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2020 WENT
WELL AS AN
ACTOR: NAWAZ
10 VIVACITY

Govt plans breakthrough in kisan talks

Agri Ministry invites 39 unions for dialogue, lists farmers' all concerns in 5-page letter

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

The Ministry of Agriculture on Sunday sent out an invite to 39 farmers' unions to join discussion with the Government again to provide details of their remaining concerns and doubts and asked them to fix the date of the meeting at Vigyan Bhavan according to their convenience to end the protests.

Earlier in the day, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said there has been progress in talks with farmers and the next round of discussion by farmers' unions is likely to be held on Monday or day after.

"I am not exactly aware of the timing but Tomar is likely to meet the representatives of farmers on Monday or the day after to discuss their demands," Shah said while addressing a press conference in Bolpur, West Bengal.

Referring to the Government's earlier written proposal on December 9 for amendments that the farmer groups had rejected, Ministry of Agriculture's Joint Secretary and CEO PM-KISAN Vivek Aggarwal said: "I request those previously invited protesting union leaders to provide details of their remaining concerns and doubts and suggest a date as per convenience for the next round of talks. Please inform us of your remaining concerns and inform us of a



Farmers gather at Singhu border during their sit-in protest against the Centre's farm reform laws in New Delhi on Sunday
Ranjan Dimri | Pioneer

date convenient to you for a meeting at Vigyan Bhavan so that a solution can be arrived at and the present agitation ends soon."

Previous five rounds of formal talks between the Government and 40 farmers' unions failed to break the deadlock with the farmers insisting on repeal of the

Centre's three laws and are camping at various border points of Delhi for over three weeks now.

In a five-page letter, Aggarwal said the Centre is making all efforts to find appropriate solution to resolve all the issues raised by the farmers with an open mind. In the letter, the Government has sent

a detailed proposal to farmers incorporating all their concerns and apprehensions. The letter also highlighted the previous meetings held with farmers' unions. At the same time the Government is continuing talks with representatives of different farmers groups to remove their concerns.

Farmers intensify stir, to hold relay hunger strike at protest sites

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Despite the Government making efforts for a breakthrough in talks with the farmers' unions, the agitating farmers on Sunday announced to intensify their protest against the three farm laws.

Besides a day-long relay hunger strike at all protest sites along national Capital on Monday, they decided to halt toll collections in Haryana from December 25 to 27.

"Farmers will begin a day-long relay hunger strike on Monday at all sites of protest against the new agri laws. It will be started by a team of 11 members at protests sites here," Swaraj India chief Yogendra Yadav said at a press conference at the Singhu Border. He also urged people demonstrating against the laws across the country to observe a day-long hunger strike at their respective protest sites.

Announcing the next move, farmer leader Jagjeet Singh Dalewala said, "On December 27, during Prime Minister Modi's Mann Ki Baat,

we would appeal to everyone to beat 'thali' at their homes during the programme."

Farmers' leader Rakesh Tikait, who was also part of the press conference, along with Yadav and Dalewala, said that farmers protesting the new agri laws will celebrate Kisan Diwas on December 23 and "we request people to not cook lunch for a day".

On Sunday, the agitating farmers paid tribute to the farmers who lost their lives during this agitation, and condolence meets were organised at different places. Punjab farmer leader Gurvinder Singh, associated with the BKU, said tribute is being paid to the farmers who lost their lives during the agitation while fighting for their basic rights. As many as at least 30 farmers have died since the protest started.

Protesting farmers' unions had earlier responded to PM Modi and Agriculture Minister Tomar in an open letter saying their statements were "factless" and that the Centre has zero sympathy with farmers.

Oli gets Parliament dissolved, Opp cries Constitutional coup



Nepalese students affiliated with Nepal Student Union burn an effigy of Nepalese Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Oli during a protest in Kathmandu on Sunday AP

PTI ■ KATHMANDU

Nepal's embattled Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli on Sunday sprang a surprise on his rivals and got the President to dissolve Parliament, a controversial move amidst a prolonged tussle for power between him and former premier Pushpa Kamal Dahal "Prachanda" within the ruling dispensation.

President Bidya Devi Bhandari dissolved Parliament's House of Representatives at Oli's recommendation and announced mid-term general election in April-May, a decision termed "unconstitutional, impulsive and autocratic" by the Opposition and dissidents in the Nepal Communist Party (NCP).

Expressing dissatisfaction

over Oli's move to dissolve the House, seven ministers, belonging to the Prachanda faction, announced their resignation in a joint statement issued during a press conference here.

Earlier in the day, an emergency meeting of the Cabinet chaired by Oli decided to recommend the President for the dissolution of Parliament, a senior Standing Committee member of the NCP told PTI.

The first phase of the mid-term election will be held on April 30 and May 10 for the second phase, the Rashtrapati Bhawan said.

The 275-member House of Representatives, which is the lower house of Parliament, was elected in 2017 for a five-year term. The upper house is the National Assembly.

Continued on Page 2

Men more vulnerable to Covid death

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Men are not only highly vulnerable to catching coronavirus disease compared to women, the hospitalised male Covid-19 patients have a 30 per cent greater risk of dying compared to women of the same age and health status, a study has found. The study is published in the Clinical Infectious Diseases.

Hospitalised patients who were obese, had hypertension or poorly managed diabetes also had a higher risk of dying compared to those who did not have these conditions, said the study.

Those aged 20 to 39 with these conditions had the biggest difference in their risk of dying compared to their healthier peers.

For the study, the researchers evaluated nearly 67,000 hospitalised Covid-19 patients in 613 hospitals across the United States to determine the link between certain common patient characteristics and the risk of dying from Covid-19.

"Predicting which hospitalised Covid-19 patients have the highest risk of dying has taken on urgent importance as cases and hospitalisations in the US continue to surge to record

high numbers during the month of December," said the study authored among others by Anthony Harris, Professor at University of Maryland School of Medicine (UMSOM) in the US.

"Knowledge is power in many ways, so I think understanding which hospitalised Covid-19 patients are at high risk of mortality can help guide difficult treatment decisions," Harris said.

For example, higher-risk patients may be considered for closer monitoring or ICU admission. Healthcare providers may also want to consider these risks when

determining which Covid-19 patients could benefit the most from the new monoclonal antibody therapies that, if given in the first few days of the infection, can reduce the risk of hospitalisation.

Age remained the strongest predictor of mortality from Covid-19. Overall, nearly 19 per cent of hospitalised Covid-19 patients died from their infection with the lowest mortality among pediatric patients, which was less than 2 per cent. Mortality rates increased with each decade of life with the highest mortality, 34 per cent, among those aged 80 and older.

Continued on Page 2

Shah blows 'Parivartan' bugle in Bengal rally

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ BOLPUR/BURDWAN

Tomake marbe je araaale barche shey... Ebar era gelo (Your terminator is growing under cover... now these people are gone). Karim Mollah, a small time tailor craned his head out of his small window to watch the overflowing humanity and un mindfully uttered these "unlikely" words. Unlikely because you would not usually hear a Muslim man quoting lines from Mahabharata — presaging Lord Krishna's arrival to eliminate Kansa the cruel king.

No living person in Bolpur remembers when for the last time such a large sea of human-

ity marched down the one-mile connector between Dak Bungalow Crossing and Bolpur Circle.

True, seldom has Bolpur seen a crowd explode like the one it did on Sunday when Union Home Minister Amit Shah led a huge road show calling for a second Parivartan (political change) in Bengal.

"This large crowd will herald the Parivartan... Parivartan to stop infiltration, to finish tolabazi (extortion) and end political violence so that we can transform Didi's Bengal into Sonar Bangla as envisaged by the likes of Subhas Babu (Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose)."

Continued on Page 2



Union Home Minister Amit Shah during a roadshow ahead of West Bengal Assembly polls 2021 at Bolpur in Birbhum district on Sunday PTI

European countries ban flights from UK as Covid strain 'out of control'

AP ■ BERLIN

Several European Union nations on Sunday banned flights from the UK and Germany was considering limiting such flights to make sure that a new strain of coronavirus sweeping across southern England does not establish a strong foothold on the continent. The Netherlands banned flights from the UK. For at least the rest of the year while Belgium issued a flight ban for 24 hours starting at midnight and also halted train links to Britain, including the Eurostar.

Austria and Italy said they would halt flights from the UK but did not give details on any timing of the ban.

Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio said on Twitter that the Government was preparing the measure "to protect Italians" from the new coronavirus variant.

About two dozen flights were scheduled to arrive in Italy on Sunday, most in the northern region of Lombardy but also in Veneto and Lazio, which include Venice and Rome respectively.

Continued on Page 2

CAPSULE

NOIDA: 1st FLIGHT LIKELY BY DEC 2023, JAN 2024

Noida: Work on the upcoming Noida International Airport is progressing as scheduled and the first flight is expected to take off by December 2023 or January 2024, a senior Government executive said on Sunday. Also, the resettlement and rehabilitation of over three thousand families who are getting displaced due to the mega greenfield project is likely to be completed by May 2021, Noida International Airport Limited (NIAL) CEO Arun Vir Singh said.

Pakistan-sponsored TRF declares jihad against J&K Police

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Pakistan-sponsored the Resistance Front (TRF), a terror group floated by the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), has said the police is its prime target in Jammu & Kashmir and next on the radar is the Government.

TRF commander Irfan said, "The war we have waged is in particular against the State police because they are our real enemies and then the occupying India."

Urging his family not to trace him, he exhorted the youth of Kashmir to be ready for jihad. Detailed report on Page 4

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PM to deliver inaugural address at India Int'l Science Fest on Tue

New Delhi: Prime Minister Narendra Modi will deliver the inaugural address at the India International Science Festival (IISF) on Tuesday via video conferencing, the Prime

Minister's Office (PMO) said on Sunday. To promote scientific temper in society, the Ministry of Science and Technology and Ministry of Earth Sciences in

association with Vijnana Bharati conceptualised the India International Science Festival. Prime Minister Modi will deliver the inaugural address at

the India International Science Festival-2020 on December 22 at 4:30 pm via video conferencing, the Prime Minister's Office said. Union Minister Harsh

Vardhan will also be present on the occasion, it said. Launched in 2015, the IISF is a celebration to promote science and technology. The aim is to engage the

public with science, celebrate the joy of science and show how Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) can provide solutions to improve lives.

The goal of India International Science Festival-2020 is to help the youth develop 21st century skills, with a focus on scientific knowledge, creativity, critical thinking,

problem-solving, and teamwork. A long-term objective is to encourage students to study and work in scientific fields. **PTI**

100 children reported missing from South Delhi traced in 2020

New Delhi: As many as 100 children kidnapped or reported missing by their respective families in 2020 have been traced and reunited with their families in Delhi Police's South District here, a senior officer said on Sunday. Of these children traced by the Anti-Human Trafficking Unit of South District police, 80 are still below the age of 18. These missing children were traced in Delhi and other states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and West Bengal. "These 100 children were reported missing at various police stations in Delhi and nearby states. The AHTU team put in sincere and systematic

efforts to trace them," said Atul Thakur, DCP South. The Delhi Police said that Sub-Inspectors Mohammad Shafiq and Virender, and ASI MP Singh played an important role in tracing these missing children. From January 2020 till October, 2,629 children were traced by Delhi Police out of 3,507 reported missing. The Delhi Commissioner of Police has announced an incentive scheme wherein any Constable or Head Constable who helps recover 50 or more missing children below the age of 14 within 12 calendar months will be considered for out-of-turn promotion. **IANS**

Yogi pushes for robust logistics infrastructure

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has issued directions for further strengthening of the investor-friendly industrial ecosystem and for building a robust logistics infrastructure in the state. The chief minister's response comes in the wake of keen interest evinced by the investors and investments worth several hundred billion rupees being in the pipeline due to the industry-friendly policies of the state. The state government has nominated Additional Chief Secretary (Infrastructure & Industrial Development) Alok Kumar as state nodal officer for developing the integrated state logistics plan aimed at overall development of logistics sector. Kumar will head a newly created state logistics cell to func-

tion in sync with national logistics division for development of supply chains and warehousing facilities for industries. The officials of state government departments like Planning, Transport, Civil Aviation, Revenue, PWD, Export Promotion Bureau, UP Expressways Industrial Development Authority (UPEIDA) will be the key members on board, and nodal officers from Central agencies like National Highways Authority of India (NHAI), Airports Authority of India (AAI), Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI), etc. will be special invitees to the cell. The state government will also set up a state logistics coordination committee under the chairmanship of the chief secretary to monitor the progress

and implementation of the logistics plan. UP's Development Minister Satish Mahana said in a statement here on Sunday that, "In the backdrop of Atmanirbhar Bharat mission for building a self-reliant India and in response to supply chain disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic, such an integrated plan would ensure coordinated action and focused attention towards logistics and supply chain issues in the state." Additional Chief Secretary (Infrastructure & Industrial Development) Alok Kumar said that in addition to granting industry status to the logistics sector and drastically reducing cost of land and operations, the state government had already made numerous new provisions to give impetus to this sector.

As a result, Uttar Pradesh is attracting sizable investments in the warehousing and logistics sector. So far, six proposals worth approximately Rs 438 crores of investment have been received in the sector. Kumar said the state government would work on six improvement parameters, viz. ease of arranging logistics at competitive rates, quality of logistics infrastructure, quality of logistics service providers, safety and security of cargo movement, efficiency of regulatory procedures and state coordination and facilitation to strengthen the logistics infrastructure in UP. It is pertinent here to mention that the UP government had launched its incentive policy for warehousing and logistics in 2018. Moreover, recently the Uttar Pradesh government rationalised its land use

policy to facilitate land for the logistics sector at lower prices and lower conversion fees. The development authorities in the state are accordingly amending their zoning regulations, master plans and by-laws to apply industrial land use and industrial land use conversion charges for logistics parks and units besides lowering the eligibility limits from 50 acres to 25 acres for setting up logistics parks across the state. With a network of expressways and the Eastern Dedicated Freight Corridor (EDFC) and the Western Dedicated Freight Corridor (WDFC) intersecting at Dabri in Greater Noida, it is envisaged to be the largest logistics hub in India. The state is coming up with multi-modal logistics/transport hubs at Boraki and Varanasi. Uttar Pradesh is one of the pioneering states to

come up with a private logistics park policy. The upcoming Noida International Airport at Jewar in Greater Noida, which will be one of the largest international airports in India, has added to the state's advantage. Together with the upcoming National Waterways-1 to ferry cargo from the eastern seaport of Haldia to Varanasi, the connectivity web of air, water, road and rail network created in the state will help the industries and manufacturing units switch seamlessly between different modes of transport as they send their goods to markets in India and abroad. Being one of the focus states under UDAN Regional Connectivity Scheme, over 25 routes have been identified in the state to strengthen the local air connectivity.

More 'innocent' Delhi riots accused get bail with our help: JUH

New Delhi: At least two dozen "innocent" accused in the February riots in northeast Delhi which broke out following clashes over the CAA have managed to secure bail with legal help from the Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind, the organisation said. JUH President Arshad Madani said: "Our legal struggle will continue for justice to all innocent people." The Jamiat, in a statement,

said that the Delhi High Court has granted conditional bail to Rehan Pardhan, Arshad Qayyum, Irshad Ahmed, Muhammad Rehan, Reyast Ali, Shah Alam, Rashid Saifi and Zubair Ahmed while accused Zubair Ahmed has been released from jail. Earlier, bail was granted to Ali, Shah Alam, Saifi, Qayyum, Mohammad Shadab, Mohammad Abid and other accused by the Karkarduma

Sessions Court. Advocate Zaheer-ud-Din Babar Chauhan and his assistant, Advocate Dinesh, appeared for the accused on behalf of Jamiat. Welcoming the bail to 24 accused, Madani said that the Jamiat's intention is not only to secure release on bail, but "an attempt to bring justice to the innocent people who have been arrested in the riots on false charges".

He said that their team of lawyers is working on this point and release of the accused on bail is the first success of the lawyers "but our legal struggle will continue until such people are given complete justice". Madani also contended that reports of some newspapers and human rights group like Amnesty International have uncovered the "true story" of the Delhi riots. "The truth has come out to

the world that in the name of investigation and action, the real culprits have been saved by the police, and the innocent people who did nothing in the riots have been arrested. Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind could not remain silent on this blatant injustice, so it decided to provide free legal aid to the victims and formed a regular panel of experienced professionals," he said. The JUH chief said that his

organisation has, for the last 70 years, been demanding a strict law against violence, atrocities and riots based on religion in which the district administration should be held accountable. He said that "there is no doubt that Delhi riots were planned and communal forces were working behind it, but it was unfortunate that the investigation file was almost closed by arresting innocent people". **IANS**

UP CM initiative helps micro, small units

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

The initiative taken by Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath to support the industries during the COVID-19 pandemic has paid rich dividends because as many as 5,12,000 micro and small units of Uttar Pradesh have availed of loans amounting to Rs 22, 800 crore to further increase their businesses. "With this money, the industries not only increased production in the coronavirus pandemic period but also made a stronghold in the market," a government spokesman said. The MSME sector, considered to be the backbone of the country, may have faced a lot of problems during the COVID-19 period, but due to government's policy the micro and small units in the state have got a lot of relief. An official said the chief minister himself distributed the loans to the MSMEs several times through loan fairs and issued instructions to banks that businessmen should not face problems in getting loans. "As a result, the micro and small units under CGTMSE (Credit Guarantee Fund Trust for Micro and Small Enterprises) have reached the

first position in taking loans in the country," he said. CGTMSE CEO Sandeep Verma said that under this scheme, loans were guaranteed to small-scale entrepreneurs so that entrepreneurs who did not have bank guarantees and wanted to grow their business could get loans under this scheme and increase their business further. "Since loans are guaranteed under the CGTMSE scheme, therefore banks do not face any problem in giving loans. The Uttar Pradesh government has done fabulous work under this scheme," Verma said. The CGTMSE scheme is being operated under the joint initiative of the Ministry of Micro and Small Industries, and SIDBI of the Central government. The CGTMSE scheme compensates the loss of loan amount received from banks by micro and small-scale industrial units working in the country. It is worth mentioning that the top eleven states that have provided the maximum amount of loans to the industries are Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala, West Bengal, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar.

Shah blows 'Parivartan' bugle in Bengal rally

From Page 1 The Mamata Banerjee Government epitomised "politicisation of administration, criminalisation of politics and institutionalisation of corruption", Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday told reporters launching a blistering attack on the Bengal ruling party Trinamool Congress. Calling for a change of power the Home Minister singled out the Trinamool

Congress' bid to focus on its achievements saying despite tall claims Bengal had remained a laggard in every field and it was only Prime Minister Narendra Modi who could restore the State to its former glory. He also said a son of soil will be BJP' Bengal CM candidate. Though at a little distance district Trinamool Congress president Anubrata Mondal making a desperate attempt to squeeze out some attention from Shah's rally — with a counter street march not even one-tenth in size of the first one — dismissed the saffron procession as one "filled with people ferried in from outside," the chock-a-block balconies and brimming terraces said it all. "BJP aschei ... bhai ebaar guchiye phel, (the BJP is definitely comingnow arrange for your exit)," Samir Roy, a TMC worker from Nichupatti, said in desperation: "Eshob CP(M)er khela (this is all CP(M)'s game plan)." The women like Pragma showed concerns for the Home Minister's security wondering "what is the need to move in an open vehicle ... there are bad people in the prowl," even as her companion Gayatri said "the security people must have sanitized the entire area... each person is undersurveillance." Arindam, a school teacher

Bandh Goda, said "if the crowd signifies something then we will be able to caste our vote ... we have not been able to do so for the past several years." His friend from DangaliKali Tola said "Bolpur was earlier known for Shantiniketan ... today it is known for a local TMC politician who openly threatens to bomb police vehicles and chop off opposition hands ... One hopes the Home Minister will be able to stop this." But then others people in the crowd like the gentlemen from NatunPalli and Sri Niketan wondered whether the BJP would be able to bring about change because in 2016 too we saw Left rallies longer and bigger than that of the Trinamool but people like us were never allowed to vote."

Govt plans to measure depth of Himalayan glaciers to assess water availability

New Delhi: As global warming affects the Himalayas, the Ministry of Earth Sciences is planning to measure the depth of glaciers in the region to assess their volume and gauge the water available in them, officials said on Sunday. The project will start next summer, sometime in June-July, said, M Rajeevan, the ministry's secretary. Ravichandran, the Director of the National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR), which will execute the project, said the country's remote and high-altitude research centre, Himansh, is also studying the Himalayan

climate. The centre was established in 2016. "The plan is to first study seven glaciers in the Chandra river basin," he said. The Chandra river is a major tributary of the Chenab river which itself is a tributary of the Indus. The Himalayan glaciers are a major source of water for rivers originating from there. The Himalayan rivers are also a lifeline for the Indo-Gangetic plains, home to several million people. The NCPOR director said while the area of the glaciers is already known with the help of satellites, what needs to be

known is the volume. "The purpose of studying the depth of the glaciers is to understand the volume. This will also help us understand the availability of water and whether the glaciers are increasing or shrinking," Ravichandran added. He said they will be using a radar technology that uses microwave signals. It can penetrate through the ice and reach the rocks, something which the satellite images cannot do. The signals, after reflecting on the rocks can help understand the depth. **PTI**

Men more vulnerable to Covid death

From Page 1 "Older patients still have the highest risk of dying, but younger patients with obesity or hypertension have the highest risk of dying relative to other patients their age without these conditions," said the study lead author Katherine Goodman, a postdoctoral fellow at UMSOM. "Doctors may want to be paying extra attention to these younger patients when they're hospitalised to ensure they detect any complications quickly," the study said. The researchers also found some good news in their study findings. Death rates among hospitalised patients have fallen dramatically since the early weeks of the pandemic in April. This is likely due to the availability of new treatments and more knowledge in the medical community on how to properly manage and care for hospitalised patients.

One of them --- a worker at a local rice mill --- who refused to share his name informed how "Bolpur has a minority vote share of about 35 per cent" and how in the 2019 Parliamentary elections the BJP and TMC fought neck and neck with the former leading in 5 out of 11 Assembly seats. "The TMC was barely 3 per cent ahead of the BJP ... if this huge turnout means something then this time they will overwhelm Mamata Banerjee and Kesho da (Anubrata Mondal)," they maintain. **PTI**

German officials, meanwhile, were considering "serious options" regarding incoming flights from the UK, but have not yet taken action. The Czech Republic, meanwhile, imposed stricter quarantine measures from people arriving from the UK. The EU governments say they are acting in response to tougher measures imposed Saturday in London and its surrounding areas by British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. He immediately put those regions into a new Tier 4 level of restrictions, saying that a

PENSIONERS CAN SUBMIT LIFE CERTIFICATES TILL FEB 28: UNION MINISTER

New Delhi: In a major relief to central government pensioners amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the date for submission of life certificate has been extended up to February 28 next year, Union Minister Jitendra Singh said on Sunday. "This decision has been taken considering all the sensitivities to avoid pandemic risk emanating from gathering of crowds at the pension disbursing banks," said Singh, the Minister of State for Personnel. **PTI**

European countries ban flights from UK as Covid strain 'out of control'

fast-moving new variant of the virus that is 70 per cent more transmissible than existing strains appears to be driving the rapid spread of new infections in London and southern England. "There's no evidence to suggest it is more lethal or causes more severe illness," Johnson said, or that vaccines will be less effective against it. Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said Sunday said he was issuing the flight ban for 24 hours starting at midnight "out of precaution." "There are a great many

questions about this new mutation and if it is not already on the mainland," he said. He hoped to have more clarity by Tuesday. The World Health Organisation tweeted late Saturday that "We're in close contact with UK officials on the new #COVID19 virus variant." It promised to update governments and the public as more is learned about this variant. The new strain of coronavirus was identified in south-eastern England in September and has been circulating in the area since, a WHO official

told the BBC on Sunday. "What we understand is that it does have increased transmissibility, in terms of its ability to spread," said Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO's technical lead on COVID-19. Studies are under way to better understand how fast it spreads and whether "it's related to the variant itself, or a combination of factors with behavior," she said. She said the strain had also been identified in Denmark, the Netherlands and Australia, where there was one case that did not spread further. **AP**

being made to oust him after his government redrew the country's political map by incorporating three strategically key Indian territories. India had termed as "untenable" the "artificial enlargement" of the territorial claims by Nepal after its Parliament unanimously approved the new political map of the country featuring Lipulekh, Kalapani, and Limpiyadhura areas which India maintains belong to it. The Prachanda and Madhav Nepal faction had been urging Oli to quit the post of Prime Minister amidst growing accusation and counter-accusation between the two factions in the NCP. In June, Oli, known for his pro-China leanings, claimed that efforts were

Oli gets Parliament dissolved, Opp cries Constitutional coup

From Page 1 The move comes as the intra-party feud reached climax in the ruling NCP which has been witnessing months long tussle between two factions, one led by 68-year-old Oli and Party's chairman and another led by 66-year-old "Prachanda", also the executive chair of the party and former premier. Expressing dissatisfaction over Oli's move to dissolve the House, seven ministers from his Cabinet resigned in protest. Those who put in their papers are minister for science and education Giriraj Mani Pokharel, minister for energy

and water resources Barshaman Pun, minister for agriculture Ghanashyam Bhushal, minister for labour and employment Rameshwar Raya Yadav, minister for tourism Yogesh Bhattarai, minister for forest and environment Shakti Basnet and minister for drinking water and sanitation Bina Magar. The seven ministers, belonging to the Prachanda faction, announced their resignation in a joint statement issued during a press conference here. The Nepali Congress (NC), the main Opposition in Parliament, said that Oli's rec-

ommendation to dissolve the House was against the provisions and spirit of the Constitution, and the party will strongly oppose the move. "We have taken this move as Oli's final attempt to fulfil his authoritarian desire," the NC said in a statement issued by party's spokesman Bishwa Prakash Sharma. "It is condemnable to push the country towards instability because of intra-party conflict amidst the Covid-19 pandemic." The party also called the decision "unconstitutional and impulsive," and appealed to President Bhandari to fulfil

her role as a guardian of the Constitution by rejecting it. Spokesperson of the NCP Narayanakaji Shrestha termed Oli's move as "undemocratic, anti-constitutional and autocratic". Meanwhile, the NCP's Standing Committee meeting termed Oli's move as "unconstitutional, undemocratic and based on his personal whim", and recommended to take a disciplinary action against the prime minister, Standing Committee member Ganesh Shah told PTI. The recommendation for action will be forwarded to the Central Committee meeting which will be held on Wednesday, he said. Of the total 44 members of the Standing Committee, 27 were present. Oli and his supporters skipped the meeting.

"The leaders have consulted about the problems caused by the decision of PM Oli," said Prachanda's press advisor Bishnu Sapkota. Prachanda had visited Oli's residence on Sunday morning, but he had returned without meeting the Prime Minister, media reports said. Senior NCP leader and former premier Madhav Kumar Nepal termed the move as unconstitutional. Constitutional experts have also termed the move as unconstitutional. As per the Constitution, there is no provision of dissolving Parliament by the Prime Minister of a majority government, they said, adding that it is likely to be challenged in court. As long as there is a possibility of forming the govern-

ment, there is no provision to dissolve the House, said constitutional expert Dinesh Tripathi. Another expert Bhimarjun Acharya termed it a constitutional coup. Former premier Dr Baburam Bhattarai said: "By inviting political uncertainty like before, this decision has torn apart our effort to improve the system from the Constitution Assembly. This is against democratic values and the Constitution." The Prachanda and Madhav Nepal faction had been urging Oli to quit the post of Prime Minister amidst growing accusation and counter-accusation between the two factions in the NCP. In June, Oli, known for his pro-China leanings, claimed that efforts were

being made to oust him after his government redrew the country's political map by incorporating three strategically key Indian territories. India had termed as "untenable" the "artificial enlargement" of the territorial claims by Nepal after its Parliament unanimously approved the new political map of the country featuring Lipulekh, Kalapani, and Limpiyadhura areas which India maintains belong to it. The Prachanda and Madhav Nepal faction had been urging Oli to quit the post of Prime Minister amidst growing accusation and counter-accusation between the two factions in the NCP. In June, Oli, known for his pro-China leanings, claimed that efforts were

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Farmers brave sinking mercury, stick to their guns

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Thousands of farmers protesting at Delhi borders against the Centre's new agri laws remained firm in their demands of repealing the legislations, even as the city recorded its coldest morning this season, with the mercury dipping to 3.4 degrees Celsius on Sunday. The farmers' agitation, which has entered its fourth week, has also led to traffic diversions at various

border points causing inconvenience to commuters.

Ever since the agitation began, the Delhi Traffic Police has been constantly putting updates on Twitter to alert commuters about the closure of certain roads and suggested them to take alternative routes.

According to the traffic police, Tikri and Dhansa borders are closed for all traffic movement. The Jhatikara Border is open only for two-wheelers and pedestrians.

However, for those travelling to Haryana, the Delhi Traffic Police said some borders are opened -- the Jharoda border (only for single carriage-way), Daurala, Kapashera, Badusarai, Rajokri NH 8, Bijwasan/Bajghera, Palam Vihar and Dundaheera.

The Ghazipur border is closed for traffic coming from Noida and Ghaziabad due to the ongoing protest.

Those travelling to Delhi can take alternative routes via

Anad Vihar, DND, Apsara and Bhopra borders, it said.

The Chilla border between Noida and Delhi is open for traffic but for just one carriageway. The other carriageway from Noida to Delhi is closed, according to the traffic police. Singhu, Auchandi, Piau Maniyari, Sabholi and Mangesh borders are closed and commuters are suggested to take alternate routes via Lampur, Safiabad and Singhu school toll tax borders, it said.



Atishi meets protesting farmers

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Am Aadmi Party national spokesperson and MLA Atishi met the farmers who have been protesting at the Singhu border and made rotis, distributed fruits among the farmers.

Atishi said, "It is because of Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's instructions that

servicing the farmer's brothers and sisters is the call of duty for every one of us. It has been 22 days since farmers started braving this cruel cold at Delhi borders, unfortunate that the Central govt. is doing nothing for the farmers."

Talking to the media, Atishi reiterated the resolution of CM Arvind Kejriwal that, "Delhi government has made

arrangements from drinking water to toilets and set up health camps that are functioning 24x7. As long as farmers are on the borders of Delhi, fighting for their rights, every MLA of Delhi Government and AAP will be there to serve them."

"If the central government is concerned about the farmers, about the people of this country,

they will immediately withdraw all the three black laws, so that the farmers and their families can go home relieved," she said.

The AAP leader further said that the whole nation as well as Delhi is grateful to the farmers of India. To ensure that farmers do not face any further problems, the Delhi government will continue to help every day and continue to do its work, she said.

Miraculous escape for many as pickup driver tries to mow down people in city hospital

STAFF REPORTER ■ GURUGRAM

In a shocking incident, a pickup vehicle driver tried to crush people with his vehicle inside a hospital near Basai Chowk late on Friday night after a domestic fuel between the two groups.

The entire incident was captured on CCTV cameras installed at the incident spot. The video of the incident later went viral on social media.

The pickup driver also damaged an ambulance and five bikes which were stationed outside the hospital premises including the hospital's medical store. An FIR in this regard was filed on Saturday.

The accused vehicle driver has been identified as Vikas Joon of Dhankot village in Gurugram.

According to the police, Balwan Singh, the director of Shri Balaji Hospital located at Basai Chowk, told the police that on Friday late night, two women and two men came to his hospital due to some injuries and he assumed that a cause behind the injuries were fighting between two groups.

"When the injured people were undergoing treatment inside the hospital two of their family members were talking to someone standing outside the hospital. Shortly thereafter, a speeding pick-up vehicle driver came and tried to crush the family members of the injured standing outside the hospital

but they luckily escaped unhurt and ran inside the hospital to save themselves," Singh told the police.

At this, the pickup driver turned the vehicle back and rammed the vehicle of the hospital and a medical store and attempted to take the pickup truck into the hospital premises.

The vehicle driver reportedly attempted to take the vehicle inside the hospital premises about 8 times.

The pickup driver severely damaged an ambulance parked outside the hospital, the medical store outside the hospital, and damaged 5 bikes. Para medical staff was present in the medical store during the incident which escaped unhurt.

Later the hospital staff informed the owner of the hospital about the incident, who reached the spot and informed the police about the entire incident.

"The entire incident was captured in a CCTV camera installed at the incident spot. The actual reason behind the incident will be cleared once the accused driver will be arrested but it seems like some domestic issues between the two groups behind the incident. A case of negligence driving and other various sections of the IPC was registered against the vehicle driver at Sector-9A police station," said Bijender Singh, station house officer (SHO) of the police station.

Farmers from UP reach Delhi to lend support to stir

STAFF REPORTER ■ GHAZIABAD

Several farmers from Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand on their tractors and trolleys came here at Ghazipur border (UP Gate) to support the ongoing farmers' agitation against the Centre's new farm laws. The farmers have camped at Indrapuram Ramlila ground near the protesting site.

"The district administra-

tion has made separate arrangements at the Indrapuram Ramlila Maidan for the farmers who have come to support in order to ensure that there is no untoward incident," said an official.

Following the protest near GT Road Mohan Nagar, the traffic was also diverted by the police officials. District Magistrate, Ajay Shankar Pandey said that the matter has been resolved in time and

there is no blockade of the road near GT road Mohan Nagar.

The DM after scores of farmers arrived at the site made arrangements at Indrapuram Ramlila Ground. Meanwhile, former Uttarakhand Chief Minister Harish Rawat also reached UP Gate and announced his full support to the agitating farmers.

Rakesh Tikait, national spokesperson of Bharatiya

Kisan Union, warned that the administration should not stop farmers coming to join the movement or else the results will not be good.



Raghav Chadha gets additional duty as Punjab unit co-incharge

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Am Aadmi Party (AAP) senior leader and national spokesperson Raghav Chadha on Sunday has been assigned additional responsibility of the Party's Punjab Unit's Co-Incharge. The announcement was made Sunday by party convener Arvind Kejriwal.

On being appointed the Co-Incharge of the AAP's Punjab unit, Chadha thanked Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, "I would like to thank party national convener Arvind Kejriwal for instilling such confidence in me. As Co-incharge of the Party's Punjab Unit, I will give my blood and sweat to this position and hope to do my bit in furthering the party's position in Punjab. India is an agrarian country and whenever it comes to agriculture Punjab stands at the forefront. Our focus will be to make Punjab a truly prosperous and golden state," he said.

Asserting the party's position to make Punjab a state to reckon with, Chadha said, "Punjab is going through challenging times. Our focus in the State will be on education and prosperity. It pains me to see how the youth of Punjab is spoiling its future by getting sucked into the vicious cycle of drugs and unemployment. Farmers have been facing severe problems as well. I take it as my personal responsibility



to change these circumstances, and am certain the AAP in Punjab will succeed in making the State green, happy and prosperous."

"The ordinary citizen in Punjab is tired and angry with the BJP, Congress and Akali Dal. Each of these parties has cheated innocent farmers. In such a precarious situation, the presence of Chadha is expected to increase the confidence of AAP Punjab Unit manifold," the party said in a statement.

As Vice Chairman of Delhi Jal Board, Chadha has also played an important role in realising Kejriwal's dream of delivering clean water to each house in Delhi.

Chadha is currently the MLA of Rajinder Nagar constituency and Vice Chairman of DJB. He has been with the party since before its inception and has been instrumental in drafting the Lokpal Bill as well.

AAP to take out 'Padyatras' in all 272 wards on Dec 22

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Am Aadmi Party (AAP) will take out 'Padyatras' in all the 272 wards on December 22 and turn the case of the misappropriation of Rs 2500 crores by the BJP-ruled MCD into a mass movement.

The AAP workers will expose the BJP's corruption in the MCD by meeting the people in all the wards of Delhi and expose the party's misdeeds before the Delhi people; AAP leader and MCD in-charge Durgesh Pathak said on Sunday.

Addressing the media, Pathak said, "You all must have seen that BJP led MCD misappropriated an amount of Rs2500 crores. This amount was of the people of Delhi and is a loss to the public exchequer. This was paid as a tax by Delhi citizens. Last week when North, South, and East MCDs released their budgets, the misappropriation of Rs 2500 crores

The AAP workers will expose the BJP's corruption in the MCD by meeting the people in all the wards of Delhi and expose the party's misdeeds before the Delhi people

came at the forefront. To call for a CBI investigation into this matter, the AAP has been determined and is fighting for the same on roads as well as in Vidhan Sabha."

"Rajindar Nagar MLA Raghav Chadha ji, MLA Kuldeep ji, MLA Rituraj ji, Sanjay Jha ji, and Rajesh Gupta ji were going to meet with Home Minister Amit Shah, but they were put under house arrest and were later sent to jail. Atishi, MLA Kalkaji, and three of our leaders of the opposition were denied permission to meet with the Lieutenant

Governor; they were roughly dealt with and later taken into police custody," he said.

"We held a Delhi Assembly session, in which we proposed a CBI investigation which was met with opposing opinions by BJP MLAs. The AAP wants to ask them that if and when you say there is no corruption, why are you afraid of a CBI investigation into the matter?" he asked. However, responding to AAP leader, Delhi BJP Spokesperson Praveen Shankar Kapoor said that that nothing can be more shameful than AAP organising mass programmes to spread canard about 2500 crores scam in North MCD.

"The purpose of daily propaganda by AAP leaders is to malign the image of BJP which rules three MCDs. The AAP leaders themselves know that there was no scam and that is the reason why the Kejriwal Government is not writing to CBI for an inquiry," he added.

Civic bodies Mayors end protest

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Mayors of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)- ruled all the three corporations ended protest on Sunday after Union Housing after Urban Affairs Minister Hardeep Singh Puri and Delhi BJP President Adesh Gupta requested them to end their hunger strike, the South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC) said in a statement.

"Protest called by SDMC Mayor Anamika, North DMC Mayor Jai Prakash and EDMC Mayor Nirmal Jain outside Delhi Chief Minister's residence demanding release of Rs 13,000 Crore ended today after Housing and Urban Affairs Minister and Delhi BJP president Adesh Gupta requested them to end their hunger strike," the SDMC said.

NDMC residents distribute woollen clothes to poor

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

In an effort to strengthen the citizen engagement of the forthcoming Swachh Sarvekshan 2021 survey, New Delhi Municipal Council has organised a unique initiative of distribution of woollen clothes, blankets, sheets, pillows covers etc to the needy people led by the residents of NDMC with the association of area RWAs and MTAs where some volunteers from the society handed their household clothes, woollen dresses, blankets, sheets and other items for donating to needy people.

This innovative initiative led by the citizens and their contribution will help in the overall reduction of the municipal solid waste, the civic body said.

area.

This was the third program under the citizen initiative. "Neki ki Deewar" - Neki means a righteous act and Deewar means wall. The wall is for donating woollen clothes, blankets and other useful items for needy people. "Neki ki Deewar" at East Kidwai Nagar is being maintained by NDMC with the association of area RWAs and MTAs where some volunteers from the society handed their household clothes, woollen dresses, blankets, sheets and other items for donating to needy people.

This innovative initiative led by the citizens and their contribution will help in the overall reduction of the municipal solid waste, the civic body said.

3 held for robbing, killing boy

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Police has arrested three men for allegedly robbing and killing a 17-year-old boy in east Delhi's Patparganj Industrial area.

The accused have been identified as Piyush (23), a resident of Mandawali, Sumit (19) and Rahul (19), both residents of West Vinod Nagar, Madhu Vihar. According to a senior police official, a police control room (PCR) call was received on Tuesday around 10.30 pm at Patparganj Industrial Area police station regarding a body lying inside the industrial area. "The body, having stab injuries, was sent to LBS hospital. Later, the boy was identified as Ronit Aashish (17), a resident of New Seemapuri. He was a private male nursing assistant. The victim used to look after old-age patients in IP Extension area," he said.

"During investigation, around 50 CCTV cameras were examined. Later, it was revealed that the three men killed the victim. One of them was a resident of Mandawali, and the other two were residents of Madhu Vihar," said police official privy to investigation. "Raids were conducted and the accused were apprehended. During interrogation, the accused said that they wanted to earn some quick money and when they saw the victim walking inside the Patparganj Industrial Area at a deserted stretch at night, two of the three accused tried to catch him, while the third stabbed the victim in the chest," said the police official.

AAP slams BJP leaders over death of two children in fire incident

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Am Aadmi Party (AAP) slammed the BJP leaders over the death of two innocent children in a fire incident at an illegal sandal factory in Sagarpur area in Dwarka, saying that the AAP will be filing a police complaint in connection with the incident and demand stern action against the culprits by demanding an impartial inquiry.

Addressing the media on Sunday, AAP MCD in-charge Durgesh Pathak and Dwarka MLA Vinay Mishra said that such accidents are happening daily at illegal factories and construction sites running on

the call of the BJP leaders.

"Due to the blatant corruption of the BJP-led MCD and its ministers, the two children lost their lives. This is just one incident. But, many more happen in Delhi every day, because of just one reason - the ministers of the BJP are filled with corruption and malice," he added.

Vinay Mishra, AAP MLA from Dwarka said, "These illegal factories are the hub of ministers' corruption. MC Mehta v/s Government of India case is a license with the MCD. They room around with the papers of the case and use them everywhere."

"I demand investigations into the illegal factories too

because these people have come to a point where they do not even care about the lives of the people. For the BJP-led MCD, only money is of supreme importance. The councilors know that they will not get the ticket again as the elections are next year and so they just want to fill their pockets without caring about the lives of the people," he added.

Pathak said, "AAP will be filing a police complaint in connection with the Dwarka incident and we will make sure that strict actions are taken against the culprits, by demanding an impartial inquiry into the incident."

City sees coldest morning at 3.4 deg C

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi witnessed season's coldest morning with 3.4 degree Celsius minimum temperature recorded on Safdarjung Observatory, the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) said on Sunday.

"The observatory recorded a minimum of 3.4 degrees Celsius, five notches below the normal, on Sunday morning. The maximum temperature is likely to settle around 22 degrees Celsius," an IMD official said.

A private weather watch organisation, Skymet said icy cold winds from Western Himalayas

will continue over Indo-Gangetic plains as well as Central part of the country for another 24 hours. Fresh western disturbance will approach Western Himalayas from December 21st. Wind speed will decrease, and wind direction will also change, leading to increase in minimum and maximum temperatures over North-West India."

On Saturday, the minimum temperature at the Safdarjung Observatory, which provides representative data for the city, had settled at 3.9 degrees Celsius.

Meanwhile, the overall Air Quality Index (AQI) in Delhi recorded 320 micrograms per

cubic falling in very poor category.

According to SAFAR, the surface-level winds were moderate and west southwesterly. "The cold day conditions are forecasted to intensify in the Delhi region and surface winds likely to slow down," SAFAR said.

SAFAR in its short range weather forecast said that the current dispersion conditions likely to decrease. Hence AQI has been deteriorate to middle end of Very Poor category on December 21st and further deteriorate to the higher end of Very Poor on December 22nd and further deteriorate December 23.



3 held for raping teen

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Police has arrested three men while a juvenile has been apprehended on Sunday for allegedly raping a 14-year-old girl in south Delhi's Greater Kailash area.

The accused have been identified as Shivam (20), Hari Shankar (30), both residents of Fatehpur district in UP, and Mangesh (18), a resident of Maharashtra. According to a senior police official, a police control room (PCR) call was received on Sunday at Greater Kailash-1 police station regarding gangrape of a girl by four persons following which a police team was dispatched for the spot.

"After reaching the spot at GK-1, the victim, a resident of Madanpur Khadar,

was found who stated that she has been working at Greater Kailash for the last four months," he said.

"A 17-year-old boy was also working there, but he left the job one-month ago. She was befriended by the boy there. She told police that on Saturday, he called her at his friend's place of work in Greater Kailash where three more persons were also present," said the senior police official.

"The juvenile allegedly raped her with the help of his associates. Thereafter, a case under sections of Indian Penal Code (IPC) and 6 POCSO Act has been registered. Three accused persons have been arrested and the juvenile was also apprehended," said the senior police official adding that further investigation is underway.

J&K cops, Govt on hit list: Pak-backed TRF

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Pakistan-sponsored The Resistance Front (TRF), a terror group floated by the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), has said police is its prime target in Jammu & Kashmir and next on the radar is the Government.

The TRF self-styled commander Irfan in a statement said, "The war we have waged is in particular against the State Police because they are our real enemies and then the occupying India."

While urging his family members not to trace him, he exhorted the youth of Kashmir, especially those from Srinagar to be ready for the so-called jihad.

The TRF statement further extended assurance that those who had recently met Irfan should also be ready for action as part of the self styled Liberation army of TRF.

TRF's Irfan also sought to express solidarity with his neighbour Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) leader Haji Parveez who had recently circulated a video in which he



claimed that Kashmiri armed fighters came to target him.

"But that is not the fact. We have nothing to do with Parveez. If we had to target him, it was quite easy. I saw him early in the morning and I wished him, so there was no question of him as our target. But, yes, the guards of state

police which accompanied Parveez were our target. Unfortunately there was only (policeman) one present at the spot when we targeted him," the outfit said.

The JeM had late last year floated the TRF in order to project the Pakistan-sponsored terrorism as a home grown

jihad and help Islamabad in denying its role for terrorism in India, sources said.

Post the Balakot strikes and Indian agencies' bid to eliminate the JeM boss Maulana Masood Azhar through poisonous injection by a set of compromised doctors of the Pak military medical corps, the outfit has been distancing itself from being seen as the key terror player in the region, they added.

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PM to hold 'virtual dialogue' with UP farmers on Vajpayee's birthday

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

As BJP has intensified its 'awareness campaign' around the three new controversial farm laws, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is to have a virtual meet with the farmers of Uttar Pradesh on the birth anniversary of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on December 25.

Farmers agitation on the outskirts of Delhi for scrapping farm laws has entered 21st day. The NDA allies in Rajasthan — Rashtriya Loktantrik Party (RLP) — indicated its plan to exit the alliance over the Central Laws after its chief and MP from Nagaur, Hanuman Beniwal announced his resignation from three different committees of Parliament.

In his outreach to farmers, Modi has been accusing the Opposition of "misleading" farmers on the farm laws, the "mandi-system" and Minimum Support Price. The PM has asserted these will continue despite the new contract farming which has come into effect in last six months.

In the continuation of his "virtual dialogue" with the farmers, Modi will have interaction with the farmers of UP on December 25.

The BJP is currently under-



Union Minister Narendra Singh Tomar with farmers from UP during a meeting on farm reform laws in New Delhi PTI

taking its "awareness" campaign over 700 districts in the country around village "chaupals", according to the party.

Central Ministers are part of the programme which mainly includes dispelling doubts about three farm laws, contract farming and assuring farmers that the "mandi-system" and the MSP will not be discontinued.

The BJP will hold "kisan samvad" at over 2,500 places in Uttar Pradesh.

UP BJP president Swatantra Dev Singh and party leader Radha Mohan Singh,

who is also State-in-charge, held a virtual meeting in this regard with party office-bearers from parts of the UP. Radha Mohan Singh charged the Opposition parties with spreading lies regarding the new farm laws.

Thousands of farmers, especially Sikhs from Punjab and from Haryana, have been protesting at Delhi borders against the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020; the Farmers Produce

Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020; and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act 2020.

BJP IS CURRENTLY UNDERTAKING ITS 'AWARENESS' CAMPAIGN OVER 700 DISTRICTS IN COUNTRY

The stand-off between the agitating farmers and the Government seeking them to walk mid-way and be satisfied with key amendments which Central Ministers are reportedly agreeing to in as many as five-rounds of talks between the two sides.

IMA moves SC against CCIM order

Order states to authorise postgraduate practitioners in specified streams of Ayurveda system of medicine to be trained to perform general surgical procedures

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Refusing to give up, the Indian Medical Association (IMA) has moved the Supreme Court against a Central Council of Indian Medicine (CCIM) order to authorise postgraduate practitioners in specified streams of Ayurveda system of medicine to be trained to perform general surgical procedures.

The petition was filed on Saturday to urge the court to set aside or quash the amendment to regulations to the Postgraduate Ayurveda Surgery by CCIM and declare that the council does not have the powers to amend modern medicine in syllabus," IMA president Dr Rajan Sharma said.

The move has drawn a lot of criticism from doctors of modern medicine, leading to a series of protests by IMA members across the country this month. Lakhs of doctors, including



those employed in government hospitals, wore black armbands at work and hit the streets in small groups to agitate against the CCIM's notification.

The Central Government had allowed PG students of Ayurveda to perform various kinds of general surgery and medical procedures, including orthopaedic, ophthalmology,

ENT and dental, by notifying an amendment in a gazette notification the CCIM issued in November.

The latest amendment allows PG Ayurveda students to receive formal training for such procedures. The training modules for surgical procedures will be added to the curriculum of Ayurvedic studies.

The CCIM amended the Indian Medicine Central Council (Postgraduate Ayurveda Education) Regulations, 2016, to include the aforementioned regulation to allow the PG students of Ayurveda system to practice general surgery.

The IMA has been openly opposing such policy moves by the Centre, especially the plan to mix modern medicine with the traditional systems of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, and Homoeopathy (AYUSH) in coming years.

Sharma had earlier said that an integrative system of medicine would create a "khichdi medical system" and produce hybrid doctors.

The apex body of private practitioners of modern medicine had also condemned the Centre's ambitious "one nation one system" policy in medical education and called it a cocktail of disaster.

Health Ministry calls urgent meet today to discuss new coronavirus strain in UK

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Union Health Ministry has called an urgent meeting of its Joint Monitoring Group on Monday to discuss the emergence of a mutated variant of the coronavirus in the UK, which has led to a surge in the infection rate there.

A number of European countries have banned flights from the UK as the British Government warned that the potent new strain of the virus was "out of control" and imposed a stringent new stay-at-home lockdown from Sunday.

"The Joint Monitoring Group (JMG) chaired by the Director General of Health Services (DGHS) will hold a meeting on Monday morning to discuss the issue of the mutated variant of the coronavirus reported from the UK. WHO's India representative Dr Roderico H Ofirin, who is also a member of the JMG, is likely to participate in the meeting," a source told PTI.

A surge in the infection rate caused by the new variant of the coronavirus has led to millions entering a stringent

new stay-at-home lockdown in the UK from Sunday, with non-essential shops and businesses now closed.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced the new rules at a briefing from 10 Downing Street on Saturday evening, which means a planned five-day "Christmas bubble" of relaxed rules has been cancelled in favour of a new Tier 4 level to the current three-tier lockdown system to try and control the surge in infections being caused by the new mutation of the deadly virus.

"It seems that the spread is now being driven by the new variant of the virus," Johnson said. "We have alerted the World Health Organisation and are continuing to analyse the available data to improve our understanding," said Professor Chris Whitty, the Chief Medical Officer for England.

"There is no current evidence to suggest the new strain causes a higher mortality rate or that it affects vaccines and treatments although urgent work is underway to confirm this," he said.

PM offers prayers at Gurdwara Rakab Ganj

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a surprise visit to Gurdwara Rakab Ganj on Sunday and paid tributes to Guru Teg Bahadur, the ninth Sikh guru, for his supreme sacrifice.

Guru Teg Bahadur, whose death anniversary was observed on Saturday, was cremated at Gurudwara Rakab Ganj. Modi offered prayers during his visit to the gurudwara for which no police bandobast or traffic barriers were put in place to restrict movement of the common man, official sources said.

The Prime Minister tweeted after his visit, "This morning, I prayed at the historic Gurdwara Rakab Ganj Sahib, where the pious body of Sri Guru Teg Bahadur Ji was cremated. I felt extremely blessed. I, like millions around the world, am deeply inspired by the kindnesses of Sri Guru Teg Bahadur Ji."

He also tweeted in Punjabi and noted that the Guru gave the supreme sacrifice while defending Hindu religion

and spread the message of universal brotherhood.

Hailed in religious traditions as a defender of Hindus and Sikhs, Guru Teg Bahadur was executed by the Mughals for defying them.

In another tweet, Modi said, "It is the special Kripa of the Guru Sahibs that we will mark the special occasion of the 400th Parkash Parv of Sri Guru Teg Bahadur Ji during our Government's tenure. Let us mark this blessed occasion in a historic way and celebrate the ideals of Sri Guru Teg Bahadur Ji."

The PM's visit to one of the most popular gurdwaras among the devotees in the national capital assumes significance as it comes amid intense protests by farmers, especially from Punjab, against the three farm laws enacted by his Government.

Modi has been at pains to explain the benefits of farm reforms and often assured farmers that the existing government mechanism to support them, including minimum support price and agriculture mandis, will continue.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi offers prayers at Gurdwara Rakab Ganj Sahib in New Delhi on Sunday PTI

Cold wave over NW, Central India likely to abate from tomorrow

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The current spell of cold wave conditions over Northwest and Central India is likely to abate from December 22.

However, it is expected to continue over Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, western parts of Gangetic West Bengal and interior Odisha till December 23.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) on Sunday predicted that there will be a gradual rise by 2-3 degree celsius in minimum and maximum

temperature by two to three-degree Celsius over plains of northwest and adjoining central India during the next 48 hours.

While the current spell of cold wave conditions over northwest and adjoining central India will abate from Monday, the condition along with dense to very dense fog will continue over a few places over east Uttar Pradesh and isolated places till December 23.

Ground frost is very likely at isolated places over Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, Gilgit-Baltistan, Muzaffarabad, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab,

Haryana, Chandigarh and Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and north Rajasthan along with strong surface wind (speed reaching 10-20 kmph) over parts of Northwest and adjoining Indo-Gangetic plains during next 24 hours, the IMD said. The IMD



said that Cold Day to Severe Cold Day Conditions are observed at a few places over north Uttar Pradesh and at isolated places over Bihar.

Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh & Delhi and

Rajasthan are showing either no change or rise by 1-2 in maximum temperatures during past 24 hours thereby causing further relief from ongoing Severe Cold Day Conditions over these regions.



Ducks make their way through frozen surface of water on a cold day in Dal Lake in Srinagar on Sunday AP



CRPF man's body found hanging from tree in UP; suicide suspected

PTI ■ SHAMLI (UP)
The body of a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel was found hanging from a tree in Shamli district of Uttar Pradesh in a suspected case of suicide, police said on Sunday.
Rajeev, a CRPF jawan, was on leave from work and had come to his native place in Kandhla area of the district five

days ago, according to officials.
"He hanged himself from a tree on Saturday evening. The cause behind him taking the extreme step is yet to be ascertained," the local police said in a statement.
The police said prima facie it is a case of suicide and an investigation has been launched into the matter.
The body has been sent for post-mortem, the police added.

CRPF trooper hurt in militant attack in J&K's Anantnag

IANS ■ SRINAGAR
A Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) trooper was injured in a militant attack in J&K's Anantnag district on Sunday, police said. Militants hurled a grenade at a party of the security forces in Achabal area of Anantnag in the evening.
"One CRPF jawan sustained splinter injuries in this attack. He has been shifted to hospital for treatment. "The area has been surrounded for searches," a police officer said.

5-yr-old girl raped by 16-yr-old uncle in UP

Hamirpur (UP): A 16-year-old boy has been detained by police for allegedly raping his five-year-old niece in the Kotwali police station area of Hamirpur district.
Superintendent of Police, Narendra Kumar Singh, said, "On Saturday afternoon, the five-year-old girl was playing at the door of her house, when her 16-year-old uncle, on the pretext of giving her a biscuit, took her to his house and allegedly raped her. After the incident, the girl came out crying from the house of the accused, and narrated the entire incident to her mother."
Based on the complaint lodged by the family of the girl, a case has been registered against the minor accused under various sections of the IPC and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act.
The girl has been sent for medical examination and further investigations are on. **IANS**

Mizoram Gov urges PM to set up AIIMS in State

Aizawl: Mizoram Governor P.S. Sreedharan Pillai has urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to set up an All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in the state which is battling several dreaded diseases including HIV/AIDS, cancer, and malaria, an official statement said on Sunday.
According to the statement, the Governor met Modi at the latter's residence in the national capital on Saturday and submitted a memorandum for setting up of an AIIMS or at least an AIIMS-like super speciality facility in Mizoram.
The Prime Minister was enlightened on key issues in the health sectors within Mizoram with special

highlights on HIV/AIDS, cancer, malaria, heart diseases, and neurological problems among others, it said.
In the health sector, the Governor suggested to the Prime Minister that the health sector in Mizoram leaves a lot to be desired and is still underdeveloped, with even the district headquarters falling behind in basic amenities.
Modi was also informed that even in the state capital, the hospitals do not have adequate medical infrastructures for treatment of some critically-ill patients and that the serious patients, most of the time, are needed to be shipped out of the state incurring huge expenditures. **IANS**

Kerala: Chargesheet against Catholic priests opens Pandora's box

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI
The chargesheet filed by the Special Investigation Team (SIT) probing the alleged forgery of documents to defame Cardinal George Alencherry, head of Catholic Church in the State against three priests and a member of the laity before a Kochi Court on Friday has given rise to more suspicions among the believers.
Various wings of the Church are of the view that extremist organizations have managed to infiltrate into the Ernakulam-Angamaly Archdiocese headed by the Cardinal and are influencing the decision making process.
The allegations against the 75-year-old Cardinal include illegal dealings in the sale of land belonging to the Archdiocese.

The probe by the SIT of the Kerala Police found that the documents submitted by a group of three priests that include Antony Kallookkaran, Paul Thelekkat, Benny John Maramparambil and Adithya Z Valavi from Kochi (a post graduate in engineering who reportedly fabricated the documents at the instance of the above mentioned priests) were fake.
While the priests had managed to escape arrest by availing anticipatory bail, Adithya was arrested by the police and this led to some members of the laity coming out in the open questioning the stance of the Church in the episode.
The SIT probe was based on a complaint by the Archdiocese that some of the senior priests had forged documents to tarnish the image of the Cardinal. The

four accused have been slapped with charges of criminal conspiracy, forgery, forgery for the purpose of cheating, fraudulently use as genuine a forged document, forgery for the purpose of harming reputation, cheating and causing disappearance of evidence of the IPC.
"There are enough evidences to suggest that these three priests and some others are supporting the jihadi elements. We have seen these three priests with Jihadi links staging demonstrations over non-issues," said Jaison Mazhuvancherry, a laity leader from Pulluvazhi.
A spokesperson of the Christian Action for Social Action (CASA), an umbrella organisation fighting for the rights of the community, said they were worried over the

presence of Islamic extremist activists and leaders in some of the rallies and demonstrations staged by the laity. "These Jihadis took part in these rallies in large numbers. There are enough reasons for us to worry over their motives. Besides the three priests mentioned in the charge-sheet, there are more persons behind the conspiracy," he said.
He also pointed out that when some nuns staged a sit-in in front of the Kerala High Court demanding the immediate arrest of Bishop Franco Mulakkal, head of the Jalandhar Diocese, on charges of molestation of a nun, various Islamic extremist organisations had taken part in the demonstration. "The allegations against Bishop Franco Mulakkal are yet to be proved. But the enthusiasm of

these outsiders remains a mystery," said Kevin Peter, president, CASA. He said there was enough documentary evidence suggesting that the allegations against the Cardinal and the Bishop were fake.
The priests named in the SIT charge-sheet were in the forefront against the agitation demanding the arrest of the Bishop, pointed out Jaison. "A person should be treated as like any other human being till it is proved that he has committed a crime. We should not play with somebody's life," he said.
The sale of Deepika, a Malayalam newspaper owned by the Church to an Islamic extremist had caused major resentment among the laity and the management had to make a hasty retreat and buy back the same.

Maha logs 3,811 new corona cases

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI
The daily Covid-19 death tally jumped to 98 and the infections dropped to 3811 on Sunday, even a relatively low 2064 patients were discharged from various hospitals after full recovery from the pandemic.
A day after the infected cases went down to 3,940 and deaths slid to 74 in Maharashtra on Saturday, the deaths went up by 24, while infections came down by 129 in the state.
With 98 new deaths, the total deaths in the state rose from 48,648 to 48,746.
Similarly, with 2811 fresh infections, total infections climbed from 18,92,707 to 18,96,518.

As 2064 patients were discharged from the hospitals across the state after full recovery, the total number of people discharged from the hospitals since the second week of March this year rose to 17,65,905.
The recovery rate in the state dropped marginally from cent to 94.14 per cent to 94.06 per cent/
With 16 new deaths, the Covid-19 toll in Mumbai rose from 10980 to 10,960, while the infected cases went up by 586 to trigger a jump in the infections from 2,86,264 to 2,86,850.
Meanwhile, the number of "active cases" total cases in the state rose from 61095 to 62743. The fatality rate in the state stood at 2.57 per cent

Pune district, which continued to be the worst-affected city-district in Maharashtra, saw the total number of cases increase from 3,66,319 to 366,957 while the total number of deaths in Pune increased from 7675 to 7682.
Thane district remained in the third spot --after Pune and Mumbai -- after the total number of infections rose from 2,49,883 to 2,50,285 while the total deaths climbed from 5481 to 5495.
Of the 1,21, 19,196, samples sent to laboratories, 18,95,518 have tested positive (15.65 per cent) for COVID-19 until Sunday.
Currently, 5,02, 362 people are in home quarantine while 3730 people are in institutional quarantine.

Hathras rape victim's family awaiting justice

PRADEEP SAXENA ■ HATHRAS
The victim's family is expecting justice very soon after the filing of the chargesheet. The victim's brother said that justice has begun. When the accused will be punished, on that day they will get complete justice, only then they will immerse the remains of his sister.
Before this, they demanded a DNA test of the bones to find out whose bones are those. The victim's brother said that he did not demand the CBI inquiry, but the relatives of the accused demanded. Truth has won today. CBI has filed a charge sheet based on what

happened. He said that whatever had happened, from the first day, he has told the police and CBI the same. The CBI strictly interrogated him and his relatives and even accused him of killing his sister but today truth came in front of everybody. The victim's brother said that there will be no immersion of the bones until they will get justice.
Brother of the victim demands that the government should hear this case in the court of Delhi. He told that advocate Seema Kushwaha is helping them, and he is confident that he will get justice. He further demanded from the government for the transfer of

AMUTA welcomes PM's participation in centenary event

PNS ■ ALIGARH
We all welcome the Honourable Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi Ji to be a part of Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) centenary celebrations, and sincerely hope that his presence will help in the quantum jump in the overall autonomy and development of the institution," stated a AMU Teachers' Association (AMUTA) resolution, pleasantly welcoming the acceptance of the Prime Minister to be the Chief Guest in a centenary celebration programme via video link.

4 rapes, or gangrapes daily in Bihar in Jan-Sep, says data

IANS ■ PATNA
Four cases of rape or gang rape have been recorded daily in Bihar from January 2020 till September, with police stations in 43 police districts of the state registering a total of 1,106 such cases, sources in the Police Department said.
As per the data accessed by IANS, June witnessed a maximum of 152 cases, July 149 cases and August 139 cases. As per the data, 88 cases were registered in January, 105 in February, 129 in March, 82 in April, 120 in May, and 142 in September.
Besides rape and gangrape incidents, 6 to 7 cases of eve-teasing and molestation or blackmailing are also registered in different police stations

of Bihar.
A senior police officer in Patna opined that rape or gang rape was also a social issues, apart from criminal aspect. "Hence, we have directed the SPs of all districts to initiate social campaigns, especially in rural areas, to educate the youth about the crime," he said.
According to officials, nearly 1,800 online complaints have been registered with the police control room. The officer said that 90 per cent of the complaints are not converted into FIRs, which is the harsh reality in Bihar.
"During police investigations, victims hesitate to come forward to register the FIR and pursue the cases due to social issues. Also, known persons or

K'taka gram panchayat organic manure to hit market, to produce foot mats from plastic waste

IANS ■ UJIRE (KARNATAKA)
Ujire Janya, an organic manure produced from wet waste collected from nearly 6,000 houses in Ujire gram panchayat, which has a population of 18,000 in Karnataka, is likely to hit the market soon, said Ujire gram panchayat (GP) Panchayat Development Officer (PDO) Prakash Shetty.
Besides this, the GP is also planning to set up a plastic recycle plant which would produce foot mats and interlock tiles which could be used at garages, Shetty told IANS from Ujire.

On December 9, a 16-year-old girl was kidnapped and gang-raped in Banka district. On October 19, three men gang-raped a 19-year-old woman in Bihar's Kishanganj district.
"We have put police on high alert in cases of crimes against women. We have directed police officers to register FIRs as soon as possible and provide all possible support and counselling to the victims, apart from cracking the cases," Banka SP Arvind Gupta.
"In case of the gang rape of 16-year-old girl, we immediately constituted a team to conduct raids at different hide-outs of the accused and cracked the case within a few days," Gupta said.

relatives are the accused in majority of such cases. Despite such situations, we do counselling of each victim of eve-teasing, molestation, or rape. It's up to the victims whether to pursue the case or not," said Pramila Kumari," Project Manager, women helpline.
Among the rape and gangrape cases reported in recent times was the one in which a 15-year-old Dalit girl of Peero village in Bhojpur district was allegedly violated by her youths on December 15 after she went to a river bank.
Her family alleged that the accused not only brutalised her but their kin also physically assaulted them and made caste-related remarks. Moreover, local police delayed medical examination of the victim.

Yogi Govt launches Virasat drive to end old land disputes

Lucknow: The Yogi Adityanath Government in Uttar Pradesh has launched a two-month-long special "Virasat" (natural succession) drive in the State to end the land disputes over the succession rights in villages, and curb the property lawsuits that form a bulk of cases at the tehsil and district level.
The novel drive will end the long-pending disputes over the land and property, and prevent exploitation of villagers by the land mafia who target disputed properties.
This a first of its kind campaign in the state.
According to the government spokesman, the new initiative is expected to settle cases pending for years in the 1,08,000 revenue villages in the state.
Under the campaign, all the information related to the 'Virasat' will also be uploaded on the website of the revenue board based on which the progress of the scheme will be reviewed.
At the end of this two-month scheme, the district magistrate, at the district and the Tehsil level, will randomly identify ten per cent of the revenue village randomly and check the facts given in the report of the Lekhpal through the sub divisional magistrates, additional district magistrates and other district level officers.
The government spokesperson said villagers will be provided the facility to register their names in the land records through both online and offline methods.
For those who own land in their native villages but are living somewhere else, a special counter will be opened at tehsil for submitting applications.
"This initiative is expected

Under the scheme, the lekhpal will also have to visit villages to verify successors and assist them in filing online applications
to settle long-pending cases in 1.08 lakh revenue villages in the state. This will also curb the irresponsible behaviour of lekhpals who, it has been noticed, generally do not take an interest in these matters and are responsible for piling up land disputes," the spokesperson said.
Under the scheme, the lekhpal will also have to visit villages to verify successors and assist them in filing online applications.
The option of filing applications from community facility centres will also be provided to people while a helpline is also being launched to assist people if they face difficulty in filing applications.
All information related to 'virasat' will be uploaded on the revenue board website where the progress of the scheme can be reviewed.
The villagers also feel that the campaign will not only help in ending the land disputes but will also put a check on the irresponsible behaviour of the lekhpal (revenue officials) who generally do not take interest in these matters.
This is also the main reason behind the disputes within families and relatives and a majority of villagers also face lawsuits, that sometimes trail for generations.
With this system, the villagers will not be exploited at any level and can get their names registered in the land records ('Khatani'). **IANS**

All eyes on outcome of DDC polls in J&K

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU
After the successful conduct of the eighth phase long district development council polls, which recorded over 50 per cent voter turnout in Jammu and Kashmir, all eyes are now set on the performance of the candidates belonging to the Bharatiya Janta Party and the People's Alliance for Gupkar Declaration (PAGD).
Ahead of the counting of votes on December 22, Lieutenant Governor, Manoj Sinha Sunday congratulated the people of Jammu and Kashmir and the election machinery for the successful conduct of District Development Council (DDC) and Panchayat Elections in the Union Territory.
"Despite harsh weather conditions, the polling stations across the UT witnessed long queues of enthusiastic voters and people came out to vote in large numbers, with the voter turnout percentage even in the

traditionally low percentage areas registering manifold increase as compared to earlier held Parliamentary elections, which itself manifests that faith of the people of Jammu and Kashmir in the democratic process has deepened," he added.
He further said that with the culmination of DDC elections, the people of J&K will, for the first time in history, see a truly empowered grass root democracy entailing direct funding and decentralized decision making in the planning and development of rural areas.
Compared to the Kashmir region, where voter turnout was recorded, the Jammu region recorded 65 to 70 per cent polling.
Among all other political parties in the fray the Bharatiya Janta Party ran a high voltage campaign centered around the performance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The entire

poll campaign was micro managed by the core group of the party to ensure victory for their party candidates.
BJP is also hoping to win a majority of seats in Jammu region as West Pakistani refugees, members of the Valmiki community and Gorkha community participated in the polls for the first time. In Kashmir valley, party is expected to improve its tally by making inroads in several pockets of central and North Kashmir. Inside reports claimed, BJP may end up winning around 10-14 seats across 10 districts of Kashmir valley while it is expected to win majority seats across six districts of Jammu region.
On the other hand, PAGD is expected to garner majority votes in Kashmir valley, Congress and Jammu and Kashmir Apni Party ran a relatively lacklustre campaign and may end up securing third and fourth place in the finally tally.

During the month long campaign, BJP parachuted star campaigners and union ministers to woo the electorate and on the other hand central Congress leaders stayed away from the campaign.
Barring J&K Unit incharge Rajni Patil no other central leader visited Jammu and Kashmir to address poll meetings. JKPC Chief GA Mir and Jammu based congress leaders were left to fend for themselves. Even the top brass of the National Conference including the father son duo of Dr Farooq Abdullah, Omar Abdullah stayed away from the campaign meetings while former party MLA's, ex-ministers ran the party campaign in their absence. Omar was relatively more active on the social media while Dr Farooq Abdullah only posted video messages urging voters to elect PAGD candidates to defeat divisive agenda of the BJP.
Political observers tracking the DDC polls told The

Pioneer, "Impressive voter turnout of over 50 per cent in these polls has silenced all those critics who were raising question marks over the timing of the polls amid growing unrest among the Kashmiri population in the aftermath of reorganisation of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir and creation of two Union Territories on August 5, 2019".
In their election campaign meetings BJP leaders maintained, "The fight is between who will carry the Tiranga in Jammu Kashmir and who will not protect it". BJP leaders also targeted PDP leaders claiming they are openly saying that they will not hoist the national flag until Article 370 is restored.
"They are seeking Chinese and Pakistani support for restoration of Article 370". "The fight is between nationalist forces and forces who want disturbance in J&K and also between those who want normalcy and those who don't

want it. This is a very special election where on one hand, the BJP is fighting for the national flag while the others are Chinese and Pakistan lovers".
BJP leaders also tried to expose the agenda of the PAGD leaders and accused them of diverting development funds meant for the welfare of the people of Jammu and Kashmir. The party also sought votes on the development plank and performance of the Modi government at the centre.
BJP leaders also wooed the women electorate in a big way across Jammu region to consolidate its hold over its vote bank. They roped in Smriti Irani and other local women leaders who campaigned aggressively and exposed the PAGD alliance which collectively deprived women of their property rights during their term in office. On the other hand, PAGD leaders focused on restoring statehood and special status of Jammu and Kashmir.

Telangana's Covid-19 recovery rate crosses 97%

IANS ■ AMARAVATI
In a horrific incident, a 24-year-old physically challenged woman's burnt body was found in Andhra Pradesh's Prakasam district.
Even 36 hours after Ummaneni Bhuvanewari's body was found lying near a pond on the Dasarajupalli Road on Ongole town outskirts on Friday night, police has not been able to reach a conclusion whether she had committed suicide or was murdered.
After the charred body was lying on a tricycle the woman moved about on, police identified her with the help of a few documents found in a handbag lying besides it.
A resident of Kammappalem area of Ongole, Ummaneni was

Burnt body of physically challenged woman found in Andhra

pursuing her MBA from Narayana University while working as a village volunteer.
Police initially suspected it was a case of suicide, on the basis of a WhatsApp message sent from her mobile phone to all her contacts, allegedly saying her app won't work anymore and requested them not to try to contact her.
However, police did not find any kerosene or petrol can near the body.
Police has since registered a case of death under suspicious circumstances and probing accordingly.
The investigators have not ruled out murder and setting the body afire on her tricycle as there were no signs of any movement of limbs prior to her death. Ummaneni's family suspect-

ed foul play. Her mother Janaki told the police that she had last spoken to her daughter at 6.49 pm.
But when she didn't return by 7.30 pm, Janaki frantically searched for her but her phone was found switched off.
Ummaneni was reportedly in her ward office till Friday afternoon but there was no clarity as to where she went to from there.
Police investigations revealed that she was last seen around 6.30 pm when a person helped her cross a bridge on her tricycle.
Circle Inspector Sivaramakrishna Reddy said the autopsy was conducted at a hospital in Ongole and that Ummaneni's phone call data was getting analysed.
State Women's Commission

member Ramadevi spoke to the family members of the young woman.
Leaders of an organisation working for the rights of physically challenged claimed that it was a murder and demanded immediate steps to arrest the accused.
Meanwhile, former Chief Minister and Telugu Desam Party President N Chandrababu Naidu expressed shock over the death and demanded a thorough probe.
"The state has so far witnessed attacks on Dalits, tribals, Muslims and backward classes and this incident show that even physical challenged have no protection".
He said that the facts of the case would come out only if the police made her call list public. Naidu also questioned the delay in the conduct of the autopsy.

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Cong deal for Rahul?

It looks like the reconciliation with dissenters is intended as a tradeoff for supporting Rahul as party president



The Congress, battered as it is as a non-performing party externally and a non-transformative one internally, stopped short of just teetering over the edge by agreeing to give a listen to senior dissenters who have been insisting on an “active and visible leadership”. Even the normally intransigent Rahul Gandhi, who has been steadfastly refusing to lead the party given the growing clamour for an elected chief and organisational overhaul, softened somewhat, saying that he was willing to “work for the party as all desire”. Read it against senior party spokesperson Randeep Singh Surjewala’s remark that “99.9 per cent” of the Congress

men wanted Rahul as their leader. Also, considering the role of the party’s first family loyalist Kamal Nath in setting up a meeting with the dissenters, one wonders whether the meeting was indeed called to resolve issues or cut a deal. One where both sides agreed to hold elections to the Congress Working Committee (CWC), giving a semblance of inner party democracy, and then have the elected office-bearers endorse Rahul without him going through the process of voting; or even if an election is held for public perception, to ensure that Rahul is the unanimous choice of the elders. It is no secret that incumbent Congress chief Sonia Gandhi has been holding on to justify the continuity of the Gandhi legacy at the helm. In fact, it was her unwillingness to hand over the leadership to a non-Gandhian that had stagnated decision-making within the party for a long, long time, causing much damage to the party’s electoral prospects as it lost State after State and fortune-hunting members to the ruling BJP. In fact, after the party’s disastrous performance in Bihar, well-meaning party leaders took the decisive step of writing a letter and then publicising it enough to build a case for organisational elections, widening the representational berth from the grassroots, ending the *status quo* and coterie *raj* and rewarding talent. So the meeting among Sonia, Rahul, Priyanka Gandhi-Vadra and the so-called “rebels” was meant to assuage the latter — considering all 23 of them have political weight and have built the party. And, by promising to address their grievances, she may have bought their support for Rahul.

The rapprochement became necessary as the Gandhis realised that they were being seen as despots, where their one-time courtiers had even lost their right to constructive criticism. Worse, Sonia even sidelined them within the party. And for all the cadres’ hopes on Priyanka, who is much more active in field campaigns than Rahul, the party is still fumbling around in Uttar Pradesh. Without political manifestation, her best efforts have made the Congress a largely non-profit organisation. How much sense will hardselling the Gandhi tag make now? That, too, at a time when senior leaders like Jitin Prasada and Raj Babbar, who had signed the dissent note, had been dropped from the State election panels despite working the ground for years. Senior loyalist Salman Khurshid will lead the team, which also includes Nirmal Khatri and Naseeb Pathan, to formulate the Congress manifesto. While Khurshid has the experience, both Khatri and Pathan have been clearly rewarded for opposing the “dissenters” who had written to party president Sonia Gandhi. Even if a compromise is reached, there is a deliberateness with which the leadership is conveying a strict message — “Stand with us or else face doom.” And should Rahul be re-anointed in much the same manner as earlier, it will legitimise the family’s priorities as the party’s own, never mind the impact it has on electoral prospects. If last year was difficult, the run-up to 2022 will be even more difficult, given the BJP’s propaganda machinery and the RSS’ rapid network. Besides, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath has scored quite a bit on perception value post-pandemic, UP being the first State to facilitate movement of migrants, providing jobs and now climbing the charts steadily on the ease of doing business. If he manages an economic recovery and meet public health challenges, the Congress would find it difficult to play issue-based politics and cannot draw on dynastic sustenance. The day the UP poll panels were set up, nine expelled party leaders wrote to Sonia and asked that the party “rise above the affinity for the family”. Rahul has to self-correct, rise above ego, value honest counsel and appear selfless in the interests of a larger political legacy.



KUMAR CHELLAPPAN

What’s common among the Great Indian Hornbill, Indian Laburnum Cassia that blooms on the Golden Shower Tree, Coconut Tree, Elephant and Pearlsport? These are all designated as the State bird, State flower, State tree, State animal and State fish, respectively, of Kerala. Another important common factor is that all of them are facing the threat of extinction due to widespread environmental destruction and massive deforestation.

Also, there has been no major industrialisation drive in the State as entrepreneurs think many a time before investing in the State. Kerala may be the only State in the country where industrialists and entrepreneurs commit suicide because of the indifferent attitude of the babus and their political masters. The State which claimed that it has eradicated the pandemic on the 100th day of the reporting of the first incident is all set to face the third wave, with Health Minister KK Shailaja asking the people to get ready for self-lockdown. This is the situation in the State a day after the results of the local body elections were announced.

One is reminded of a cartoon drawn by the legendary RK Laxman in the early 1980s when K Karunakaran was the Chief Minister. In a wordy duel between two Cabinet Ministers, one is seen shouting at the other: “I am more honest than you are. There are eight corruption charges against you and only six against me!”

The situation is no different in 2020 as the Ministers in the CPI(M)-led Government face charges of corruption, impropriety and scams. Legislative Assembly Speaker P Sreeramakrishnan had to convene a Press meet and threaten the Opposition that he would initiate legal action against all who linked his name to Swapna Suresh, the gold smuggling kingpin. Tourism Minister Kadakampally Surendran, who visited the UAE Consulate General’s office in Thiruvananthapuram, claims that he had called on the Consul General to discuss the traffic congestion problem in front of the consulate! Much has already been written about KT Jaleel, the Higher Education Minister and a former leader of the banned Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI).

As I write this article, news channels flash the news that CM Raveendran, the additional private

Third Front not just yet

The results of the three-phase local body elections in Kerala prove that the Congress-led UDF’s base has eroded significantly since the Lok Sabha polls



secretary to Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, is being interrogated by the Enforcement Directorate officials about the disproportionate assets amassed by him and his wife during the past 20 years.

M Sivasankar, former principal secretary to the Chief Minister, has been sent to jail and he is yet to secure bail. Sivasankar, described as the ‘conscience keeper of the Chief Minister’, was arrested by the Customs and ED for his alleged links with Swapna Suresh, Sarit and Sandeep Nair, the kingpins of the gold smuggling racket through diplomatic channels. If the pattern of investigation by the Central agencies continues like this, Pinarayi too is likely to be grilled.

The Chief Minister has alleged that the Centre is misusing agencies like the ED and DRI to tarnish his Government’s “good image” by spreading falsehoods. Besides gold smuggling, the agencies are investigating *hawala* and reverse *hawala* transactions, the LIFE Mission kickbacks (one of the flagship programmes of the CPI(M)-led LDF Government) and K-Fone (Kerala Fibre Optic Network) project. Sadly, all the development schemes declared by the Government are enmeshed in scams and graft.

Kodiyeri Balakrishnan had to step down as the party’s secretary in-charge of Kerala following the arrest of his younger son Binish Kodiyer by the ED and NCB on the charges of drug trafficking, *hawala* transactions and money laundering.

It is in this background that the local body polls were held in three phases. The CPI(M) was literally fighting with its back to

the wall because at no point in its history, the party has faced so many corruption charges. The Chief Minister himself asked New Delhi to depute Central agencies to probe the allegations. He would not have expected the intensity of the probe and now everything associated with the CPI(M) is being seen as illegal by the State’s people. Sadly, the Uralunkal Labour Credit Cooperative Society (ULCCS) — an NGO launched in 1925 with the blessings of Malabar’s great social reformer Vagbhatananda to uplift the lives of the suppressed and oppressed classes — was hijacked by the CPI(M) and degenerated as a money laundering centre for the party. The ED is grilling Raveendran, popularly known as Kerala’s super Chief Minister, for his alleged role in the illegal dealings of ULCCS.

A close scrutiny of the local body election results throws up some interesting facts. Though the CPI(M)-led LDF won five of the six municipal corporations, it would be able to wrest control in two only through horse trading or with the support of the Congress. The Grand Old Party, which had more than 30 seats in the Thiruvananthapuram Municipal Corporation, has been decimated and had to be content with just 10 seats.

In most of the seats won by the CPI(M), the BJP-led NDA is the runner-up. The BJP has failed to win any district *panchayat* as the LDF walked away with 10, leaving four for the UDF. The Congress and its allies won 45 of the 86 municipal councils while the LDF ended up with 35. The NDA retained the Palakkadu

Municipal Council while it wrested the Pandharam municipality from the CPI(M). Of the 941 village *panchayats*, the LDF won 514, the UDF 375 and the NDA 23. Twenty 20, a political entity promoted by entrepreneur Sabu M Jacob in 2015, not only retained its home turf of Kizhakkambalam but won three more village *panchayats*, shocking the established political parties.

But the talking point is the debacle suffered by the Congress-led UDF. The front which literally swept the Lok Sabha election in May 2019 by winning 19 of the 20 seats from the State has lost heavily in this election. “It is a reflection of the Congress high command’s weakness. It is true that Congress is at the crossroads. The UDF won the 2019 election because of the consolidation of the minority vote. You may want to remember the Assembly poll results in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in November 2018, which were all won by the Congress. The minorities in Kerala were under the impression that this would be replicated in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections but that turned out to be incorrect. So the minorities, especially the Christians, have started moving away from the Congress,” said P Rajan, a renowned political commentator and author. He said the Church, especially the bishops, doubt the soft approach of the Congress towards Islamic terrorism and Love Jihad.

Sreejith Panicker, a cyber security specialist who is a keen follower of the voting pattern in Kerala, says that the UDF’s base has been eroded over the

past year. “In most places, the BJP has finished the runner-up. This is a change which signals the beginning of a political process that would result in the formation of a Third Alternative in Kerala. What has happened is that traditional UDF votes have gone to the NDA. The Congress should have a rethink on its approach towards Islamic extremist parties like the Welfare Party of India and SDPI. The secularism propagated by the Congress and the UDF should be thoroughly discussed as the Christian minorities in the State have started doubting their intentions. It’s for the national leadership of the Congress to initiate this discussion,” said Panicker. He also said that the Kerala Congress is facing a leadership crisis. “There is not a face other than Ommen Chandy’s who is acceptable to all sections but Chandy is plagued by ill health,” he added.

Though the BJP has reached a position from where it could play a crucial role in the State’s politics but Kerala’s wait for a Third alternative would not end soon. “It may materialise after the 2021 Assembly elections, provided the BJP plays its cards smartly,” said Rajan. Till then, Keralites may have to wait like the Great Indian Hornbill for the occasional rain with which it quenches its thirst.

PS: The BJP too is not free from factionalism and groupism. The truth is that there are no capable leaders in the party to guide it at this crucial hour. Moreover, the party has its own share of Saritha Nairs and Swapna Sureshs. (The writer is a senior journalist. The views expressed are personal.)

They all fall down!

Third day’s play at Adelaide saw the scores of Indian batsmen reading like a telephone number: 4, 9, 2, 0, 4, 0, 8, 4, 0, 4, 1



At the end of the day, there was shock, disbelief, disappointment. Having had the better of the exchange with hosts Australia during the first couple of days of the Adelaide day-night Test, suddenly, it seemed, the knees of the Indian batting line-up crumbled and the entire team collapsed in the course of amassing a minuscule total of 36 runs. The team, however, did manage to create a dubious record: its lowest ever total in Test matches. India started its quest to repeat the 2018-19 historic feat against Australia in their own backyard in the worst possible manner when the pace attack led by Josh Hazlewood demolished Indian batting within 15.2 overs on the third morning of the game. Before the game,

there was a lot of hype around Indians’ handling of the Oz pace trio of Mitchell Starc, Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood under lights with Kookabura pink ball and, for the first two days, India was 53 runs ahead after the first essay but what happened on Saturday was completely unbelievable. No one could have imagined India getting out in just one session; that too from the position where it looked like dominating the proceedings. What India was supposed to do on the third day was to just keep the scoreboard ticking, bat the entire day and build on the lead. But before anything of that sort could happen, Australia showed why they are a team to fear. Hazlewood, who has often drawn comparisons with Aus legend Glenn McGrath for his on-the-spot bowling, produced the most iconic spell of modern times which forced Indian batsmen to commit same mistakes repeatedly and it was quite visible on the scoreboard as well, with four of his five scalps coming in an identical fashion (caught behind by Tim Paine, in what looked like an action replay of the previous wicket). And to complement him, there was Pat Cummins, who got rid of two best batsmen — Virat Kohli and Cheteshwar Pujara — to set the stage. The way Indian batsmen failed to answer any of the questions posed by the Aussie bowlers will certainly create a moment of panic in the Indian dressing room as now they have to do it without skipper Virat Kohli, who is returning to India, and this makes the task a lot more complicated.

With Kohli not available for the rest of the series and an injured Shami ruled out, India has plenty of questions to answer and the biggest of all is who’ll take the initiative to not just lift the team’s mood but also show the intent to take on the feisty Kangaroos. A morale-boosting win of this stature will not only give Australians the belief to take revenge of the last series’ humiliation but will also cause more insecurity in the Indian team’s dressing room as there was not one particular batsman to be blamed but it was a collective failure, yet again. Save the 2018 series in Australia, the Indian team has had way too many batting collapses including six on the trot, starting with New Zealand early this year, when it suffered a 0-2 whitewash. The score of 36 is not something that is expected from the Indian batting line-up but when Indian skipper during the post-match conference urged people not to “make a mountain out of a molehill”, it certainly raised a lot of eyebrows. The last time India toured Oz and won the first series Down Under in 71 years, the Indian skipper himself rated it as “bigger than a World Cup win for us”. So now that the team has done something which no other team of the past did, why this attitude?

SOUNDBITE

<p>The police notices to 600 party leaders were in total violation of the Constitution which allows for freedom of speech and peaceful assembly.</p> <p>TDP national president —N Chandrababu Naidu</p>	<p>The UK and the EU will continue the post-Brexit trade talks, but there remains a gap that needs to be bridged. We always want to keep talking.</p> <p>British Prime Minister —Boris Johnson</p>	<p>I have quit eating sweets but I had to pose with a <i>rasgulla</i> and <i>gulabjamun</i>, and was asked to express how tasty it feels to eat them! There can’t be a bigger torture than this.</p> <p>Bollywood actor & icon —Amitabh Bachchan</p>	<p>I still think the pink ball is at a very nascent stage of where Test cricket should head forward. But I am sure it is very exciting for a lot of people watching the game.</p> <p>India off-spinner —R Ashwin</p>
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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A farmer is an optimist

Sir — Most of the people in our country are poor and earn their living from farming; and by reforming agriculture, we can overcome poverty. Will Rogers, an American actor and humourist, once said: “The farmer has to be an optimist or he wouldn’t be a farmer.” Let’s not snatch that optimism from him.

The ongoing farmer crisis is in no way either new or unique: 11.2 per cent of all suicides in India are by farmers. Anti-farmer laws, high debt burdens, poor Government policies, corruption in subsidies, crop failure and mental health, all take a toll on them.

The Government introduced the farm laws to improve the lot of farmers and has assured them that the Minimum Support Price (MSP) will stay. This reform was overdue as it could have been implemented in 1991 when the new economic reforms were introduced. As most people in rural India earn their livelihood from farming, any improvement in the conditions of this sector will directly help alleviate the poor condition of the farmers.

Yash Pal Ralhan
Jalandhar

BJP pulls out all the stops for ‘Mission Bengal’

This refers to the editorial ‘Blow to Mamata’ (December 19). Verily speaking, the political track started becoming difficult for the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) in Bengal since the very induction into politics of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee’s nephew Abhishek Banerjee, who is supposed to be her political successor as well, and whom the party cadres are not happy with.

As regards the BJP’s tremendous show in the State during the last parliamentary election when the party won 18 seats to the TMC’s chagrin, the BJP seems to have a pan-India plan in mind. During Home Minister Amit Shah’s two-day visit to Bengal, the party engineered desertions by prominent State leaders — including TMC stalwarts Suvendu Adhikari, Shilbhadra Dutta and minority cell leader Kabirul Islam — from the ruling party’s ranks.

All these machinations are coming handy in the consummation of the BJP’s political dream in Bengal. Now, Shah’s claim to winning 200 of the 292 seats in the upcoming Assembly polls in the State has also ruffled a few feathers in political corridors. It will come as another blow to Mamata if the BJP’s chief strategist succeeds in parading the TMC’s defectors in front of the media.

Azhar A Khan
Rampur



However, the BJP faces a pestering question as to who it should present as the chief ministerial face in the Assembly elections due in April-May next year even as former cricketer Sourav Ganguly’s name is doing the rounds in this regard. However, even he is no match for Didi’s political stature and the sway she holds over the State’s people. Given that politics is a game replete with bizarre twists and turns till the last minute, any prediction may fall flat on its face. Hence, let’s wait and watch which way the political cookie crumbles in Bengal this time around.

Punish Hathras culprits

Sir — It’s heartening to know that the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has filed a charge sheet against four accused in the alleged gang rape-murder in Hathras in September. Under pressure following a nationwide outcry, the UP Government had recommended a CBI probe into the case on October 2.

The victim’s dying declaration on September 22, in which she had claimed that she was gangraped by four youth of the village, was the basis of the CBI charge sheet. This after the State police had said that “no rape or gang rape took place”. All the youth named were arrested by the local police by September 26. The case hit the headlines after the victim’s family alleged that her body was hastily cremated by the local administration after midnight without their consent.

Now the courts must award death to the four accused and they must hang as early as possible to provide a semblance of justice to the victim and her family.

Bhagwan Thadani
Mumbai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

Hope amid despair

No revival or turnaround can take place unless some people believe that it can happen. The WEF's report is a nudge in the right direction



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

Finally the commentaries in the printed and the audio-visual media have begun to change from what it is today, to what a year it has been and how things will be in the year to come. Whereas nothing on the ground has substantially, changed (and indeed many territories of the world are still passing through very demanding times even for the COVID-era.) there is a growing realisation that hope is a no choice situation. Of the many basic truths of life, the biggest is that one gets tired even of despair. Fantasy is born in many seedbeds and one of them is excessive despair.

The global havoc caused by COVID-19 will someday be assessed. As of now, some are still trying to swim underwater and there are others trying to build a fortune by fishing in troubled waters. They are doing remarkably well as they understand that people pay and pay disproportionately high (if they can afford to) when the going gets tough. This cannot be an occasion for pontificating. One can only say: To each his own! Meanwhile, strained relationships in families, misconstruction and misunderstanding of otherwise simple activities are taking a toll. This is bound to happen if there is refraction of meaning through an overstrained mental capacity. Be that as it may, one of the brighter signs on the horizon is the strong mind of some people who still make sense through their sheer capacity of mindfulness. The first defining characteristic of mindfulness is recognition that one cannot project one's insecurities on others. No matter how wonderful or strong the foundations of the relationship, no one can carry anybody else's burden endlessly. Especially of those people who do not know how to control themselves.

This has nothing to do with the uniqueness of the COVID-era. It is a common human feeling which behavioural scientists have not offered many solutions to, perhaps because the indicators are weak and defences which people put up are formidable. Along with that comes the propensity to hold on to one's frameworks of reference and plans. The reality perception of many can be weak. An amalgamation of such propensities creates a devastating cocktail.

Perhaps, the problem could be handled by an approach which travels from outside-in rather than inside-out. Plus, we need to grant that humans are complex beings and there is real difficulty in even understanding oneself, let alone others. Any attempt at "understanding" should be the end of a process rather than the beginning. The thought of travelling the route of understanding from outside-in creates a hierarchy of efforts which helps to make it progressively more effective and capable of handling increasingly more complex situations. Applying that frame of reference to the present situation of human reaction to the pandemic (and often intractable complexity and anxiety) leads to some possible conclusions. One of them is to start understanding possible responses of the economy to material conditions and then gradually move to inner layers.

Mercifully, that process seems to have begun. The World Economic Forum (WEF) has come out with a special edition of its *Global Competitiveness Report: 2020*. It ostensibly talks of how countries are performing on the road to recovery. It will be read and reread over its 90 plus pages as indeed it deserves.

In the limitations of space of this column it is not possible to provide a substantive critique. In India the partner to this effort was an institution which is not so widely-known and yet seems to have collaborated with competence. Territories from Albania to Uruguay have contributed through some institution and that itself is a commendable canvas. The partner institutes helped to administer "the executive opinion survey and advance the competitiveness agenda in their respective economies." There were other institutions which pitched in with different competencies including what goes into composing the WEF's index. From collecting the data to analysis and more, was a huge organisational exercise. That itself deserves high praise. More substantially, the contents while not being revolutionary, have helped to redefine the meaning of competitiveness in a changed world context. It was pleasing to see that disruption and resilience were treated in the same section. The concept of the pandemic has made its mark on the literature on economics. More efforts in the genre will surely come. For the present it may suffice to mention that it is a great attempt of analysis of the past decade and of future trends. The pleasing thing in the WEF's report is the focus on the idea of the "road to recovery." Obviously, for any meaningful journey, it must begin somewhere. No revival or turnaround can take place unless some people believe that it can happen. The WEF's report is a nudge in the right direction. The scientific method would require some instruments of measurement. All that would involve a cushioning crucible of faith and belief in it being possible. This should be not only an interesting but a worthwhile journey.

(The writer is a well-known management consultant of international repute. The views expressed are personal)

I CANNOT BETRAY THE FARMERS OF MY COUNTRY WHO HAVE BEEN SLEEPING ON THE STREETS WHEN THE TEMPERATURE IS 2 DEGREES CELSIUS.

—DELHI CHIEF MINISTER
ARVIND KEJRIWAL

POINTCOUNTERPOINT



IN CASE THE SITUATION IN DELHI WORSENS, ARVIND KEJRIWAL SHOULD BE HELD RESPONSIBLE FOR IT.

—DELHI BJP'S IT CELL CHIEF
ABHISHEK DUBEY

Growing a better future

Away from the raging storm in Delhi-NCR is a small group of women farmers from Satara who are managing a farmer producer company to help alleviate the woes of others like them



MOIN QAZI

There is a tempest in India's farmlands even as their tillers wage an extraordinary crusade for alleviating age-old distresses. Away from the bustle of the raging storm in the Delhi-National Capital Region is a small semi-literate group of women farmers in a remote hinterland who are assiduously managing a farmer producer company (FPC) to help alleviate the woes of other women growers like her.

The Mann Deshi Farmer Producer Company (MDFPC) plans to organise 12,000 small and marginal growers (70 per cent of whom are women) to secure better prices for their agricultural produce. The MDFPC was founded by Chetna Gala Sinha, the well-known social entrepreneur who is shepherding a rural revolution in western Maharashtra. The epicenter of this movement is Mhaswad, a large village that nestles in Satara district, on the placid banks of the Manganga River, some 300 km south-east of Mumbai. A 45-year-old woman farmer Vanita Pise is the co-founder of the MDFPC. However, she does not let the fact that she is semi-literate stop her from trying to better the lot of growers like her.

On account of adversities at home, Vanita couldn't study beyond class IX. She married a farmer in Mhaswad when she was 17. Within a week she was required to take charge of the family poultry. She had never entered a poultry shed before. With persistence and tenacity, she was able to grasp the entire operations. When the poultry business had to be wound up after an outbreak of bird flu, she became a daily wage labourer. The failed business left the family with a debt of ₹55,000. It was at this time that Vanita came to know of Mann Deshi Bank and its work with rural women. She approached them and secured a loan for a buffalo. Luckily for Vanita, within a week the buffalo delivered a calf. The enterprising woman started selling the milk. With her earnings, she repaid the loan in six months. Vanita took another loan and bought a machine for manufacturing paper cups. Six months later 10 women of her village, impressed by Vanita's success, approached her to help them set up similar units.

Sadly, their ventures could not succeed and she had to face a backlash from them. Undeterred by this setback, Vanita went back to the Mann Deshi, and took a course in financial management from their business school. Her experience in business, farming and grassroots community mobilisation came in handy when the group decided to set up the MDFPC. It was clear to Vanita that the future of small farmers lay in collectivising themselves. In this model, scattered small farms are systematically aggregated and provided centralised production, post-harvest and marketing services. This helps reduce the transaction costs of the farms for accessing the value chains and makes it easier for small farmers to access inputs, technology and the market.

The task was not easy. Vanita and her team faced several challenges, most of them related to the contentious issue of categorisation of women as farmers. In the registration process, they were told by the officials concerned that since women did not own farms they could not be classified as farmers. Similar hiccups continued but now that they have been able to make this venture a success. Vanita now wants to spread the word so that other women farmers like her can replicate her success. "Women have come a long way in several fields. They are also the mainstay of farming, doing much of the primary



VANITA AND HER TEAM FACED SEVERAL CHALLENGES, MOST OF THEM RELATED TO THE CONTENTIOUS ISSUE OF CATEGORISATION OF WOMEN AS FARMERS. IN THE REGISTRATION PROCESS, THEY WERE TOLD BY THE OFFICIALS CONCERNED THAT SINCE WOMEN DID NOT OWN FARMS, THEY COULD NOT BE CLASSIFIED AS FARMERS. SIMILAR HICCUPS CONTINUED BUT NOW THAT THEY HAVE BEEN ABLE TO MAKE THIS VENTURE A SUCCESS, VANITA WANTS TO SPREAD THE WORD SO THAT OTHER WOMEN FARMERS LIKE HER CAN REPLICATE HER SUCCESS



work in the fields. Ironically they cannot claim themselves to be farmers because they don't own the land they till. It is in the name of their husbands. This makes a huge difference to their economic and social status and disqualifies them from several official development benefits," avers Vanita.

The FPC was finally registered when the husbands certified that their wives were coparceners in their land parcels. Since then the MDFPC has been trying to make women farmers coparceners in their husband's property and registering these women as members in the FPC. Vanita's work as the team leader is very challenging. She has to oversee all major operations at the company. She has to supervise aggregation of the farm produce and the entire intermediate operations leading to despatch of consignments to the market. This includes sorting and grading and organising the logistics in the supply chain. Vanita explains her business model: "Our model of procurement is different and is done through weekly farm bazaars. Women farmers are contacted and we send vehicles to their homes to procure the agricultural produce. In addition to vegetables and grains we also deal in processing and manufacturing products including hard toffee, syrups, flaxseed chutneys, amla candy, pickles among other products."

Though the FPC was formed two years ago, it has been operating informally for the last couple of years. The company deals in both perishables and non-perishables. About four truckloads of vegetables are sent to Mumbai daily and these are supplied to 5-star hotels and local retail outlets. The MDFPC's formal journey began in September 2018 with onions, a highly uncertain and volatile crop. The reason for severe and frequent price

shocks for onions is the production fluctuations and changes in the nature of demand. The FPC helped the farmers grow high quality onions so that they could get a better price. "We struggled a great deal but succeeded in our efforts albeit partially. Getting a market was difficult because Mhaswad is geographically not well-connected and we face several logistical impediments," admits Vanita.

"Bringing women farmers on a common platform, designing appropriate crop patterns, aggregating and marketing the produce requires rigorous planning and execution. Some enterprising women have been able to sell their produce in Mumbai markets and got good value for it, too. But it is important to get more women farmers enrolled in the collective and make them align their crop pattern with the market," says Vanita.

Meanwhile, the FPC inked an agreement with a leading company that wanted to export okra. The members were excited with the opportunity and 16 women joined the project. Unfortunately, things didn't work as per the plans. The agreement, which was worded in technical English, stipulated that agronomists would visit the farmers and guide them on quality control, which actually didn't happen. The FPC had to compensate the counter party because they couldn't fulfil the contractual commitments. However, the women learnt an important lesson: When you want to survive and prosper despite the competition, you have to maintain quality and honour every term of the contract. In addition, timely delivery is important.

This learning came handy in a recent contract. The FPC received an order for 11,000 kg of pulses. The grain was to be supplied in 22,000 packets of 500 grams each. The FPC approached the women

farmers in Latur, who grabbed the opportunity. In just eight days, the women coordinated the entire chain consisting of harvesting, aggregating, packaging and other logistics. At the last moment, the team found a bug in one of the cartons. They decided to recheck the entire consignment. It took the women an entire day but it made them understand the importance of quality and the credibility of the seller that hinges on the consignment.

"During this project, I found that many women farmers store pulses at home and not in warehouses because of the logistical and transport issues. These women would prefer warehouses if they could be assured of a loan against the pledge of warehouse receipts," adds Vanita.

She believes that the best gift for farmers would be to initiate practical solutions for their basic problems. The Government has introduced three new farm laws. And there has been a mixed reaction to them. Vanita feels this can work only if proper infrastructure is created through warehouses, cold storages and other support systems. Farmers are capable of producing good quality crops if they get the required extension services, such as soil-testing, advisory in agro-economics and so on. Instead of grandiose reforms, the farmers need solutions to their fundamental problems. This cannot be done by NGOs alone. The Government will have to actively invest in it. It is also important to build the capacity of FPCs. In the Budget last year the Finance Minister had announced a plan to form 10,000 Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) over a period of five years. This will require extensive Government support.

(The writer is a well-known development professional of international repute. The views expressed are personal)

The real idea behind moral policing

Realising their inability to address and resolve real problems, politicians opt to present themselves as guardians of other things such as morality



NADEEM PARACHA

A single theme runs across the movies of the British documentary film-maker, Adam Curtis. He has scripted and directed over a dozen documentaries for the BBC. They are mostly sardonic laments on how, ever since the late 1970s, governments have allowed their roles to recede in addressing various issues.

Curtis often tries to demonstrate that, in the wake of increasing economic, social and political complexities, governments that were once at the forefront of providing leadership and solutions, began to shrink from this responsibility. This happened particularly once the paradigm that they had established in this context

began to shift, especially after the 1973 international oil crisis.

According to Curtis, governments began to outsource their responsibilities to large private operators such as banks and big businesses, which had furnished loans and services to them when they had been badly impacted by a series of economic downturns triggered by the crisis.

The role of the State continued to shrink. To Curtis, politicians and civil servants who were once expected to lead and plan their countries' progress and well-being, simply became nothing more than props. However, from the mid-2000s, all eyes and expectations fell upon the Government again when major financial scandals and economic recessions exposed the dangers of overtly banking on the private sector to provide services which were once the domain and purpose of State institutions.

In the July 24, 2012 issue of *The Guardian*, the British philosopher Julian Baggini writes that governments struggled to come to terms with the economic and social fall-

out of the new recessions. What's more, by then, the public had also lost their trust in the private sector. According to Baggini, unable or feeling helpless to address and resolve the problems, politicians began to look to present themselves as guardians of other things. If they were unable to prevent economic declines, they posed that they were now there to halt moral declines.

Baggini writes that the most fundamental problem with morality is that society still lacks a sense of where it comes from and who is qualified to make claims for it. There is great irony in politicians, a naturally amoral lot, speaking of morality. Baggini is right to observe that most people are highly sceptical of politicians in this regard. And it is also a fact that those whose domain it was to define and judge morality — i.e. priests, clerics, pandits and so on — lost their credibility after the rapid emergence of modernity.

Therefore, according to Baggini, "the danger is that we will either fall back on the old authorities or allow new moral leaders to emerge, who may well base their pronouncements

on little more than populist sentiment." This is exactly what has been happening in various countries since Baggini wrote his essay eight years ago. Unable to control economic declines, various heads of governments in Europe, South and North America and in South and East Asia, have increased their talk about morality, in an attempt to distract the attention of the polity from larger and less-abstract issues.

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi promised economic miracles, after being in power for almost six years, there has been more talk of temples, mosques, cows and the Hindutva identity than about the country's faltering economy. US President Donald Trump, before his defeat in this year's presidential election, continued to surround himself with animated evangelists, while completely failing to control the spread of COVID-19 and the devastating impact it has had on the country's economy.

Governments in Brazil, the Philippines, Turkey, Pakistan, Hungary and Poland are adopting similar tactics. For example, in the

face of the rising criticism on his regime's chaotic style of governance and its mishandling of the economy, Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan constantly reminds everyone how he overcame the dangers of Westernisation and colonialism to become a man of impeccable morals. He says this after milking everything there was to about such 'immoral' Westernisation when he was a popular lifestyle liberal, before he turned 40 and "rediscovered his faith." As Pakistan's economy continues to nosedive and Opposition parties prepare to oust him after accusing him of incompetence, Khan can often be seen lecturing young people on what Islam is, what the poet-philosopher Iqbal meant, and how to understand Sufism though Turkish soap operas! To most sociologists, the idea of morality largely derives from and attracts the urban middle-classes. It is this class that is most receptive to Khan's moral posturing. In a 1993 essay for the *Wilson Quarterly*, the American political scientist and sociologist Allan Wolfe writes that the "old middle class" that experienced some

form of economic prosperity in the 1960s because of the developmental economics that was all the rage at the time, was less concerned with morality as an issue. After the 1973 oil crisis, when global economies began to cave in, a new middle class emerged. But this one had to struggle more than the previous one.

According to Wolfe, there are, therefore, two competing ideas of middle-class morality. Coming of age in uncertain times, the middle class that appeared from the turmoil of the 1970s tries to save moral capital rather than economic capital. Wolfe writes that it is a lot more conservative than the older middle class and wants morality to take centre stage in political and social discourses. But he also writes that this may include those who would rather exhibit morality in public while largely ignoring it in private, creating cognitive dissonance.

A report published in the April 2, 1977 issue of the now-defunct Pakistani evening *Leader*, quotes a young shopkeeper in Karachi who was taking part in the movement against the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto

regime. He tells the reporter that "Bhutto (with his socialist policies) had usurped the dignity of the country's middle classes."

He also adds that the regime was doing this by spreading immorality and obscenity, even though he was interviewed while coming out from a cinema after enjoying a Hollywood film. Post-1970s generations of the urban middle classes in Pakistan, too, are examples of cognitive dissonance in this context.

But this is how they address it. Khan tries to rationalise this dissonance by suggesting that it is actually a mandate of the country's majority faith that morality be highlighted in public and episodes of immorality be kept private and not spoken about.

This idea of middle-class morality thus absolves him of hypocrisy, comforting him to go on lecturing without having to bother about the irony attached to it and, without addressing more tangible issues, such as a depressed economy and political polarisation.

(Courtesy: Dawn)



A Nepalese protester burns an effigy of Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Oli in front of the parliament building in Kathmandu on Sunday

KP Oli — remarkable journey of student Communist leader to Nepal's power centre

Kathmandu: Veteran Communist leader K P Sharma Oli kindled hopes for much-needed political stability in Nepal when he assumed power for the second time in 2018 after the Left alliance swept the historic parliamentary polls. However, his surprise move to recommend the dissolution of Parliament after weeks of power tussle within the ruling Nepal Communist Party dashed all hopes, once again created political instability and paved the way for a possible split in the largest communist party of the country. Oli, who joined politics as a student activist in his teenage and spent 14 years in jail for opposing the now-abolished monarchy, became Nepal's Prime Minister for a second time in 2018 as a joint candidate of the Left alliance. The alliance between the CPN (Unified Marxist-Leninist) and Pushpa

Kamal Dahal-led CPN (Maoist Centre) won a majority in the House of Representatives and in six of the seven provincial assemblies in the 2017 elections. After their victory, the two parties formally merged in May 2018. Known for his pro-China stance, 68-year-old Oli had earlier served as the country's prime minister from October 11, 2015 to August 3, 2016 during which Kathmandu's ties with New Delhi had strained. During his first term, Oli had publicly criticised India for interfering in Nepal's internal matters and accused it of toppling his government. He, however, promised to forge a partnership with India to move forward the country towards the path of economic prosperity ahead of assuming office for the second term. In 2015, when Nepal adopted a new Constitution that split it into seven states, the

ethnic Madhesi group, mostly of Indian-origin, protested for months, saying they were not getting enough territory in one of the provinces and were also facing discrimination. The issue had strained Indo-Nepal ties. During his second term, Oli claimed that efforts were being made to oust him after his government redrew Nepal's political map by incorporating three strategically key Indian territories, a move that strained ties between the two countries. India had termed as "untenable" the "artificial enlargement" of the territorial claims by Nepal after its Parliament unanimously approved the new political map of the country featuring Lipulekh, Kalapani, and Limpiyadhura areas which India maintains belong to it. Oli accused his rivals within the party of making efforts to topple his government. **PTI**

Pearl murder accused claims he is scapegoat: Lawyer

Islamabad: A lawyer representing the parents of slain US journalist Daniel Pearl has produced a handwritten letter in Pakistan's Supreme Court in which the key accused in the case claimed that he was a "scapegoat" arrested under "US pressure" and the real mastermind was a Karachi-based terrorist. Pearl, the 38-year-old South Asia bureau chief for The Wall Street Journal, was abducted and beheaded while he was in Pakistan investigating a story in 2002 on the links between the country's powerful spy agency ISI and al-Qaeda.

British-born al-Qaeda leader Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh and his three aides were convicted and sentenced in the abduction and murder case of Pearl. In April, they were exonerated by the Sindh High Court and an appeal against their acquittal is being heard in the Supreme Court. According to an Express Tribune report on Sunday, Faisal Siddiqui, counsel for Pearl's parents, has produced



the handwritten letter in the Supreme Court in which Sheikh claimed that the real culprit was a militant, Attaur Rehman, from Karachi. Siddiqui told the apex court that the letter was submitted to the Sindh High Court on July 19, 2019. In the letter, Sheikh claimed that he was "a scapegoat" arrested on the "US pressure" and that the real culprit was Rehman. The letter was produced during a hearing of the appeals against the acquittal of the four accused in the Pearl murder case. A three-judge special bench led by Justice Mushir Alam heard the appeals of the Sindh government and Pearl's

parents, Ruth and Judie Pearl, against the high court ruling. Siddiqui contended that the bench must consider it. However, the apex court will decide on it on the next date of hearing on January 4, the report said. Sheikh further said in his letter that he had been in prison under the death sentence since 2002, charged and convicted for the abduction and murder of Pearl. However, it was on public record that neither did he abduct Pearl nor did he murder him and it had been acknowledged by the US government and by Pakistan's former president Pervez Musharraf in his book. Sheikh said his role in this case was a relatively minor one, which did not warrant the death sentence, adding that he had already served in prison — most of which has been in illegal solitary confinement. According to the letter, the pressure on the Pakistan government at the time (in 2002) by the US was so intense that Sheikh was used as a "scapegoat" to lessen that pres-

sure. "Therefore, evidence was fabricated against me to convict me of the abduction and murder of Daniel Pearl," Sheikh claimed. "Later, when the person (Rehman alias Naem Bukhari) who actually abducted Daniel was arrested, he was not charged with the case because to do so would have exposed the lies and perjured evidence that the Musharraf government used to convict me," he added. The letter claimed that despite Rs 1 million reward money on Rehman — because of his role in the case — he was not produced in court but was kept in secret illegal custody of the Rangers for five years, then in Sukkur jail for two years and charged only with a fabricated case of possession of drugs. After Rehman's release, he is alleged to have organised some of the most devastating attacks Karachi has ever seen, including blowing up of the Rangers Headquarters in Nazimabad, where he was pre-

viously secretly held, Sheikh claimed. The letter also claimed that if Ata was executed then the evidence, which would prove the truth about Pearl's case, would be lost forever. Therefore, Sheikh requested the court to pass a stay order that would ensure that Rehman was not executed until testified in the Pearl case. "The court is also requested to arrange for the hearing of this appeal without further delay on a day to day basis and to summon both me and Rehman to the court for hearing so that I may be exonerated of the fabricated charges against me and given an opportunity to clarify my actual role in this matter so that my sentence may be reduced, accordingly to one which is consistent with the requirements of justice," the letter stated. Two days after the Sindh High Court overturned Sheikh's conviction in April, the Sindh government invoked the Maintenance of Public Order to keep the four convicts in jail. **PTI**

Car bomb kills 9, hurts 20 in Kabul

Kabul: A car bomb blast that rocked Afghanistan's capital Sunday morning killed at least nine people, according to the Afghan Interior Ministry. Interior Minister Masoud Andarabi told reporters at the site of the attack that the attack wounded around 20 others, including a member of parliament, Khan Mohammad Wardak. Andarabi said the lawmaker was in "good condition." The interior minister added that the casualty toll could rise further. The attack happened while

the lawmaker's convey was passing through an intersection in Kabul's Khoshal Khan neighborhood. The blast set afire surrounding civilian vehicles, as well as damaging nearby buildings and shops. No one immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. In a statement condemning the attack, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani said that the Taliban should stop violence against civilians and accept a ceasefire, to facilitate the current peace process. **PTI**



Afghan security personnel oversee the removal of damaged vehicles after a bombing attack in Kabul on Sunday

Santa Claus bikers parade in Tokyo against child abuse

AFP ■ TOKYO Harley Davidson bikers dressed in Santa Claus costumes rode through the streets of central Tokyo on Sunday for their annual parade against child abuse, saying more children were vulnerable in 2020 due to the coronavirus pandemic. The parade, followed by a toy run to donate toys to kids, is a global tradition around Christmas time. In Tokyo, the event is held by members of the "Harley Santa Club", founded in 2008. At the parade, bikers said this year's event meant more, because more children were vulnerable to domestic violence during the coronavirus year. "Especially because of the coronavirus pandemic this year, I think there are many child abuse cases out of sight," said Takashi Mine, director of the event. "It is very likely now that

parents will take the stress out on their children after losing their jobs, so I think particularly during the pandemic we have to do the parade," he said. The number of child abuse cases in Japan per month rose up to 20% between January and March versus the same period last year, as more families spent time at home because of the pandemic, the daily Asahi Shimbun reported. The number of reported child abuse cases was a record high last year, according to the health ministry. Normally hundreds of motorcyclists take part in the parade, but because of coronavirus only about 100 rode this year. Still, riders proudly roared their engines to bring Christmas joy to kids living in children's homes. Riders plan to visit four homes in Tokyo this year to donate toys and candy to about 400 children.

Trump floats Sidney Powell as special counsel: Sources

Washington: President Donald Trump floated naming lawyer Sidney Powell, who was booted after pushing unfounded conspiracy theories, as a special counsel investigating allegations of voter fraud. During a Friday meeting at the White House, Trump went as far as discussing getting Powell security clearance, according to two people familiar with the meeting, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations. It is unclear whether Trump intends to move forward with the effort. Under federal law, the US attorney general, not the President, is responsible for appointing special counsels. And numerous Republicans, from outgoing Attorney General William Barr to Governors and state election officials, have said again and again that there is no evidence of the kind of mass voter fraud Trump has been alleging since he lost the November 3 election to Democrat Joe Biden. That Trump is even enter-



taining the idea of installing Powell underscores the increasingly desperate steps he has been weighing as he tries to reverse the results of the election and remain in power. Trump has increasingly entertained conspiracy theories and outlandish ways to stay in office, egged on by allies like former national security adviser Michael Flynn and former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, the president's personal attorney. Indeed, at the meeting, Giuliani pushed Trump to seize voting machines, which the Department of Homeland

Security made clear it had no authority to do. It is also unclear what that would accomplish, given that the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security have both looked into the issue. Paper ballots are also retained under federal law. Flynn, whom Trump recently pardoned for lying to the FBI, went even further, discussing the idea of imposing martial law and using the military to re-run the election. Trump's chief of staff, Mark Meadows, and White House counsel Pat Cipollone voiced their objections. **AP**

Mexico President speaks with US President-elect Biden on phone

Mexico City: Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said he spoke with US President-elect Joe Biden by phone on Saturday, five days after he sent a tardy and somewhat chilly letter of congratulations to Biden. "We reaffirmed our commitment to work together for the good of our peoples and our countries," López Obrador wrote in his social media accounts. López Obrador and Brazil's president, Jair Bolsonaro, finally congratulated Biden only after the Electoral College vote confirmed his victory. The two were the last major Latin American leaders to send congratulations. Both López Obrador and Bolsonaro were seen as friendly to President Donald Trump. The Mexican president has stressed that maintaining good relations with the United States — Mexico's northern neighbour and by far its top trading partner — is one of his top priorities. **AP**

Thousands line up for tests amid Thailand virus outbreak

Samut Sakhon: Thousands of people lined up for coronavirus tests in a province near Bangkok on Sunday, as Thai authorities scrambled to contain an outbreak of the virus that has infected nearly 700 people. Triple lines of mainly migrant workers stretched for around 100 metres in one location alone, at Mahachai in Samut Sakhon province, as health officials in mobile units methodically took nasal swabs. There were three locations in total in the area. Nearby, razor wire and police guards blocked access to the Klang Koong, or Central Shrimp, seafood market — one of Thailand's largest — and its associated housing, the epicentre of the new cluster. Thailand's Disease Control Department said on Sunday that they found 141 more cases linked to the market outbreak. On Saturday, the department reported 548 cases, **AP**

Thailand's biggest daily spike, sending shockwaves through a country that has seen only a small number of infections over the past several months due to strict border and quarantine controls. The new outbreak has been traced to a 67-year-old shrimp vendor at the seafood market. Health officials say most of those who have been infected are migrant workers from Myanmar. The workers live close to the market in crowded accommodations, raising fears that the virus could spread exponentially. Samut Sakhon is 34 kilometres (21 miles) southwest of Bangkok, the capital. Samut Sakhon's governor has imposed a night curfew and other travel restrictions until January 3. Many public places in the province, including shopping malls, schools, cinemas, spas and sports stadiums, have been ordered closed. **AP**

More students abducted in Nigeria but are quickly rescued

Maiduguri (Nigeria): Gunmen in Nigeria abducted more than 80 Islamic school students in northwestern Katsina state on Saturday night, but the pupils were quickly rescued by security forces after a fierce gun battle, police announced on Sunday. The foiled abduction comes less than two days after the release of 344 schoolboys who were kidnapped in the same area on Dec. 11. The incidents have highlighted the insecurity in northern Nigeria. Saturday night's attempted kidnapping took place in Dandume, about 64 kilometers (40 miles) from Kankara, the town where the earlier kidnapping of schoolboys occurred. The bandits had already abducted four people and stolen a dozen schoolbags when they ran into the schoolchildren who were on their way home from a celebration, Katsina state police spokesman, Gambo Isa, said early on Sunday morning. Police and a local community self-defense group rescued the children from the



bandits after a gunfight, he said. "The teams succeeded in dislodging the bandits and rescued all the 84 kidnapped victims and recovered all the 12 rustled cows," said Isa in a state-

ment. "Search parties are still combing the area with a view of arresting the injured bandits and/or the recovery of their dead bodies."

Dandume, an area bordering the northern part of Kaduna state, is one of the region's hotspots for banditry and kidnapping, according to residents.

The teams succeeded in dislodging the bandits and rescued all the 84 kidnapped victims and recovered all the 12 rustled cows

"Dandume is a no-go-area for many of us because of the high level of crimes and insecurity being perpetrated by armed bandits," said Saidu Lawal, an official of a local civic group in Katsina, told The Associated Press. "Despite Government efforts to open up the area by constructing roads leading from the metropolitan locations to the hinterlands of Dandume... The banditry still persists," said Lawal. "On many occasions, the bandits block the Dandume-Sabuwa highways to attack travelers. It was based on that reason that many people have abandoned the new route." **AP**

Kuwait's key reformer, son of late emir, dies at 72

Dubai: Kuwait's Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al Sabah, the eldest son of the late emir, who emerged as an influential reformer in the oil-rich Gulf sheikhdom, died on Sunday, the country's state-run news agency reported. He was 72. Sheikh Nasser, who held various government posts over the years including minister of defense and deputy prime minister, had been considered a top contender for crown prince following the death in September of his father, the 91-year-old Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Sabah. Although he drew popular support for his ambitious mega-projects and anti-corruption efforts, he was passed over for his uncle, Sheikh Meshal Al Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah, a more cautious choice of heir apparent at a turbulent time for Kuwait's politics and the wider region. The KUNA state-run news agency did not specify how Sheikh Nasser

died, but he was known to be in fragile health after having a lung tumor removed two years ago. In a country that depends on oil for some 90% of its revenues, Sheikh Nasser championed bold plans to diversify Kuwait's economy by building up a business hub with a free zone and deep sea port in the country's north. But with many in Kuwait's parliament committed to the status quo, his ideas repeatedly ran aground even as fears mounted that the country was falling behind its more powerful and better-developed neighbors, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Last year, Sheikh Nasser's public allegations of government corruption vaulted him into the national political scene, as he pressed for investigations into the suspected embezzlement of hundreds of millions of dollars from a military fund. **AP**

Nepal's private airline flew 69 passengers to wrong destination: Report

PTI ■ KATHMANDU Passengers bound for Nepal's Janakpur were in for a surprise after they ended up in Pokhara, 255 kilometres away from the actual destination, after a rare flight mix-up by a leading private carrier, according to a media report on Sunday. The incident happened on Friday to 69 passengers travelling on Buddha Air, The Kathmandu Post reported. The weather was not quite favourable for the flights on Friday so carriers were making use of every available weather window to take the passengers on board as quickly as possible and take off, the report said. Buddha Air's flight U4505 was cleared to take off for Janakpur airport in the plains. Passengers were taken in and the plane took off, with its estimated arrival time at Janakpur by 3:15 pm. **AP**

Additional borrowing permission granted

₹16,728 CR FOR 5 STATES

PII ■ NEW DELHI

Centre has granted permission for additional mobilisation of financial resources to the tune of ₹16,728 crore through open market borrowings to five States.

The permission has been granted as the state have so far completed the stipulated reforms in the ease of doing business. These states are Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Telangana, said a Finance Ministry statement.

In view of the resource requirement to meet the chal-

lenges posed by the pandemic, the government had on May 17, 2020 enhanced the borrowing limit of the states by 2 per cent of their GSDP. Half of this special dispensation was linked to undertaking citizen centric reforms by the states.

The four citizen centric areas for reforms identified were implementation of 'One Nation One Ration Card' system, ease of doing business reform, urban local body or utility reforms and power sector reforms.

So far 10 states have implemented the One Nation One Ration Card system, five States have done 'ease of doing business' reforms, and two states have done local body reforms.

Besides additional borrowing permissions, the states

completing three out of the four reforms are entitled to get additional financial assistance under the "Scheme for Financial Assistance to States for Capital Expenditure".

Under the scheme, an amount of Rs 2,000 crore is earmarked for this purpose.

To facilitate more states to undertake the reforms and avail additional borrowings, the Department of Expenditure, Ministry of Finance had recently extended the deadline for the states to complete citizen centric reforms in various sectors. Now, if the recommendation from the nodal ministry concerned regarding implementation of the reform is received by February 15, 2020, the state will be eligible for reform linked benefits, said the statement.

Our investment plans in India on track: Saudi Arabia

Indian economy has strength to bounce back

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Saudi Arabia, the world's largest oil exporter, on Sunday said its investment plans in India are on track, noting that the Indian economy has the strength to recover from the adverse impact of the coronavirus crisis.

In February last year, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced that Saudi Arabia would invest over USD 100 billion in India in petrochemicals, refining, infrastructure, mining and manufacturing, agriculture and several other sectors.

"Our plans to invest in India are on track and we are in discussion to prioritise investment opportunities in several sectors in both coun-

tries," Saudi Ambassador Dr Saud bin Mohammed Al Sati told PTI in an interview.

Stating that Saudi Arabia values India as a strategic partner and a close friend, Al Sati identified ongoing cooperation in areas of training, knowledge sharing and combating terrorism as key elements of the partnership in defence and security sphere.

Al Sati complimented India's measures to revive its economy in view of the impact of the pandemic and said the economic recovery of both countries will help elevate other economies in the region as well.

"The economic relief package provided by India for its most prominent sectors is commendable. As the fifth-largest global economy and the largest economy in South Asia, the Indian economy has the impetus to recover from the impact of the ongoing pandemic," he said.

Without commenting on Army Chief Gen MM Naravane's visit to Saudi Arabia

during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Riyadh in October last year. The council is mandated to monitor the progress of strategic relationships in a whole range of key areas.

"The current decade has witnessed a remarkable stride in the relations between Saudi Arabia and India. What was once viewed as ties between two friendly countries is now a strong strategic partnership between two formidable economies," Al Sati said.

Gen Naravane on Sunday held extensive talks with Commander of Royal Saudi Land Forces Gen Fahd Bin Abdullah Mohammed Al-Mutir as he began a two-day rare visit to the Gulf country to lay the ground for deeper military ties.

In the first-ever visit by a head of the Indian Army, Gen Naravane travelled to Saudi capital city Riyadh last week where he held talks with top military brass.

The two sides set up the Strategic Partnership Council

billions in Reliance's Jio platforms" Saudi Aramco is committed to investing in India's energy sector. Aramco's decision to buy a stake in Reliance Industries Oil to Chemical business and Aramco's commitment to invest in the West Coast refinery petrochemical project signifies the interest Saudi Arabia places in the development of India's energy sector," he said.

Apart from this, Al Sati said Saudi Arabia is continuing to explore new investment opportunities in India. The envoy also highlighted Saudi Arabia's recent Labor Reform Initiative (LRI), saying they will further help Saudi Arabia and India to cement their economic relationship.

"It will enhance the contractual relationship between workers and employers, and will support the Kingdom's vision of establishing an attractive job market, empowering and developing labour competencies and developing the work environment," he said.

On trade partnership, the envoy referred to the decision by Saudi Public Investment Fund (PIF) to invest approximately USD 1.3 billion in Reliance Retail and USD 1.5

Corporate Affairs Min defers implementation of CARO order

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Government has deferred implementation of the strict disclosure requirements for auditor reports of companies by one year, a move that comes amid the disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

Now, the Companies (Auditor's Report) Order, 2020 would come into effect from financial years commencing on or after April 1, 2021, according to a notification issued by the corporate affairs ministry.

The ministry is implementing the companies law. Sanjeev Singhal, Partner at S R Batliboi and Co LLP, said the coronavirus pandemic has caused significant disruptions forcing the companies to focus on ensuring business continuity.

"Deferral of CARO 2020 by one year will give the much-needed relief to companies and they will be able to use the additional time to prioritise allocation of resources and better prepare for the enhanced

requirements.

It will be equally helpful for the auditors as well," Singhal said.

Earlier, CARO 2020 was to come into force from financial year starting on or after April 1, 2020.

The CARO requires companies to comply with stricter disclosure requirements on various issues, including whistle blower complaints and default in repayment of borrowings.

"CARO 2020 would necessitate enhanced due diligence and disclosures on the part of auditors of eligible companies, and has been designed to bring in greater transparency in the financial state of affairs of such companies," the ministry had said in February this year.

Under this stricter framework, auditors are required to provide detailed disclosures about loan defaults, amount of cash losses and immovable properties as well as other aspects about companies in their annual reports.

Reliance, BP to get Govt capped price of USD 4.06 for new gas from KG-D6

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Reliance Industries and its partner BP will get only USD 4.06 a unit for the new gas they have started to produce from the eastern offshore KG-D6 field even though they have discovered a higher rate in an open market auction, sources said.

Reliance-BP in November 2019 auctioned initial gas from the R-Series field at a biddable percentage of Brent crude oil price.

If Brent crude oil stays in the current range of USD 50 to 51 a barrel, the price comes to USD 4.2 to 4.4 per million British thermal unit, two sources at the buyers of R-Series gas said.

Even though operators have pricing freedom, they can't sell gas at a rate higher than the cap the government notifies every six months. The cap for six months to March 31, 2021, is USD 4.06 per mmbtu and so Reliance-BP would get only that amount for the remainder of the current fiscal, they said.

Essar Steel, Adani Group and state-owned GAIL in November 2019 bought the

majority of the initial 5 million standard cubic meters per day of gas planned to be produced from R-Series in the KG-D6 block by bidding between 8.5 and 8.6 per cent of dated Brent price.

Emails sent to Reliance and BP for comments remained unanswered.

The rate discovered in the November 2019 auction at the lower end of the Brent price band is the same as the one that Reliance got in the first five years of production from Dhirubhai-1 and 3 and MA fields in the KG-D6 block. These fields ceased to produce a few months back.

Reliance got USD 4.205 per mmbtu for gas from D1 and D3 and MA fields during April 2019 and March 2014. It would have got double of that rate if a new formula proposed by the Rangarajan committee was approved but the new BJP government scrapped it and brought a new formula on pricing gas at rates prevalent in export surplus nations such as the US and Russia.

The rates came to USD 5.05 in 2014 and are currently at USD 1.79 per mmbtu. Sources said the govern-

ment in 2016 allowed a higher price for any new gas to be produced from a difficult project such as the deep sea field. R-Cluster field fell in that definition and gas from it was free to be sold but subject to the price cap.

The price cap for October 2020 to March 2021 period is USD 4.06 per mmbtu, down from USD 5.61 in the previous six months.

Reliance and BP had on November 18 stated that they have the commencement of natural gas production from Asia's deepest gas project, R-Cluster or R-Series. The two firms are investing USD 5 billion in bringing to production three deepwater gas projects in block KG D6 - R-Cluster, Satellites Cluster, and MJ - which together are expected to meet about 15 per cent of India's gas demand by 2023. R-Cluster will have a peak output of 12.9 mmscmd while satellites, which are supposed to begin output from the third quarter of 2021 calendar year, would produce a maximum of 7 mmscmd. MJ field will start production in the third quarter of 2022 and will have a peak output of 12 mmscmd.

NE India can be an ideal tourist destination post-Covid: Experts

PII ■ GUWAHATI

Due to its close proximity with five countries, unique culture and traditions besides picturesque beauty of its mountains and lush green landscapes, northeast India could be an ideal tourist destination post-Covid, experts and administrators said on the final day of the North East Festival (NEF) here on Sunday.

The two-day 8th edition of NEF concluded after setting the NE growth agenda as its priority with businessmen, administrators and experts expressing their strong confidence on the travel and tourism industry's revival in post Covid situation, by showcasing potentials of the region.

Assam Tourism Secretary Razvee Hussain said that Covid-19 can be a blessing in disguise. "All northeastern states can be a great tourism destination. Focus on tea tourism where old bungalows can get converted to boutique hotels. Experiencing the life of a tea planter here can be a tourist attraction. Chopper

service availability from Guwahati to Kaziranga, Majuli etc will also help the tourism industry here," he said.

Assam Tourism Department Director Deba Kumar Mishra said that focus on local tourism, more from domestic tourists, creatively planned projects for establishments of good tourism would attract and appeal more people.

Mishra said: "Northeast region shares borders of different countries and it is an incredible boon.

Assam has 'Chicken-Neck' with West Bengal and five international frontiers along the eight northeastern states are best for tourism.

Stress on eco-cultural tourism, flourishing more local commodities, local lifestyle and food could boost the tourism industry." "One more major focus is in 'Medical Tourism'. Need to welcome high level and leading tours from Mumbai, Telangana, Delhi and other big states. We are blessed with resources, we have to think with regional perspective," the Director added.

Consumer confidence improves in Dec: Report

PII ■ NEW DELHI

As economic activities gather pace and hopes of vaccines to counter the coronavirus pandemic rise, confidence among Indian consumers has also improved.

The monthly Refinitiv-Ipsos Primary Consumer Sentiment Index (PCSI) for India, has inched up by 2.1 percentage points in December 2020, said an Ipsos statement.

The monthly PCSI, which is driven by the aggregation of the four weighted sub-indices, has shown improvement across the four indices, in December.

The PCSI Employment Confidence Sub-Index is up by 0.6 percentage points, the Economic Expectations Sub Index, is up by 1.1 percentage points. The Current Personal Financial Conditions Sub-Index and the Investment Climate Sub-Index have increased by 4.2 percentage points and 3.3 percentage points respectively. "The consumer sentiment has further improved in December, which shows there is confidence in jobs, ability to spend and save and there is confidence in the economy," said Amit Adarkar, CEO, Ipsos India.

Amazon India adds 1.5 lakh sellers in 2020

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

E-commerce major Amazon India on Sunday said 1.5 lakh new sellers joined its platform this year, and over 70,000 Indian exporters in its global selling programme have crossed USD 2 billion in cumulative exports.

Amazon India, in its SMB Impact Report 2020, noted that it works with more than 10 lakh small and mid-size business (SMBs) including sellers, delivery and logistics partners, neighbourhood stores, enterprises, developers, content creators and authors work with the company in the country.

"This year has been unprecedented and has impacted the way we work and live. Yet, we remain inspired by the undying entrepreneurial spirit, creativity, resolve and trust in us of businesses, creators and authors to overcome challenges and grow," Amazon India Senior VP and Country Head Amit Agarwal said.

He added that technology adoption and digitisation will continue to play a crucial role in offering expanded access and opportunities to SMBs, and that the company remains committed to invest and partner in success of SMBs in India.

Earlier this year, Amazon had pledged to invest USD 1 billion to digitise 10 million SMBs, enable e-commerce exports worth USD 10 billion and create 1 million incremental jobs by 2025.

The SMB Impact Report 2020 said 1.5 lakh new sellers joined Amazon.In in 2020 with over 50,000 registering in Hindi and Tamil.

"(A total of) 4,152 Indian sellers surpassed Rs 1 crore in sales in 2020 and the number of core-partners grew 29 per cent year-on-year," it added.

Amazon has over seven lakh sellers on its platform.

Amazon.In has unveiled the top 10 states and union territories with most number of sellers. With more than 1,10,000 sellers, Delhi has the largest number of Amazon.In sellers in the country, followed by Maharashtra (87,000) and Gujarat (79,000).

South Central Rly bags 3 National Energy Conservation awards

PII ■ ARRAYHYDERABAD

South Central Railway has won three national energy conservation awards announced by the Bureau of Energy Efficiency, Ministry of Power, Government of India.

These awards were declared for the year 2020 as part of the National Energy Conservation week being celebrated from December 14 to December 21 throughout the year.

The awards are announced every year to recognize the efforts of various industrial units/establishments/organizations who have shown exemplary performance in conservation of energy and effective utilization of available energy.

Diessel Loco Shed, Vijayawada got the first prize in

the industry/railway workshops category.

Lekha Bhavan (SCR Accounts Office building) got the second prize in the building/government offices category. South Central Railway (SCR) zone also got the Certificate of Merit in transport/zonal railways category.

SCR being at the forefront in energy conservation has been winning these awards from the union ministry of power for the last nine years consistently.

The zone has been able to bag these awards through relentless efforts in the area of energy efficiency and green initiatives by all the divisions, workshops, field units of all the departments, even with the stiff competition from various ministries, PSUs and corporate sectors, SCR said.

ONGC starts oil production in Bengal Basin

PII ■ NEW DELHI

Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Ltd (ONGC) has commenced oil production from the Asokenagar-1 well, Bengal Basin in West Bengal's 24 Paragana districts. In a statement, the public sector energy major said that Union Petroleum & Natural Gas Minister, Dharmendra Pradhan on Sunday dedicated the Bengal Basin, the eight producing basin of India to the nation. With the development, the Bengal Basin has joined the ranks of Krishna-Godavari (KG), Mumbai Offshore, Assam Shelf, Rajasthan, Cauvery, Assam-Arakan Fold Belt and Cambay. Pradhan, while dedicating the Asokenagar discovery to the nation, said that the discovery would play a role for India's energy security.

Need multiple bad banks to address NPA issue: CII to Govt

PII ■ NEW DELHI

The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) has urged the government to consider creation of multiple bad banks to address the adverse impact of non-performing assets accumulated by public sector banks in the recent past, and which have got further accentuated during the pandemic.

In its pre-budget memorandum submitted to the government, the industry body has recommended the government to consider enabling Foreign Portfolio Investors (FPIs) and Alternative Investment Funds (AIFs) to purchase NPAs.

CII President Uday Kotak said: "In the aftermath of Covid, it is important to find a resolution mechanism through a market determined price discovery. With huge liquidity,

both globally and domestically multiple bad banks can address this issue in a transparent manner and get the credit cycle back in action."

As per the industry body, a robust market-based mechanism will encourage public sector banks to sell their bad loans, without fear of questions being raised later. With cleaner balance sheets, PSBs should be able to raise capital from the market, obviating the need for re-capitalisation by government, a bill which the government can ill-afford to foot at this point of time, it said.

The government has put in Rs 80,000 crore in bank re-capitalisation in FY18, Rs 1.08 lakh crore in FY19 and Rs 70,000 crore in FY20. In September this year, the parliament approved another Rs 20,000 crore of capital infusion into PSBs.

4,000 Indian sellers surpass sales worth ₹1 cr in 2020 on Amazon

PII ■ NEW DELHI

Business of small and medium enterprises selling products on Amazon.in witnessed growth amid the pandemic and around 4,152 Indian sellers surpassed sales worth Rs 1 crore in 2020 on Amazon.in, said a report by the e-commerce major.

The report noted that the number of 'core-partners' sellers on the platform grew 29 per cent on a year-on-year basis.

It said that emerging brands on Amazon Launchpad saw their business grow by 135 per cent YoY. Further, the number of women entrepreneurs under 'Saheli' programme saw their business grow nearly '15x', and weavers and artisans part of 'Karigar' program saw their

business grow by 2.8 times. Amazon.in on Sunday published the 2020 Small and Medium Business (SMB) Impact Report. The report marks some of the achievements made by the SMBs working with Amazon and highlights the impact of digitisation on entrepreneurs and businesses across sectors.

Amit Agarwal, Senior VP and Country Head for Amazon India, said: "It's humbling to see over 10 lakh small businesses associated with Amazon in India. This year has been unprecedented and has impacted the way we work and live." "Yet, we remain inspired by the undying entrepreneurial spirit, creativity, resolve and trust in us of businesses, creators, authors, etc. to overcome challenges and grow," he said.

Gold imports decline by 40 per cent in Apr-Nov to \$12.3 bn

PII ■ NEW DELHI

India's gold imports declined by 40 per cent to nearly \$12.3 billion during the April-November period as demand weakened amid the pandemic, as per Commerce Ministry's data.

During the same period of the last financial year, gold imports stood at nearly \$20.6 billion.

However, imports of the yellow metal witnessed a 2.65 per cent growth last month, at over \$3 billion, compared to \$2.94 billion in November 2019.

Silver imports during



April-November this fiscal plunged 65.68 per cent to \$751.92 million, from nearly \$2.2 billion during the year ago period.

In November 2020, silver worth only \$9.30 million was imported, compared to \$90.39 million in November 2019.

This decline in gold and silver imports has led to the narrowing of India's trade deficit.

Top 5 Indian cities capture 25% of smartphone market in October

PII ■ NEW DELHI

As India's smartphone market registered a massive year-over-year (YoY) growth of 42 per cent in October shipping 21 million units, 25 per cent of the market sat in top tier cities -- New Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai, and Kolkata -- registering more than 50 per cent YoY growth in October. According to the IDC, the next set of emerging markets, namely Jaipur, Gurgaon, Chandigarh, Lucknow, Bhopal and Coimbatore, also grew by nearly 50 per cent YoY.

However, the rest of the states (up-country markets) registered slower growth (aver-

age 25 per cent), primarily owing to looming economic concerns and consumer spending narrowing to essentials only, according to the International Data Corporation (IDC). India Monthly Smartphone Tracker. The leading 50 cities accounted for 55 per cent demand nationally. Despite delayed deliveries due to restrictions in several zones, consumers went for online purchases, especially on third party e-Tailer platforms, registering 23 per cent YoY growth with 50 per cent share," the report showed.

Bigger cities leaned heavily towards online channels, with 57 per cent online share in

the top 5 metros. "But supply constraints remained, impacting offline channel sales as a result of fewer retail walk-ins." While Xiaomi led in 34 of the major 50 cities within the online channel, Vivo led in 44 of the major 50 cities within the offline channel. Half a million 5G devices were sold, with almost 80 per cent from the top 10 cities of India. "Though 5G is a driver from a technological advancement standpoint, uncertainties on spectrum availability, clear use cases and high prices might restrict its uptake to few bigger cities initially," said Sachin Mehta, Market Analyst, Client Devices, IDC India.

Digital training of blue-collar employees on the rise, says experts

PTI ■ MUMBAI

Even when faced with challenges of connectivity and bandwidth, companies across sectors embraced digital training or learning and development (L&D) for blue collar staff, which witnessed from nearly nothing to double fold growth, as the pandemic fast tracked adoption of technology by two decades, says experts.

"Specific to blue collared staff, the thinking was always that they will not be able to learn effectively using technology.

Trend
Blazer

'This year went well as an actor'

Actor **NAWAZUDDIN SIDDIQI**, who had two big releases this year — *Serious Men* and *Raat Akeli Hai*, said due to the pandemic this year went by like how it was for others but as an actor it went well.

In 2020, Nawazuddin was seen in two projects seen playing Jatil Yadav in *Raat Akeli Hai* and Ayyan Mani in *Serious Men*, which have been two of the most memorable characters in the Indian OTT space, in a year when visual entertainment has been defined by digital content.

Looking back at his 2020 journey, Nawazuddin said, "As a human being this year has gone by like the others. But as an actor, if we see, two films released *Serious Men* and *Raat Akeli Hai*."



'Friends, how come we have made ourselves so vulnerable in front of terrorists and foreign powers?'

Every single day I have to justify my intention, whereas I am a patriotic person. What is Diljit Dosanjh and Priyanka Chopra doing? Why doesn't anyone question them? If I am doing rajneeti (politics) by talking in favour of the country, what kind of neeti are these people doing? Please ask them.'

—**Kangana Ranaut**

Actor **RAVEENA TANDON** is returning to the city after what she reveals has been one of the longest outdoor schedules in her near-three decade career. Raveena was shooting in Himachal Pradesh for an forthcoming project.



She shared a selfie from her flight, posing in a face shield and mask. The actor wrote: "On the way back home!! After one of the longest outdoor schedules I've ever done in my entire career! Longest ever away from home, I am headed back finally!"

In several of her posts, she even compared Himachal Pradesh with Switzerland.

Millie to star in The Electric State

Actor **MILLIE BOBBY BROWN** has been roped in to star in the science-fiction film, *The Electric State*. The film is produced and directed by Anthony and Joe Russo.

Set in an alternative future, the story revolves around a teenage girl (played by Brown) who realises that a strange and sweet robot, who comes to her, has been sent by her missing brother.

They then set out to find her brother in an imaginative world of humans and robots.

"We're thrilled to have this deal with Universal who has committed to a theatrical release of the film. This is incredible news for us as filmmakers, and for the audience around the world, who want an opportunity to experience films in theaters again," said the Russo brothers.

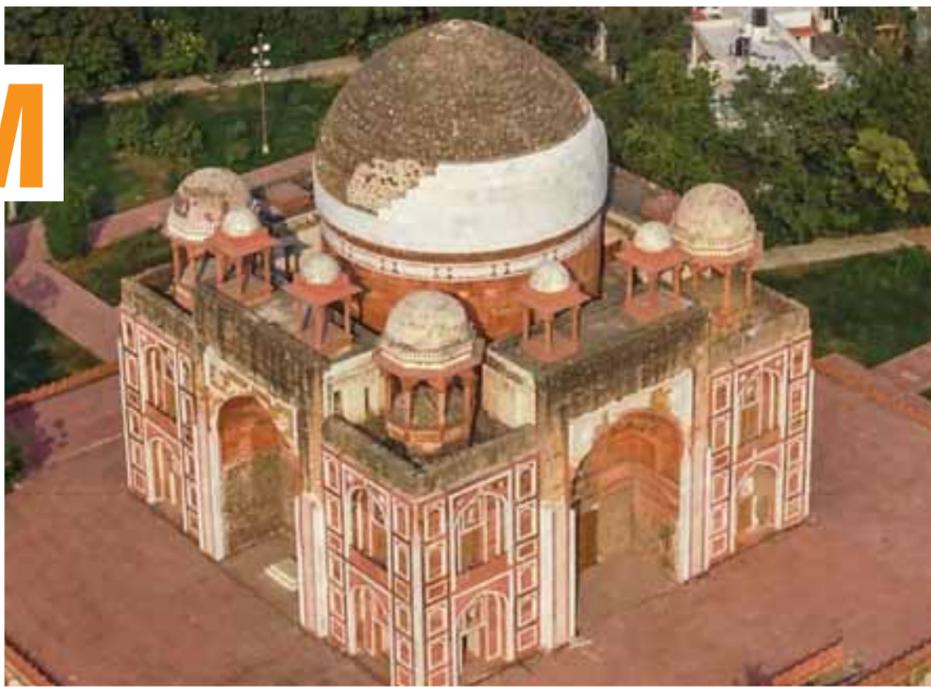
RESCUING RAHIM

Layers of soot and lime-wash had obliterated the 17th century patterns in most parts of the Abdur Rahim Khan-I-Khanan's tomb but especially in the main chamber. To ensure no damage occurs to the underlying plaster patterns, craftsmen took over a year to clean the domed ceiling. Finally, the mausoleum has been opened for the public

Standing only a few hundred yards south of the mausoleum of emperor Humayun is the monumental tomb built by Abdur Rahim Khan-I-Khanan for his wife — Mah Banu. Built in 1598 AD, this would be the first monumental tomb built for a lady in Mughal times and, on his death, Rahim was also buried in the mausoleum. Son of Bairam Khan-I-Khanan, a close associate of Emperor Humayun and the regent of the young Akbar, Rahim was also the greatest of Akbar's nobles; a statesman, courtier, linguist, humanitarian, patron and above all, poet.

Despite the historical, architectural and archaeological significance of the structure, by the 21st century, Rahim's Tomb was in a ruinous condition with a risk of complete collapse. Though an estimated six million people drive past the mausoleum annually, very few are aware that the ruin is the tomb of the legendary Rahim. The marble and sandstone cladding on the dome, facade, flooring of the terrace and the tomb, the parapets, lattice screens have largely been stripped of the building over the years including significant loss of fabric in the 20th century.

In-line with the vision of reviving heritage monuments in the country, InterGlobe Foundation and Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) announced the completion of restoration work on Rahim's tomb in the Nizamuddin area. The foundation supported the project being executed by AKTC for the physical restoration of the Rahim's tomb and cultural revival of Rahim and his poetry. Archaeological Survey of India, the custodian of the monument was a key



supporter and partner in the project, which started in 2014.

The physical revival included repairs to the major damaged structures on the interior and exterior of the mausoleum dalans, canopies (*chattris*), dome, facade and landscape, along with the wall and ceiling surfaces. The landscape around Rahim's tomb has been restored to original slopes and height. The conservation of the dome has been completed with a symbolic addition of marble cladding.

Commenting on the project completion, Rohini Bhatia, chairperson, InterGlobe Foundation, said, "India is known for its cultural heritage, hence, the preservation of our art and culture is essential for our identity. We are pleased to be a part of restoration of Rahim's mausoleum. In addition to physical restoration, we are also establishing the relevance of sites and creating awareness among communities towards the need for preservation of culture and heritage. We strive to conserve the cultural heritage of our nation."

Rahim ornamented his wife's mausoleum with diverse motifs — in plaster and stone. As with his poetry, these patterns include both geometric and floral patterns commonly seen in mausoleums but also patterns seen in Hindu buildings — Swastika and Peacock among these. Each of the arches of the ground level arcade boast of medallions of varying designs in the spandrels of the arches. Where these were evidence of original design, the medallions were restored, carefully matching the quality of the 16th century craftsmen.

On cleaning layers of soot and 20th century paint layers, the principal tomb chamber and five arched bays on each facade of the ground level arcade were found to be ornamented with breath-taking incised plaster patterns. Careful cleaning, using soft brushes, revealed that much of the ornamentation of the principal tomb chamber had survived; its revelation led Prof Ebba Koch to comment, "... the cleaning of the amazing decoration of the inner hall. We can now see again and marvel about the wonderful patterns which decorate the walls and the dome. Your work changes our perception of Mughal monuments."

The tomb is crowned with a double dome, where the outer dome would have originally been clad with marble serving as a protective layer for the underlying masonry. Though several peer reviews suggested completing the marble cladding on the dome, on the advice of the Archaeological Survey of India, restoration of marble cladding was limited to the base. This served the dual purpose of strengthening the base as well as to indicate to visitors the original finish of the dome. In view of the several opinions expressed on this matter, it is possible that sometime in the future opinion will veer towards completing the marble cladding on the grand dome of Rahim's mausoleum. On the roof, anastylis of four canopies was possible with stone elements found at site.

All conservation works utilise 'available traditional craftsmanship in the country and the use of traditional building materials and skills as an integral part of the conservation process. All repairs have focussed on imparting stability and to prevent loss of original material. The conservation effort have primarily aimed to 'prolong the life' of the mausoleum while preventing any further damage and deterioration by minimising the impact of external agents of decay (natural and human induced) on its setting, structure and material.

Ratish Nanda, CEO of Aga Khan Trust for Culture said, "Conservation at Rahim's tomb has been possible with a public-private partnership. Not only has a significant monument been conserved for posterity but dignity has been restored to the resting place of the cultural icon, Rahim. Conservation in the Indian context can benefit from thousands of years of building craft traditions and recourse to an inter-disciplinary scientific approach. Around 1,75,000 craft days of work has helped restore this grandeur."

TODAY IS THE DAY



Fashion designers **SHANTANU** and **NIKHIL MEHRA** share that this pandemic has taught them a lot about being disruptive and fearless

Designers Shantanu and Nikhil Mehra feel the post-COVID era will be all about being disruptive and fearless. "I feel that this pandemic has definitely taught us a lot and I think all the young budding designers, artists from whatever walks of lives, they should feel a lot more fearless. No one is going to judge you for what you are or how you plan to pursue your career as a brand," Shantanu said.

"Just be a little disruptive, even if you feel you can't make it on your own, have the guts and the courage to go seek a job because today everybody is looking for some talent. So if you have it in you or even if you feel that you do not have the talent or courage to start your own business, brand or entrepreneurship journey because the pandemic has given you that suffering or pain points, don't hesitate in going back to the drawing board and say okay I think I'm going to work for a bit. Just give it a try," he shared.

"Give some value to the person who is employing you and at the same time get some value that yes, you can again restart and reshape my journey. I think it's going to be about that disrupting self," he added. Nikhil said, "This is a great moment in our lives when for the first time when you talk about true democracy, it's happening across the world to every human being."

He continued, "It's a time that will give us a chance to understand why we are here. A lot of times we spend a lifetime trying to figure that out or we can never do that and we pass away but this gives us an opportunity to really dig deep inside and understand why we are here."

"I find this year or this moment to be a blessing so that it can help us to understand we are humans, we have emotions and it's not just the greed that we need to go after but really ourselves. I hope this gives us all an opportunity to be humans again," shared the designer in an episode of Lakshmi Manchu's show *Coming Back To Life With Lakshmi Manchu*, which is available on SouthBay channel.

—IANS

WEBBED



THE MIDNIGHT SKY

George Clooney is getting in the director's chair to adapt Lily Brooks-Dalton's novel *Good Morning, Midnight*. He also stars in the film, playing a (heavily bearded) scientist, isolated in the Arctic in a post-apocalyptic world, who sets out to stop a space crew led by Felicity Jones from returning to a catastrophic Earth. It releases on December 23 on Netflix.



BRIDGERTON

Shonda Rhimes is finally coming to Netflix. The showrunner's first release is an adaptation of Julia Quinn's romance novel series about the wealthy, English Bridgerton family and their affairs. Julie Andrews is among the stars. It releases on December 25.



BEST LEFTOVERS EVER!

Do you just nuke your leftovers in the microwave, or otherwise let them go to waste? Then you could learn a thing or two from the cooks on this competition series who are masters in leftover cooking and take on challenges that give new life to old meals. It releases on December 30 on Netflix.

A RAY OF HOPE

The new electricity distribution reform programme brings hope for the people residing in rural and remote areas of J&K who have been awaiting power supply for decades now. By SALMA RAZI



A BETTER WORLD

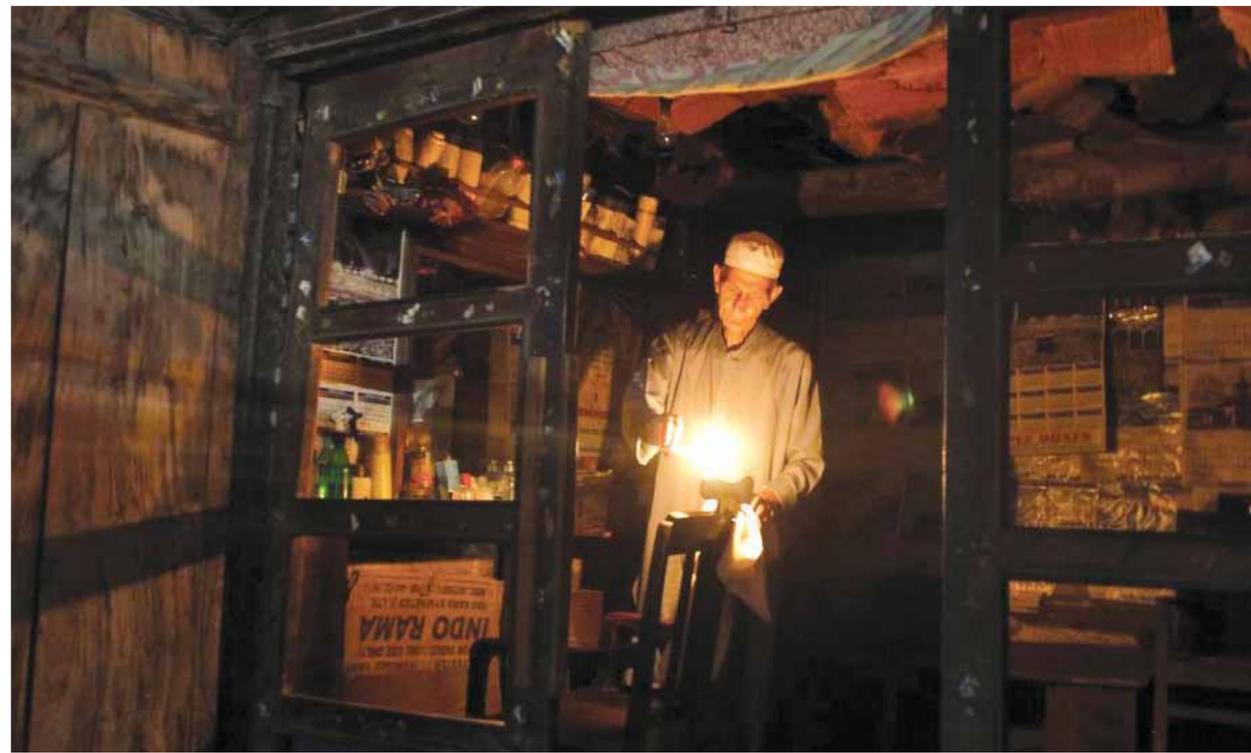
We should make a resolution to invest our time, money and energy for peace and harmony, says RAJYOGI BRAHMAKUMAR NIKUNJ JI

Since ages, philosophers across the world have argued that the concept of happiness can be defined or analysed simply in terms of 'individual contentment' or by being satisfied with one's life. So in simple words, one can say that in order to be happy, one needs to be content. But is it really possible in today's time and age? Well, in the present world, one would hardly find a man who is not discontented. There may be many reasons behind that, of which one of the major ones is his financial challenges. Other than this, it may be related to the personal, social, economic, political and moral issues. As a result of this, man is weighed down with despair, indifference, tension, animosity, even fury and mental agony. Hence, his plans and acts go wrong and this leads to fights. Some people also have a habit of building castles in the air. As a result, they fail to understand that it is only by hard work that a man can make both ends meet. Hence, we should remember that just like food sustains the body, in the same way your mind find sustenance in happiness. So, the saying goes: there is no food as good as happiness. And, to be happy, you have to be contented. As Alfred Nobel has rightly said that 'Contentment is the only real wealth,' we should therefore not run after securing another kind of wealth to lose the wealth of contentment.



Contentment is as good as a means of happiness as wealth is considered to be. Is it proper, therefore, to lose the wealth of contentment in order to secure another kind of wealth? The right course of conduct is that man should be calm in the present crisis and at the same time, find a systematic method of mending or ending it. Considering the present to be the consequence of our own actions, we should thus be careful about the future. We must remember that the world is subject to change and every human being reaps as he sows. Hence, man should play his part and do good deeds so that he doesn't face any undesirable situations later in life.

Contentment, purity and peace are the trios which make one's life worth living. They appear on in life after one has been pursuing spiritual studies and practising meditation. Without Yoga, one cannot attain and sustain inner peace and tranquility. However, people generally think that spiritual studies are uninteresting, boring, tedious and are mainly based on faith, accompanied by rituals and repetition of mantras. But this is not the truth. Spiritual studies are as interesting as any other subject and meditation is neither a ritual nor does it involve the repetition of a sacred Sanskrit formula. It is as simple as reflecting, remembering and feeling, with a bit of guidance in the beginning. Meditating should be considered as an investment for gaining high dividends in the form of contentment and peace, which are the most valuable prizes that life offers. Today, if we look around, how many people would we find who are spending their time, money and energy for peace and harmony in society? Unfortunately there aren't many. It is high time we make a resolve to put our time, money and energy for peace and harmony because if we wish to have a peaceful and harmonious world around us, then it should begin with each one of us.



hearing since 1965 that our region will get the power supply, but we are still fighting for poles, wires and transformers to reach our village," shared Afsana Rashid (name changed), an elderly woman from the mohalla.

In Morban, the situation is a little better as a transformer and poles have been installed here under the *Din Dayal Yojana*. However, the village is yet to be blessed with power supply. As per the Junior Assistant working at the power department, lockdown due to the ongoing pandemic had interrupted the installation work. "Now, we are waiting for the harvesting season. As soon as the crops are harvested and the land is vacant, we will install the power lines," he shared.

said scheme has been given to a third party who shared that at present, work is divided into four phases. "Of four phases, Hari Badha and Morban are about to be completed. As soon as we install 39 power poles in Morban and 29 in Thapla Mohalla, the work will be completed in these two areas. Work in Fatehpur region has not started yet but we are working on the action plan," he informed.

In the past few years, the government has taken several concrete steps towards ensuring electrification of remotest of villages. This new electricity distribution reform programme will not only trim electricity losses but with improved reliability and efficiency, it may finally bring light to these distant villages.

—Charkha Features

The contract for the work under the

THE YOUTH DIALOGUE

The future we seek

The availability of information and technology makes online education a better option. But we need new policies to develop and integrate ed-tech and life skills into the curriculum, says NEIL BINOY



are transforming for free. During the pandemic, we are finding ourselves with more time on our hands, and various people are turning to courses on sites like EdX, Udemy and Coursera to earn certifications. The practise of reading frequently has increased, under

the fiercely watchful eyes of at-home parents and buffeted by the fact that many children are cut off from most activities, like extended television sprees, or any outdoor activity. It has proven a solace and many became accidental readers. From Mahatma Gandhi to Nelson Mandela, Obama to Nehru, Bill Gates to Elon Musk, Anne Frank to Greta Thunberg, there is one thing they have all in common: reading. Gates has reported devoting much of his day to reading, even opening a section in his website GatesNotes, devoted entirely to his musings on books. School children could start with storybooks before they get into further reading. Through this column, I intend to introduce a book every fortnight for kids to encourage them to read. This week, I would recommend a book I had read and reviewed recently — *Unfair* by Rasil Ahuja. Set in the sweltering suburbs of Delhi, the book explores discrimination in our schooling system. It is a perfect pick for beginners.

Issues such as safety, high fees and peer pressure have made the educated parents opt for more reliable home schooling. From one million in two decades to the two million

children currently registered in the NIOS evidence it. The availability of information online and technology make this form of education a better option. The government should formulate new education policies, to evolve itself, to develop and integrate ed-tech and life-skills into its curriculum. Ranjitsingh Disale recently won the million-dollar Global Teacher's Prize. This Maharashtrian teacher learned Kannada and converted the school textbooks into a more digestible structure for his students. Utilising QR codes, interactive, lively teaching, and technology like tablets, mobile phones and computers, he has transformed the lives of his students. If an individual teacher can embrace such novel education methods, why can't the governments do the same? Well, secure internet access and devices to empower the children in remote and rural areas would be a good start, but only a start. As Queen Rania of Jordan says, "In education, technology can be a life-changer, a game-changer, for kids who are both in school and out of school."

(The writer is founder of Voice of Kids and Gold medal winner at the International English Olympiad.)

Peace begins with a smile. —Mother Teresa

MALE COVID PATIENTS AT HIGHER RISK

Hospitalised male COVID patients have a 30 per cent greater risk of dying compared to women of the same age and health status, revealed a new study that identified several risk factors for mortality from the disease.

Hospitalised patients who were obese, had hypertension or poorly managed diabetes also had a higher risk of dying compared to those who did not have these conditions, said the study published in the journal *Clinical Infectious Diseases*.

Those aged 20 to 39 with these conditions had the biggest difference in their risk of dying compared to their healthier peers.

For the study, the researchers evaluated nearly 67,000 hospitalised COVID-19 patients in 613 hospitals across the US to determine the link between certain common patient characteristics and the risk of dying from COVID-19.



ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS MAY UP DEATH RISK

Consuming a high amount of ultra-processed foods may increase the risk of death from any cause by 26 per cent, and 58 per cent specifically from cardiovascular diseases, say researchers.

Supermarket shelves are increasingly flooded with foods produced by extensive industrial processing, generally low in essential nutrients, high in sugar, oil and salt and liable to be overconsumed.

Now a study from IRCCS NEUROMED — Mediterranean Neurological Institute in Italy, confirms that these foods are harmful to health.

Published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, the study was conducted on over 22,000 people participating in the Moli-sani Project.

By analysing their eating habits and following their health conditions for over 8 years, the researchers were able to observe that those consuming a high amount of ultra-processed foods had an increased risk of death.



VAPING LINKED TO INCREASED SMOKING

Researchers have now claimed that kids who use e-cigarettes are more likely to take up smoking or smokeless tobacco.

The study, published in the journal *Addictive Behaviors*, says teenage boys who vaped were almost three times as likely to start smoking as other teen boys with similar risk profiles and more than two times as likely to try smokeless tobacco.

"For an ideal study, from a purely scientific perspective, we'd give everybody an e-cigarette, follow them for a few years and see if they start smoking, then rewind the clock and don't give them an e-cigarette," said study author Britney Keller-Hamilton from Ohio State University in the US.

"Or we'd randomly assign kids to vape or not to vape. We can't do either of those things, obviously," Keller-Hamilton added.



STUDY SUGGESTS VIRUS ENTERS BRAIN

Researchers have now claimed that more and more evidence is coming out that people with COVID-19 are suffering from cognitive effects, such as brain fog and fatigue.

The study, published in the journal *Nature Neuroscience*, found that the spike protein, often depicted as the red arms of the virus, can cross the blood-brain barrier in mice.

This strongly suggests that SARS-CoV-2, the cause of COVID-19, can enter the brain.

"The spike protein, often called the S1 protein, dictates which cells the virus can enter. Usually, the virus does the same thing as its binding protein," said lead author William A Banks from the University of Washington in the US.

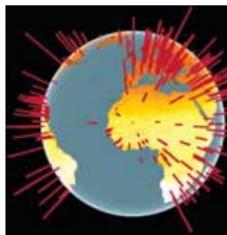


CORONA SPREAD LINKED TO UV VARIATIONS

Natural variations in ultraviolet radiation (UV) influence the spread of COVID-19, but the influence is modest compared to preventive measures such as physical distancing, mask-wearing, and quarantine, say researchers.

"Understanding the potential seasonality of Covid-19 transmission could help inform our response to the pandemic in the coming months," said study author Jonathan Proctor from the Harvard University in the US.

These findings, published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, suggest that the incidence of COVID-19 may have a seasonal pattern, spreading faster in the winter when it is darker than in the summer.



GILL, KL, PANT GET READY FOR BOXING DAY

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Veteran wicketkeeper-batsman Wriddhiman Saha and young opener Prithvi Shaw are unlikely to be picked for the remaining Tests in Australia as India look to ring in wholesale changes after the batting debacle in Adelaide.

It is understood that young Shubman Gill, after a couple of impressive knocks in the warm-up games, is seen as a replacement of Shaw as senior star Rohit Sharma will not be available until the third Test match in Sydney.

With Saha's batting not giving any confidence to the dressing room, the team management will certainly look at Pant, who had scored a hundred Down Under during his previous tour, as keeping might not be a factor on pitches with firm and even bounce.

KL Rahul and Mohammed Siraj are the two others in fray to enter the playing XI and those would be forced changes due to the absence of skipper Virat Kohli and senior pacer, Mohammed Shami, who is out with a fractured wrist.

The 36-year-old Saha could well be running the last lap of his international career as young and feisty Pant is set to be preferred by the team management over the next three Test matches and if he does well, against England, too.

As far as Saha is concerned, his inept batting in SENA countries hasn't gone unnoticed (he doesn't have a half-century there), but former chairman of selectors MSK Prasad said that during his regime, certain plans were chalked out on the Saha-Pant conundrum.

"Look, our committee was clear that Rishabh Pant will be our first choice keeper in places like England and Australia. Only when we are looking at matches in India where you don't need batting after number six most times, you can have a specialist keeper," Prasad told PTI on Sunday.

"I believe Rishabh has



Virat closes gap with Smith

PTI ■ DUBAI

India may have suffered an embarrassing defeat in the series-opener against Australia but its skipper Virat Kohli fractionally closed the gap with top-ranked Test batsman Steve Smith, following his 74-run knock in the first innings in Adelaide.

Kohli gained two points for his half-century to get to 888 while Smith (911) lost 10 points in the table after scoring 1 and 1 in his two innings.

Marnus Labuschagne's innings of 47 and 6 in the low-scoring match pushed him to a career-best 839 points in the latest ICC rankings for Test batsmen.

Australia skipper Tim Paine's player-of-the-match innings of 73 not out has lifted him to a career-best 33rd with 592 points.

His previous best was 45th in December of 2018. Further



down, Joe Burns' unbeaten 51 saw him move into 48th place, the first time he has been in the top 50 since 2016.

Spinner R Ashwin has now become India's top-ranked bowler after taking four wickets in Australia's first innings. Ashwin, now ranked ninth, overtook pacer pacer Jasprit Bumrah.

Ravindra Jadeja, who did not play the Adelaide Test, was unchanged at number three in the all-rounders' list.

Australian fast bowler Pat Cummins gained six points for his seven-wicket haul as he moved from 904 to 910 for a comfortable lead over Stuart Broad in second place.

Cummins' pace colleague, Josh Hazlewood's figures of 5/8 in India's second innings helped him gain four spots and move back into the top five with 805 points, the first time since March 2018.

worked on his fitness issues during the past month and looked in good touch during the pink ball practice game. So I would agree with the team management if they give Rishabh a go for the next three Tests," Prasad said.

As far as Shaw is concerned, everything that can go wrong has gone for the 21-year-old Mumbaier, whose technique, temperament and overall attitude towards the game has raised some serious question marks in the corridors of Indian cricket.

If sources in the know of things are to be believed, despite his slump in form, Shaw was preferred over an in-form Gill because he had played in the last series in New Zealand and needed to be given at least one more game.

Since he has wasted his

chances, it's time for him to cool his heels before going back to the drawing board.

Not only has teams sorted his faulty technique, his fielding has been below par from the time of IPL as he has either been slow on the outfield or missed sitters like the one offered by Marnus Labuschagne, which cost his team 30 extra runs.

The Indian team management could mull bringing Hanuma Vihari up the order in the absence of Virat Kohli and Prasad, who has seen Vihari from close quarters, feels it won't be a bad idea to play him at No. 5.

"Vihari has a very sound technique and temperament and he can serve this Test team for a long time. In absence of Virat, it would be a great oppor-

tunity for him and KL (Rahul) to stand up and be counted," Prasad said.

"I would prefer Vihari batting at No. 4 or 5 in the next few Tests and face the challenge. He is a gutsy boy and I have confidence that he will do well if given the challenge. KL can be a good No. 6 in this series," the former chairman of selectors said.

He has endured a tragedy during the ongoing tour, having lost his father but young Mohammed Siraj's six five-wicket hauls for India is finally going to be rewarded as he gets ready to make his Test debut at MCG in place of Shami.

The choice was between him and Navdeep Saini, but Siraj's better show during the two practice games has tilted the scales in his favour.



Cummins wants sporting MCG wicket

PTI ■ ADELAIDE

One of the architects of India's humiliating loss in the pink-ball series opener, Australian pacer Pat Cummins acknowledged the help offered by the lively track here and wants a similar "sporting" pitch for the Boxing Day Test in Melbourne.

Cummins (4/21) and Josh Hazlewood (5/8) produced a sensational performance as India collapsed to their lowest-ever Test score of 36, paving the way for an eight-wicket win and a 1-0 lead in the series for the home team.

"I thought the Ashes Test (2017-18) and the Indian Test at the MCG a couple of years ago were pretty flat wickets," Cummins was quoted as saying by 'cricket.Com.Au'.

"As a bowler, last year against New Zealand, it was a really good wicket, a bit of sideways movement and a bit of pace and bounce, so, hopefully, much the same (this year).

"Not only as a player but as a fan, they are the best wickets - when it is good battle between bat and ball. You feel like if you do your skill well, you can have a big impact on the game."

Cummins had taken the prized scalp of Virat Kohli and Cheteshwar Pujara, who will be expected to take a lot of responsibility in the remainder of the series as the India skipper returns home for the birth of his child.

Talking about Pujara's wicket, Cummins said: "One of the biggest helpers was the wicket, it felt like there was a bit of sideways movement."

"We could just challenge his defence over and over again and having a bit of bounce in the wicket certainly helped," Cummins said.

The Australia vice-captain also praised off-spinner Nathan Lyon for bowling well to Pujara in the first innings.

"I thought Lino (Nathan Lyon) bowled beautifully to him in the first innings. But, for sure, we are really clear what we want to do to him. We saw we probably brought an extra man to the leg side as well to try and really attack his stumps," he said.

"I thought he batted really well in the first innings. We bowled well enough for the scoreboard to not go anywhere. If he hasn't gone on to that big score, you are right in the game."

SCG remains preference for 3rd Test: CA

PTI ■ ADELAIDE

Cricket Australia on Sunday said the SCG remains its preferred venue for the third Test against India after reports emerged that the governing body is contemplating swapping the last two games of the four-Test series due to growing COVID-19 cases in Sydney.

Australian cricket officials were put on high alert last week after an outbreak of the virus in the northern beaches in Sydney, which will host the third Test from January 7.

There were reports that the CA was mulling options and "swapping the third and fourth Tests between Sydney and Brisbane was the top alternative."

However, CA's interim chief executive officer Nick Hockley said he is hopeful of staging the third Test between Australia and India at the SCG.

"We have made no changes to our schedule and our preference remains to play the match at the Sydney Cricket Ground," Hockley was quoted as saying by 'Sydney Morning Herald' in a statement.

"Cricket Australia has developed a solid track record of delivery throughout this most challenging of summers and will continue to make appropriate and proportionate decisions in consultation with our biosecurity team, governments, state and territory associations, the Australian Cricketers' Association, our partners and venues."

With cases growing, star Australia opener David Warner and pacer Sean Abbott — both recovering from injuries — were on Saturday flown from Sydney to Melbourne, which will host the Boxing Day Test from December 26.

The governing body's coronavirus working group was also due to meet on Sunday to take stock of the impact of Sydney's northern beaches virus cluster on the third Test.

With the number of cases shooting to 71, Victoria and South Australia have already announced tighter border controls, while the New South Wales state government have also imposed fresh restrictions.

Under the current circumstances, there are concerns that Queensland state may close its border with New South Wales, which will mean players and broadcasting crews will not be able to travel from Sydney to Brisbane between the third and fourth Tests.

Hockley said the governing body is prepared for such contingencies.

"CA has prepared for the possibility of COVID-19 hotspots and state border closures over the course of the summer and the protocols that we have put in place have been effective in ensuring the safety and success of the men's and women's domestic and international programs to date," he said.

According to the report, "Hosting the next two Tests in Melbourne, where the series will resume on Boxing Day after Australia took a 1-0 lead in Adelaide, is another option..."

Good chance for Oz to go for clean sweep: Ponting



PTI ■ MELBOURNE

The humiliation in Adelaide has opened up "serious wounds" for India and Australia now have a "good chance" of inflicting on the visitors a whitewash in the four-Test series, reckons former captain Ricky Ponting.

India were bundled

out for their lowest-ever Test score of 36 in their second innings as Australia claimed an eight-wicket win in the pink-ball Test to take a 1-0 lead in the Border-Gavaskar trophy.

"Now there's some serious wounds opened up. There could be a good chance (of a sweep)," Ponting told

cricket.Com.Au.

"Let's hope we do get a result in Melbourne and if we do, I think India's going to find it really hard to bounce back and win a game."

India will miss skipper Virat Kohli in the remaining three Tests as he returns home for the birth of his child and

Ponting said it will be a real test for the visitors as they look to pick up the pieces under the captaincy of Ajinkya Rahane.

"We'll learn a lot about them, won't we? With Kohli not being there as well there's almost no one to pick them back up after a loss like that," Ponting said.

AP ■ HAMILTON

Opener Tim Seifert carried his bat for 84 in an unbroken 129-run partnership with Kane Williamson to steer New Zealand to a nine-wicket win over Pakistan in the second Twenty20 international Sunday and an unassailable 2-0 lead in the three-match series.

Williamson finished 57 not out in his return to the short format as New Zealand overtook Pakistan's total of 163-6 with four balls to spare.

Seifert took his runs from only 63 balls with eight fours and three sixes, unleashing a wide variety of shots on a flat wicket against a Pakistan attack that struggled to find consistently challenging lengths.

Williamson was scratchy at first, then became unstoppable, reaching his 12th T20 internation-

Black Caps wrap T20 series



Injured Babar could miss 1st Test

PTI ■ KARACHI

Recovering from a thumb injury, Pakistan captain Babar Azam could miss the opening Test against New Zealand at Mount Maunganui beginning December 26.

Babar, who has been Pakistan's top run-scorer across all three formats since last year, suffered a fracture in his thumb during a throw-down session in Queenstown on December 12 which ruled him out of the

three-match T20 series.

"Babar is under rehab and has done some light training but whether he will be 100 percent match fit in time for the first test is a long shot," a source aware of the developments in New Zealand said.

Babar has also been given a 12-day rehab and rest period to be fit again but the source said the Pakistan captain's injury was taking time to heal and he was still unable to hold a bat properly.

al half century from 37 balls on the same ground where he scored a test-best 251 in his last innings.

"It was a good surface, good for the bowlers but obviously if you could build partnerships you could get there," Williamson said.

Hafeez came to the last over 82 not out, hit three singles, a six and a four and was 93 not out with only one ball left in the innings. He did the best he could, hitting the final delivery for six to finish just short of a maiden century.

Tim Southee, Trent Boult and Kyle Jamieson also returned, giving New Zealand an all-new pace attack. Southee made his presence felt, taking 4-21 from his four overs to weaken the Pakistan innings.

Boult took 0-33 and Jamieson 0-43 but New Zealand generally bowled well after losing the toss.

Amir blames management for early retirement

PTI ■ KARACHI

Pacer Mohammad Amir has held the Pakistan team management responsible for his decision to quit international cricket at 28 and slammed coach Misbah-ul-Haq and bowling coach Waqar Younis for "spoiling" his image.

Speaking on his official Youtube channel, left-arm pacer Amir made it clear that his problem was with Misbah and Younis.

"These people have been trying to slowly poison people's minds by saying that I didn't want to play Test cricket and only wanted to play in T20 leagues to earn money. They built a narrative that I had let down the team despite all the investment in me," Amir said.

"They have tried to spoil my image and it takes a lot of hard work to build your image."

"It was a very hard decision for me but I think the time has come



when one shouldn't keep quiet. I took this decision to raise this issue and let people know what is happening."

"Obviously I was very hurt when they didn't select me even in 35 players for New Zealand. If I only cared about playing in leagues then I would not feel bad at being dropped for the New Zealand tour nor would I have reacted," he stated.

Simranjeet, Manish win Gold in Cologne WC

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Indian women boxers Simranjeet Kaur (60kg) and Manish (57kg) notched up Gold medals with contrasting final wins in the Cologne World Cup in Germany.

Manish defeated compatriot Saskhi 3-2, while Simranjeet got the better of German Maya Klienhans 4-1 to finish on top in their respective categories.

India finished the competition at the second spot overall after claiming three gold, two silver and four Bronze medals.

On Saturday, Asian Games champion Amit Panghal (52kg) had claimed the sole Gold among men. He got a walkover in the finals.

Veteran Satish Kumar (+91kg) had to settle for a silver after an injury forced him to withdraw from the finals.

Sonia Lather (57kg), Pooja Rani (75kg) Gaurav Solanki (57kg) and Mohamed Hussamudin (57kg) had claimed the bronze medal in their respective categories.

United embarrassment for Leeds

AFF ■ MANCHESTER

Scott McTominay became the first player in Premier League history to score twice in the opening three minutes of a match, and Manchester United ran riot against arch-rivals Leeds United, plundering four more goals en route to 6-2 victory at Old Trafford on Sunday.

Bruno Fernandes bagged a brace of his own - including a second-half penalty - and Victor Lindelof and Daniel James chipped in to give United their biggest win of the Premier League season.

Leeds' Liam Cooper and Stuart Dallas provided the visitors with meager consolation goals.

Jamie Vardy's penalty and Toby Alderweireld's own-goal propelled Leicester to a 2-0 victory over Tottenham and up to second in the Premier League,



moving ahead of the north London club on Sunday.

Tottenham's once-blossoming title challenge has faltered over the last eight days, with only one point collected by Jose Mourinho's side from three games. But Leicester, the surprise 2016 title winner, is now only four points behind current defending champion Liverpool after 14 games.

A first half lacking clear-

cut chances ended with Vardy putting Leicester ahead with the final kick from the penalty spot in stoppage time after Tottenham defender Serge Aurier barged Wesley Fofana over. Tottenham had an escape early in the second half when James Justin's long ball over the top was artfully brought down by James Maddison before netting - only for VAR to spot a tight offside.