be a crisis of capitalism.

To defend their bold claims, Friedman and Schwartz embraced a methodological approach inspired by Mitchell but increasingly castigated as old-fashioned against the growing influence of econometric analysis in economics. Econometricians agreed with Mitchell on the importance of integrating economic theory and evidence but they cast economic activity in terms of stable mathematical relationships that belied the importance of cumulative change that Mitchell emphasised.

Friedman and Schwartz refused to be swayed by methodological fashion, opting instead for history to discriminate among different explanations of “statistical covariation” by going “beyond the numbers alone” to “discern the antecedent circumstances whence arose the particular movements that become so anonymous when we feed the statistics into the computer”.

Based on historical research, they purported to reconstruct the temporal sequence of events that they claimed led to a “catastrophic contraction” during the Great Depression. They also used historical reasoning to go further, to transcend a story that would otherwise locate the collapse of the US economy in the failures of its private financial system. The Federal Reserve System had “ample powers”, they suggested, “to cut short the tragic process of monetary deflation and banking collapse” but did not use these powers “effectively”. Through the use of counterfactual history, therefore, they created the impression of a crisis that did not have to occur.

MONEY, MONEY, MONEY

Asking why the Great Depression occurred in the US was a difficult question. Friedman and Schwartz’s answer was provocative and plausible, but much was left out and a great deal added in. We would expect criticism of their claims, and a plethora of alternatives. Yet, despite criticism over the years, many historians have extended the money hypothesis or qualified specific elements of it, rather than confront or evaluate the core claims on which it was constructed.

By the end of the 20th century, the radical interpretation of the Great Depression that Friedman and Schwartz proposed had become historical orthodoxy. The few scholars who were impatient enough to directly confront it were subject to an onslaught of criticism. And for those unwilling to buy into the claim of capitalism’s inherent stability, neglect

proved to be a powerful weapon. That such neglect was by design as much as ignorance can be seen in the writing of an academic economist, Ben Bernanke, who was to build an even more dazzling career as a central banker.

Bernanke acknowledged an important gap in the money story and proposed to fill it. Friedman and Schwartz’s interpretation of the Great Depression relied heavily on a banking panic, in which depositors pulled their money out of healthy and unhealthy banks, but without offering any serious explanation of the disruption of the US financial system. Bernanke came to the rescue but only by ruling out the few contemporaries like Hyman Minsky to whom he might have turned for insights on the instability of the US financial system, since their work departed “from the assumption of rational economic behaviour”.

That Bernanke’s paper garnered so much academic attention suggests the crushing effect of academic orthodoxies on purportedly scientific inquiry. But the stakes suddenly became a great deal more important, and the action more dramatic, when the historical orthodoxy of the Great Depression passed from academic minds into the policy sphere in the early 21st century.

Some sense of what was to come was in evidence at a celebration of Friedman’s 90th birthday in 2002. By then, Bernanke was a member of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System and in an oft-cited tribute, he said: “I would like to say to Milton and Anna: regarding the Great Depression. You’re right, we did it. We’re very sorry. But thanks to you, we won’t do it again.”

Bernanke’s words surely gave the nonagenarian as much pause as pleasure. In Friedman’s presidential address to the American Economic Association, a few years after *A Monetary History’s* publication, he worried that “we are in danger of assigning to monetary policy a larger role than it can perform”. Still, he could hardly have imagined what Bernanke would dare when the opportunity presented itself.

Friedman may not have been around to witness the aggressive policies of monetary expansion that Bernanke implemented in his determination not to “do it again”. However, Schwartz suggested he was fighting the wrong war since the 2008-2009 crisis had nothing to do with liquidity. Ironically, many economists once believed much the same thing about the Great Depression of the 1930s. Just imagine what it would imply about our understanding of that crisis, not to mention the current fashion for quantitative easing, if they were right.

*[the writer is Professor of Economic History and Director of the Department of History, Economics and Society, Université de Genève]*



# Higher altitudes beckon more wildlife in Nepal amid warmer climes

MARISSA TAYLOR

**KATHMANDU, 14 APR [KATHMANDUPOST]:** Indra Dhara Bista remembers his childhood winters being biting cold. From December to February, the thatched roof of his home in Jomsom, a village in Gharapjhong Rural Municipality in Mustang district, would be blanketed by thick, white snow. Livestock would be kept indoors throughout the season; fed stored, sun-dried hay. When the temperature dipped too low, his family would be compelled to migrate down to lower elevation.

"But in the last decade or so, winters have become considerably warmer. And only few people move down these days," says 50-year-old Bista, a resident of Jomsom. "Not just temperatures, but rain and snowfall patterns have also become unpredictable in recent years. Even summer temperatures are rising."

Accompanying the changes in weather are the sightings of an insect unseen in the area before—the tiny mosquito.

"As a child, I didn't know what a mosquito was. But now there are mosquitoes here in Mustang in the summer," he says. The insect, which has been known to live only at a maximum elevation of 1,500m, is being sighted in higher elevations, such as in Jomsom (2,743m). Last year, they were reportedly sighted in Lo Manthang (3,840m).

Erratic weather patterns are being witnessed across the Himalayan region of the country, affecting its delicate ecology and possibly even influencing species' habitats and biodiversity, climate change experts say. And the effects of changing climate will be exaggerated for such a geographi-

cally vulnerable region, especially considering the country's lack of economic resources and poverty-stricken population.

Mosquitoes are not the only species that are being sighted in altitudes that were previously unheard of.

A research study titled 'House Crow (Corvus Splendens) Heading Upwards in Nepal: Possible Climate Change Impact Influencing its Movement', conducted from 1999 to 2011 on the movement pattern of the bird, reveals that the species is moving by an altitude of 136m annually, from 2,000m to 4,200m, on an average, in Mustang.

"There have definitely been sightings of species at higher altitudes, in Nepal and abroad. Even our research on the house crow revealed just that," says Yadav Ghimire, a conservation biologist and one of the authors of the report. "Increase in temperature could be a contributing factor in influencing species to adapt to the warming climate, forcing them to go upwards to survive."

In another part of the Himalayan region in Nepal, the mountain-dwelling pika is another animal that researchers have found to be moving upwards. A three-year study (2011-13) conducted by Narayan Prasad Koju, PhD programme coordinator, MSc Natural Resources Management, in Kyanjin (3,900m) in Langtang National Park shows the lowest elevation of pika habitat has shifted up by 200m in an interval of 46 years, suggesting they are either getting locally extinct or are migrating upwards.

"Either situation could spell a disaster for the local ecosystem. Pikas are extremely temperature



sensitive and are non-hibernating species, which means the slightest alterations in temperature can make them extremely vulnerable," says Koju. "It is also a keystone species and it has an immense effect on its surrounding natural environment."

Residents of Kyanjin Gumpa, the last village in the Langtang valley, situated at 3,800m, too feel the effects of a warming climate.

"It is definitely warmer now, in the summers and winters. We are now able to grow cauliflowers in greenhouses throughout the year. This was not possible when we were children; it would be too cold to do so," says 45-year-old Mangalmu Lama, who runs a lodge in Kyanjin Gumpa all year round. "When I was a child, Kyanjin would be buried in snow five feet deep. I haven't seen snow like that for years now," she says.

Another study conducted on the clouded leopard in 2020 in the Langtang area found the elusive animal surviving at 3,498m. The animal has so far been found only at 2,300m.

And this kind of movement

has not just been witnessed in the mountains of Nepal.

A study led by the University of Colorado, spanning nearly 13 years, published in February 2021, has reported that critters such as the golden-mantled ground squirrel, a popular sight in the Rockies, are moving up as the mountain range warms. The report stated that on an average the ranges of the ground squirrel and 46 other species of small mammals have shifted upward by more than 400 feet since the 1980s. Species living at higher elevations, like the squirrel, have moved up by 1,100 feet.

Closer to Nepal, a study by the Zoological Survey of India, released in 2019, identified at least 49 species of moth and 17 species of butterfly that have shown "considerable new upward altitude records" in the Himalayas with a difference of more than 1,000 metres between their current and previously recorded mean habitat altitudes, according to Indian news reports.

What all these changes mean for biodiversity and humanity isn't easy to predict.

"Species move but they do not move at the same time and at the same pace, meaning all species do not respond to the same signals," says Koju. "Some can move, some can adapt and some may die; the response of the species to a changing climate is unpredictable. But any kind of change in natural order or redistribution can have catastrophic implications on the local ecology and this will have a chain reaction."

However, experts also say that there could be other factors at play in the movement of animals and insects.

"We cannot deny the fact that there is a basic warming trend that is being witnessed across Nepal," says Dipesh Joshi, a climate change expert with WWF Nepal. "But there are multiple factors that could be influencing these animals to move, such as better habitat, human-influenced transportation, easier prey."

In the same vein, Ghimire, the conservationist, too believes that it is too early to make conclusions. "To say that climate change is causing upward migration without proper, long-term research would be too rash. There is much more research needed to ascertain the biological responses towards climate change," he says.

But research opportunities are hard to come by in a poor, under-developed nation like Nepal that is always mired in political instability.

"Changing climate and biodiversity loss are two urgent, global issues, but in a developing country like Nepal, there are other more pressing issues that need attention," says Buddhi Sagar Poudel, chief of the REDD+ Initiative, a cli-

mate change adaptation initiative under the Ministry of Forest and Environment. "Right now, when it comes to climate change, the focus of the government is more on mitigation and adaptation. We just do not have the resources to carry out long-term extensive research work."

But if the climate continues to warm at its current rate, experts believe that consequences will be dire. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report titled 'Global Warming of 1.5 degrees Celsius', "twice as many plant species—and three times as many insects, which are critical to our food supply—could lose at least half their habitat under a 2-degree versus a 1.5-degree rise."

"Nature is constantly changing, always evolving—that is a given. But changes in the past few decades have taken place too quickly, and we have no idea what the implications will be," says Koju.

Back in Mustang, for people like Bista, these changes are already far too real. With the emergence of mosquitoes in mountainous regions, there has been an increase in malaria and dengue cases. A 2016 report states that since 1988, a total of 9,836 malaria cases have been reported from 13 out of 16 mountain districts—places where the disease was previously unheard of.

Changes in the climate directly and indirectly affect the lives of the people who call the mountains their home.

"These changes are subtle but they are definitely there," says Bista. "For people who live in the mountains year-round, they are much more visible already."

## Assam issues new SOP for air passenger amid Covid surge

GUWAHATI, 14 APR

**[SHILLONGTIMES]:** With the surge of Covid cases in the state, the Assam government on Tuesday issued modified Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for persons arriving in the state by air, making tests and quarantine compulsory, officials said.

Principal Secretary, Health and Family Welfare, Samir Kumar Sinha, who issued the modified SOP, said that all people arriving in Assam through any of its five airports, will have to mandatorily undergo the Rapid Antigen Test (RAT) free of cost.

Those found positive will have to undergo home isolation or get admitted in a private hospital or government health institution, depending upon their medical condition.

If the RAT is negative, the passenger will have to undergo an RT-PCR



test at the airport with minimum payment of Rs 500.

"Any person violating the instructions would be liable to be prosecuted against as per provisions of section 51 to 60 of the Disaster Management Act, 2005, besides legal action under section 188 of IPC, and

other legal provisions as applicable," the SOP said.

The numbers of Covid-19 cases have shot up by 732 per cent since the declaration of the three-phase Assembly elections.

According to the Assam Health Department, the Covid active cases were only 287 on Feb-

ruary 26, when the Election Commission had declared the poll schedule for the 126-member Assam Assembly, but have climbed to 2,387 now.

So far, 2,20,893 people have tested Covid-19 positive, out of which 2,16,041 have recovered while 1,118 have succumbed.

he added.

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel, state ministers and other senior leaders of the Congress had extensively campaigned during the three-phase assembly elections in Assam that concluded on April 6.

The Congress-led "Mahajoth" or Grand Alliance of opposition parties in Assam comprises the AIUDEF, BPF, CPI(M), CPI and other parties.

The BPF had fielded 12 candidates in the polls and one among them joined the BJP amid the elections, the leader said.



Nava Raipur.

These candidates were accompanied by some Congress leaders and other members of the BPF during their

journey to Chhattisgarh, he said.

They will stay in Raipur till May 2, the day when results of the Assam elections will be out,

## Yogi Adityanath tests positive for COVID-19

LUCKNOW, 14 APR [PTI]:

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has tested positive for COVID-19 and is isolating himself, he tweeted this afternoon.

The announcement comes a day after he went under isolation following some of his officials of his office testing positive for the virus. The 48-year-old said all activities of the state government are being conducted normally and urged those who came in contact with him in recent days to get themselves tested.

"When the initial symptoms were seen, I got myself tested for Covid and my report came back as positive. I am in self-isolation and fully following the instructions of physicians. I am doing all work virtu-



ally," he tweeted in Hindi.

Yogi Adityanath's announcement comes on the same as that of his predecessor, Samajwadi Party chief Akhilesh Yadav, who too has tested positive for COVID-19.

He had received the first dose of vaccine against COVID-19 in Lucknow earlier this month.

Apart from monitoring the Covid situation in the state, the Chief Minister had been actively campaigning for his party, the BJP, in West Bengal that is voting in eight-phase assembly election.

Last week, the Uttar Pradesh government ordered the closure of all schools till

April 30. It also directed to impose night curfews from 9 pm to 6 am in districts reporting more than 100 new infections every day.

Uttar Pradesh recorded a single-day spike of 17,963 coronavirus cases in the last 24 hours. 85 people died of the disease in the same period.



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# 100 Days: Tokyo Olympics marked by footnotes and asterisks

**TOKYO, APR 14 (AP):** Tokyo pitched itself as "a safe pair of hands when it was awarded the Olympics 7 1/2 years ago.

"The certainty was a crucial factor," Craig Reedie, an IOC vice president at the time, said after the 2013 vote in Buenos Aires.

Now, nothing is certain as Tokyo's postponed Olympics hit the 100-days-to-go mark on Wednesday. Despite surging cases of COVID-19, myriad scandals and overwhelming public opposition in Japan to holding the Games, organizers and the IOC are pushing on.

Tokyo's 1964 Olympics celebrated Japan's rapid recovery from defeat in World War II. These Olympics will be marked by footnotes and asterisks. The athletes will aim high, of course, but the goals elsewhere will be modest: get through it, avoid becoming a super-spreader event, and stoke some national pride knowing few other countries could have pulled this off.

"The government is very conscious of how the world' views Japan," Dr Gill Steel, who teaches political science at Doshisha University in Kyoto, wrote in an email.

"Cancelling the Olympics would have been seen, at some level, as a public failure on the international stage."

The price will be steep when the Olympics open on July 23.

The official cost is USD 15.4 billion. Olympic spending is tough to track, but several government audits suggest it might be twice that much, and all but USD 6.7 billion is public money.

The Switzerland-based IOC generates 91% of its income from selling broadcast rights and sponsorship. This amounts to at least USD 5 billion in a four-year cycle, but the revenue flow from networks like American-based NBC has been stalled by the postponement.

What does Tokyo get out of the 17-day sports circus?

Fans from abroad are banned, tourism is out, and there'll be no room for neighborhood partying. Athletes are being told to arrive late, leave early and maneuver around a moving maze of rules.

There are also reputational costs for Japan and the International Olympic Committee: a bribery scandal, botched planning, and repeated misogyny in the Tokyo Olympic leadership.

The IOC is betting Tokyo will be a distraction "the light at the end of the pandemic tunnel" as the closing ceremony comes just six months



before the opening of the boycott-threatened Beijing Winter Olympics.

Various polls suggest up to 80% of Japanese want the Olympics cancelled or postponed. And many scientists are opposed.

"It is best to not hold the Olympics given the considerable risks," Dr Norio Sugaya, an infectious diseases expert at Keiyu Hospital in Yokohama, told The Associated Press.

Japan's vaccine rollout has been almost nonexistent, few will get shots before the Olympics open, and Tokyo has raised its alert level with another wave predicted about the time of the opening ceremony. About 9,500 deaths in Japan have been attributed to COVID-19, good by

global measures but poor by standards in Asia.

And what's the impact of 15,400 Olympic and Paralympic athletes from more than 200 countries and territories entering Japan, joined by tens of thousands of officials, judges, media, and broadcasters?

"The risks are high in Japan. Japan is dangerous, not a safe place at all," Sugaya said.

The heavily sponsored torch relay with 10,000 runners crisscrossing Japan also presents hazards. Legs scheduled for Osaka this week were pulled from the streets because of surging COVID-19 cases and relocated into a city park with no fans allowed. Other legs across Japan are also sure to be disrupted.

The IOC and Japanese politicians decided a year ago to postpone but not cancel the Olympics, driven by inertia and the clout of Japanese ad giant Dentsu Inc., which has lined up a record of 3.5 billion in local sponsorship probably three times more than any previous Olympics.

"I think the government knows full well the Japanese public doesn't want the Olympics as of now," Dr Aki Tonami, who teaches political science at the University of Tsukuba, wrote in an email to AP. "But no one wants to be the one to pull the plug."

The Olympics may also determine the fate of Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, who replaced

Shinzo Abe seven months ago. It was Abe who famously told IOC voters in 2013 that the Fukushima nuclear disaster of March 11, 2011, was "under control."

Despite being billed as the Recovery Olympics, the northeastern area of Japan is still hurting a decade later. Many blame the Olympics for the slow recovery and siphoning off resources.

"Suga's fate is sealed," Tonami said. "I think he knows his tenure as a PM will not be a long one, so even though it would be nice for him personally to pull it off, it probably doesn't change the political conditions around him."

Steel was more optimistic.

"His government has a higher chance of surviving, even thriving, if they can pull off a successful Olympics risky strategy, obviously, if it is a disaster."

IOC President Thomas Bach has repeatedly called Tokyo the "best prepared Olympics in history" and he's restated it during the pandemic. Handsome venues went up quickly including the 1.4 billion National Stadium by Kengo Kuma and, though expensive, the Games were on track until the pandemic hit.

But the "safe pair of hands" have often been shaky.

## Neymar calls PSG "home" amid contract extension talks



**Sao Paulo, Apr 14 (AP):** Striker Neymar called Paris Saint-Germain his "home" after the team's 1-0 defeat against Bayern Munich, which was still enough for the French club to advance to the Champions League semi-final.

The Brazilian is currently negotiating a contract extension.

"I don't think this is even a topic anymore, I obviously feel very comfortable, at home at PSG," Neymar told TNT Sports Brazil after the match at Parc des Princes stadium in Paris.

"I feel happier than before."

Neymar's tone is very different from less than two years ago, when Barcelona officials were confident they would be able to bring the Brazilian back to Camp Nou.

The Brazilian forward became the most expensive player in the world when he moved from Barcelona to PSG for 222 million euros (about 250 million) in 2017. His first two seasons with the French champions were disappointing, with the star out of key matches due to injuries.

Now at age 29, the Brazilian has boosted his profile in Paris after great performances that took PSG to the last final of the Champions League, which ended in a 1-0 defeat against Bayern in Lisbon.

Neymar also talked about his raucous end-of-match celebrations in front of Bayern's Joshua Kimmich.

"I wasn't celebrating to provoke him. I celebrated with Leo Paredes, he was in front of me," Neymar said.

"It was fate that Kimmich was also there, he said his team is better and they would go through. As if he was secured in the semifinal."

PSG's semifinal opponent will be known on Wednesday. Manchester City won the first leg against Borussia Dortmund 2-1.

Neymar hit the post and the bar in three clear opportunities on Tuesday, which made him promise coach Mauricio Pochettino he will be sharper in the next stage.

"I owe him a goal, regardless of the good match I played, the Brazilian said.

## Durant, Nets top Wolves 127-97 in makeup game after shooting

**MINNEAPOLIS (AP):** The show in Minnesota went on, the day after raw emotion from a fatal police shooting of a local Black man was too strong to play.

Kevin Durant and the Brooklyn Nets made quick work of the Timberwolves, even if focus was harder to come by than usual.

Durant scored 31 points on 11-for-15 shooting in his most productive performance in 2 1/2 months, as the Brooklyn Nets blew out the Minnesota Timberwolves 127-97 on Tuesday afternoon.

"I felt like my wind and legs are getting up under me, each and every minute I'm playing," said Durant, who missed 23 games with a strained hamstring until returning last week.

The game was rescheduled from the previous night, out of sensitivity to the community following the traffic-stop death of 20-year-old Daunte Wright. Players from both teams wore black warmup shirts that read, "With liberty and justice for all," with the last two words in all-caps for extra emphasis, and a moment of silence was held before tip-off.

"All we can do is be here for each other physically, emotionally try to comprehend what guys are going through," Tim-



berwolves guard D'Angelo Russell said, adding: "I encourage everybody to go out there and do what you can physically do to make things better, not just speak about it."

Anthony Edwards had 27 points and eight rebounds for the Timberwolves, who played without Karl-Anthony Towns on the one-year anniversary of his mother's death from COVID-19 complications. Towns chose to sit out and spend the time with his family.

Joe Harris pitched in 23 points for the Nets, who had 31 assists on 46 made baskets. Missing James Harden (strained hamstring), Kyrie Irving (personal reasons) and LaMarcus Aldridge (non-COVID-19 illness), the Nets were in command from the jump and ahead by 23 points before the midpoint of the second quarter. They built their lead as big as 45 points early in the fourth quarter.

With Harden, Irving and Aldridge all out, Nash put Chris Chiozza and Nicolas Claxton in the starting lineup for the first time, the 17th and 18th different players to appear in the first five for the Nets in just 54 games this season. They have used 32 different combinations.

"I'm really proud of the guys. We've had a lot thrown at us this year," coach Steve Nash said.

Durant played 27 minutes and had his highest points total since Jan. 31.

"We're trying to find that balance, and at least he had a good game and got some minutes on his legs," Nash said.

**NEXT TEST**

The Nets would prefer not to play Durant in back-to-back games, so the postponement will force them to make a decision on his status for Wednesday against Eastern Conference co-leader Philadelphia. Pursuing the No. 1 seed for the playoffs might not be as important as keeping their star forward fresh.

"I want to play just to get back in the swing of things, more so than

pinpointing that matchup. We want to get everybody healthy and acclimated to what we're doing out there, and I think that's just as important rather than circling the calendar," Durant said.

Harden won't be ready to play the Sixers. Nash had no update on Irving's status.

**JUST A GAME**

Several Timberwolves players have been outspoken on issues of racial justice over the past year, with the death of George Floyd literally hitting close to home — about three miles from Target Center. The trial of Derek Chauvin, the Minneapolis police officer whose knee was pressed on Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes, has been taking place about eight blocks from the arena.

"I can't imagine what it's like to be African American, to be an African American parent," Nash said. "It's unacceptable, and it's devastating to put yourself in their shoes."

Said Timberwolves guard Josh Okogie: "When nothing changes and the same thing happens, that's I think for me the most difficult part."

**HEAVY HEARTS**

The Timberwolves have also carried the burden of the loss of one of their biggest fans, Jackie Cruz-Towns, the mother of their star center who died at age 58 last year. She fought COVID-19 for more than a month.

**EMPTY ARENA, AGAIN**

With the day-of rescheduling and the afternoon tipoff, the game was played with the gates closed. The Timberwolves have had only two home games in front of fans, with a 3,000-person capacity allowance that started on April 5 as part of the state's relaxation of some COVID-19 restrictions.

**TIP-INS**

Nets: Chiozza hurt his right hand in the first half and did not return. He had four points and five assists in 14 minutes. ... DeAndre Jordan, who was a healthy scratch the past five games, had 13 points and seven rebounds.

Timberwolves: Russell scored 15 points in 20 minutes against his former team. ... Naz Reid started for the 14th time this season in place of Towns. He had two points in 16 minutes.

**UP NEXT**

Nets: Visit Philadelphia on Wednesday. They split the first two games against the Sixers.

Timberwolves: Host Milwaukee on Wednesday and finish the home-stand on Friday against Miami.

## India make winning start at youth world boxing championship



**NEW DELHI, APR 14 (PTI):** India were off to a perfect start at the youth world boxing championships in Kielce, Poland with Poonam (57kg) and Vinka (60kg) advancing to the pre-quarterfinals after notching up contrasting opening-round wins.

While Poonam out-punched Colombia's Valeria Mendoza 5-0, Vinka edged past Russia's Daria Panteleva 3-2 to make the last-16 stage on Tuesday.

Next up for Poonam is Hungary's Beata Varga. Vinka, on the other hand, will square off against Kazakhstan's Zhuldyz Shayakhmetova.

India have fielded a 20-member contingent -- 10 men and as many women -- for the marquee age group event.

The women's side also features 2019 Asian Youth champion Naorem Babyrojisana Chanu (51kg), Sanamacha Chanu (75kg), Alfiya Pathan (+81kg) and three-time Khelo India gold medalist Arundhati Choudhary (69kg) along with Gitika (48kg), Arshi Khanam (54kg), Nisha (64kg) and Khushi (81kg).

The men's challenge is being spearheaded by Asian Youth Championship silver-medallist Ankit Narwal (64kg) and Asian junior champion Chongtham Bishwamitra (49kg).

Other male boxers in the squad are Vikas (52), Sachin (56kg), Akash Gorkha (60kg), Sumit (69kg), Manish (75kg), Vinit (81 kg), Vishal Gupta (91kg) and Jugnoo (+91kg).

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# Hong Kong's delayed legislative elections set for December



**HONG KONG, AUG 14 (AP):** Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam has said that the semiautonomous Chinese territory's legislative elections will take place in December, more than a year after they were postponed by authorities citing public health risks from the coronavirus pandemic.

Lam also said on Tuesday that laws will be amended so that inciting voters not to vote or to cast blank or invalid votes will be made illegal, although voters themselves are free to boycott voting or cast votes as they wish.

"When a person willfully obstructs or prevents any person from voting at an election, we will consider it corrupt conduct," said Lam.

Lam said that the elections will take place

on December 19. The elections were initially slated to be held last September.

Lam was speaking a day ahead of the first reading of draft amendments to various laws in the city's legislature, to accommodate Beijing's planned changes to the city's electoral system.

Beijing in March announced changes to Hong Kong's electoral system, expanding the number of seats in the legislature while reducing the number of directly-elected seats from 35 to 20.

The move is part of a two-phase effort to rein in political protest and opposition in Hong Kong, which is part of China but has had a more liberal political system as a former British colony.

China imposed a national security law on Hong Kong last year and is following up this year with a revamp of the electoral process.

The crackdown comes in the wake of months of pro-democracy protests in 2019 that brought hundreds of thousands to the streets and turned violent as the government resisted the movement's demands.

In the current 70-member legislature, voters elect half the members and the other half are chosen by constituencies representing various professions and interest groups. Many of the constituencies lean pro-Beijing, ensuring that wing a majority in the legislature.

The new body will have 20 elected members, 30 chosen by the

constituencies and 40 by an Election Committee which also chooses the city's leader.

The committee, which will be expanded from 1,200 to 1,500 members, is dominated by supporters of the central government in Beijing.

A new, separate body will also be set up to review the qualifications of candidates for office in Hong Kong to ensure that the city is governed by patriots, in the language of the central government.

Elections for the Election Committee, which will choose the city's leader and 40 lawmakers, will be held on Sept. 19. Elections for the chief executive will take place on March 27, 2022, Lam said Tuesday.

# Iran president calls 60% enrichment an answer to 'evilness'

**DUBAI, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (AP):** Iran's president on Wednesday called his country's decision to dramatically increase its uranium enrichment after saboteurs attacked a nuclear site "an answer to your evilness," saying Israel hoped to derail ongoing talks aimed at reviving Tehran's tattered nuclear deal with world powers.



This weekend's sabotage at the Natanz nuclear facility appears to be part of an escalating shadow war between the two countries. Israeli authorities have not commented on the attack, but are widely suspected of having carried it out.

Iran announced Tuesday it would increase uranium enrichment up to 60%, its highest level ever, in response to the attack. That could draw further retaliation as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed never to allow Tehran to obtain a nuclear weapon. While Iran's move keeps enrichment below weapons-grade levels of 90%, it is a short step away.

Speaking to his Cabinet, an impassioned President Hassan Rouhani said the first-generation IR-1 centrifuges that were damaged in the attack would be replaced by advanced IR-6 centrifuges that enrich uranium much faster.

"You wanted to make our hands empty during the talks but our hands are full," Rouhani said.

He was referring to ongoing talks in Vienna that are aimed at finding a way for the United States to re-enter Tehran's nuclear agreement with world powers and have Iran comply again with its limits. The accord, which former President Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. from in 2018, prevented Iran from stockpiling enough high-enriched uranium

to be able to pursue a nuclear weapon in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions.

Rouhani added: "60% enrichment is an answer to your evilness. ... We cut off both of your hands, one with IR-6 centrifuges and another one with 60%."

Rouhani also accused Israel of being behind the Natanz attack.

"Apparently this is a crime by the Zionists. If the Zionists take an action against our nation, we will respond," he said, without elaborating.

In Jerusalem at a Memorial Day commemoration, Netanyahu appeared to reference Iran.

"We must never remain apathetic to the threats of war and extermination of those who seek to eliminate us," he said.

Rouhani in his comments Wednesday insisted Iran is still hoping that the Vienna talks lead to a negotiated settlement over its program — and the accompanying lifting of punishing sanctions.

France, Germany and the United Kingdom, all parties to the nuclear deal, issued a joint statement Wednesday expressing their "grave concern" over Iran's decision to increase enrichment.

"This is a serious development since the production of highly enriched uranium consti-

tutes an important step in the production of a nuclear weapon," the countries said. "Iran has no credible civilian need for enrichment at this level."

Saudi Arabia, a regional rival to Iran, similarly issued a statement, saying enriching at that level "could not be considered a program intended for peaceful purposes."

"The kingdom calls on Iran to avoid escalation and not to subject the security and stability of the region to more tension, and to engage seriously in the current negotiations," Saudi Arabia said.

Iran insists its nuclear program is peaceful, though the West and the International Atomic Energy Agency says Tehran had an organized military nuclear program until the end of 2003. An annual U.S. intelligence report released Tuesday maintained the American assessment that "Iran is not currently undertaking the key nuclear weapons-development activities that we judge would be necessary to produce a nuclear device."

Iran previously had said it could use uranium enriched up to 60% for nuclear-powered ships. However, the Islamic Republic currently has no such ships in its navy.

Iran had been enriching up to 20% — and even that was a short

technical step to weapons-grade levels.

Officials initially said the enrichment would begin Wednesday. However, an early Wednesday morning tweet from Iran's envoy to the IAEA, Kazem Gharibabadi, suggested it might come later.

He later posted a letter addressed to IAEA Director-General Rafael Grossi warning against "any adventurism by (the) Israeli regime" against Iranian nuclear sites.

"The most-recent cowardly act of nuclear terrorism will only strengthen our determination to march forward and to replace all (damaged) centrifuges with even more advanced and sophisticated machines," Gharibabadi wrote.

The weekend attack at Natanz was initially described only as a black-out in the electrical grid feeding above-ground workshops and underground enrichment halls — but later Iranian officials began calling it an attack.

Alireza Zakani, the hard-line head of the Iranian parliament's research center, referred to "several thousand centrifuges damaged and destroyed" in a state TV interview. However, no other official has offered that figure and no images of the aftermath have been released.

# Somalia's president OKs mandate extension, alarming US, EU

**MOGADISHU, SOMALIA (AP):** Somalia's president has defiantly signed into law an extension of his mandate and that of his government as the United States and others threatened sanctions and warned of further instability in one of the world's most fragile countries.



The standoff prolongs a months-long election crisis after the February national vote was delayed. Critics say President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed's time in office is over. The international community had objected to a mandate extension and warned that the al-Qaida-linked al-Shabab extremist group could take advantage of the country's heated political divisions.

The president late Tuesday signed the controversial law after the lower house of parliament this week voted to effectively extend his mandate for two years while calling for direct elections during that time. Leaders of the Senate, however, called the vote illegal and Somalia's opposition protested.

The U.S. is "deeply disappointed," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement overnight that threatened the

possibility of sanctions, visa restrictions and a re-evaluation of "our bilateral relations." The statement called for Somalia's federal government and regional states to urgently return to talks on the election crisis.

The European Union had warned that signing this week's decision into law would divide Somalia and "constitute a grave threat to the peace and stability of Somalia and its neighbors," and it threatened to consider "concrete measures" in response.

Britain said this week's move "undermines the credibility of Somalia's leadership" and it threatened to work with international partners to "reevaluate our relationship and the nature of our assistance to Somalia."

In response, Somalia's foreign ministry said it was concerned by

"misleading and alarmist statements" by some international partners, and accused them of "inciting the Somali people against their legitimate government." The statement added that Somalia will "reject any attempts to use the humanitarian assistance to blackmail the country," without giving details.

Somalia relies heavily on outside aid to feed, shelter and care for a large population displaced by insecurity and climate shocks, as well as to train and equip its security forces.

In the capital, Mogadishu, frustration deepened.

"What happened can be explained as a coup d'etat executed by a group of people who were hungry for power for so long," said civil society leader Abdullahi Mohamed Shirwa. "This is just like the craziest

political gamble."

Somalia's government has been unable for months to reach agreement on how to carry out the election, with the regional states of Puntland and Jubbaland and objecting on certain issues and the international community warning against holding a partial election. The crisis led to deadly violence against demonstrators who opposed an election delay.

Contentious issues in months of talks on the election process included the formation of the electoral management commission, the selection of commission members for the breakaway region of Somaliland.

Somalia hasn't had a one-person-one-vote direct election in decades.

The country began to fall apart in 1991, when warlords ousted dictator Siad Barre and then turned on each other. Years of conflict and attacks by al-Shabab, along with famine, left this Horn of Africa country of about 12 million people largely shattered.

Al-Shabab controls large parts of southern and central Somalia and often targets the capital with suicide bombings. The extremist group has

# EU to negotiate major vaccine contract extension with Pfizer

**BRUSSELS (AP):** EU Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen announced plans Wednesday for a major contract extension for COVID-19 vaccines with Pfizer stretching to 2023.



In a sign of confidence in a company that has been a mainstay of Europe's vaccination drive so far, von der Leyen said the EU will start negotiating to buy 1.8 billion doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine through 2023.

Von der Leyen expressed full confidence in the technology used for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which is different from the technology behind the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine.

"We need to focus on the technologies that have proven their worth," von der Leyen said.

Pfizer-BioNTech plans to provide the EU with an extra 50 million doses in the 2nd quarter of this year, on top

of 200 million doses already earmarked for the bloc. The deliveries will be especially welcomed by the EU's 27 member nations considering supply delays and concerns over rare blood clots potentially linked to the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine.

Denmark decided Wednesday not to resume use of AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine after putting it on hold last month following reports of rare blood clots in some recipients. The

bulk of the shots given in the Scandinavian country so far have been the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

The European Commission currently has a portfolio of 2.3 billion doses from a half dozen companies and is negotiating more contracts.

The planned negotiations with Pfizer left in the middle what the EU would do about any new contracts with AstraZeneca, which has had massive delivery problems during the first quarter and ex-

pects to send far fewer vaccines than its contract with the EU called for during the second quarter.

The European Commission said in a statement, "We keep all options open to be prepared for the next stages of the pandemic, for 2022 and beyond. We can, however, not comment on contractual issues."

Von der Leyen, however, showed her full support for Pfizer-BioNTech, with the announcement for the massive order.

# Nancy Pelosi invites Prez Biden to address joint session of US Congress on April 28

**WASHINGTON, APR 14, (PTI):** US House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi has invited President Joe Biden to address a joint session of Congress on April 28.

This would be President Biden's maiden address to a Joint Session of Congress.

"Nearly 100 days ago, when you took the oath of office, you pledged in a spirit of great hope that 'Help Is On The Way'. Now, because of your historic and transformative leadership, Help Is Here!" Pelosi wrote in a letter to Biden on Tuesday.

"In that spirit, I am writing to invite you to address a Joint Session of Congress on Wednesday, April 28, to share your vision for addressing the challenges and opportunities of this historic moment," she said.

President Biden has accepted Speaker Pel-

si's invitation.

"The President has accepted the invitation of the Speaker of the House to address a Joint Session of Congress on April 28, the night before his 100th day in office," a White House official confirmed.





**BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE! The Queen's Gambit actress, Anya Taylor-Joy and model Alton Mason are all smiles during a photoshoot for Tiffany & Co in NYC.**

## Thomas Vinterberg to direct series 'Families Like Ours'



**LOS ANGELES, APR 14 (PTI):** Danish filmmaker Thomas Vinterberg will make his small-screen directing debut with the upcoming series "Families Like Ours".

The six-part series, which will be produced by Danish production outfit Zentropa, has been described as a "thought-provoking drama", reported Variety.

Vinterberg, who is currently nominated for best international feature Oscar for his movie "Another Round",

will also co-write the script with Bo Hr Hansen.

The two had previously collaborated for Vinterberg's debut feature film, "The Biggest Heroes".

"Families Like Ours" takes place in summertime Denmark where everything seems normal, but is about to be disrupted by a natural catastrophe.

After a flood slowly takes over the country, Denmark is gradually evacuated. People must bid farewell to what

they love, what they know, and to who they are. In the coming years, Danes disperse in all directions: only houses, schools and empty streets are left.

Vinterberg has been co-developing the series with Zentropa for a year. It will be produced with support from the Danish Public Service funds.

"Families Like Ours" is slated to shoot in late 2021 or early 2022. The cast will be announced at a later stage.

## 'Mirzapur' creator Puneet Krishna boards two shows for Netflix

**MUMBAI, APR 14 (PTI):** Writer-director Puneet Krishna, who is known for his popular crime drama "Mirzapur", is collaborating with Netflix to create and showrun two series, a dark comedy and a drama.

The shows are likely to get into production later this year to early next year.

Talking about his association with the streamer, Krishna said, My association with Netflix is in-line with my vision for myself as a storyteller and for the evolution of my body of work as I have imagined it to be."

Krishna said the streamer had built a vibrant storytelling culture for writers.

"I admire their focussed sense of innovation which offers creative talent like me limitless possibilities to grow and evolve. I continue to be grateful to the audience who have loved my past work and I hope I can continue entertaining them as I start this new chapter," he added.

When reached out for a comment, Monika Shergill, VP, Content, Netflix India called Krishna one of the country's finest storytellers.

Great stories can come from any-



where and be loved everywhere. At Netflix, we are always looking to partner with the best storytellers from all around the world. We want to be the home for the best creators to be able to tell diverse and authentic stories.

"Puneet is undoubtedly one of India's finest storytellers and we are huge fans of his powerful and inventive writing. We're thrilled to welcome Puneet and can't wait to bring his passion and vision alive on Netflix," Shergill said.

Krishna made his debut as the co-writer of the critically acclaimed satire "Bangistan", produced by Excel Entertainment.

He was a part of the writers' room of Amazon Prime's first Indian original "Inside Edge" but his most famous work is "Mirzapur", produced by Excel Entertainment for Amazon Prime. He worked on the show as one of the creators along with Karan Anshuman and Vineet Krishna.

## Alia Bhatt tests negative for COVID-19

**MUMBAI, APR 14 (PTI):** Actor Alia Bhatt on Wednesday said she has tested negative for COVID-19, more than 10 days after contracting the virus.

Bhatt had tested positive for COVID-19 on April 2 and was under home quarantine.

The 28-year-old actor took to Instagram and shared a picture of herself, writing, "the only time being negative is a good thing."

Prior to her diagnosis, the actor was shooting for her upcoming Sanjay Leela Bhansali-directed drama "Gangubai Kathiawadi". The production was halted after Bhatt tested positive.

Maharashtra government has put on hold films, TV serials and advertisement shoots in the state from Wednesday evening as part of the fresh guidelines to curb the



coronavirus cases.

On Tuesday, Mumbai reported 7,898 new COVID-19 cases, taking the tally to 5,35,017.

## Ranveer Singh to collaborate with Shankar for Hindi adaptation of 'Anniyan'

**MUMBAI, APR 14 (PTI):** Bollywood star Ranveer Singh is set to headline the Hindi adaptation of Tamil blockbuster "Anniyan", to be directed by acclaimed filmmaker Shankar who also helmed the original.

The 2005 psychological action thriller featured South star Vikram in the lead and chronicled the story of a man who suffers from multiple personality disorder - working as a lawyer by day and a vigilante at night.

The adaptation, billed as a pan-India project, will be produced by Jayantilal Gada of Pen Studios.

Singh, 35, said he is blessed to be a part of the "spectacular cinematic vision" of Shankar, known for directing blockbusters like Rajinikanth's "Enthiran", "2.0" and "Sivaji The Boss".

The "Gully Boy" actor described the filmmaker as a "true disruptor" who has proved with his films that no vision is large enough to achieve on screen.

"To lead a film like 'Anniyan' is a dream come true for any artiste. Vikram sir, one of our country's finest talents, an artiste who I hugely admire, gave a colossal performance in the original, one that can never be matched.

"I can only hope that my interpretation and rendition of the part also con-



nects with audiences in the same way. It's undoubtedly a once-in-a-lifetime performance piece, and I am ready to give this role every single ounce of my being," Singh said in a statement.

Shankar, 57, said the Hindi adaptation of "Anniyan" needed a "maverick, charismatic showman" which he found in Singh.

"I'm thrilled to make 'Anniyan' for the pan-Indian audience and I'm confident that this powerful story will strike a chord in the hearts of all. In Dr Gada, Ranveer and I have found an ideal producer who believes in the vision we have to change the nativity of content for audiences across the country," the director said.



Gada, chairman and MD of Pen Studios said the film will be one of the biggest cinematic events in the country.

Pen will also be the worldwide distributors of the film.

"We are confident that their collaboration will write a new chapter in the history of Indian cinema. We are announcing the film during a very significant time of Baisakhi and Puthandu to signify Shankar and Ranveer's intent to make a truly pan-Indian entertainer," Gada said.

The movie, co-produced by God Bless Entertainment, is slated to go on the floors in mid 2022

The film's music will be available on Saregama.

### ARIES:

Spirit is under no obligation to make you feel comfortable. Comfort equals stagnation and stagnation is the enemy of growth, Aries. So, allow things to come undone if they need to. Accept the natural ending of things in your life. Truth is, you may or may not have clarity on the path you're meant to choose just yet, and that's okay. It's best to let go of your false sense control and allow the plan to reveal itself.

Tip: Allow things to come undone.

### TAURUS:

What if we said you are your own worst enemy and that you're sabotaging your growth in more ways than you can imagine? It's time to get real with yourself, Taurus. It's time to face the demons of self-doubt. Repeating the affirmation 'I am enough' is a good way to rewire your subconscious and replace the unhealthy beliefs that are weighing you down.

Tip: You were born to fly!

### GEMINI:

Truth tea, Gemini: you are \*not\* their therapist. There's nothing you can do to heal or fix the situation. You have to let them experience what life is throwing their way themselves as you redirect

your focus towards the most important person in your life. Yes, you have hurt and pain too to deal with. You've had your dream shattered in more ways than you can imagine. It's best to sit down with what's coming than to choose the path of denial.

Tip: Work through your own trauma first.

### CANCER:

It's one of those days, Cancer. You're surrounded by love and laughter and the company of the people you love the most. So celebrate your soul ties and let them know how special they are. For some of you, this could be a time of reconnecting with your sibling(s) or cousins. Reach out to them if you're struggling on the work front too. Their insights could help you level up in more ways than you can imagine.

Tip: It's a 'good vibes only' kind of day.

### LEO:

We all start off with an idea of what we want to create in our lives. Time and again, we hit speed breakers which make us question our choice. You are about to hit one such roadblock, Leo. A roadblock that will make you want to give up on the dream. We're not saying you should. We're not saying you shouldn't. All we're saying is let these

feelings pass. You will have clarity on the given matter soon.

Tip: Become an observer of what's coming up.

### VIRGO:

Your success is no accident, Virgo. Your blood, sweat, and tears have helped you get where you are and experience the abundance you now see in your life. Take a moment to acknowledge your efforts and the divine forces that supported your journey. If there's anything you need to know right now, it's that you will find a way out of your financial troubles (if at all) soon. Focus on fulfilling your purpose. That's all!

Tip: You will find a way out of your financial troubles soon.

### LIBRA:

If there's anything your journey has taught you, it's that the plan is overrated and that everything does transpire for a reason. Today, you're giving thanks for all that was and all that will be. You understand that this delay is but a divine detour in the grand scheme of things. On the professional/creative front, you're being reminded that the idea at hand is worth a million bucks. But you have to allow the incubation process to take place as it must.

Tip: Trust the divine detours, Libra.

### SCORPIO:

It's all about zen rituals in the Scorpio HQ. You're spending more time with yourself than you have in a long time. You're spending more time looking within and asking yourself significant questions. You may not have the answers to all of these questions, but you realise that everything you need to know will be revealed to you in due course of time.

Tip: You are becoming your own best friend.

### SAGITTARIUS:

When we're in the midst of chaos, it's hard to make sense of things. Often, it feels like everything that is sacred to us is being taken away at once and that our lives will never be the same. It is only with the passage of time that we're able to understand why things transpired the way that they did. Trust that you will find the answers you seek eventually.

For now, focus on concluding certain chapters and moving forward with dignity and grace.

Tip: Forward and onwards, Sagittarius.

### CAPRICORN:

Intention + Action + Grace = Magic. Read that again and apply it to every single aspect of your life. This is a time of auspicious beginnings, Capricorn. This is a time of sowing your seeds consciously and

watching your ideas come to life. Things on the work and money front are about to take a turn for the better. The project at hand promises to bring big money to the bank soon.

Tip: You've got big plans on your mind.

### Aquarius:

Change is seldom easy to deal with. But if nothing changed, everything would remain constant. And if everything remained constant, we would begin to stagnate, and that is never a good place to be. So, welcome the winds of change with both your arms even if they're stirring up a storm. When you look back at this moment in your life, you will realise how it was the beginning of a major personal transformation in your life.

Tip: Welcome the winds of change, Aquarius.

### PISCES:

Life is not an equation that needs to be solved. It's a mystery that needs to be lived. A mystery that will help you discover the depth of your soul and your connection with everything around you. Yes, you are the Universe in motion, Pisces, and you're understanding this via direct experiences. So trust what you're being shown by your higher self as you consciously drop the questions in your mind.

Tip: You are the Universe in motion.