

WORLD 5

POPE PRAYS FOR PANDEMIC'S
END, PEACE DIALOGUES

MONEY 6

INDIAN ELECTRONICS MFG SECTOR
TO TOUCH ₹7 LAKH CR NEXT FISCAL

SPORT 7

PAKISTAN BEAT INDIA BY
2 WICKETS IN THRILLER

NEW DELHI, SUNDAY DECEMBER 26, 2021; PAGES 12 ₹4



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Jab for 15+ from
Jan 3, says Modi‘Boosters for 60+,
frontline staffers
from Jan 10’

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

In an address to the nation late on Saturday evening, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced that children between 15 and 18 years will be vaccinated from January 3 and booster doses will be given to health and frontline workers and those above 60 with other health problems from January 10.

The PM said the Government has decided to go for vaccination of children after holding wide-ranging consultation with scientific advisers. The PM's announcement coincided with the drug regulator's granting approval for giving vaccine to children above 12. The move has to be cleared by the Government.

Modi also said, "Precaution doses" will be started for health care and front-line workers from January 10.

Those over 60 with other health problems will also receive extra doses from January 10 on their doctor's advice, he said.

Modi said global experience showed following all preventive measures was a big weapon to fight Covid. "Coronavirus is not gone... The



world is now talking about Omicron. Today is Atal Bihari Vajpayee's birthday and Christmas, so we decided to announce this step today," he said. Asking the people not to panic in view of the Omicron threat, the PM said, "In India, many people have been found to be infected with Omicron. I would urge all of you not to panic, be careful and alert. Remember to wash hands and mask," he said.

When virus is mutating our self-confidence and preparedness is also multiplying," the PM said and informed that "country has 1,80,000 isolation beds, 5 lakh oxygen supplied beds, 140,000 ICU beds, 3000 O2 plants..." to counter any new threat from the virus.

Modi said all States have been given enough vaccination doses and testing kits. Besides, he said "we are at mission-mode in vaccine production".

The PM announced soon we will have nasal vaccine and world's first DNA vaccine in the country. Modi said, "There are different opinions on Omicron Indian scientists are working on it."

The PM said after 11 months vaccination experience in the country "the Government today decided that children in the age group of 15 to 18 years will be vaccinated from January 3 which will answer the concerns of the parents of school-going children".

Modi said vaccination in the country was started on January 16 and till date 141 crore doses have been given with 61 per cent of adult population receiving both of it. He said while 90 per cent adults have one dose, States like Goa, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh have 100 per cent single dose vaccination.

Continued on P2

Punjab Police identifies
Ludhiana blast suspectMan, a sacked
cop, had links with
Khalistanis, terror
outfits in Pakistan

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

Punjab Police on Saturday said it has cracked the Ludhiana Court bomb blast case after zeroing in on the identity of the deceased Gagandeep Singh (31) of Khanna, who was recruited in Punjab Police as constable and dismissed in August 2019 after



385 gm of heroin was recovered from his possession.

Addressing a news conference, Punjab DGP Siddharth Chattopadhyaya said the former State police Head Constable who was killed in the

Ludhiana district court blast had links with Khalistani elements and terror outfits, and some Pakistan-based entities could be behind the incident. He said Gagandeep, who was dismissed from service in 2019, had gone to the washroom to assemble the bomb and plant it somewhere. He was alone in the washroom when the bomb went off.

Gagandeep was posted as a "munshi" at a police station in Khanna, his native city, and was sacked in connection with a drug-related case, Chattopadhyaya said.

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Children, who are being treated for different ailments at a hospital, interact with a man dressed as Santa Claus during Christmas celebrations in Mumbai, on Saturday

AP

Guj, Maha, Goa top
in Centre's good
governance indexUP tops in
Commerce and
Industry sector

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

Gujarat, Maharashtra and Goa emerged as the top three States while Delhi stood number one in the list of Union Territories (UTs) in the Good Governance Index (GGI) 2020-21 released by the Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances on Saturday.

Andhra Pradesh topped list of States in the Agriculture and Allied Sector while Telangana was number one in the Commerce and Industry sector. Uttar Pradesh has secured top position in Commerce and Industry sector and also shown increase in Social Welfare and Development, Judiciary, Public Safety and citizen Centric governance.

Gujarat topped the composite ranking in the 58 indicator index followed by Maharashtra and Goa. Gujarat registered an over 12 per cent increase and Goa registered a nearly 25 per cent increase over the indicators recorded by these states in the last index issued in 2019.

Gujarat has performed strongly in economic governance, human resource development, public infrastructure and utilities, social welfare and development, judiciary and public safety, while Maharashtra scored in agriculture and allied sector, human resource development, public infrastructure and utilities, social welfare and development. Goa's showed good performance was in agriculture and allied sector, commerce and industry, public infrastructure and utilities, economic governance, social welfare and development and environment.

While the States have been divided in four separate groups, Uttar Pradesh ranked at fifth position in Group B which is led by Madhya Pradesh. Uttar Pradesh which has shown incremental growth of nearly 9 per cent over its 2019 performance and secured the top position in the commerce and industry sector, which was one of the 10 sectors of good governance that were covered by the index.

Uttar Pradesh has registered an 8.9 per cent improvement in the GGI indicators in the period 2019 to 2021 which Jammu and Kashmir registered an improvement of 3.7 per cent in the same period.

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CAPSULE

OMICRON CASES WILL
BE MILD IN INDIA: DR

Kolkata: India will see a surge in Omicron-driven Covid cases and a high positivity rate but the infection will hopefully be mild in most people as is being seen in South Africa, says Dr Angelique Coetzee who first identified the variant.

MAHA RECORDS 1,485
COVID-19 CASES

Mumbai: Maharashtra on Saturday reported 1,485 new coronavirus cases and 12 fatalities which took the caseload to 67,56,240 and death toll to 1,41,416, officials said.

The tally of active patients in the state rose to 9,102. As many as 796 coronavirus patients recovered during the day, taking the tally of recoveries to 65,02,039.

With 1,17,793 samples being examined in the last 24 hours, the number of coronavirus tests conducted in the state rose to 6,83,53,269.

As per the official release, 92,048 people are undergoing home isolation and 887 are in institutional quarantine.

Covid curbs in more States

Centre to
deploy experts
in 10 States

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

As the number of Omicron variant cases rose to 415 on Saturday across the country and more States imposed night curfews and related curbs, the Centre will be deploying Central teams of experts with nodal officers to 10 States that have been either reporting a rapid surge in Omicron and Covid-19 cases or has a slow vaccination pace.

Curb has been announced in Uttar Pradesh from 11 pm to 5 am, starting Saturday amid growing concern over the spread of the Omicron coronavirus variant.

The district administration in Gautam Buddh Nagar on Friday imposed Section

144 CrPC across Noida and Greater Noida till December 31 ahead of the upcoming festive season.

Assam has also announced a night curfew which will come into effect from Sunday, December 26 between 11:30 pm and 6 am.

However, this curfew will not be applicable on December 31, 2021.

According to the order issued by the Union Health Ministry on Saturday, these States are Kerala, Maharashtra,

Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Mizoram, Karnataka, Bihar, Jharkhand and Punjab. Both Punjab and Uttar Pradesh are in the list where elections are due in two months time.

This comes days after the Allahabad High Court flagged the Omicron threat, asking the Election Commission and Prime Minister Narendra Modi to consider postponing polls by one or two months in Uttar Pradesh and other States.

Continued on P2

Delhi reports 249 Covid
cases, 1 death in 24 hours

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The threat of the third Covid-19 wave hitting the Delhi is becoming real by the day. The Capital saw a massive spike in single-day Covid cases on Saturday, reporting 249 infections and one death.

This is the highest single-day spike since Delhi reported 255 cases on June 13 this year.

The national Capital's total number of cases now stood at 14,43,062 and the death toll at 25,104, according to the health bulletin data.

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22 kisan bodies
form party to contest
Punjab elections

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

After forcing the Centre to withdraw the three controversial farm laws, victorious farmers have decided to test their luck in the forthcoming Punjab Assembly elections. Twenty-two farm organisations in Punjab announced a political front on Saturday and said they would contest the polls, 2022 to bring in a "political change".

These bodies were among 32 farmer organisations in Punjab which participated in the over-a-year-long protest against the three Central farm laws. However, the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), which had led the farmers' stir against the laws, clarified that it is not contesting the Assembly elections.

Talking to reporters here,

farmer leader Harmeet Singh Kadian said the Samyukt Samaj Morcha has been set up for fighting the Punjab polls due early next year.

The SKM was formed with various bodies having different ideologies and "we returned after fighting a battle after more than a year", he said while referring to the Central laws which were repealed in the recently concluded Winter Session of Parliament.

"The kind of welcome we received in Punjab and the expectations of the people from us has increased," said the Bhartiya Kisan Union (Kadian) leader.

"There is a lot of pressure from the cadre and others on us, and said they if you can win that 'morcha', then you could do something for the betterment of Punjab," Kadian said.

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NASA's James Webb
space telescope to scour
universe for hints of lifeAP KOUROU ■ (FRENCH
GUIANA)

The world's largest and most powerful space telescope rocketed away on Saturday on a high-stakes quest to behold light from the first stars and galaxies and scour the universe for hints of life. NASA's James Webb Space Telescope soared from French Guiana on South America's northeastern coast, riding a European Ariane rocket into the Christmas morning sky.

The \$10 billion observatory hurtled toward its destination 1 million miles (1.6 million km) away, or more than four times beyond the moon. It will take a month to get there and another five months before its infrared eyes are ready to start scanning the cosmos. First, the telescope's enormous mirror and sunshield need to unfurl;



Arianespace's Ariane 5 rocket with NASA's James Webb Space Telescope onboard, lifts off Saturday, Dec. 25, 2021, at Europe's Spaceport, the Guiana Space Center in Kourou, French Guiana

AP

they were folded origami-style to fit into the rocket's nose cone. Otherwise, the observatory won't be able to peer back in time 13.7 billion years as anticipated, within a mere 100 million years of the universe-forming Big Bang.

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‘Sikh Gurus contributed to nation’s integrity’

Modi recounted their valour, sacrifice in address to Lakhpat Gurudwara in Gujarat

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Recalling the contribution of ‘Sikh Gurus’, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday said Guru Nanak Dev Ji understood the danger that Babar’s invasion posed to India and Guru Tegh Bahadur taught us how to fight against terror and religious fanaticism.

He said the contribution of Sikh Gurus not limited to society and spirituality only “but stretches to preserving “the faith and integrity of the nation”.

Addressing virtually Gurpurab celebrations of Guru Nanak Dev at the historic Gurudwara Lakhpat Sahib, Gujarat, Modi said, “Guru Nanak Dev Ji was clear in his understanding of the danger that Babar’s invasion posed to India”.

He added that “Guru Tegh Bahadur’s valour and his sacrifice against Aurangzeb teach us how the country fights against terror and religious fanaticism.”

The Prime Minister recalled the contribution of the great Guru tradition to Indian society in the times of “subjugation and attacks by the invaders.”

He said Guru Nanak Dev ji came with a message of brotherhood when society was ridden with obscurantism and divisions. “Similarly, Guru Arjan Dev Ji, through integrating the voice of the saints of the entire country brought a sense of unity to the nation. Guru Harkishan ji showed the path of service of humanity which still guides Sikhs and rest of humanity”, he said.

The Prime Minister noted that Guru Nanak Dev ji and after him different Gurus “not only kept the consciousness of India ignited, but also made a way to keep India safe. The contribution of our Gurus is not limited to society and spirituality only. Rather, if our nation, the contemplation of the nation, the faith and integrity of the nation is safe today, then at its core is the

great ‘tapasya’ of the Sikh Gurus”. “If India is safe today, then at its core is the great ‘tapasya’ of the Sikh Gurus”, he said.

Guru Nanak Dev Ji, said the Prime Minister, was clear in his understanding of the danger that Babar’s invasion posed for India.

Similarly, Guru Teg Bahadur’s entire life is an example of “Nation First”, the Prime Minister emphasised. The Prime Minister said, “Just as Guru Tegh Bahadur ji always stood firm for his concern for humanity, he gives us the vision of the soul of India. The way the country gave him the title of ‘Hind ki Chadar’, shows the attachment of every Indian towards the Sikh tradition.”

Similarly, the life of the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh Sahib is also a living example of tenacity and sacrifice at every step, he said.

Addressing the gathering, the Prime Minister said, “Gurdwara Lakhpat Sahib has been a witness to every flow of

time.”

He said he was reminded of how Lakhpat Sahib has seen upheavals in the past. He recalled that once upon a time this place was a major centre for trade to go to other countries.

The Prime Minister noted that after the 2001 earthquake, he had the privilege of serving this holy place by Guru’s grace.

Modi recalled that then artisans from different parts of the country restored the original glory of this place. He said Guruvani was inscribed on the walls here using the ancient writing style. This project was also honoured by UNESCO then.

The Prime Minister said that by the grace of great Guru Sahib, the Government got to be in a position to celebrate auspicious occasions like 350 years of Prakash Purab of Guru Gobind Singh Ji and 550 years of Prakash Purab of Guru Nanak Dev ji.

In recent years, the Prime Minister said efforts were made

at every level for the message of Guru Nanak Dev ji to reach the whole world with new energy.

He said the Kartarpur Sahib Corridor, which was awaited for decades, was completed in 2019 by the Government. Currently, 400 years of Prakash Utsav of Guru Teg Bahadur ji are being celebrated.

The Prime Minister said, “We have been successful in bringing the ‘Swaroop’ of the revered Guru Granth Sahib from Afghanistan to India. What can be a greater experience of Guru’s grace than this?”

He said that when he went to America a few months ago, America returned more than 150 historical objects to India there. He said there is also a ‘peshkabz’ or small sword, on which the name of Guru Hargobind ji is written in Persian. “It is the great fortune of this Government to be able to do all this”, the Prime Minister said.

Four LeT, JeM terrorists killed in encounters in J&K

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

Four local terrorists belonging to Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad terror outfits were eliminated by the joint team of security forces without suffering any collateral damages in two separate encounters in Shopian and Tral area of Awantipora on Saturday.

Around 185 terrorists have been eliminated this year in counter terrorist operations.

According to police the terrorists killed in Chowgam area of Shopian have been identified as Sajad Ahmad Chak son of Bashir Ahmad Chak resident of Braripora, Shopian and Raja Basit Yaqoob son of Mohd Yaqoob Najar resident of Achan Litter, Pulwama. Both the slain terrorists were categorized terrorists linked with Lashkar-e-Taiba. They were also involved in several

terror crime cases. Besides, the killed terrorist Sajad was also instrumental in motivating & recruiting the youth to join terror folds, a polcie statement said.

Security forces also recovered 02 AK series rifles, 4 AK Magazines and 32 rounds from the encounter site.

Meanwhile, in a separate encounter in Hardumir, Tral area of Awantipora two more terrorists were eliminated by the security forces. Till the time of filing the reports the security forces were still ascertaining their real identities. Unconfirmed reports, however, claimed the two terrorists killed in the operation too were local youth.

One of them was an active member of JeM terror outfit while his associate was an active member of Ansar Ghazwatul Hind outfit since 2017.

Omicron cases in Maha cross 100-mark

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

The total number of Omicron cases in Maharashtra rose to 110 on Saturday, as two more cases were recorded in Aurangabad.

Of the total 110 Omicron cases recorded, Mumbai accounted for a maximum of 46 cases, followed by Pimpri-Chinchwad: 19, Pune rural -- 15, Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC)—7, Satara --5, Osmanabad—5, Kalyan-Dombivali, Nagpur and Aurangabad--2 each, Buldhana, Latur, Vasai-Virar, Navi Mumbai, Thane Municipal Corporation (TMC), Mira-Bhayandar and Ahmednagar—1 each.

Of the total cases, 57 patients have been discharged after a negative RT-PCR test.

The two persons who were diagnosed positive for Omicron virus were men of 50 and 33 years of age. “Both are fully vaccinated. One is asymptomatic, while another patient had mild symptoms.

Of the two cases reported, one had a history of travel to Dubai, while another is a contact of an international passenger.

Meanwhile, the authorities said the total number of passengers who arrived at Mumbai, Pune and Nagpur airports since December 1 was 1,70,587 (24,922 from At-risk countries and the rest 1,45,665 are from other countries), while passengers whose RT-PC tests have been done are 32,086 (24,922 are from high-risk countries and 7164 are from other countries). Similarly, RT-PCR positive and samples sent for genomic sequencing was 208 (153 are from at-risk countries and 55 are from other countries).

Additionally, field surveillance of all international passengers who have arrived since 1st November is underway.

“Through airport and field surveillance, 729 samples have been sent for genomic sequencing. The results of 162 are awaited so far,” the daily health bulletin said.

Vested interest seeking to derail online classes in Kerala: Educationists

KOCHI: One of the main spin-offs of Covid-19 pandemic was the on-line classes launched by the Government of Kerala. This innovative system of teaching became popular all over the State as the Government ordered the shutdown of schools and colleges to keep the students away from the marauding virus that had claimed more than 46,000 lives till date.

But an attempt is being made by vested interest to derail the on-lines system citing lame excuses, according to leading educationists.

Though some teachers had reservations, on-lines classes were widely accepted as an effective tool than conventional class rooms. Though students missed their campus life, which included the daily quarrels over non-issues, banter,

peer camaraderie and the “anthakshari” events during class breaks, a majority of them as well as teaching faculties welcomed on-line system of education which they found to be more effective than traditional classes.

“Initially, I had reservations about the efficacy of the on-line classes. But it proved that I as well as the principal of the school could monitor the functioning of the classes, the quality of teaching as well as the performance of the students. Now I prefer on-line classes,” said Jayaprakash Valiathan, director, Vidhyadhiraja Vidyapeetam Higher secondary School, Mavelikkara. He found that teachers and students were happy that they need not commute the distance daily and could attend classes from their homes itself.

AICC drops Raut as SC dept chief

T N RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

The All India Congress Committee (AICC) has sacked Congress leader and Maharashtra Energy Minister Dr Nitin Raut as the chairman of its Scheduled Caste (SC) Department.

In a statement issued on Saturday, general secretary K C Venugopal said that the party had appointed Rajesh Liloitha as the AICC Scheduled Caste (SC) Department’s new chairman, in place of Raut.

Simultaneously, the Congress president appointed K Raju as the coordinator to oversee the activities of AICC SC/OBC/Minority Departments and All India Adivasi Congress with immediate effect.

However, the AICC did not

specify the reason behind the removal of Dr Raut from the party post as the AICC’s Scheduled Caste (SC) Department chairman.

Meanwhile, Raut appeared to have taken his removal from the central party post in his stride. “This decision was expected 6 months ago. The Party president has taken this today,” Dr Raut said in a statement issued here on Saturday.

“I was unable to travel across the country and give justice to the post as I’m a minister in Maharashtra. That’s why I requested the party president to free me from the post of President, SC department of AICC,” Dr Raut said.

“The party has a policy of one person one post,” he added.

Student who topped M Phil entrance exam denied admission to IMHANS

Without citing reasons, IMHANS director says Tara Meena’s admission has been put on hold

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

The Kerala Government which found itself in the dock over appointing relations of the ruling CPI(M) to various senior faculty positions in the State universities has shocked a well-qualified student by denying her admission to M Phil course despite her meeting all mandatory requirements.

Tara Meena Hari, who scored first rank in the entrance

examination for the M.Phil clinical course in the State-run Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (IMHANS) has been denied admission to the prestigious course citing flimsy grounds.

Tara, who qualified as a lawyer from the National Law Institute University, Bhopal, passed M A Psychology course from the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU).

The prospectus issued by Kerala University of Health Sciences (KUHS) and the IMHANS are silent about any kind of restrictions on the M A (Psychology) course from IGNOU. “I was told by the KUHS authorities that though I am a qualified student, they do not want to set a precedent

of accepting distance learning students despite me emerging as the topper in the entrance examination,” Tara told The Pioneer.

P Krishnakumar, director, IMHANS said that Tara’s admission had been put on hold. He refused to elaborate the rationale behind the decision even as Tara is getting ready to move the High Court of Kerala to challenge the decision.

“If they wanted to keep the IGNOU qualified students from the course, they could have made it known in the prospectus itself. But denying a student admission after she emerged as the first rank holder in the entrance examination is injustice and unfair,” said M R Hari, Tara’s father.

22 kisan bodies...

From Page 1

“We are coming out with a new morcha Samyukt Samaj Morcha,” he said.

Kadian claimed that three more farm bodies, including the BKU (Dakaunda) and the BKU (Lakhawal), have supported this decision but they are holding their own meetings.

“On the call of the people of Punjab, we brought this ‘morcha,’ which is ready to fight all the 117 (assembly) seats (in the state),” he said.

“We also give an open invitation to other bodies to join us to build a new Punjab,” Kadian said.

Balbir Singh Rajewal of the Bhartiya Kisan Union (Rajewal) will be the leader of the Samyukt Samaj Morcha, he said.

Delhi...

From page 1

On Friday, Delhi reported 180 fresh cases with an increased positivity rate of 0.29 per cent. Delhi has witnessed a sharp rise in Covid cases in last few days amid a jump in cases of the new Omicron variant. The city has also has 67 Omicron cases. With the rise in Omicron cases in the city, the Delhi government had banned all gatherings to celebrate Christmas and New Year. Cultural events were also prohibited. Maharashtra confirmed two fresh cases of Omicron variant of Covid-19.

Both the patients are from Aurangabad. With this, the state’s tally has climbed to 110, with 57 patients recovered as well. Meanwhile, Uttar Pradesh confirmed third Omicron case. An woman who recently returned to Rae Bareilly from the US via Delhi, has tested positive for Omicron.

Jab...

From Page 1

The PM asked people “to not to give ears to rumours and fear creating attempts”. It is not yet known which vaccines will be given to children. Covaxin is the second vaccine to be cleared by the drug regulator for those below 18 after Zydzus Cadila’s needle-free Covid-19 vaccine ZyCoV-D. India has 415 Omicron cases as of today. On Saturday, the Drug Controller General of India (DCGI) gave Bharat Biotech approval for emergency use authorisation of the Covaxin Covid vaccine for children in the 12-18 years age group with certain conditions.

This makes Covaxin the second vaccine cleared for use for children in India. In August, Zydzus Cadila’s three-dose DNA jab was allowed to be used on adults and children over the age of 12. No vaccine has been approved yet for children below the age of 12 years in India.”... Based on the recommendations

of SEC experts and submission of additional safety data, this directorate has no objection at this stage for additional indication of whole virion inactivated corona virus vaccine for use in age group of more than 12 years to 18 years with the dose schedule of 0 and 28 days for restricted use in emergency situation with the condition to submit SmPC, PI, Factsheet incorporating clinical information for said age group along with pharmacovigilance & risk management plan,” the DCGI approval order issued said. Reacting to the development, Bharat Biotech in a statement said, “Covaxin is formulated uniquely such that the same dosage can be administered to adults and children.

Covaxin has established a proven record for safety and efficacy in adults for the original variant and subsequent variants. We have documented excellent safety and immunogenicity data readouts in children. We look forward for Covaxin to provide similar levels of protection for adults and children.”

Punjab Police identifies Ludhiana blast...

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He was arrested by the anti-drug special task force for carrying 385 grams of heroin and was booked under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act in 2019. He spent two years in jail and was currently out on bail. The next hearing in the case was scheduled for December 24, a day after the blast, the officer said.

The dismissed constable was killed and six others were injured in the blast that occurred in the court complex on Thursday. The Punjab Government had declared a high alert in the State after the incident. During his time in jail, Ganadeep probably came in contact with some bad elements, the police said.

Citing the initial probe, Chattopadhyaya said the killed constable had links with Khalistani elements, both within Punjab and abroad, terror outfits and mafia groups as well as narcotic smugglers. He said further details will be disclosed later.

To a question about Pakistan’s involvement in the blast, the DGP said the police have “full suspicion” but he could not say

so conclusively. The leads gathered so far indicate that someone sitting and operating in Pakistan could be behind it, he added.

Asked if Pakistan-based pro-Khalistani organizations could have had a role in the blast, the DGP said there were indications of links to Khalistani elements and narcoterrorism. Gagandeep was facing a narcotics case and his link with the mafia was also established, he said.

The DGP said the explosive used in the blast was the kind that only terrorists have and it might have come from across the border. He said the Ludhiana court blast was the biggest example of the “dangerous cocktail” of terrorism, organized crime, mafia and narcotics.

Asked if RDX was used in the bomb, Chattopadhyaya said the material has been sent for examination and the type of explosive used will be known after the report comes. “I cannot say conclusively what the (explosive) material was,” he said, adding that it was unlikely to be RDX.

Replying to another question, the DGP said Gagandeep was technically

sound when he was serving in the police as he was very good with computers and technical material.

Ruling out the human bomb angle, Chattopadhyaya said, “It appears that he went there (washroom) to connect some wires and... to place it (the bomb) somewhere. It was not in the concept of a human bomb.”

“The posture in which he was sitting (showed) that he did not go to the washroom to use it. He was using the washroom to assemble it (the bomb). He was alone there,” the DGP said. The DGP praised the police and other investigative agencies for identifying the man within 24 hours of the incident.

The DGP said that preliminary investigations suggest that accused Gagandeep wanted to create fear and panic at the court premises.

During the course of systematic clearing of debris at the blast site, the forensic team collected some vital clues like damaged mobile set and burnt clothes on the body of the deceased besides other material evidence, the DGP added.

According to the accused Gagandeep’s wife Jaspreet Kaur, Gagandeep had left home at about 9.30 a. on the day of the blast and his mobile was switched off ever since. She recognised the tattoo mark on the arm of Gagandeep and the apparel worn by him.

NASA’s...

From Page 1

NASA Administrator Bill Nelson called Webb is a time machine that will provide “a better understanding of our universe and our place in it: who we are, what we are, the search that’s eternal”.

“We are going to discover incredible things that we never imagined,” Nelson said following liftoff, speaking from Florida’s Kennedy Space Center. But he cautioned: “There are still innumerable things that have to work and they have to work perfectly...We know that in great reward there is great risk.”

Intended as a successor to the aging Hubble Space Telescope, the long-delayed James Webb is named after NASA’s administrator during the 1960s. NASA partnered with the European and

Canadian space agencies to build and launch the new 7-ton telescope, with thousands of people from 29 countries working on it since the 1990s.

With the launch falling on Christmas and a global surge in COVID-19 cases, there were fewer spectators at the French Guiana launch site than expected. Nelson bowed out along with a congressional delegation and many contractors who worked on the telescope.

Around the world, astronomers had eagerly waited to see Webb finally taking flight after years of setbacks. Last-minute technical snags bumped the launch nearly a week, then gusty wind pushed it to Christmas. A few of the launch controllers wore Santa caps in celebration. “We have delivered a Christmas gift today for humanity,” said European Space Agency director general Josef Aschbacher.

Air quality ‘severe’ in city for 5th day

New Delhi: The air quality of the national capital on Saturday was recorded in the ‘severe’ category for the fifth consecutive day, according to the Central Pollution Control Board. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has predicted generally cloudy sky with light rain on Sunday.

The city’s 24-hour average air quality index read 431 at 4 pm. It was 415 on Friday, 423 on Thursday, 407 on Wednesday and 402 on Tuesday.

An AQI between zero and 50 is considered ‘good’, 51 and 100 ‘satisfactory’, 101 and 200 ‘moderate’, 201 and 300 ‘poor’, 301 and 400 ‘very poor’, and 401 and 500 ‘severe’. The city has recorded 23 ‘severe’ air quality days in this year so far.

In November, it recorded 11 such days, the highest in the month since the Central Pollution Control Board started maintaining air quality data in 2015. The IMD said humidity levels oscillated between 74 per cent and 95 per



cent.

On Saturday, Delhi’s minimum temperature settled at 7 degrees Celsius, a notch below normal, and maximum was recorded at 23.6 degree Celsius, two notches above the season’s average.

The maximum and minimum temperatures are expected to settle at 22 and 8 degrees Celsius, respectively, on Sunday, the weather department said. **PTI**

Guest teachers protest outside Sisodia’s residence for regularisation of services

New Delhi: Scores of guest teachers in the national Capital staged a protest outside the residence of Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia on Saturday, demanding regularisation of their services.

The protest was organised by the All India Guest Teachers Association.

Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee president Anil Kumar also joined the protest extending the party’s support to the demands of guest teachers.

“The guest teachers have been betrayed as they have not been regularised despite the Aam Aadmi Party promising to do so in its three election manifestoes.

“Sisodia, who had announced that the salaries of the guest teachers would be

increased, did not bother to meet the protesting teachers outside his residence to pacify them regarding regularization of their services, which has been a long-pending demand,” Kumar said.

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal had announced in Punjab that ad hoc teachers in the state would be regularized forgetting the fact that he had made a similar promise in the national capital to get teachers’ votes, only to “betray” them,” the Delhi Congress chief alleged.

“The AAP government should first regularise the ad hoc teachers of Delhi, to set a golden example before making hollow promises in Punjab and other poll-bound states,” he added. **PTI**

AAP calls U’Khand CM ‘incompetent’ over alleged sacking of Dalit woman school cook

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The AAP on Saturday slammed the BJP government in Uttarakhand over the alleged sacking of a Dalit woman cook at a school in the state and offered to give her a job in the Delhi government.

Addressing a press conference at the party headquarters here, senior Aam Aadmi Party leader and Social Welfare minister in Delhi government Rajendra Pal Gautam also hit out at Uttarakhand Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami on the issue, alleging that he is “incompetent” to render justice to the people of the state.

He demanded that Dhami should apologise to the people of the state for the “removal” of the Dalit woman from her job.

“I invite her to come here. The Delhi government will

A Dalit woman who served mid-day meal at a Government secondary school in Uttarakhand’s Champawat district was allegedly removed from her job recently after upper caste students refused to eat the meal cooked by her

give her a job as a cook,” Gautam told reporters.

A Dalit woman who served mid-day meal at a government secondary school in Uttarakhand’s Champawat district was allegedly removed from her job recently after upper caste students refused to eat the meal cooked by her.

Following a row, the Uttarakhand Chief Minister on Friday ordered a probe into the incident and asked the authorities to take stern action against the guilty after visiting the school in Sukhidhang.

“Chief Minister Dhami is not competent. He cannot render justice to people. Their entire politics is to divide people on the lines of religion and caste,” Gautam charged.

He claimed that the Dalit woman was appointed as ‘Bhojanmata’ at the government school through a due process of selection but removed by chief education officer of Champawat R C Purohit because some of the upper caste students had refused to eat the food cooked by her.

“For this, Dhami ji should apologise. He should have taken immediate cognisance of it and rendered justice to the victim,” Gautam said.

The removal of the Dalit woman from her job is an act of “encouraging those who discriminate people on the lines of caste,” he said. **PTI**

Shops in Sarojini Nagar market open on odd-even basis

New Delhi: Shops in Sarojini Nagar market opened on an odd-even basis on Saturday, with enforcement teams of the New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) removing encroachments in order to ensure there is no overcrowding in the market amid rising Covid cases in the city.

According to the Sarojini Nagar Market Traders’ Association, the shops have opened on an odd-even basis but the crowd continued to swell up at the market due to weekend rush and Christmas.

Following the Delhi High Court’s rap, the Delhi government on Friday ordered the shops at Sarojini Nagar market to operate on an odd-even basis over the weekend in view

of the large footfalls seen at the place in the last few days, amid a spike in COVID-19 cases and the threat of Omicron variant.

The decision was taken at a meeting of stakeholders of the market. It was also decided that all shopkeepers in the market shall ensure 100 per cent vaccination of their staff in the vaccination camp set up in the market.

“The shops have opened on an odd-even basis but the crowd is as much as it was in previous week. It is only increasing since morning due to the weekend rush and Christmas. What purpose will be served by implementing an odd-even scheme just in Sarojini Nagar market? Everything else is open, all

other markets are open but only this market is being considered a possible super spreader,” said Ashok Randhawa, president of Sarojini Nagar Mini Market Traders Association.

“If we have to fight with Covid and Omicron, then the norms need to be the same for everyone. There is no restriction on people coming to market but restrictions imposed if shopkeepers are selling stuff to them?” he added.

The enforcement teams were patrolling through the market and regular announcements were being made to maintain social distance and wear masks.

“In pursuance of the high court order, NDMC enforce-

ment teams are taking a massive anti encroachment drive in Sarojini Nagar market, along with the Delhi Police team, to ensure that there is no overcrowding in the market today,” a senior civic body official said.

“The district administration has ordered for odd and even wise opening of the shops and tehbazari on weekends. This is being enforced. A meeting was conducted with all stakeholders today in the market to sensitise them about the high court order.

No laxity will be acceptable by anyone in the market and the court order will be followed in letter and spirit,” he added. **PTI**

X’mas celebrations muted in city amid Omicron threat

New Delhi: The Christian community in the national capital celebrated Christmas on Saturday with caution as fewer people reached churches amid concern over the Omicron variant of coronavirus.

On Wednesday, the Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) had directed district magistrates to ensure that no Christmas and New Year gatherings take place in the national capital.

However, after receiving various communications seeking clarity, it said on Thursday that religious places will remain open on Christmas and New Year’s Eve for celebrations and prayers subject to strict compliance of Covid-appropriate behaviour.

Talking about the midnight mass across churches in the city, Anil Joseph Thomas Couto, Archbishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Delhi, said not many people stepped out for Christmas this year.

“Even though there is no such restriction on visitors, there was confusion regarding the DDMA order. So, not

many people have come out this year. People seem a bit anxious due to the entire situation. We haven’t seen much footfall,” Couto told PTI.

He said a lot of churches made extra efforts by holding early services last evening. “Even though churches were prepared to handle the situation keeping the Covid SOPs in mind, the overall environment is not very positive and vibrant,” he said.

Father James Peter Raj of St Luke’s Church in Defence Colony also said that fewer people attended the celebrations this year. “People were wearing masks and maintaining social distancing but the celebrations were less crowded than usual this year,” he said.

Centenary Methodist Church in Lodhi Road also had a “subdued service with fewer people in attendance”.

On Friday, Delhi reported 180 fresh Covid cases, the highest since June 16, while the positivity rate increased to 0.29 per cent, according to health department data. **PTI**

HC asks city Govt to enable BS-III diesel vehicle owners to apply for no entry permit online

The Delhi High Court has directed the city government to include BS-III commercial diesel vehicles in the drop-down menu of the online portal for the grant or renewal of ‘all-time no entry permission’ permits.

Justice Sanjeev Sachdeva said no notification has been issued by the deputy commissioner of police to impose restrictions on BS-III vehicles under the Delhi Control of Vehicular and Other Traffic on Road and Streets Regulations of 1980 for such permits and the authorities have “merely omitted to provide an option in the drop-down menu of the online portal.”

“Since the respondents have neither issued any order or notification, nor issued any direction but have simply omitted the option for applying in the drop-down menu on the online portal, the action of the respondents cannot be sustained,” the court said in its order dated December 21.

Justice Sachdeva, who was hearing a petition filed by the Foundation of Azadpur Tempo and Truck Welfare, observed that merely because a vehicle is BS-III compliant and not BS-IV or above compliant, it will not in any manner achieve the object



of reducing congestion on roads.

The petitioner sought directions to the respondents, the Delhi government and the Delhi Police, to permit the owners of BS-III compliant commercial diesel vehicles to apply for grant or renewal of “all-time no entry permission” for the operation of their vehicles in the national capital for supplying essential commodities such as fruits and vegetables.

“Admittedly, permits are being issued for the identical size and shape of vehicles which are owned by the petitioners, the only distinction being that vehicles of the petitioners are BS-III compliant and permits are being issued only for BS-IV and above complaint diesel vehicles.

“It is not in dispute that CNG and petrol vehicles can apply for the permit on the online portal and restrictions apply only to BS-III diesel vehicles,” the court stated.

“This petition is disposed of with a direction to the respondents to include the option of BS-III vehicles, which are in conformity with the directions of the Supreme Court and National Green Tribunal with regard to their age and condition for plying in Delhi, in the drop-down menu of the online portal for grant or renewal of ‘all-time no entry permission’ permits,” it ordered.

The court clarified that despite its order, the authorities are free to issue an appropriate notification for excluding BS-III vehicles. **PTI**

Public health inspector of North MCD held for demanding bribe

New Delhi: The Delhi Government’s Anti-Corruption Branch has arrested the public health inspector of North MCD for allegedly demanding a bribe of Rs 1,75,000 for providing a health trade licence to run a spa here, officials said on Saturday.

The action was taken against Harish Kumar, the public health inspector, after the spa owner approached the Anti-Corruption Branch on Friday.

“Our team was dispatched immediately to Kumar’s house, who is an employee working as the public health inspector, Karol Bagh Zone, Health department of North MCD where he was caught red handed while accepting Rs 40,000 as an initial instalment for providing a health trade licence to the spa,” said SK Gautam, special commissioner of police (Anti-Corruption Branch) of the Delhi government.

A case was filed against him under Section 07 POC (Prevention of Corruption) Act on Friday and further investigation was underway, he said. **PTI**

Woman, her mother among four held for kidnapping employer’s son in city

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

A woman and her three associates were arrested for allegedly kidnapping her employer’s son from Ghazipur flower market and extorting Rs 50 lakh of the Rs 1-crore ransom they had demanded, police said on Saturday.

The accused were identified as Richa Sabarwal, her mother Anita, her boyfriend Gurmeet Singh and Kamal Bansal, they said.

On December 18 at 3.45 pm, a caller, Vikas Aggrawal, informed the Patparganj Industrial Area police station that his son Kinshuk had been kidnapped at gunpoint (using a toy gun) from flower market, Gazipur, and was released later after paying a ransom of Rs 50 lakh, police said.

Kinshuk, a resident of Shalimar Bagh, said that he, along with Richa, who works as flower decorator at his father’s banquet, and driver Jitender, went to the Gazipur market for purchasing flowers, police said.

As they entered the car after buying flowers, a person wearing black hood jacket, cap and mask, also barged into the vehicle and pointed a gun at the driver and asked him to speed away towards Ashok

Vihar, a senior police officer said.

On the way to Ashok Vihar, the kidnapper made a WhatsApp call to Vikas from Kinshuk’s mobile phone and demanded Rs 1 crore, police said.

After a negotiation, Vikas paid Rs 50 lakh at Ashok Vihar. Thereafter, the kidnapper released Kinshuk, Richa and driver Jitender and asked Vikas to drive the car, the officer said.

The kidnapper then asked Vikas to take them towards Dhaula Kuan and got down from the car near Radisson Hotel in Pashchim Vihar after threatening him to pay the remaining Rs 50 lakh, the officer said.

During investigation, police checked around 150 CCTV cameras covering around 70-kilometer distance and identified one suspected scooter. On the basis of the route followed by the scooter, Bansal was arrested.

Later, Gurmeet Singh, Richa and her mother were also arrested, Deputy Commissioner of Police (East) Priyanka Kashyap said.

During interrogation, Gurmeet said that he is the boyfriend of Richa, who is an employee of Vikas. Richa was under a debt running into

lakhs of rupees. Gurmeet Singh, Richa Sabarwal and Richa’s mother Anita hatched a plan to kidnap Kinshuk and extort money, the DCP said.

On December 16, when Kinshuk asked her to visit the flower market, Richa readily accepted the offer, seeing an opportunity in disguise. The accused managed to get a toy gun and executed the plan the next day. Richa said that she is married and has two children, Kashyap said.

Her husband had suffered huge loss in his business during the coronavirus pandemic and she had to bear all the expenses to run her house. She was paid Rs 25,000 salary per month, police said.

She had taken huge debt from several people and was unable to pay it back. She was well aware about the strong financial position of Vikas, who used to run two banquet halls in Derawal Nagar, they said.

Therefore, Richa, Gurmeet and her mother Anita hatched a conspiracy to kidnap Kinshuk to get huge amount from Vikas as ransom. A total of Rs 36 lakh have been recovered on the instance of Gurmeet from Richa, Anita and Gurmeet’s friend Kamal, police added.

Baby-trafficking ring busted in Capital, six women held

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Police has arrested six women members of a gang for allegedly trafficking in infants, officials said on Saturday.

The gang, involved in trafficking of over 50 infants, used to procure them from the parents belonging to poor financial background by offering them money and further sold the babies to childless couples for a hefty amount, police said.

On December 17, police were tipped off that the members of the gang would come near Shamsah Ghat, Gandhi Nagar, around 3.30 pm to sell an infant.

Thereafter, a raid was conducted and three women, having a seven to eight months old boy with them, were apprehended from the spot. Three more members of the gang were arrested the next day and one baby girl was rescued, Deputy Commissioner of Police (Crime) Rajesh Deo said.

Those who have been arrested were identified as Priya Jain, Priya, Kajal, Rekha, Shivani and Premvati, the officials said. During interrogation, the accused revealed that a few of them had come in contact with an IVF centre and started donating their eggs to be used in IVF process. In this process, they came in contact with several couples who had no children of their own and could not even get through the IVF process, police said.

The gang would identify a pregnant woman having a poor financial background and strike a deal with her and her husband. When the child was born, they used to keep it in their custody, police said.

They would simultaneously identify several possible buyers and circulate the child’s photograph among all touts through WhatsApp and sell the child to one who agreed to buy, the DCP said.

Kajal and Priyanka are the mastermind of the gang. It is also suspected that their network is spread in other states as well. Priyanka is absconding and efforts are being made to arrest the remaining accused, police added.

Salaries of over 40 Delhi prison officials stopped after mismatch in biometric verification

New Delhi: The Delhi Prisons Department has stopped the salaries of over 40 officers after a mismatch was detected in their biometric verification, officials said on Saturday.

Directed General (Prisons) Sandeep Goel has confirmed the development.

The Delhi Subordinate Services Selection Board (DSSSB) had conducted a biometric verification drive in the prisons department in the last week of November, they said.

Those who joined the Delhi Prisons Department from 2019 onwards in warder and assistant superintendent ranks -- recruited through the exams conducted by the DSSSB -- were screened by matching their biometrics with the data preserved at the time of recruitment, an official said.

As a result of the exercise, 47 cases of preliminary mismatch have been detected. Further action will be taken after the final report is received from the DSSSB, the official said.

However, as an immediate and interim measure, the salaries of all these officials have been stopped and show cause notices have been issued to them, the official added. **PTI**

4 arrested for duping people in name of loan approval from west Delhi

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Four people including a woman were arrested for allegedly duping people on pretext of sanctioning loans, police here said on Saturday.

The accused have been identified as Arun Kumar (26) and Sunil (30), both residents of Raghubir Nagar, Himanshu Maheshwari (30), a resident of Budh Vihar, and Anjali Tomar (21), they said.

According to police, a man named Shahnawaz on Wednesday had lodged a complaint alleging he was cheated with offer of a loan. He said he transferred Rs 85,000 into an account given by the accused, who stopped taking his calls after getting the money, police said.

On the basis of intelligence gathered through technical surveillance and address mentioned in account, a raid was conducted on Thursday at 11 am at the alleged call centre in Raghubir Nagar area from where Arun and Sunil were apprehended, Deputy Commissioner of Police (southeast) Esha Pandey said.

The accused revealed that Maheshwari provided the account number and the ATM card in which the money was deposited by the complainants, police said.

On their instance, Maheshwari and Tomar were nabbed from their residences and seized nine mobile phones, one wire-



less phone, one laptop and six ATM cards from their possession, the DCP said.

During interrogation, the accused revealed they procured contact details of their targets from among those who made enquiry about loans through an app, police said.

Thereafter, they would call these people offering approval of loans from various banks, in return asking them to deposit an amount as filing and security charge in Tomar’s account, they added.

CRPF reactivates Covid monitoring cell

To track Covid situation in its ranks in view of Omicron rise

RAKESH K SINGH ■ NEW DELHI

The Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) has reactivated the Covid Monitoring Cell to track the daily situation reports of the pandemic in its ranks at its headquarters here "in view of the sudden rise in Covid-19 (Omicron) variant at the pan India level."

The Cell was deactivated on November 18 amid declining case count in its rank. All the formations have been asked to send daily situation reports of Covid cases to the Cell till further orders. The CRPF has only 44 active cases in its ranks at present, according to the directive circulated on Friday,



officials said quoting from the circular sent across all the CRPF establishments across the country.

"The directive has been sent to all the formations of the

CRPF across the country asking them to update the Covid Monitoring Cell with the case counts on a daily basis so as to keep close tabs on any possible surge of the deadly viral disease

in the paramilitary ranks," an official said.

The Cell was reactivated within just five weeks of the closure of the Covid monitoring mechanism at the CRPF direc-

torate here on November 18.

As on Friday, a total of 127 paramilitary forces' personnel were active cases of Covid-19, including eight men who contracted the disease during the last 24 hours.

While a maximum of 44 Covid patients are in the CRPF ranks, the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) has 36 cases followed by 32 in the Border Security Force (BSF), six in Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB), five in Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) and two each in National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) and the National Security Guard (NSG).

Till Friday, the cumulative number of Covid cases in the paramilitary ranks stood at 88,584 out of which 88, 109 patients have recovered and 348 personnel have succumbed to the disease besides 127 patients continue to be actively infected with the contagious viral infection.

Centre hatching conspiracy to bring back 3 farm laws: Cong

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Congress on Saturday alleged that the Centre was hatching a "conspiracy" to bring back the three farm laws after the next round of Assembly polls and urged the people to teach the Government a lesson by defeating it in the elections.

The grand old party's attack came over Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar's remarks in which, while talking about the agriculture laws, he said the Government moved a "step back" and "will move forward again."

Former Cong president Rahul Gandhi said the country's agriculture minister has "insulted" Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "apology" and "it is condemnable."

"If anti-farmer steps are taken again, then satyagraha of 'annadatas' will take place again," he said. "Had defeated arrogance, will again defeat it," Rahul Gandhi said in a tweet in Hindi, using the hashtag 'FarmersProtest'.

Speaking at an event in Nagpur, Tomar said, "We brought agriculture amend-

ment laws. But some people did not like these laws which were a big reform brought about 70 years after Independence under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership."

"But the government is not disappointed, we moved a step back and we will move forward again because farmers are India's backbone," he added.

Referring to the remarks, Congress' chief spokesperson Randeep Surjewala said the "concerted conspiracy" to bring back the three "anti-farmer" agri laws now stands exposed again by the statement made Tomar.

"Perceiving defeat in the five state elections including Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Punjab, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had apologised and repealed the three black laws in Parliament. This happened after the longest, peaceful, Gandhian agitation for over 380 days on the borders of Delhi where over 700 farmers sacrificed their lives," Surjewala said. "Even then we had suspected the intent of the prime minister, the BJP, the RSS and the Modi government," he said.

Immediately after the repeal of the laws, many BJP

leaders had made intemperate statements pointing to the "conspiracy" to bring back the three farm laws, he said.

On November 21, Rajasthan Governor Kalraj Mishra said the three repealed farm laws will be brought back and also BJP MP Sakshi Maharaj made a statement to that effect, Surjewala said.

Many people dismissed these statements as aberrations but on Friday in Maharashtra, Tomar has "fortified the conspiracy being hatched" by the Modi government to bring back the three "anti farmer" farm laws after the completion of the elections in five states, he said.

"We call upon India's farmers, we call upon fellow Indians, that the only way to stop the diabolical conspiracy of the Modi government from bringing back the farm laws is to decisively defeat the BJP in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab and other elections so that a lesson is taught to the crony capitalist-driven BJP government at the Centre that they cannot annihilate the rights of 62 crore farmers of the country," Surjewala said at AICC press conference.

After giving Harish free hand, Congress makes additional appointments

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

A day after senior party leader Harish Rawat was given free hand for the upcoming elections in Uttarakhand following a meeting with former party chief Rahul Gandhi, Congress President Sonia Gandhi on Saturday approved a proposal to attach Kuldeep Indora (AICC secretary attached with General Secretary Madhya Pradesh) with in-charge of Uttarakhand Devender Yadav till the forthcoming elections in the State.

Indora will continue to hold his existing charge, the party said.

The additional appointment was done by the party to ease out the strain between Rawat and Yadav which had led the former to express his anguish on social media and even threatening to the extent to quit politics which could have been a major setback for the party looking for fortunes in the Himalayan state.

Congress also appointed Rajesh Liloithia as chairman of the party's Scheduled Castes Department, replacing Nitin Raut.

Congress President Sonia Gandhi on Saturday approved a proposal to attach Kuldeep Indora with in-charge of Uttarakhand Devender Yadav till the forthcoming elections in the State

Sonia Gandhi also appointed K Raju as coordinator to oversee the activities of the All India Congress Committee's (AICC's) SC/OBC/Minority Departments and All India Adivasi Congress with immediate effect.

"The party appreciates the contributions of outgoing chairman, SC Department, Dr Nitin Raut," a statement issued by AICC general secretary, organisation, K C Venugopal, read.

The Congress chief also set up a three-member disciplinary action committee for Kerala Pradesh Congress Committee with Thiruvanchoor Radhakrishnan as its chairman, and N Azhakesan and Arifa Sainuddin as members.

BJP launches micro donation drive on Vajpayee's birth anniv

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

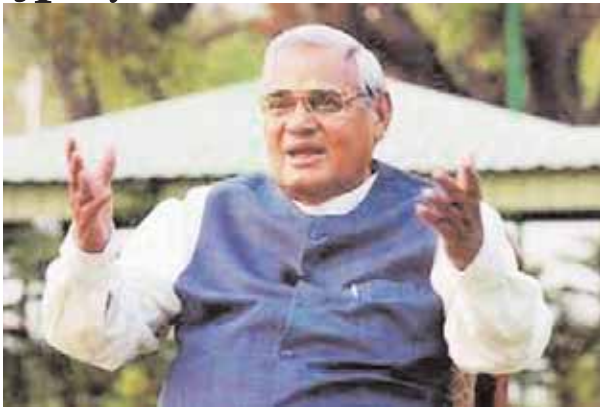
On the 97th birth anniversary of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Saturday, BJP national president Jagat Prasad Nadda launched a micro donation drive to make the party become "a self-reliant organisation" with Prime Minister Narendra Modi also donating ₹1000.

The micro donations can range from ₹5 to ₹1,000, Nadda said. The voluntary fund-collection campaign will run till February 22, the "Punya Tithi of Deen Dayal ji", said the BJP president.

"A special connect campaign by the BJP from 25th December - Jayanti of Atal ji, to 11th February - Punya Tithi of Deen Dayal ji. Your support will enthrone millions of Karyakartas who are selflessly devoted to the cause of nation building", he said.

Modi contributed with ₹1,000 tweeting "I have donated ₹1,000 towards the party fund of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Our ideal of always putting Nation First and the culture of lifelong selfless service by our cadre will be further strengthened by your micro donation. Help make BJP strong. Help make India strong."

Nadda also made a dona-



tion of ₹1,000 to start the drive, several leaders from the party, including union home minister Amit Shah and Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Pema Khandu, have already made their contribution.

In an appeal Nadda requested party workers to donate as per their capacity. "Our karyakartas may connect with the people for micro donations within the range Rs 5 to Rs 1,000.

The donations module is available in the 'NaMo Exclusive' section of the NaMo app, which will be the medium through which we will collect these donations," said the letter by Nadda.

"I seek the blessings of people to strengthen the world's largest nationalist

movement", said Nadda.

Nadda has listed three major reasons behind the appeal. The first is the cause of keeping the nation first. Second, the BJP cadre's selfless service to the nation and, third, for the Narendra Modi-led government's brand of leadership.

BJP-ruled states have already started the donation drive. The latest is Assam, which has launched a drive to collect donations from BJP members and their families to raise a fund of Rs 100 crore to take care of the organisation and its expansion.

The party said workers will connect with the maximum number of people to make micro-donations which will be organised at district, state and national levels.



President Ram Nath Kovind and First Lady Savita Kovind during their visit to the Sacred Heart Cathedral on the occasion of Christmas, in New Delhi

Cong attacks Govt over fuel prices with Xmas-themed tweets

New Delhi: The Congress on Saturday took digs at the Government over fuel prices and inflation through a series of Christmas-themed tweets.

"All we want for Christmas is a government that listens," the party tweeted with a Santa Claus image and message which read: "Thank God Santa is listening to everyone's wishes because Modi ji is only listening to his Mann ki Baat."

In another tweet, the Congress said, "Imagine dashing through the snow at Rs.95/litre."

This tweet was accompanied by an image of Santa riding a sleigh and a message which read, "Thank god Santa rides a sleigh, he doesn't need to pay hefty prices for fuel."

"Jingle bells... Jingle bells...Jingle all the way. Oh what fun it would be to buy things...Without burning all your savings away," the Congress said in another Christmas-themed tweet.

In another dig, the Congress tweeted, "Jingle bells, jingle bells, ports, airports, roads, railways, are just a few things Modi ji sells."

The Congress said, "He's not making a list, The govt's not checking anything twice; They have no data on- who's naughty or nice."

"Thank God Santa has a naughty and nice list, because our government has no data," a message with a Santa image on the party's Twitter handle read. **PTI**

Bofors case: Application filed in SC for early hearing of plea against Delhi HC verdict

New Delhi: An application has been filed in the Supreme Court seeking early hearing on a petition challenging the Delhi High Court's 2005 verdict which quashed all charges, including against the Hinduja brothers, in the politically-sensitive Rs 64 crore Bofors pay-off case.

The application, filed by advocate Ajay Agrawal, has said that the apex court had on November 2, 2018 dismissed the CBI's plea against the high court verdict and had said that the probe agency can raise all grounds in the appeal filed by him against the same judgement.

Agrawal said he had filed the petition in the top court against the high court verdict in 2005 itself and over three decades have gone by since the matter came into light.

"It is expedient in the interest of justice that the matter be heard at an early date," the application said, adding that there have been "recurrence of

scams" in the defence sector since the accused in the Bofors case "have not been punished".

It said three years have gone by since the top court had passed the November 2018 order and the matter has not been listed for hearing.

In its November 2, 2018 order, the top court had rejected the CBI plea seeking condonation of 13-year delay in filing the appeal against the May 31, 2005 judgement of the high court saying it is not convinced with the grounds furnished by the agency.

"We are not convinced with the grounds furnished by the petitioner for the inordinate delay of 4,522 days in filing the present Special Leave Petitions," the apex court had said in its order.

The high court in its 2005 judgement had quashed all charges against the three Hinduja brothers -- S P Hinduja, G P Hinduja and P P Hinduja -

- and the Bofors company.

Before the 2005 verdict, the high court had on February 4, 2004, exonerated former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in the case and directed the framing of charge of forgery under section 465 of the Indian Penal Code against Bofors company.

The Rs 1,437-crore deal between India and Swedish arms manufacturer AB Bofors for the supply of 400 units of 155 mm Howitzer guns for the Indian Army was entered into on March 24, 1986.Swedish Radio on April 16, 1987, had claimed that the company had paid bribes to top Indian politicians and defence personnel.

The CBI on January 22, 1990, had registered the FIR for alleged offences of criminal conspiracy, cheating and forgery under the Indian Penal Code and other sections of the Prevention of Corruption Act against Martin Ardbo, the then president of AB Bofors, alleged

middleman Win Chadda and the Hinduja brothers.

It had alleged that certain public servants and private persons in India and abroad had entered into a criminal conspiracy between 1982 and 1987 in pursuance of which the offences of bribery, corruption, cheating and forgery were committed.

The first charge sheet in the case was filed on October 22, 1999 against Chadda, Italian businessman and alleged middleman Ottavio Quattrocchi, the then defence secretary S K Bhatnagar, Ardbo and the Bofors company.A supplementary charge sheet was filed against the Hinduja brothers on October 9, 2000.A special CBI court in Delhi on March 4, 2011, had discharged Quattrocchi from the case, saying the country could not afford to spend hard-earned money on his extradition which had already cost Rs 250 crore. **PTI**

PIL in SC seeks direction for uniform procedure for case registration in HC

New Delhi: A PIL has been filed in the Supreme Court seeking directions to the high courts to take appropriate steps to adopt a uniform procedure for case registration and to use common judicial terms, phrases and abbreviations.

The plea, filed by advocate Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay, has also sought directions to the Law Commission to prepare a report in consultation with the high courts to ensure uniformity in judicial terms, phrases, abbreviations, case registration process and court fee.

"The terminology used by different High Courts for different types of cases is not uniform. This non-uniformity causes inconvenience not just to the general public but, in many cases, to the advocates and the authorities as well.

"Not just the terms used by

them to refer to the same types of cases are different but even the abbreviations used to refer to these terms are different in case the same term is used. It is inexplicable as to why there is a difference in terminologies, procedure, court fees etc., within courts when all are governed by the same laws," said the plea filed through advocate Ashwani Kumar Dubey.

It said not only are the high courts adopting different norms and procedures for case registration and using different judicial terms, phrases and abbreviations but are also charging different fees, which is against the rule of law and the right to justice.

The petition stated that all 25 high courts across the country have different usage of phrases when it comes to identifying different cases. **PTI**

Modi: 150 varsities across country should be involved in writing on life of Sri Aurobindo

New Delhi: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday suggested that 150 universities across the country should be involved in writing papers on different aspects of spiritual leader Sri Aurobindo's life and philosophy to commemorate his 150th birth anniversary.

Sri Aurobindo was born on August 15, 1872, in Kolkata, West Bengal.

Modi chaired the first meeting of a high-level committee that was formed to commemorate Sri Aurobindo's 150th birth anniversary, according to a statement issued by the culture ministry.

Govind Mohan, Secretary (Culture), gave a presentation on the roadmap for the celebrations and sought the advice

of the members of the committee for commemorating the occasion in a befitting manner, the statement said.

The committee comprises 53 members from various walks of life.

According to the statement, 38 of the 53 members were present at the meeting, either virtually or physically.

"Speaking on the occasion, the prime minister expressed his gratitude to the esteemed members for their valuable thoughts and suggestions on Sri Aurobindo's commemoration," the statement noted.

Modi said it is India's responsibility as a spiritual leader of the world to contribute in terms of spiritualism

to nations across the globe.

"He suggested that 150 universities across the country should be involved in writing papers on different aspects of Sri Aurobindo's life and philosophy and the 150 papers to be published on the occasion," the statement said.

The prime minister proposed to launch the commemoration celebrations of Sri Aurobindo from Puducherry, coinciding with the celebration of the National Youth Day, it mentioned.

"This will encourage the youth to visit Puducherry and learn about his life and teachings, where Sri Aurobindo spent his life from 1910 to 1950," the statement said. **PTI**

JNUTA demands better guidelines for viva voce, evaluating candidates

New Delhi: The Jawaharlal Nehru University Teachers' Association on Friday demanded that a consultation be held across the varsity to evolve guidelines for conducting viva voce and evaluating candidates in a fair manner.

The demand comes in the backdrop of allegations by students and teachers that there were anomalies in the process of admission to PhD programmes of the university, in particular, the discrimination faced by students belonging to marginalised sections.

"All data, in the past, pertaining to the final selection, including the marks obtained by candidates in written and viva voce examinations were posted on a notice board by the admin-

istration. However, this practice was stopped a few years back and candidates are now only provided information about their own marks," the JNUTA said.

The teachers' body demanded that the university administration make public all data regarding the marks scored by various candidates as was done in the past. "JNUTA also demands that a university wide consultation be initiated so as to evolve guidelines for conducting viva voce and evaluating performance of applicants in a fair manner. At the moment, there are no clear guidelines in the university about how interview boards should be constituted and candidates be evaluated," it said in a statement. **PTI**

Teams deployed in 10 States with rising Covid, slow vaccination pace

New Delhi: Multi-disciplinary central teams have been deployed in 10 States which are reporting either an increasing number of Omicron and COVID-19 cases or a slow vaccination pace, according to a Union Health Ministry office memorandum.

As per the document, these 10 states are Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Mizoram, Karnataka, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Punjab.

"In view of rapid surge in cases and deaths because of COVID-19, as reported by various news channels, the state governments, and noted in internal reviews, it has been seen that the number of Omicron cases has emerged in some states. **PTI**

"It has also been observed that the pace of COVID-19 vaccination in these states is less than the national average. In wake of this situation, a decision has been taken to deploy multi-disciplinary central teams to 10 identified states some of which are either reporting increasing number of Omicron and COVID-19 cases or slow vaccination pace (list enclosed), to aid the efforts of the state and district administration for management of COVID-19," the memorandum stated.

These teams will be stationed in the states for three to five days, and they will work along with the state health authorities, it said.

The teams will specifically look into areas of contact-trac-

ing, including surveillance and containment operations, and COVID-19 testing, including sending of adequate samples from clusters to the INSACOG network for genome sequencing, the memo stated.

They will also look into enforcement of Covid-appropriate behaviour, availability of hospital beds, sufficient logistics, including ambulances, ventilators, and medical oxygen, and the COVID-19 vaccination progress.

The state-level central teams will assess the situation, suggest remedial actions and submit a report every evening by 7 pm on public health activities being undertaken, besides submitting the same to the state governments, the memo stated. **PTI**

VIRUS-CHRISTMAS-PLAN

Covid puts damper on Christmas eve again around world

AP ■ LONDON

From Bethlehem and Frankfurt to London and Boston, the surging coronavirus put a damper on Christmas Eve for a second year, forcing churches to cancel or scale back services and disrupting travel plans and family gatherings.

Drummers and bagpipers marched through Bethlehem to smaller than usual crowds after new Israeli travel restrictions meant to slow the highly contagious omicron variant kept international tourists away from the town where Jesus is said to have been born.

In Germany, a line wound halfway around Cologne's massive cathedral, not for midnight Mass but for vaccinations. The offer of shots was an expression of "care for one's neighbor" that was consistent with the message of Christmas, cathedral provost Guido Assmann told the DPA news agency. Around the world, people weary from nearly two years of lockdowns and other restrictions searched for ways to safely enjoy holiday rituals. "We can't let the virus take our lives from us when we're healthy," said Rosalia

Lopes, a retired Portuguese government worker who was doing some last-minute shopping in the coastal town of Cascais.

She said she and her family were exhausted by the pandemic and determined to go ahead with their celebrations with the help of vaccines and mask-wearing in public. She planned a traditional Portuguese Christmas Eve dinner of baked cod.

In New York City, where omicron has spread widely, people waited in long lines to get tested, many doing so as a precaution before traveling to reunite with family.

But holiday travel was dealt a blow when major airlines canceled hundreds of flights amid staffing shortages largely tied to omicron.

Sadia Reins arrived in New York City from Alexandria, Virginia, on Friday to be with her 75-year-old mother. Reins said the two haven't spent Christmas together in two years, and despite the risks in traveling during the outbreak, she couldn't bear to be apart from her mother again this year. "We're going to cry,"

she said, adding: "We talk on the phone all the time, but it's not the same as looking at someone." In Britain, where the coronavirus variant is ripping through the population, some houses of worship hoped to press on.

At St. Paul's Old Ford, an Anglican church in East London, priests planned to hold services on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. But to protect parishioners, the church called off its Nativity play.

"You might have to cancel the service, but you can't cancel Christmas," said the Rev. April Keech, an associate priest. "You can't stop love. Love still stands."

Numerous churches in the US Canceled in-person services, including Washington National Cathedral in the nation's capital and historic Old South Church in Boston. Others planned outdoor celebrations or a mix of online and in-person worship. In Rome, a maskless Pope Francis celebrated Christmas Eve Mass before an estimated 2,000 people in St. Peter's Basilica, where admission was limited and worshippers had to wear masks.

Covid-19 makes Biden's 1st White House Christmas less merry

Washington: So long eggnog, shrimp cocktail and pet-shaped sugar cookies. It's been a less merry holiday scene at White House this year under COVID-19's shadow. President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden have replaced packed parties and overflowing buffet tables of the past with food-free open houses, face masks and testing for the unvaccinated.

Beyond the impact on Biden's first Christmas in office, the virus and its variants largely put kibosh on entire White House social scene for 2021, starting with an inauguration that positioned flags in place of people on the National Mall. "I think it's been really tough on them," said Philip Dufour, who was Vice President Al Gore's social secretary. He noted that many events were not held while president and first lady did others over Zoom. Major social events scrubbed from calendar

included White House ball for nation's governors and Easter Egg Roll, the second straight year that springtime ritual has been cancelled.

The Democratic president also has yet to toast a foreign counterpart at a glitzy White House state dinner because he has yet to invite a world leader for a state visit. In fact, months passed before Biden was able to welcome a foreign leader to the Oval Office for even lower-key talks. Still, the White House managed to pull off some events despite pandemic, such as bill-signing and Medal of Honor ceremonies.

The Bidens also hosted large receptions for Hanukkah and for artists recognised by John F. Kennedy Center for Performing Arts. But pandemic's biggest blow to calendar came at Christmas, forcing White House to overhaul its holiday entertaining—and trim the guest list. **AP**

On Christmas, Pope prays for pandemic's end, peace dialogues

Rome: Pope Francis prayed Saturday for an end to the coronavirus pandemic, using his Christmas Day address to urge health care for all, vaccines for the poor and for dialogue to prevail in resolving the world's conflicts.

Amid a record-setting rise in COVID-19 cases in Italy this week, only a few thousand people flocked to a rain-soaked St Peter's Square for Francis' annual "Urbi et Orbi" ("To the city and the world") Christmas address. Normally, the square would be packed with tens of thousands of holiday well-wishers. At least they could gather this year. Italy's 2020 holiday lockdown forced Francis to deliver a televised address from inside the Apostolic Palace to prevent crowds from forming in the square. Although Italy this week counted more than 50,000 cases in a single day for the first time, the government

has not ordered another lockdown. The pope's Christmas Day speech gives him an opportunity to draw a global audience's attention to conflicts big and small. This year was no different.

Francis lamented ongoing conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, newly flaring tensions in Ukraine and Ethiopia, and an "unprecedented crisis" in Lebanon. "We have become so used to them (conflicts) that immense tragedies are now being passed over in silence; we risk not hearing the cry of pain and distress of so many of our brothers and sisters," he said from loggia of St Peter's Basilica as Swiss Guards stood at attention in square below. Francis warned of pandemic tendency to withdraw and isolate, urging instead dialogue to try to resolve world conflicts. He prayed in particular for those most affected by virus, including women and chil-

dren who have suffered increased abuse during lockdowns. "Son of God, comfort the victims of violence against women, which has increased in this time of pandemic. Offer hope to young children and adolescents suffering from bullying and abuse," he said. He prayed for "consolation and warmth" for older adults who are alone, as well as for health care workers who "generously devote themselves" to caring for the sick. "Grant health to the infirm and inspire all men and women of good will to seek best ways possible to overcome current health crisis and its effects," he said. "Open hearts to ensure that necessary medical care – and vaccines in particular – are provided to those peoples who need them most." Francis delivered his speech hours after celebrating a "Midnight Mass" service for some 2,000 people, a fraction of the basilica's capacity. **AP**

Pakistan, Afghanistan border fencing dispute resolved, says official

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan and Taliban authorities in Afghanistan have resolved the recent row over border fencing by agreeing that further work on the project that led to a tense situation would be done through consensus, a media report said on Saturday.

A senior official, who spoke to a group of journalists on Friday, said it had been decided at a senior level that fencing-related issues would in the future be dealt with through mutual agreement.

The official, however, did not exactly specify at which level the talks between Pakistan and the de facto Afghan government were held after Wednesday's incident in which Taliban fighters disrupted border fencing and took away spools of barbed wire, the Dawn newspaper reported.

The fighters had then also warned Pakistani soldiers against resuming fencing. The incident led to a tense situation in the area where it occurred, it said. Defence ministries of the two sides later held talks on the issue. The Taliban ministry of the border and tribal affairs also reportedly took part in the parleys.

The official said Taliban Defence Minister Mullah Yaqoob visited the area on Wednesday and defused the situation. "The dispute has been quietly and calmly settled," he said. Pakistan has been fencing the 2600-kilometer-long border with Afghanistan since 2017 to end terrorist infiltration and smuggling despite very intense

opposition from the neighbouring country, the report said. Besides the erection of a fence, the project also includes the construction of border posts and forts, and the raising of new wings of Frontier Corps, the paramilitary force that guards the border.

The official said 90 per cent of the fencing had been completed. A large part of the fence has been constructed in inhospitable terrain and in some places at very high altitudes. The fencing is expected to be completed at a cost of about USD 500 million.

Fencing has been a contentious issue in Pakistan-Afghanistan ties because the Afghans dispute the border demarcation done during the colonial period. Pakistan, however, insists that the line separating the two countries, also called the Durand Line, is the valid international border.

The differences over the status of the border have been so intense that they have in the past resulted in several fatal clashes between the troops of the two countries.

Pakistani construction teams installing the fence have on a number of occasions endured cross-border attacks by terrorists, the report said. Islamabad had always hoped that the Afghan Taliban would help in settling the longstanding matter.

However, that has not been the case. The Taliban did not resolve the issue when they were in control of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 and have not done anything substantive to address it this time either so far, the report said.

Bangladesh ferry fire: Search operations on for missing passengers

PTI ■ DHAKA

Massive search operations continued for the second day on Saturday for the missing passengers of an overcrowded three-storey ferry carrying around 800 people that caught fire on the Sugandha River in southern Bangladesh, killing at least 41 people and injuring over 150 others.

The fire broke out around 3:00 am (local time) on Friday in the engine room of the Barguna-bound MV Abhijan-10 launch that started a journey from Dhaka. Scores of passengers went missing in the mishap, police and fire service officials said.

"Coastguard, fire service officials and police are still looking for bodies as we are unsure about the exact number of the missing passengers," a district administration official told reporters in Jhalakathi district in southern coastlines. Hundreds of people crowded the river bank and joined the rescuers in engine-run boats to look for their missing relatives, officials said.

The record suggests 310 listed passengers were travelling in the ferry, but we assume the actual number was much higher," junior minister for shipping Khaled Mahmud Chowdhury told reporters after he visited the accident site on Friday.

Fire service officials earlier said most of the victims were burnt to death or died inhaling hot smokes as they were trapped inside the vessel, while many passengers jumped into the river but some of them could not swim ashore or be rescued. Officials said most of the dead passengers were

assumed to be residents of Barguna where 37 bodies were sent for burial but relatives could identify only 14 of them.

"We have handed 14 bodies to relatives after mass funeral (in line with Muslim rituals)...The rests were buried under official arrangement as nobody could identify them," Barguna's deputy commissioner Habibur Rahman told reporters.

He said doctors have, however, kept the DNA specimen of the unidentified bodies so that the relatives might identify them in future.

A seven-member committee comprising inland water transport regulating authorities, fire service personnel and police have been formed to determine the cause of the fire.

The panel has been asked to submit the report in three days. The accident was the latest in a number of similar incidents in Bangladesh, a small country criss-crossed by a network of some 230 rivers of different sizes and shapes.

These watercourses cover nearly 7 per cent of the total area of the country. An overloaded speedboat allegedly driven by an inexperienced underage boy capsized in Bangladesh after a collision with a sand laden vessel in May this year, killing at least 26 people. In June last year, a ferry carrying over 100 passengers capsized in the Buriganga river in Bangladesh after it was hit from behind by another ferry, killing at least 32 people. In February 2015, at least 78 people died when an overcrowded ship collided with a cargo vessel.

China's Communist Party removes top Xinjiang official sanctioned by US

PTI ■ BEIJING

The ruling Chinese Communist Party (CPC), headed by President Xi Jinping, has abruptly replaced its chief in volatile Xinjiang province, Chen Quanguo, who was sanctioned by the US over alleged human rights abuses against Uyghur Muslims in the region. Chen no longer serves as Secretary of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Regional Committee of the CPC, state-run Xinhua news agency reported on Saturday.

Ma Xingrui, who was governor of Guangdong province, has been appointed as new party chief for Xinjiang. The CPC Central Committee has decided to give Chen another appointment, the news agency said in a brief report.

Chen has been accused by US, the UK and European Union of widespread human rights abuses against Uyghurs, but he is tipped for a promotion, Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post reported on the development.

Last year, the US government had slapped sanctions against Chen and several other Chinese officials in-charge of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, stating they were "believed to be responsible for, or complicit in unjust detention or abuse of Uyghurs, ethnic -Kazakhs and members of other minority groups in Xinjiang".

The three Chinese officials banned by US were Chen Quanguo, CCP Party Secretary of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Zhu Hailun, the then Party Secretary of Xinjiang Political and Legal Committee and Wang Mingshan, the Party Secretary of Xinjiang Public Security Bureau.

RUSSIA-INTERNET-CRACKDOWN

Russia blocks website of group that tracks political arrests

AP ■ MOSCOW

A Russian organisation that tracks political arrests and provides legal aid to detainees said Saturday that government regulators blocked its website, the latest move in a months-long crackdown on independent media and human rights organisations.

OVD-Info reported that Russia's internet and communications watchdog, Roskomnadzor, blocked the group's website.

The organisation said in a tweet that it wasn't formally notified about the decision and doesn't know the reason for the action beyond that it was ordered by a court outside Moscow on Monday.

OVD-Info gained prominence for its meticulous tracking and counting of arrests at street protests in Russia.

Activists first started the practice during mass protests triggered by a 2011 Russian parliamentary election tainted by numerous reports of voter fraud and then formed a group that has continued the work over the years. The data has been indispensable to news outlets over the years as Russian authorities largely kept quiet or underplayed the scale of mass arrests at protests and demonstrations.

OVD-Info operates as a legal aid group as well, dispatching lawyers to help detained protesters at police stations and in courts. In September, a Sweden-based international human rights organization awarded OVD-Info its Civil Rights Defender

of the Year award. That same month Russian authorities designated the group as a "foreign agent" — a label that comes with excessive government scrutiny and strong pejorative connotations that can discredit recipients. OVD-Info's founders vowed to continue the organisation's work despite the designation.

Russian authorities have mounted pressure on rights groups, media outlets and individual journalists in recent months, naming dozens as foreign agents. Some were declared as "undesirable" — a label that outlaws organisations in Russia — or accused of links to "undesirable" groups. On Friday, Russia's Justice Ministry added two more rights groups to the registry of foreign agents: Coming Out and Revers, which advocate for LGBT rights and provide assistance to Russia's embattled LGBT community.

Russian law mandates a non-governmental organisation, a media outlet, an informal movement or an individual to be listed as a foreign agent for having received foreign funding — even a small donation from a foreign national counts — and engaging in loosely defined political activity.

OVD-Info, together with other rights groups, launched a campaign in September to abolish the "foreign agents" law. As of late December, more than 240 organisations and over 260,000 individuals had signed a petition that describes the law as "discriminatory and unlawful."

Sudanese rally in new anti-coup protests amid tight security

AP ■ CAIRO

Sudanese protesters marched Saturday in the capital of Khartoum and elsewhere across the country to denounce the October military coup and subsequent deal that reinstated the prime minister but sidelined the pro-democracy movement.

Hundreds took to the streets, even as authorities tightened security across the capital, deploying troops and closing all bridges over the Nile River linking Khartoum with its twin city of Omdurman and the district of Bahri, the state-run SUNA news agency reported.

Authorities have warned protesters against approaching "sovereign and strategic" sites in central Khartoum — a reference to main government buildings and key institutions. The city's Security Committee said Sudanese forces would "deal with chaos and violations," SUNA had reported.

In Khartoum, the marches started in different locations, from where the protesters would converge on the presidential palace.

PUBLIC NOTICE

It is hereby notified to Ms. Ritu Pandey D/o Late Sh. Chandra Prakash Pandey and the public at large that my client Mr. Rohit Mishra S/o Sh. C. B. Mishra, R/o:- C-81/3, 2nd Floor, Bhajan Pura, Main Wazirabad Road, North District, Delhi-110053, has filed the divorce petition (HMA no. 705/2018) under section 13(1) (a)(b) of Hindu Marriage Act 1955 against his wife Ms. Ritu Pandey. This petition under section 13(1) (a)(b) of Hindu Marriage Act 195 has been allowed vide order 25.06.2020 and accordingly, the marriage between petitioner Sh. Rohit Mishra and respondent Smt. Ritu Pandey is dissolved with the decree of divorce under section 13(1) (a) (b) of Hindu Marriage Act 1955.

(Vijay Shukla)
Advocate for Petitioner

Greece: Death toll from capsized migrant boat rises to 16

Athens: At least 16 people died after a migrant boat capsized in the Aegean Sea late Friday, bringing the three-day death toll from such shipwrecks in Greek waters to at least 30.

The deadly accidents came as smugglers who arrange sea crossings for Europe-bound asylum-seekers increasingly favour a perilous route from Turkey to Italy, avoiding Greece's heavily patrolled eastern Aegean islands that were a prime destination for years.

The Greek coast guard said Saturday that 63 people were rescued after a sailboat capsized late Friday some 8 kilometers off the island of Paros, in the central Aegean.

The coast guard reported 13 deaths as of late Friday, but three more bodies were found early Saturday. Survivors told the coast guard that about 80 people had been on the vessel. The boat was towed to a nearby port, and authorities said the search for survivors and victims continued.

Report: Women, kids among dozens killed in Myanmar

AP ■ BANGKOK

Myanmar government troops rounded up villagers, some believed to be women and children, fatally shot more than 30 and set the bodies on fire, a witness and other reports said Saturday.

The purported photos of the aftermath of the Christmas Eve massacre in eastern Mo So village, just outside Hpruso township in Kayah state where refugees were sheltering from an army offensive, spread on social media in the country, fuelling outrage against the military that took power in February.

The accounts could not be independently verified. The photos showed the charred bodies of over 30 people in three burned-out vehicles.

A villager who said he went to the scene told The Associated Press that the victims had fled the fighting between armed resistance groups and Myanmar's army near Koi Ngan village, which is just beside Mo So, on Friday. He said they were killed after they were arrested by troops

while heading to refugee camps in the western part of the township.

The government has not commented on the allegations, but a report in the state-run Myanma Alinn daily newspaper on Saturday said that the fighting near Mo So broke out on Friday when members of ethnic guerrilla forces, known as the Karenni National Progressive Party, and those opposed to the military drove in "suspicious" vehicles and attacked security forces after refusing to stop.

The newspaper report said they included new members who were going to attend training to fight the army, and that the seven vehicles they were travelling in were destroyed in a fire. It gave no further details about the killings.

The witness who spoke to the AP said the remains were burned beyond recognition, and children's and women's clothes were found together with medical supplies and food.

"The bodies were tied with ropes before being set on fire," said the witness, who spoke on condition of anonymity

because he feared for his safety. He did not see the moment they were killed, but said he believed some of them were Mo So villagers who reportedly got arrested by troops on Friday. He denied that those captured were members of locally organised militia groups.

Myanmar's independent media reported on Friday that 10 Mo So villagers including children were arrested by the army and four members of the local paramilitary Border Guard Forces who went to negotiate for their release were reportedly tied up and shot in the head by the military. The witness said the villagers and anti-government militia groups left the bodies as military troops arrived near Mo So while the bodies were being prepared for cremation.

The fighting was still intense near the village. "It's a heinous crime and the worst incident during Christmas. We strongly condemn that massacre as a crime against humanity," said Banyar Khun Aung, director of the Karenni Human Rights Group. Earlier this

month, government troops were also accused of rounding up villagers, some believed to be children, tying them up and slaughtering them. An opposition leader, Dr Sasa, who uses only one name, said the civilians were burned alive. A video of the aftermath of the Dec 7 assault — apparently retaliation for an attack on a military convoy — showed the charred bodies of 11 people lying in a circle amid what appeared to be the remains of a hut.

Fighting meanwhile resumed Saturday in a neighbouring state on the border with Thailand, where thousands of people have fled to seek shelter. Local officials said Myanmar's military unleashed airstrikes and heavy artillery on Lay Kay Kaw, a small town controlled by ethnic Karen guerrillas, since Friday.

The military's action prompted multiple Western governments including the US Embassy to issue a joint statement condemning "serious human rights violations committed by the military regime across the country".

Four policemen killed in shooting by colleague in Sri Lanka : Official

PTI ■ COLOMBO

A Sri Lankan policeman opened fire on a group of his fellow officers, killing four of them and wounding three others in eastern Sri Lanka's Thirukkovil town, a senior official said on Saturday.

The incident happened on Friday evening at Thirukkovil police station when police sergeant had opened fire at his colleagues killing three on spot. While another died in hospital due to critical injuries, "Four policemen were killed in the incident that happened on Christmas eve on Friday," a senior police officer said.

The sergeant later surrendered at the nearby Ethimale police station with his T56 rifle and 19 rounds of ammunition, the police said. The motive for the killing is being investigated, police officer said.

कार्यालय कार्यपालन अभियंता,
खारंग जल संसाधन संभाग, बिलासपुर (छ.ग.)

आदेश क्रमांक / 5710 / व.ले.लि. / 2021 - 22 बिलासपुर, दिनांक

कार्यालयीन आदेश

निविदा सूचना क्रमांक 13 / व.ले.लि. / 2021 - 22 दिनांक 02.12.2021

निविदा सिस्टम क्रमांक 87883 (मोंगरा जलाशय योजना का उन्नयन कार्य राशि रुपये 120.41 लाख) को अपरिहार्य कारण से निरस्त किया जाता है।

टीप :- अवार संहिता का उल्लंघन नहीं किया गया है।

हस्ता / -
कार्यपालन अभियंता

RO. No:- 66177/3 खारंग जल संसाधन संभाग,
RO. Date :- 24.12.2021 बिलासपुर (छ.ग.)

WESTERN RAILWAY

E-PROCUREMENT TENDER NOTICE No.
S/42/2021 Date 22.12.2021

S.N.	Short Description of Item	Quantity	T.O.D.
1005	PIJF Telephone Cables	102.10 KM	07-Jan-22
1006	Lateral Damper 200 Kg	580.00 Nos.	07-Jan-22
1007	CENTRE BUFFER COUPLER	25.00 Nos.	14-Jan-22
1008	Yaw Damper	800.00 Nos.	17-Jan-22
1009	Primary Vertical Damper	1561.00 Nos.	17-Jan-22
1010	Spheri Bloc for Traction Totor	120.00 Nos.	17-Jan-22
1011	Set of Dampers (Shock Absorbers)	9.00 Set	17-Jan-22
1012	Set of Hydraulic Dampers	80.00 Set	17-Jan-22
1013	Supply , Transportation, Installation, Testing and Connection of Multi Section Digital Axle Counter (MSDAC)	1.00 Set	24-Jan-22
1014	Retro Fitment of Revised WSP Wiring	75.00 Set	24-Jan-22

Regarding detailed notice EMD, Purchase restrictions and detailed tender conditions, please visit website www.ireps.gov.in and www.wr.indianrailways.gov.in.

626 For Principal Chief Material Manager

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BOOSTED BY LOCALISATION

Indian electronics mfg sector to touch ₹7 lakh cr next fiscal

New Delhi: Buoyed by the Government's ₹2.3 lakh crore policy push for self-reliant India, the domestic electronics manufacturing industry is expected to see 30 per cent growth in the next fiscal to be worth nearly ₹7 lakh crore.

While the Government continues to make efforts to move up in the global electronics supply chain and is expected to come up with new policies and incentive schemes for wearables and IT hardware, the immediate challenges are those around electronic components, mainly electronic chips, and potential threats from the coronavirus pandemic.

"The value addition from local manufacturing units is expected to go up to 25 per cent next year from 18 per cent at present. The government is aiming to grow overall electronics production in the country by 30 per cent to over ₹ 6.9 lakh crore next year," a senior Ministry of Electronics and IT (MeitY) official told PTI.

The MeitY has proposed a PLI scheme of about ₹22,000 crore to promote wearables as well as enhance incentives for IT hardware manufacturers in

the next financial year as it aims to increase electronics exports from India by 50 per cent.

According to industry body ICEA, whose members include Apple, Foxconn, Wistron, Lava and Vivo, mobile phone production in the country peaked at ₹ 2.2 lakh crore in 2020-21 and is expected to cross ₹ 2.75 lakh crore by March 2022.

Chinese players like Xiaomi, BBK Electronics group firms Vivo, Oppo, Realme and Iqoo dominate the smartphone segment with about 70 per cent market share.

"Chinese companies are only focussing on catering to the Indian market requirement. Therefore, they have not participated in the PLI scheme. We expect Indian companies to do well and become global champions," the MeitY official said.

When asked about the contribution of Indian companies in electronics production, India Cellular and Electronics Association Chairman Pankaj Mohindroo said the share has come down from 47 per cent of volume in 2016 to under 8 per cent now.

"The Government has

already introduced a significant measure in PLI wherein under the USD 200 (about ₹15,000) segment is reserved for Indian companies. A slew of other support measures is also being planned and we are sure that not only will Indian companies have a share of the domestic market but they will also emerge as global champions at least in the entry level segment," Mohindroo said.

The electronics manufacturing growth in the country remained almost between ₹5,33,670 crore in 2020-21 and ₹5,33,550 crore in 2019-20.

"Today we are exporting 50 lakh phones, including smartphones. However, the concern remains that we are not still close to a strong electronics brand emerging out of India which could cater locally as well as become India's face globally," market research firm Techarc Founder and Chief Analyst Faisal Kawoosa said.

The import of electronics in 2020-21 reduced to around ₹ 2.85 lakh crore from about ₹2.9 lakh crore in 2019-20 due to an increase in local manufacturing of consumer electronics items especially LED television sets and electronic



components.

However, the import in the IT hardware segment increased to around ₹ 79,000 crore in 2020-21 from about ₹68,400 crore in 2019-20. MAIT CEO George Paul said that the digital infrastructure supported economic activity across the world during the lockdown which resulted in a boom in demand against a scaling down of worldwide semiconductor capacity.

Paul said that the shortage of semiconductors is because of a combination of the US-China trade war and the outbreak of COVID and the

forecast of a possible deceleration of global demand.

Infineon Technologies India Managing Director Vinay Shenoy said the demand for semiconductors remains extremely high and is by far outstripping supply.

He said that the imbalance between supply and demand will continue for several quarters and will persist into 2022.

BenQ India & South Asia managing director Rajeev Singh said that in the short term, the situation is gradually becoming better as trade gateways are getting aligned.

The government has made a third attempt to attract electronics chip makers in the country with Rs 76,000 crore incentive schemes spread over a period of six years and is confident of attracting 100 companies in the next 4 years under the package.

The Government expects two companies manufacturing electronic chips and two companies for manufacturing display units to set up their units in the country within four years with investment in the range of Rs 30,000 crore-Rs 50,000 crore.

"In the context of the prevailing geopolitical situation as well as pandemic pressures on electronics supply chains, there is a greater emphasis on diversification and building regional hubs.

"In this context, India's initiative to build an end-to-end semiconductor manufacturing value chain in India from fab to box offers an unparalleled opportunity to establish India as a global electronics manufacturing hub," CMR Head of Industry Intelligence group Prabhu Ram said.

According to the electronics industries association

Elcina's Secretary General Rajoo Goel, besides shortage of semiconductors, the industry is facing an unprecedented shortage of even multilayer PCBs (motherboards) and copper clad laminates.

"There is an equally severe shortage of raw materials such as Ferrite Powder which is impacting a large section of the Indian component sector viz transformers, inductors and coils where we have a significant presence," Goel said.

He said that some of Elcina members' companies are seeing over 20 per cent increase in the price of electronics components.

The mobile phone segment, which is a major consumer of semiconductors and the biggest contributor to 'Make in India' electronics segment, remains optimistic of facing the crisis as most of the players manufacturing their devices in the country are the global majors who procure electronics chips on a regular basis with prior commitments to their vendors.

Mobile phone company Realme India CEO Madhav Sheth said that since the onset of this shortage, realme has

been looking at and working on collaborations with chipset manufacturers who can provide processors to us without compromising performance.

"India is a key market for us, and therefore, we do not want our consumers to witness any shortage of products. We are also in conversations with mainstream chipmakers to keep ahead of the curve with new and powerful 5G chipsets," Sheth said. Lava International said that the challenge of semiconductors continues but they have made alternate arrangements to ensure continuity of the business but they had to increase the price of their devices due to the rise in the price of components.

"We believe that we can navigate through the current chipset shortage scenario by maintaining an optimum balance between demand and supply.

"We have been successful in doing this pre-emptively and efficiently, which is reflected in the recent quarters where we have been able to cater to the market demand," HMD Global vice president for India and MENA region Sanmeet Singh Kochhar said. **PTI**

Govt to tweak subsidy policy to promote local production of P&K fertiliser

New Delhi: The Government on Saturday decided to make changes to the existing nutrient based subsidy (NBS) policy to promote domestic production of phosphatic and potassic (P&K) fertilisers amid a sharp rise in global prices.

A decision in this regard was taken in a high-level meeting chaired by Union Minister for Chemicals and Fertilizers Mansukh Mandaviya.

In the meeting, "...It was decided to continue support to the domestic industry for production of P&K fertilisers and propose additional provisions in the present NBS Policy to promote domestic production of P&K fertilisers in the country," an official statement said.

This decision will help in utilising the unutilised domestic production capacity of these fertilisers and promote 'Atmanirbhar Bharat', it added.

Under the NBS policy, being implemented since April 2010, a fixed amount of subsidy which is



decided on an annual basis is provided on P&K fertilisers depending on their nutrient content. Under this policy, maximum retail price (MRP) of P&K fertilisers is fixed by the fertilizer companies as per the market dynamics at reasonable levels which is monitored by the government.

However, in the current 2020-21 fiscal, the government notified NBS rates for P&K fertilisers twice in order to keep

domestic prices of these soil nutrients reasonable to farmers and ensure adequate supply.

Keeping in account high global prices, the Centre has also provided a special one time package for additional subsidy over above the NBS rates for period from October 2021 till March 2022 for Diammonium Phosphate (DAP) and three most consumed NPK fertilisers.

The government has also included potash derived from

molasses under the NBS scheme with effect from October, 2021.

The country imports P&K fertilisers to meet its domestic demand. Global prices of these soil nutrients have increased continuously since early this year.

For instance, global prices of DAP had increased to USD 730 per tonne in September from USD 565 per tonne in May.

They have further risen now **PTI**

Every 3rd informal worker registered on e-Shram, total enrollment cross 14 cr mark

New Delhi: Every third informal sector worker in India is now registered on e-Shram portal with registration on the portal crossing the 14 crore mark in four months, Union minister Bhupender Yadav said on Saturday.

The national database being created on e-Shram portal will eventually help the government to provide various social security and other welfare benefits to unorganised workers in the country. The e-shram portal was launched on August 26, 2021.

"e-Shram portal in just about 4 months 14 crore crossed... Kudos to all those who made it possible," the labour and employment minister tweeted on Saturday.

According to the minister, as many as 14,02,92,825 informal sector workers registered on the e-Shram portal. The latest data of the portal shows that the top five states in terms of number of registration on e-Shram are Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, Odisha and Jharkhand. Gender analysis of the data shows that 52.56 per cent are female



while 47.44 per cent are male.

The data show that 42.64 per cent of registered workers are other backward classes (OBC) followed by 26.45 per cent from general category, 22.54 per cent from the scheduled caste and 8.38 per cent from the Scheduled Tribe.

It also show that over 94 per cent registered workers' income is Rs 10,000 per month or below while over four per cent have income in the range of Rs 10,001 to Rs 15,000 per month.

About 51 per cent registered workers are farm labourers followed by 11 per cent in construction sector, 10 per cent in domestic & household workers and 6.5 per cent in the apparel segment.

About 61 per cent registered workers' ages range from 18 years to 40 years, 23 per cent in the range of 40 years to 50 years and 12 per cent above 50 years. About four per cent of registered workers are in the age group of 16 years to 18 years. **PTI**

NCLAT stays CCI order imposing ₹873 cr penalty on UBL, other beer makers

New Delhi: The National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) has imposed a stay on the orders passed by the fair trade regulator CCI slapping penalties on several beer makers, including United Breweries Ltd that faces a fine of ₹ 751.8 crore.

Passing an interim order, a two-member NCLAT bench has directed parties, including United Breweries Ltd, to deposit 10 per cent of the penalty amount by way of 'Fixed Deposit Receipt' within three weeks.

The Competition Commission of India (CCI) on September 24, 2021, imposed penalties totalling over ₹873 crore on UBL, Carlsberg India, All India Brewers' Association (AIBA) and 11 individuals for cartelisation in the sale and supply of beer.

The said order was challenged before the NCLAT, which is an appellate authority over the CCI. It hears appeals against any direction issued or decision made or order passed by the CCI.

"...During the pendency of the Appeal, to prevent an aberration of justice and to secure the ends of justice, stays the impugned order dated 24.09.2021 in suo moto case no. 6/2017 subject to the payment of 10 per cent of the penalty amount levied by the first Respondent/CCI, by way of 'Fixed Deposit Receipt' to and in favour of the Registrar, NCLAT, New Delhi, within three weeks from the date of passing of this order," said an NCLAT order passed on December 23.

The NCLAT has also directed the CCI and the All India Brewers Association to file replies over the notices issued by it.

The appellate tribunal has directed to list the matter on March 29, 2022, for admission. Confirming the development,



UBL in a regulatory filing said it received an order passed by the NCLAT, staying the CCI order upon a condition of pre-deposit of 10 per cent of the penalty amount imposed on the company.

"The company will comply with the directions and the said 10% amount shall be deposited through a fixed deposit receipt within stipulated time as mentioned in the Order," UBL had said, now controlled by Dutch-based multinational Heineken.

Earlier this year, Heineken had acquired additional ordinary shares in UBL on June 23 taking its shareholding in the company from 46.5 per cent to 61.5 per cent.

The CCI had passed the final order against United Breweries Ltd (UBL), SABMiller India Ltd, now renamed as Anheuser Busch InBev India Ltd (AB InBev), and Carlsberg India Private Ltd (CIPL), among other entities. In its 231-page order, which had come nearly four years after ordering a detailed probe, the CCI had also directed the companies, associations and individuals to "cease and desist" from anti-competitive practices in the future. The period of cartelisation was considered to be from 2009 to at least October 10, 2018, with Carlsberg India joining in from 2012 and AIBA serving as a platform for facilitating such cartelisation since 2013. All three beer companies were lesser penalty applicants before the regulator. **PTI**

Kabra Extrusion Technik board approves raising ₹301 cr for expansion

Mumbai: The board of Kabra Extrusion Technik Ltd has approved a proposal to raise up to Rs 301 crore for the expansion of its future technologies brand Battribrx, the company said on Saturday.

Of this, Rs 101 crore will be raised initially through issuance of warrants to promoters and foreign investors while Rs 200 crore will be mopped up through financial institutions for the working capital, the company said in a release.

A part of the city-based Kolsite Group and leading manufacturer of plastic extrusion machinery, Kabra Extrusion Technik recently ventured into the production of lithium-ion battery packs.

According to the company, Battribrx is positioned to provide a wide range of advanced Li battery packs with smart battery management system (BMS).

With the fund infusion, Battribrx will strengthen its leadership

position and continue to invest in newer technologies to manufacture batteries for electric vehicles and other energy storage applications, it said.

The company aims to reach 2-GWh capacity over the next 12-18 months, as per the release.

The board of Kabra Extrusion Technik Ltd met on Saturday to discuss raising of funds via debt and equity for the expansion of its future technologies brand Battribrx, the company said.

"The promoters and other investors have shown the confidence to infuse more capital in Battribrx, which will be used to further the growth of the brand in the electric mobility sector. A total Rs 101 crore will be raised initially through issuance of warrants to promoters and foreign investors subject to necessary approval of the members of the company and other regulatory authorities, as may be applicable," the company

said.

These funds will enable Battribrx to enhance its annual production capacity in phases from existing 100,000 battery packs to 700,000 packs by the end of FY24 to meet the growing demand in EV industry and other energy storage applications, it said.

The Board has also approved to raise necessary additional working capital up to Rs 200 crore from financial institutes," Kabra Extrusion said.

"We are upbeat about the business, especially what we are doing in the EV space. We have clear goals and will use the funds to enhance capacity, upgrade machinery and further research and development," said Anand Kabra, Vice Chairman & Managing Director, Kabra Extrusion Technik, said. According to the company, the lithium-ion battery market size in India is estimated to increase from 2.9 GWh in 2018 to 800 GWh by 2030. **PTI**

TN Govt directs Foxconn to upgrade infra facilities for employees at unit in State

Chennai: Electronic parts manufacturer Foxconn would commence operations at its facility in neighbouring Sriperumbudur and it has been advised to enhance basic infrastructure facilities provided to the employees, the Tamil Nadu Government said on Saturday.

The comments from the government come in the wake of employees resorting to a protest last week as food poisoning hit over 100 of them after they ate at a facility allegedly run by their firm.

In an official release on Saturday, the Tamil Nadu government said a meeting was conducted in which senior government officials including Labour Commissioner Atul Anand, Industries department Principal Secretary S Krishnan, Additional Director General Of Police - law and order, Thamaraikannan and representatives of the Foxconn Group participated.

During the meeting it was advised to the Taiwan-based firm to enhance the basic infrastructure facilities provided to the employees like adequate accommodation and rest rooms, among others. "The hostels provided to the employees should have a quality certificate issued by the Collector and

food should be prepared at the place of accommodation of the employees and it should be served to them on time," the release said.

The government also directed that those employees who seek leave be granted immediately and the company should utilise the services of manpower agencies on such occasions. Representatives of Foxconn assured to implement the guidelines as directed by the government, the release said.

"The officials also assured of providing quality food to the over 15,000 employees and added they would commence production at the facility soon," the release said. "The facility will be expanded and new jobs will be created at the unit," the release quoting the officials of Foxconn said.

Meanwhile, the government said, State Industries Promotion Corporation of Tamil Nadu (SIPCOT) was engaged in the construction of hostels to accommodate 18,750 people at a cost of ₹ 570 crore at Vallam Vadagal in Sriperumbudur.

The construction of the 11-storeyed building, spread across a 20-acre land was expected to be completed in 15 months, the release added. **PTI**

Over 9,000 Utilisation Certificates of projects not submitted by Assam Govt: CAG report

Guwahati: Over 9,000 Utilisation Certificates of various projects and schemes of 52 departments of the Assam Government from 2001-02 to 2018-19 have not been submitted, a CAG report said.

More than 68 per cent of the 9,379 outstanding UCs are of the last four years since 2015-16, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India said in its report on state finances, under the section of 'Quality of Accounts & Financial Reporting Practices'.

The amount against which UCs are still pending comes to ₹20,402.48 crore, it said.

At least 1,345 UCs amounting to ₹ 7,197.84 crore are due for the 2018-19 fiscal, while 24 such documents worth ₹1,607.23 crore in 2016-17 have not been submitted, according to the report which was tabled in the assembly on Friday.

Utilisation Certificates of ₹ 3,494.38 crore grants paid up to the financial year 2018-19 are pending from the health department, followed by the Welfare of Plain Tribes and Backward Classes with UCs worth ₹2,403.51 crore.

UCs help rule out misappropriation of grants and frauds. About 50 per cent of capital expenditure is being incurred out of grants-in-aid. In the absence of UCs, it could not be ascertained whether the recipients had utilised the grants for the purpose for which those were given, and the assets had been created," the CAG report said.

It also said the state government has given grants-in-aid of Rs 18,032.66 crore during the 2018-19 fiscal under 'Others' head, which constituted 70.39 per cent of the total assistance given in the year.

During the 2019-20 fiscal, the state government incurred an expenditure of Rs 19,036.52 crore under 'Minor Head 800', constituting 23.76 per cent of the total revenue and capital expenditure. "Indiscriminate operation of omnibus Minor Head 800 - Other Expenditure affected transparency in financial reporting and obscured proper analysis of allocative priorities and quality of expenditure," the report stated.

If such instances occur on a regular basis, it is the responsibility of the state government to seek advice from the Accountant General (A&E) on an appropriate classification, it said.

The CAG said it had not received 704 annual accounts of 138 autonomous councils and government bodies for audit as on December 31, 2020. **PTI**



India's take on South Africa

PTI ■ CENTURION

Skipper Virat Kohli will be battling on multiple fronts with an aim to get the tricky team combination right as India have a real shot at winning their first ever away series against South Africa, which is short on experience going into the contest, starting with the Boxing Day Test.

The choice between an untested rookie like Shreyas Iyer and a proven but out-of-form Ajinkya Rahane for the number five slot, is not an enviable one. It's more like choosing between rock and hard place with fear of unknown being a persistent factor.

Not to mention the hard call on whether Shardul Thakur with far superior skills should be the fifth bowler in

place of an 'over the hill' Ishant Sharma. These are not easiest of decisions to make that require copious amounts of tactical acumen mixed in equal proportion with proper communication skills.

In Mumbai, during the New Zealand Test, the team management could "rest" both Rahane and Ishant on the pretext of niggles but if on Sunday, the duo doesn't figure in the playing eleven, it will be as good as being dropped.

In the last Test, they were "unofficially dropped" and in this one, they will be officially dumped.

Since their historic first visit in 1992, the tour to Rainbow Nation has been an 'Achilles' Heel' for the touring Indian teams and skipper Kohli, who is certainly veering towards the business end of his leadership tenure, will like to achieve a first.

South Africa is no longer the force to reckon with in international cricket as they have been going through a rough transition phase over the past few years.

Kohli's men would like to pounce on the jittery Proteas like hungry African lions as the visitors have way more quality in its ranks than the home team which is full of rookies.

However an away Test series with some interesting sub-plots and hidden narratives adds to the intrigue of the battle that lies ahead and especially for 'King Kohli'.

This particular series, where even if he emphatically denies in public sphere, will be fighting multiple battles -- some tangible ones and a few intangibles.

First and foremost, Kohli, the captain, who would like to reassert his supremacy with a victory against a side which has only two players with 50 plus games -- skipper Dean Elgar (69 Tests) and senior keeper-batter Temba Bavuma (53 Tests).

It only helps that Kagiso Rabada will not have the dangerous and world's fastest Anrich Nortje for company in the bowling attack and left-arm spinner Keshav Maharaj is least of a worry as far as Indian batters are concerned.

Secondly, Kohli, the best batter in the team, has not scored a Test hundred since 2019 and has an average of less than 30. It does not match the lofty standards that is associated with the Indian skipper. He must be backing himself up to fire in this series.

Kohli is also going into the series after taking on the establishment.

He made it clear what he thinks of a sitting BCCI president, who also happens to be a distinguished former national skipper.

But those who know Kohli understand that every little skirmish for him is a platform for a good scrap. In his head, he is someone who loves to fight a good fight and when he perceives the world to be against him, Kohli is at his best.

He has been in good form during the net session and South African attack could just be the meal he would like to feast on.

But he would need his new deputy KL Rahul to replicate his performance in England and also need Cheteshwar Pujara to score a few runs after having

blunted the new Kookaburra if need be.

Iyer, who looks ahead of Rahane in battle for No. 5 slot, would be tested by Duanne Oliver's back of the length deliveries that can rear up on a Centurion track which promises to quicken up as match progresses.

In case of Rahane, he is completely out of confidence and that's never a good sign.

Rishabh Pant's game always goes up a notch or two in adverse conditions and skipper Kohli won't mind if he can make a mincemeat of left-arm spinner Maharaj with those one-handed sixes.

A lot will depend on how Rabada and Oliver start the proceedings.

But like any other away tour, the difference between the two sides could be Jasprit Bumrah, fresh from a break and raring to dismantle a batting lineup that depends on Elgar, his deputy Temba Bavuma and De Kock.

If Bumrah and Shami can blow up the top-order, the rest of the South African batters might not do well against Ravichandran Ashwin. Skipper Kohli will need all of that.

Tamil Nadu firm favourites against resurgent Himachal Pradesh

PTI ■ JAIPUR

Formidable Tamil Nadu will start as overwhelming favourites against rank outsiders Himachal Pradesh, eyeing their maiden title, when the two teams lock horns in the Vijay Hazare Trophy summit clash here on Sunday.

The two teams made it to the final in a contrasting manner. While former India player Rishi Dhawan-led Himachal stormed into the final crushing Services by 77 runs, Tamil Nadu won a last ball thriller to knock out Saurashtra by two wickets.

Having won the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy earlier this season, Tamil Nadu would be eyeing a double by annexing the Vijay Hazare Trophy too.

It has been an all-round performance so far by the southern giants with various players delivering in different games and will expect the same come Sunday at the picturesque Sawai Mansingh stadium.

The Tamil Nadu team will be pleased as punch in the manner Baba Aparajith has upped his game since his return from the India A's tour of South Africa.

His opening partner N Jagadeesan too has been in good nick, having hammered a ton against Karnataka and would be keen to put the failure in the



semi-final behind and get among the runs.

A line-up which includes Aparajith's twin brother Baba Indrajith, who hit a vital half-century in the last four clash, skipper Vijay Shankar, the experienced Dinesh Karthik combined with the finishing firepower of the burly M Shahrulkh Khan and M S Washington Sundar can send shivers down the spine of any bowling attack.

And, Himachal's rather inexperienced attack would need to be at their best if they hope to stop the TN juggernaut from running away with the game.

Washington Sundar, on a comeback trail since being injured during the England tour, would take a lot of confidence from his superb knock of 70 in the semi-final, which played a key role in the team's win.

Shahrulkh with his power-hitting abilities, can change the complexion of the game in a jiffy and could probably be the difference between the two sides.

TN's troika of spinners- Sai Kishore, M Siddharth and Washington can be more than a handful for the Himachal batters.

However, they would have to pull up their socks after the hammering received at the hands of Sheldon Jackson and company on Friday. Pacers Sandeep Warrier and R Silambarasan have more often than not struck early blows and this is something the Himachal team would be wary about. That apart, Vijay Shankar would also be keen to play a part with his medium-pace stuff.

For Himachal, which has punched above its weight, skipper Rishi Dhawan would hold the key, with both the bat and ball.

Pakistan beat India by 2 wickets in thriller

PTI ■ DUBAI

Pakistan edged out a mediocre Indian side by two wickets in a last-ball thriller in the U-19 Asia Cup here on Saturday.

Pakistan rode on a stroke-filled 81 by one-down Muhammad Shehzad and a late cameo by Ahmad Khan (29 not out) to chase down a target of 238.

Ahmad hit Ravi Kumar for a boundary in the game's final delivery to seal the game for his side.

Earlier in the day, the Pakistan U-19 bowlers, led by right-arm medium pacer Zeeshan Zameer (5/60), wreaked havoc as they bun-

dled out the opposition for a sub-par 237.

India lost opener Angkrish Raghuvanshi (0), Shaik Rasheed (6) and skipper Yash Dhull (0) cheaply, with Zameer accounting for all the wickets to leave the batting side reeling at 14/3.

Nishant Sindhu (8) became Awaish Ali's first victim as India slipped to 41/4.

Harnoor made a patient 59-ball 46, striking six boundaries. When it looked like he would score big, Ali dismissed him in the 19th over to leave India at 96/5.

However, wicket-keeper Aaradhya Yadav's 83-ball 50, in which he hit three fours, coupled with Kaushal Tambe's



32 and Rajvardhan Hangargekar's brisk 33 off 20 balls, took India past the 230-run mark.

Chasing 238, Pakistan lost opener Abdul Wahid (0) early as Hangargekar castled him.

Then, Maaz Sadaqat (29) and Shehzad (81) rallied the innings with a 64-run stand for the second wicket.

Shehzad, who hammered four boundaries and five towering sixes, was in belligerent

mood as Sadaqat played second fiddle. Left-arm medium pacer Raj Bawa (4/56) broke the stand by removing Sadaqat. Bawa struck again by dismissing Haseebullah (3) as Pakistan slipped to 69/3. Skipper Qasim Akram (22) also fell cheaply as Pakistan found themselves in a spot of bother at 115/4, even as Shehzad continued to tore apart the opposition attack.

Hangargekar ran out Shehzad in the 37th over to bring India back into the contention as Pakistan lost half its side for 159.

However, Irfan Khan (32) and Rizwan Mehmood (29) took the game deep by adding 47 runs for the sixth wicket.

Internal conversation about captaincy is not for media: Rahul Dravid

PTI ■ CENTURION

India head coach Rahul Dravid on Saturday refused to divulge details of any internal conversation he might have had with the selectors on Virat Kohli's white-ball captaincy, saying it is not for public consumption.

It has been a convention that Indian captain addresses the media ahead of the opening Test match of a series but it was Dravid, who took the questions ahead of the 'Boxing Day' Test against South Africa.

Kohli had decided to give up the leadership role in Twenty20 format

and later he was replaced by Rohit Sharma in the One-day format too.

"To be honest that's the role of the selectors and I am not going to get into conversations that I might or might not have had," when asked if he had given his opinion on change of white ball captaincy.

"It's not the place and the time to be doing that and dis-

cussing that. And what internal conversations I have had is certainly not going to come out in the media and I am not going to start telling people what conversations I have had," Dravid said in a polite-yet-firm manner.

When Kohli spoke to the media 10 days back about change in captaincy, it snowballed into a huge storm as he had openly contradicted claims of BCCI

president Sourav Ganguly that he was asked to continue as T20 captain as there can't be two white ball captains.

Kohli had said that no one in BCCI told him not to quit T20 captaincy and it created an ugly controversy.

Dravid, himself a former India captain, however praised Kohli for his passion for Test cricket and hoped that he would do well in this series.

"Virat has played a huge role in that obviously as a player and a leader. He has been fantastic. He is one of those players who loves Test cricket and really wants to compete.

All eyes on ISL star Marcelinho as I-League kicks off



PTI ■ KOLKATA

All eyes would be on Brazilian star Marcelinho Leite Pereira when a spirited Rajasthan United FC make their I-League debut against RoundGlass Punjab FC in the opening day's fixture at the Kalyani Stadium here on Sunday. The 34-year-old, who had taken the Indian Super League by storm winning the Golden Boot in his maiden season in 2016, is one of the biggest attractions this I-League season.

Having started off with the Delhi Dynamos, the attacking midfielder enjoyed spells at FC Pune City, Hyderabad FC, Odisha FC and ATK Mohun Bagan, making 79 appearances and scoring 33 goals.

The forward scored 10 goals en route to winning the Golden Boot in his maiden season and with 18 assists, he is also at third place currently in the all-time ISL charts.

Now he will look to raise the bar for RUFC who is the first team from Rajasthan to qualify for the I-League.

"It's a new team, and I want to set an example for the young players. At the same time, I want to enjoy my football with the team, and let all enjoy it too," the Brazilian said.

About his target, he said: "To be at the top."

"The target is always to be champions. Nothing else matters."

They also have the likes of I-League winner Komron Turunov, Diego Bielkiewicz, Akeem Abioye and Fabiano Alves in their foreigners' lineup.

The Ashley Westwood-coached Punjab FC, on the other hand, have the likes of English defender Josef Yarne, Spanish midfielder Joseba Beitia, English striker Kurtis Guthrie and Australian forward Travis Major.

Local players Gurtej Singh, Rinto Anto and Bikash Yumnam will form the core of their defence, while the midfield will be helmed by the likes of CK Vineeth, Kean Lewis and Ashish Pradhan.

In attack, the club will bank on Sumeet Passi and Robin Singh to score goals.

Hailing RUFC's success, Westwood acknowledged that they're geared up for a tough fight.

"They have trained well and maybe better prepared considering the fact that they have played competitive matches longer. They will have the advantage," Westwood said in a virtual interaction on the eve of their match.

"We are expecting a tough game. We need to perform well otherwise we will coming back with no points," he added.

Boland test debut, England makes 4 changes

AP ■ MELBOURNE

Australia will give fast bowler Scott Boland a test debut in the third Ashes match beginning Sunday at the Melbourne Cricket Ground while England has made four changes to its side.

Boland was brought in as cover earlier this week and received the starting nod when fellow fast bowlers Jhye Richardson and Michael Neser were ruled out because of muscle soreness.

Josh Hazlewood was already out as he continues to recover from side strain, meaning captain Pat Cummins and Boland are the two new inclusions to the Australian XI.

"Jhye and Nes were a little bit



sore after Adelaide so we've decided to go with Scotty," said Cummins, who missed the Adelaide test after being a close contact of a COVID-19 case.

"It's a luxury to have someone like him, fresh and ready to go."

Boland will become the second Australian male indigenous test player after fellow pace bowler Jason Gillespie.

Australia, which leads the five-match series 2-0, can wrap up the series and clinch the Ashes with a victory at the MCG. England, meanwhile, dropped opener Rory Burns and paceman Stuart Broad, along with Ollie Pope and Chris Woakes.

Bowlers Mark Wood and Jack Leach will return to the

starting side, while Zak Crawley and Jonathan Bairstow will play their first tests in this series.

England also confirmed Jos Buttler will continue as wicket-keeper, rather than Bairstow taking over the gloves.

Buttler was in a confident mood Saturday at a Christmas morning media conference.

"We're certainly not here to just take part and let 70,000 people enjoy another Australian victory," Buttler said.

"We have to fight back, we want to win the series and we want to win this test match."

"I'm sure it will be a hostile environment here but that's to be embraced and enjoyed, everyone is excited to be here. This is why you play the game because you want to be part of big occasions."

Kerala Blasters face stern test against Jamshedpur

PTI ■ VASCO DA GAMA

Kerala Blasters will look to remain Kunsathed and continue their invincible run when they take on an in-form Jamshedpur FC in the Hero Indian Super League here on Sunday.

The Boxing Day blockbuster at the Tilak Maidan Stadium will see two sides who are not only in the top four but also in supreme form, riding on some free-scoring attackers and well-oiled defence in the last few matches.

Kerala have been unbeaten in six games while Jamshedpur haven't lost their last two.

Jamshedpur shared the spoils in a 0-0 draw against Bengaluru FC in their previous engagement but the Men of Steel have been prolific in front of goal with Greg Stewart being at the heart of their success.

Kerala have been spectacular so far, putting behind disappointments of previous years with a collection of players who have dazzled, especially in front of the goal. They won 3-0 against Chennaiyin FC in their last game, mak-

ing light of an obdurate Chennaiyin defence. Among the players who have risen to the occasion for Kerala is Sahal Abdul Samad, who has been brilliant, scoring in back-to-back games.

Prior to the start of the 2021-22 Hero ISL, the youngster had just one goal to his name. But in seven games this season, he has managed to score thrice, including one each in the last two games.

His defensive game has also been encouraging this season. He has 13 successful tackles, the second-highest among Kerala players after Adrian Luna (15). Sahal's 11 blocks this season is bettered only by Marko Leskovic's 14 among Kerala players.

Luna has been the creative spark in Kerala's attacking arsenal.

He has three assists in the league until now, only Ahmed Jahouh (5), Roy Krishna (4) and Greg Stewart (4) have more.

His passing, vision, and ability to pick out players perfectly is one of the reasons why Kerala look so comfortable in creating chances in open play.

"We have been consistent and the



players are working hard. That's how you get better in football," said Kerala head coach Ivan Vukomanovic.

"Our goal this season is to work hard. We finished second from bottom last season, so we need to keep working hard and build on the momentum. In football, it's about momentum and playing game by

game."

Kerala have scored 12 goals in their first seven games, including an own goal in the game against Bengaluru FC.

For the first time in its ISL history, the club has scored more than 10 goals after seven opening league games and that is a testament to its teamwork.

Sometimes you need to have difficult conversations with players: Dravid

PTI ■ CENTURION

Head coach Rahul Dravid didn't let the world in on his preferred playing XI for the opening Test against South Africa but said Indian players have been "professional" when it came to handling "difficult conversation" about their places in the side.

As India geared up for the 'Boxing Day' Test against one of the most depleted South African sides in recent times, Dravid said that it's good if players are disappointed at not being picked as it testifies that they care and have the hunger to be in the middle of action. The context was what kind of conversations does he have with senior players like Ishant Sharma and Ajinkya Rahane, who might be overlooked in the Centurion Test.

"I think the guys have been very good about it and I think most players are professionals. I mean, obviously, sometimes you need to have difficult conversations with players and by difficult you know what I mean, telling any player that he is not playing, it's hard as everyone wants to play and be part of playing eleven," Dravid said on Saturday. The batting great believed that most of the senior players have themselves taken tough decisions at some level, may be when they have captained first-class sides or been part of a leadership group. "They understand situations and not the first time, they had been in situations like this and some of them are in senior positions in their state teams and they are part of decision making groups where they leave out people.

WRAPPING IT UP

From vaccine drive to second wave in India to mourning in Bollywood with several veteran actors dying to the kind of music we grooved to samosa as the dish of the year to making a style statement, COVID-19 made sure nothing was normal in 2021, says SUNDAY PIONEER

DEATH ON DOORSTEPS

Never had anyone imagined that an outbreak of severe viral pneumonias, first reported in Wuhan city, Hubei province China in December 2019, would, in the months to come, create havoc in the world. Coronaviruses which usually cause common colds in humans and also infect animals, likely, though still not apparent, jumped from an animal in a seafood market in China to infect humans.

On February 11, 2020, the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses adopted the official name Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, has declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, a global pandemic.

"According to the transmissibility, virulence and effectiveness of therapeutics, vaccines and diagnostics, WHO has classified SARS-CoV-2 into variants of concerns (VOC) and variant of interest (VOI). VOC include Alpha, Beta, Delta, Gamma and latest being Omicron," Dr Gurmeet Singh Chhabra, Director Pulmonology, QRG Super Speciality Hospital, Faridabad says.

Throughout the world, 5,410,984 people have died so far from the coronavirus COVID-19 outbreak as on December 25, 2021 including 4,79,520 in India. Total Coronavirus cases in India till date are 34,779,815.

Omicron virus is a new mutant of SARS-CoV-2, which was first documented in South Africa on November 24, 2021. On November 26, 2021, WHO declared it as variant of concern.

India has so far recorded 415 cases of the Omicron variant across 15 States and Union territories. Omicron has more than 50 mutations with more than 30 being in spike protein itself which makes it highly transmissible.

"In countries with documented community spread, doubling time of Omicron is one-and-a-half to three days. Omicron spreads three times faster than the delta virus which caused the brutal second wave in India. It evades immunity acquired due to previous COVID infection or vaccination and causes reinfections and breakthrough infections," Dr Gurmeet tells you.

There is a possibility of decreased effectiveness of available vaccines and also cocktail therapy, given for mild to moderate high risk COVID-19 cases, in

Named after the Greek letter, the omicron variant is the 13th variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that has received a Greek designation under the World Health Organization's classification system for variants of interest or concern

GLOBAL DEATHS:
53.9 LAKH
ACTIVE CASES:
27.9 CRORE

INDIA
DEATHS
4.8 LAKH
ACTIVE CASES
3.48 CRORE

Omicron infected cases. Still vaccination would prevent severe disease, hospitalisation and deaths in infected patients.

In India, more than 80 per cent have taken a single shot of COVID vaccine and about 50 per cent are fully vaccinated. Those who have not yet got vaccinated should get vaccinated.

"Wearing a mask properly, keeping a safe distance of six feet, maintaining hand hygiene, avoiding gatherings and crowded places and social meetings would prevent spread of this disease. It is expected that about 1.5 to 1.8 lakh cases per day would be recorded by the end of February 2022," Dr Gurmeet says.

ADHERE TO PROTOCOLS

The third wave could be larger than the first two. To combat this, we strongly advise everyone to get vaccinated with two doses of the vaccine. The general public should also take extra precautions against new viruses and variations of novel coronavirus. People should keep

wearing masks in public places, avoid crowds, maintain social distance, and adhere to all directives issued by the Government of India from time to time. Private health-care companies are already providing the Government all of the resources it requires, including testing, isolation beds for treat-

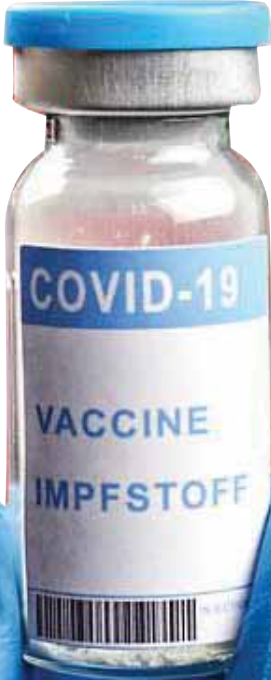
ment, medical personnel, and equipment at Government Covid-19 hospitals. We were hopeful that with our combined efforts, we will be able to defeat the Omicron variant too.

— Dr Alpna Razdan,
Microbiologist, Vice-president and Head,
Lab Services, Genestrings Diagnostics

◆ Total doses given: 140 crore
◆ People fully vaccinated: 57 crore
◆ % fully vaccinated: 41.3%

As we prepare to welcome 2022, India, particularly the Indian health sector, will face new challenges. Omicron has already arrived, which means we must intensify and expand our efforts to halt its spread. The first line of defense against Omicron will be COVID-appropriate behaviour and immunisation. It is strongly recommended that all citizens get both doses of Covid vaccines as soon as possible.

The Delta strain caused unprecedented mortality in 2021, for which no country, including India, was prepared. As the number of deaths increased, we rose to the occasion and joined forces with



the Government. We were able to combat the second wave of COVID pandemic as a result of our combined efforts. Similarly, now we must immediately unite all of our efforts because the number of Omicron patients is steadily increasing.

As per the tests conducted at Institute of Genomic and Integrative Biology, nearly one out of every five travellers testing COVID-positive at IGI airport is infected with the Omicron variant. Omicron variety has stronger transmissibility than Delta, which means we'll have to put in more effort to stop it.

It is necessary that the citizens take the initiative to get vaccinated themselves.

People should also continue to diligently follow COVID protocols including proper use of masks, maintaining social distance and hand hygiene. We can counter the looming threat of a third wave of COVID pandemic if we all work together.

— Dr Pallavi Banerjee,
Microbiologist Indian
Spinal Injuries Centre



DILIP KUMAR: Better known by his stage name Dilip Kumar, was an Indian actor and film producer who worked in Hindi cinema. Referred to as the 'Tragedy King' for his portrayal of serious roles and retrospectively as The First Khan of Bollywood.

RAJIV KAPOOR: He was an actor, producer, director and a member of the Kapoor family. He is best known for his lead role in *Ram Teri Ganga Maali*.

SIDDHARTH SHUKLA: He was an actor, host and model who appeared in Hindi television and films. He was known for his role in *Balika Vadhu*.

SUREKHA SIKRI: She was a theatre, film and television actress. She received three National Film Awards and a Filmfare Award. She made her debut in *Kissa Kursi Ka*.

ANUPAM SHYAM: He was an Indian film and television actor, who usually played villainous roles.

RAJ KAUSHAL: was an Indian director, producer who was active during the 1990s and mid 2000s. He was married to Mandira Bedi.

AMIT MISTRY: He appeared in a number of tele serials, drama as well as films.

GHANSHYAM NAYAK: His last memorable role was of Natwarlal Prabhashankar Undhaiwala aka Nattu Kaka in *Tarak Mehta Ka Ooltah Chashmah*.

BOLD & BEAUTIFUL

The 2021 has been a roller coaster ride for everyone. As much as we all had to sit at home and be safe, we all also wanted to get out of the homes in search of our normal lives. These two minds of ours definitely reflected on the trends we all referred to for fashion. The year 2021 was a lot about self-expression and we all preferred to slip in what made us happy rather than following certain specific trends. In spite of this, some very popular trends were seen in 2021.



TIE & DYE

The dull life we all experienced in the past couple of years called for some brightness and dazzle in everyday fashion. Bright coloured tie and dye has been an on and off trend for a while now, but in 2021, this trend took off in summers and is still popular among women specially in casual wear. Co-ords & jackets are the most popular category with bright coloured tie & dye surface.

CO-ORDS

Co-ords have been a big category this 2021. It gained its popularity when celebs started sporting co-ords in their airport looks. Be it from printed floral co-ords or athleisure co-ords, they have been widely popular and people have found comfort in wearing as well as styling this category.



BOLD & BRIGHT

Be it in prints or solids, the hues this year were far brighter and dazzling. Not just summers, but winters in 2021 also witnessed the brightness. People loved to colour block with complementing colours and we all saw a lot of fashion bloggers and influencers helping their audience to pick the right colour combinations.

The 2021 seemed like an after effect of 2020, but it was great to see everyone moving out of their comfort zones and experimenting with colours, styles and fits.

LILAC

Didn't you observe everyone starting to rave about Lilac in 2021. Actually, Lilac was revived right in 2018 when Victoria Beckham was spotted in a lilac suit. It took 2021 for us to start using this colour so confidently without any hesitation. People got a hang of styling this colour. It was styled either with solid whites to keep it classic or people loved styling it with complementing neons to make it a statement outfit.



COLOUR OF THE YEAR

Pantone chose two colours for 2021. After a particularly distressing year, Ultimate Gray symbolised a quiet reassurance and resilience, while Illuminating, a cheery butter yellow, reflected sunshine and optimism about a better tomorrow.

DISH OF THE YEAR



According to food ordering and delivery company Swiggy, the modest Samosa is India's most binged snack of 2021, with approximately 50 lakh orders, topping the

list of the most ordered meal of the year. India ordered 115 Biryani's per minute or two biryani's per second. Chicken biryani was ordered 4.3 times more than vegetarian biryani.

HOW TO SEARCHES

(How to help others)
● Help Afghan refugees
● Help Texas
● Help India COVID
● Help a toddler with cough
● Help foster kids



(How to be)
● Eligible for a stimulus check
● More attractive
● Happy alone
● A baddie
● A good boyfriend

(How to style)
● Straight leg jeans
● A wolf haircut
● A corset
● Rings
● A sweater vest

THIS OR THAT SEARCHES

● Effect or affect
● Barbie, Bratz or Fairy
● Allergies or COVID
● Bones or no bones
● Bougie or boujee
● Pfizer or Moderna
● Sinus infection or COVID
● Choose Bidoof or Bidoof
● Cold or COVID
● Capitol or capital

INNEWS



Kim Taehyung, commonly known as V of the K-pop group BTS, has been named Most Handsome Man in the World in 2021.

SOORYAVANSHI IS THE BOLLYWOOD GROSSER WITH COLLECTION OF ₹293.34 CRORE



SPIDER-MAN: No Way Home has officially become the highest-grossing Hollywood film of 2021.

Most searched face (India)

NEERAJ CHOPRA was the most searched face of 2021 and why not. He brought home the Gold at the Olympics held this year in Japan in javelin throw. He is ranked No 2 internationally by World Athletics.

INDIA GROOVED TO...

Artists

◆ Arijit Singh
◆ Pritam
◆ AR Rahman
◆ BTS
◆ Tanishk Bagchi

Most Streamed Songs

◆ Raataan Lambiyan 'by Asees Kaur, Jubin Nautiyal, Tanishk Bagchi
◆ Ranjha by Jasleen Royal, B Praak, Anvita Dutt
◆ Brown Munde by AP Dhillon, Gminxr, Gurinder Gill, Shinda Kahlon
◆ STAY (with Justin Bieber) by The Kid LAROI, Justin Bieber

◆ Lut Gaye by Jubin Nautiyal, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Manoj Muntashir
Most Streamed Albums
◆ Shershaah
◆ Kabir Singh
◆ Moosetape
◆ Love Yourself 'v' Answer'
◆ Love Aaj Kal

GLOBALLY

Most Streamed Artists
◆ Bad Bunny
◆ Taylor Swift
◆ BTS
◆ Drake
◆ Justin Bieber
Most Streamed Songs

◆ Drivers license by Olivia Rodrigo
◆ MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name) by Lil Nas X
◆ STAY (with Justin Bieber) by The Kid LAROI
◆ Good 4 u by Olivia Rodrigo
◆ Levitating (feat. DaBaby) by Dua Lipa

Most Streamed Songs Albums

◆ SOUR by Olivia Rodrigo
◆ Future Nostalgia by Dua Lipa
◆ Justice by Justin Bieber
◆ = by Ed Sheeran
◆ Planet Her by Doja Cat
— Courtesy: Spotify

WORD OF THE YEAR

VACCINE
MERRIAM WEBSTER HAS CHOSEN VACCINE AS THE WORD OF THE YEAR FOR 2021. THE DICTIONARY ALSO STATED THAT INTEREST IN THE WORD HAS BEEN HIGH EVER SINCE THE START OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

HEALING TOUCH

2021 was a grim year, but music emerged as a healer and a much needed source of entertainment. Audio content received healthy traction and emerged as a way to engage consumers with screen-free entertainment. Tanishk Bagchi was the most heard artist in 2021 with over 1.2 billion streams on Gaana, followed by Arijit Singh and Neha Kakkar.

Consumption of podcasts grew by 40 per cent Y-O-Y. Love for regional music was also more powerful than ever in 2021 contributing 40 per cent to the total streams. Bhojpuri and Haryanvi were the biggest gainers with more than 15 per cent increase compared to last year.

RECIPES SEARCHED



■ TikTok pasta
■ Bacon jam
■ Birria tacos
■ Crockpot chicken
■ Hamantaschen
■ Squid Game cookie
■ Baked oats
■ Cicada
■ Gigi Hadid pasta
■ Smashed potatoes



the pioneer agenda



Sardar: India's Iron Man

Justice S N Aggarwal's book is the answer to the question why a son of the soil was always given a raw deal by vested interests

2

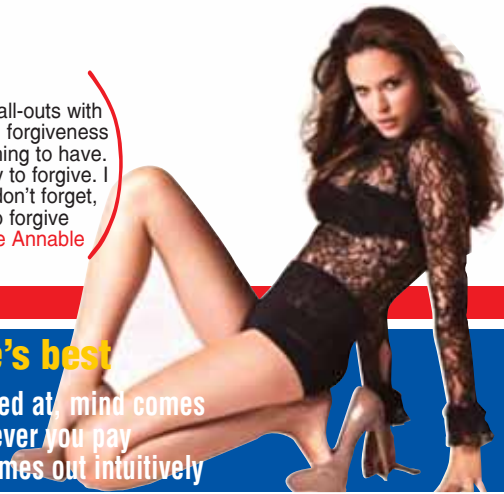


4

Dhyana brings out one's best

When the state of *dhyana* is arrived at, mind comes out with its optimum best. Wherever you pay attention, the underlying truth comes out intuitively

You have fall-outs with friends, and forgiveness is a great thing to have. It's not easy to forgive. I definitely don't forget, but I do forgive
— Odette Annable



ECONOMY

IS INDIA BACK IN HIGH GROWTH PHASE?



From the fastest growing economy in 2015, India became one of the slowest in the world in 2020 as its growth plunged to -7.3%, compared to the global fall of -3.1%. That tells its own tale, writes PRASANNA MOHANTY

The government thinks a 1.6% growth in FY22 over FY20, when growth was just 4%, is back to high growth. But India's annual average growth for 15 years before FY20 was 7%. To reach that level, it will have to address many structural challenges

After claiming a V-shaped recovery ("India will be among only a few economies in the world to rebound strongly from COVID-19 induced economic contraction of 2020-21") and that India would become "the fastest growing one in the world" — all on the basis of first two quarters of GDP numbers for FY22 — the Finance Ministry's November 30, 2021 report gets factual: "The MPC (RBI's monthly monetary policy committee report) in its December statement has maintained the growth forecast of 9.5 per cent during FY 2021-22 (full fiscal), implying a full recovery and a 1.6 per cent growth over pre-pandemic GDP level of FY 2019-20" (emphasis added). But, what does the above sentence actually mean?

ILLUSIONS OF A V-SHAPED RECOVERY

It means, the growth for full FY22 will be 9.5% (over -7.3% in FY21) but this would translate to only 1.6% growth over FY20. The FY20 growth was 4%.

This is hardly inspiring, especially since India's average annual GDP growth during the previous 15 years, between FY05 and FY19, was 7%!

All economies were hit by the pandemic. The IMF's World Economic Outlook report of October 2021 (which uses official data of all countries) says, global GDP will bounce back from -3.1% in 2020 (the pandemic year closest to India's FY21) to 5.9% in 2021 (India's FY22); advanced economies (average) from -4.5% to 5.2%; emerging economies (average) from -2.1% to 6.4% and India will bounce back from -7.3% to 9.5%.

From the fastest growing major economy in 2015, India became one of the slowest in the world in 2020 (ranked 142 out of 194 countries) as its growth plunged to -7.3%, compared to the global fall of -3.1%. That tells its own tale.

Now let us see the actual quarterly GDP numbers released in November 2021. It shows in the first two quarters (H1) of FY22, the GDP at constant price was ₹68.1 lakh crore. This is lower than ₹71.3 lakh crore in H1 of FY20. So, the GDP hasn't yet reached the FY20 level at this stage. Whether it will do in the full fiscal is purely speculative.

The official data also reveals that private consumption (PFCE), the most powerful growth engine contributing 55% to the GDP, is far off from FY20 level — ₹37.3 lakh crore in H1 of FY22 against ₹40.4 lakh crore in H1 of FY20. Actually, it is less than ₹37.9 lakh crore of H1 of FY19 too. This means, consumption demand

hasn't recovered to the FY19 level.

When demand engine slows down, it drags down other growth drivers: production of goods and services, capital expenditure (investment) and imports. Even this H1 GDP numbers don't reflect the real state of the economy.

That is because quarterly GDP is estimated mostly from organised/formal sector numbers (high-frequency indicators). The pandemic hit the unorganised/informal economy, which contributes nearly half of the GDP, the harder. Therefore, the quarterly GDP is likely an overestimation.

There is enough evidence to show unorganised/informal sector grew in size due to the pandemic — explained later — thereby making the quarterly GDP numbers even more off the mark.

Yes, stock markets boomed during the pandemic crisis (2020 and 2021) but stock markets are disconnected from the real economy as economic literature tells. Further, the pandemic saw massive loss of lives, jobs and businesses (loss of income) and the economy plunging to new lows and yet stock markets boomed.

WHY DID THE PANDEMIC HIT INDIA HARDER?

The reasons are several; one being low government (fiscal) spending. The Finance Ministry's March 2019 report had already warned that only this engine (government spending) was working, the three other engines — private consumption (PFCE), capital investment (GFCF) and net exports (exports minus import) — had sputtered out.

That is why eminent economists Amartya Sen, Abhijit Banerjee and Raghuram Rajan repeatedly pleaded for higher government spending. The government ignored them and its massive ₹23.66 lakh crore pandemic relief and stimulus packages of 2020 had fiscal spending component of just 1.6% of the GDP. In contrast, developed nations spent much more, the US, for example, spending more than 10%.

The budget for FY22 saw a minor correction with budget expenditure going up by just 1% over FY21 (RE) level. Given that government expenditure (GFCE) contributes about 11.5% to the GDP (in H1 of FY22), a 1% increase is too small to boost significant growth in FY22.

The two pandemic waves saw more than 4,75,000 deaths (third highest after the US and Brazil) and more than 34 million cases (second highest after the US). Since 60 million Indians slip into poverty every year due to 'catastrophic' healthcare cost in normal times, as the government admits, this means the pandemic (higher cost of treatment) would have pushed several multiple of this number into poverty. The Pew Research said the first wave alone might have pushed 75 million into poverty (with incomes of \$2 or less a day) — contributing "60% to the global rise in poverty."

A study by the Azim Premji University showed 15 million jobs were lost permanently

“

THE PANDEMIC CRISIS ALSO SAW A FOCUS SHIFTING TO LONG-TERM "REFORMS" LIKE NEW FARM LAWS, NEW LABOUR CODES, DECLARATION OF *EN MASSE* PRIVATISATION OF PUBLIC ASSETS, MONETISATION OF EXISTING BROWN-FIELD INFRASTRUCTURE (ROADS, PORTS, RAILWAYS ETC.) AND INWARD-LOOKING IMPORT SUBSTITUTION POLICY, INSTEAD OF FIRE-FIGHTING THE PANDEMIC CALLED FOR

”

(by the end of December 2020); there was 50% rise in informal workers as salaried/regular wage jobs shrunk and workers migrated to informal self-employment (30%), casual (10%) or informal salaried (9%) work and 90% people survey said their food intake had reduced.

The OECD countries saved 50 million jobs during the pandemic in 2020, India didn't any. It doesn't even have data on job or business losses/closures. Other than subsidised ration (which didn't reach migrant workers due to lack of data), the government offered little help to poor households who suffered the most.

As a result, India was the only country to witness massive distress migration to rural India and the demand for menial work under the MGNREGS went up dramatically. The number of households worked under this scheme rose from 54.8 million in FY20 to 75.5 million in FY21 and the number of individuals from 78.9 million in FY20 to 111.9 million in FY21. The trend continues in FY22 too (63.3 million and 90.7 million by December 13, 2021).

The people and the economy received a far bigger shock also because of gross incompetence of the government, which centralised all powers invoking the National Disaster Management Act of 2005, in handling the pandemic. There was no planning, no strategy and no preparations in announcing the lockdown. The same was the case with the unlocking and the second wave of 2021 which had been forewarned. Then, the second wave saw super spreader events like the Kumbh mela and month-long election rallies in West Bengal.

The pandemic crisis also saw a focus shifting to long-term "reforms" like new farm laws, new labour codes, declaration of *en masse* privatisation of public assets, monetisation of existing brown-field infrastructure (roads, ports, railways etc.) and inward-looking import substitution policy, instead of fire-fighting the pandemic called for. But the plunge to -7.3% in FY21 wasn't all because of the pandemic mismanagement.

PRE-PANDEMIC SLOWDOWN

India was already in a prolonged slowdown when the pandemic hit in early 2020.

This slowdown was due to a series of man-made disasters: the twin shocks of demonetisation and GST (both hurt poor households and informal economy); shutting down policy and planning body (Planning Commission of India) without a suitable replacement (NITI Aayog cheerleads the government, rather than provide rational policy inputs); fudged 2011-12 GDP series which inflated growth rates by 2.5 to 3.7% percentage points during FY12-FY17, as former CEA Arvind Subramanian pointed out; corporate tax cut of ₹1.45 lakh crore amidst fiscal constraints in 2019 and lack of critical data (impact of these pre-pandemic disasters on jobs and businesses) for policy making.

The combined impact was:

- GDP growth fell from peak of 8.3% in FY17 to 4% in FY20.
- Growth in private consumption (PFCE) fell from peak 8.1% in FY17 to 5.5% in FY20.
- Growth in overall investment (GCF) fell from a peak of 14.5% in FY18 to 5.4% in FY20.
- Capital investment (GFCF) fell from a peak of 9.9% in FY19 to 5.4%.
- Net exports from a peak of 17.4% in FY18 to -0.8% in FY20.
- Household savings fell from 24% of GDP in FY11 to 19.6% in FY20.

A study by Ashoka University-CMIE showed that during the five fiscals between FY12 and FY21, jobs shifted from formal to informal sector. It noticed three disturbing trends:

- Manufacturing jobs nearly halved (fall of 46%) in five years
- Agricultural jobs increased by 4% (from 36% to 40% in total employment)
- Overall employment fell by 7% during the period (from 407 million in FY17 to 378 million in FY21).

The PLFS of 2019-20 (pre-pandemic) showed a similar trend, as did the Azim Premji University study mentioned earlier, leading to a sharp decline in income and rise in poverty level.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Once the above facts and evidence are acknowledged, the road ahead becomes obvious.

There is a need for both short and long-term measures.

The short-term measures are to address the pandemic distress and hence, should focus on direct income support (cash transfers) to poor households as well as to struggling SMEs. This will revive consumption demand. A national employment policy (NEP) to focus on creating jobs, particularly in urban areas, should also get priority.

The long-term measures are to address structural challenges that have emerged and caused the prolonged slowdown. This calls for a complete overhaul of the extant economic thinking. The focus needs to shift from promoting growth of top 10% or top 1% in the economic pyramid to the rest 90-99% of people who also constitute the economy. Without improving the social and financial health of 90-99% of the population, no economic growth will be sustainable in the long run.

Such policies then relook at skewed tax regime (tax burden less on those who can pay); indiscriminate handing over public assets to private business; industries running banks; laws that hurt the interests of farmers and workers and self-defeating import substitution and many more.

The writer is a journalist and researcher. He writes on public policy, politics, governance. His latest book An Unkept Promise: What Derailed the Indian Economy, has been published by SAGE Publications India

Beijing destroying Hong Kong's democratic future

The latest elections to the Hong Kong Legislature (known as Legislative Council or Legco) have clearly indicated how China is fast taking control over the island territory. Popularly termed as the first “patriots only” election for Hong Kong, it witnessed a record low voter turnout after the complete overhauling of the city's existing electoral system. Many China observers say that this trend has reflected a steep decline in the civic and political engagement of the Hongkongers in a largely orchestrated electoral process of the territory. According to a government media release, the 30.2 per cent turnout was far lower than the earlier record low of 43.6 per cent in the year 2000. It must be noted here that the last legislative election five years ago recorded a polling percentage of 58 per cent.

This election is a historic one for Hong Kong. This is the first election conducted after passing the infamous National Security Law on June 30, an hour before the 23rd anniversary of the city's handover to China by Britain in 2020. Officially it is known as the Law of the People's Republic of China on Safeguarding the National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR).

The law empowers Beijing to handle all the troublemakers in the island, particularly the pro-democracy activists and their supporters. Further, the law creates four prominent offences, namely secession, subversion, terrorism and collusion with foreign forces to endanger national security. Many say that this law will bring an end to Hong Kong's autonomy and democratic future forever. The island will fast turn into a Communist fiefdom. And the first signal has been directly sent by the results of this election only.

Also, this is the first election that took place after the massive pro-democracy movement of June 2019 when millions marched across the island territory, protesting against Beijing's intervention and demanding more autonomy as promised under the Basic Law under which Hong Kong had to be governed with “One Country, Two Systems” till 2047. Mainly, the Hongkongers marched on the streets to protest a proposed extradition bill that would allow the city administration to extradite suspects to mainland China. It marked the beginning of a



In this photo released by Xinhua News Agency, Chinese President Xi Jinping at right poses for a photo with Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Carrie Lam, during a meeting in Beijing, China on December 22. Xi endorsed Hong Kong's first legislative elections held under new laws ensuring that only 'patriots' who have shown loyalty to Beijing could run as candidates

protest that was extended up to the year 2020. Seeing all these, Beijing initiated all preparations to bring back peace to the island.

Again, it is a remarkable electoral process as it is carried out under new stringent electoral reforms initiated in the month of March 2021. The reforms under the new electoral system offered the Government more vetting powers and it directly reduced the citizens to elect the candidates of their own choice. The new system simply allows the candidates screened by the government i.e. the “patriots”, those exclusively loyal to Beijing and the Communist Party of China (CPC) to stand in the electoral fray. Previously, the half of the 70 seat Legco members were elected by the people directly and the other half were selected by trade and industry lobbies, mostly loyal to mainland China. The worst part is that under the new electoral system, the Legco was expanded to 90 seats. The half of the seats are filled by pro-Beijing trade and industry conglomerates and only a bare minimum of 20 seats are made

open to popular public voting. And this has been observed as the lowest number of seats for popular representation of the commoners since the handing over of the territory to China in 1997. It is clear now that Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement will have to find other way out to fight the Xi regime and its tight National Security Law.

Further, this election will add more credibility to Carry Lam, the fourth and the current Chief Executive of Hong Kong since 2017 as she can show to Beijing that normalcy has returned to her city. Moreover, today the issue in Hong Kong is not freedom, basic rights and increasing intervention of Beijing over the autonomy of the island promised under the Basic Law. Crippling rent and large wealth inequality are simply making life unbearable in the city for the public. These are pressing issues beyond democracy. Thus, Beijing and the HKSAR administration under Lam hope that issue of survival will certainly bother more Hongkongers than democratic rights and freedoms. And,

hence, the patriots may get a fair chance to deliver the goods and services to the needy in the days to come.

Thus, Lam said that “it was an important election following the improvements to the electoral system to implement the principles of patriots administering Hong Kong”. In the guise of bringing more locals into the city administration, Beijing is simply turning the Legco into another committee of the National People's Congress.

In a 1984 speech, the legendary Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping said, “We are convinced that the people of Hong Kong are capable of running the affairs of Hong Kong well, and we want to see an end to foreign rule. The people of Hong Kong themselves will agree to nothing less.” But what Deng pronounced 13 years before the induction of the island into the People's Republic of China (PRC) seemed completely different as the Hongkongers gradually moved on with the archaic Communist system of Beijing.

Today, Chinese President Xi Jinping's only intention is to

display Beijing's money and muscle power and to claim as many territories as possible. In fact, his extremely aggressive foreign policy is stimulating increased global opposition both to the country and to the CPC. Succinctly, it is directly undoing decades of efforts by the PRC to assuage its neighbours that a stronger China will always be peaceful and absolutely non-domineering. Xi's predecessor Hu Jintao especially espoused the dictum called Hepen Queqi (Peaceful Rise or sometimes quoted as Peaceful Development) to convey to the world and its neighbourhood that China's fast growing political, economic and military might would not pose a threat to world peace and security. The policy was articulated by China to counter its so-called “Threat Theory”. By 2004, then Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao said that China's rise “will not come at the cost of any other country, will not stand in the way of any other country, nor pose a threat to any other country”. But what we have witnessed today is completely the opposite of all these Chinese Communists

had preached before to mask the whole world. Not only its neighbours, but also its own rebel territories like Hong Kong and Taiwan, and precisely its own Uyghur Muslims in the westernmost Xinjiang Province are bearing the brunt of Xi's vastly militarised statecraft. Needless to say, Uyghur genocide is fast threatening the survival of the community in this restive region. Therefore, Hongkongers may also encounter the worst forms of Chinese atrocities in the days to come unless the CPC mends its ways sooner or later.

Meanwhile, the joint statements released by the G-7 and members of the Five Eyes Alliance countries (Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the UK and the UK) criticised the Legco election that drew a record low turnout of voters in the recent history of the island. On a separate note, the EU, the UK and the US also denounced the results of the election. To all of them, the new changes imposed by the Communists in Beijing are simply eliminating any meaningful political opposition in the HKSAR.

Finally, one must say that

Hongkongers have set an example for all that one can and should do to stand up for freedom in the face of an authoritarian regime of immense brutality. This dedication and bravery of the islanders must be cherished and celebrated. But as of now what has been observed is that no one could help the Hongkongers except they themselves. However, the UK is the only nation in the world that could legitimately step into the current crisis, simply because China's actions towards the island territory are directly violating the principles of the 1997 Sino-British Declaration.

At present, international pressure and isolation of China are the only solutions for bringing back Hong Kong to its original “One Country, Two Systems” status. Else, under the long arm of China's security apparatus, the HKSAR will pass onto oblivion. But Hong Kong people kowtowing to the wishes and commands of the CPC will lead to the death of another democratic challenge against China. It will indeed be a failure of the global liberal order if millions struggling for their basic rights and freedoms are not supported. What is fast taking place in this island is nothing but the brutality and total disregard for humanity kept covered under the rubrics of Xi's massive expansion plans. The road ahead for Hong Kong would be tumultuous. Sadly, most of the pro-democracy activists and lawmakers are today either in prison or in exile. China's mindless violence, spying tactics and massive surveillance system have already worked very well.

What Franklin D Roosevelt once said seemed appropriate for today's Hong Kong, “In politics, nothing happens by accident. If it happens, you can bet, it was planned that way.” Hong Kong's current fate is all what the Mandarins have been planning quietly since the days of Deng to Xi now.

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National Security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region law empowers Beijing to prosecute all the ‘troublemakers’ in the island, particularly the pro-democracy activists and their supporters. This law is aimed to bring an end to Hong Kong's autonomy and democratic future and the island will fast turn into a Communist fiefdom. The first signal is the dismal turnout in the election



MAKHAN SAIKIA

PERSPECTIVE

Hybrid hearing: Way forward for justice delivery system

The adaptability of a hybrid format facilitates versatile case management in these uncertain times where social distancing restrictions may be relaxed or tightened at short notice. However, a clear-cut policy is required to promote transparency and consistency in the process of determining which elements of a case are suitable to be heard remotely and which are not



PAMARTY VENKATARAMANA

Courts which have traditionally functioned in real halls have switched over perforce onto virtual screens of desktop computers, laptops and the smartphone. But, how smart or truthful is such a mouse operandi for delivering justice has become the moot question today.

Since the year 2020, courts of India and also those in many other parts of the world have undergone a sea change in the mode and manner of dispensation of justice. The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in lengthy lockdown periods that almost knocked down the “rule of law” made by man to set right society.

As it is, courts across all rungs of the hierarchy are bogged down with an ever-burgeoning litigation. The reasons for this elephantine burden on courts are not far to seek, be it bad laws, poor enforcement or a rank failure on part of establishments to check corruption. This essay is an effort at trying to look at the brighter side of a dark scenario and to help nip the menace of “Lis pendens” or cases pending at courts of law by advocating the refined variety of “hybrid hearings”.

During this period of suspended life in society, pro-

ceedings were largely curtailed or limited to those held over remote links. And, as proceedings recommence post lockdown, it becomes important to consider the legality as well as the future of such remote proceedings.

Even though it is my personal opinion that justice can only be dispensed to a large extent only in personal courtroom trials, hearings and arguments, many deliberations are on to evaluate whether remote hearings can be adapted into an effective and beneficial long-term initiative?

The higher judiciary has been expressing its views from the Bench and so have we practitioners of law. But, what about the litigants viewpoint? Using technology to conduct trials and hear arguments from confines of remote homes was unthinkable as a normative practice even three years ago. Final hearings and also hearings with contested evidence are inevitably being conducted remotely using technology for otherwise there will be no hearings and access to justice would be a mirage.

The courts exist to resolve disputes. The default position now in all jurisdictions is that a hearing should be conducted with one, more than one, or

all participants attending remotely.

In practice, many questions arise. Whether a particular hearing should be adjourned if the case cannot be heard face to face, or whether there should be a remote hearing even where several parties to the case are involved?

The continued administration of justice must be the overriding factor to determine this question. Justice delayed is justice denied even when the delay results from a response to the prevailing extenuating circumstances.

Nevertheless, it is equally important for a court to remember that there will be cases where the court cannot be satisfied that a fair evaluation of facts or resolution of disputes can be achieved by way of saying remote hearing. The appropriateness of the nature of proceedings should be individually assessed by the court.

A virtual or remote hearing, where it is appropriate, can only replicate some and not all of the characteristics of a fully attended hearing in the court hall (a postage stamp image of a particular attendee at the remote hearing is definitely a poor substitute to seeing that person fully present in flesh and blood, in the court).

Much may be lost in a remote hearing. The intervention of technology between the viewers and viewed, sterilises the exchange, removing a critical dimension of human interaction. The whole experience becomes literally and figuratively two-dimensional.

It is easier to lie to a machine than to someone's face. The truth does not hit you in the same way through a screen. The impact of both examination-in-chief and the cross-examination gets diminished. Vulnerable witnesses via video-link can prove to be a challenging task unless a close-up gaze of the camera is revealing. It is difficult to pick up on subtle emotional cues at a distance. This is important not just for the assessment of witness testimony but for proper client care, and for the ends of justice.

This being so, cases that do not involve hearing or weighing live evidence are clearly more suitable for remote determination. Interim order hearings, directions hearings, case management hearings and pre-hearing reviews are natural contenders for continuing to be heard remotely. Simpler review and substantive hearings such as conviction, performance or health cases where impair-

ment is not contested can also be dealt with effectively without requiring attendance. Similarly, remote hearings are more suited to short cases. Remote hearings are easier to arrange at short notice. The litigants and witnesses do not need to arrange travel and accommodation, saving time, expense and expanding availability.

Added point is that a few have suitable private space at home to engage in private link without interruption for days on end.

Herein comes the need for a hybrid system of court hearings. Instead of a presumption of a hearing in person, case hearings could be held remotely where it is possible and fair to do so: working from a starting point of the “due process of law” that is possible for proceedings to be held remotely, parts can then be “hived off” into sections where attendance would be required or advantageous in the interests of justice.

Some cases may be conducted in person until all witnesses, including parties to the litigation, have given evidence testimony, with the remainder proceeding remotely. Eventually almost all cases would lend themselves to some form of such hybrid solution to the odd

situation continuing to prevail worldwide. Thus, a hybrid hearing involves conducting all or a part of the proceedings without all the parties being present in person, physically in the court hall. Submissions, determinations and even the questioning of witnesses, where appropriate, can all be performed or delivered via alternative remote means.

Hybrid hearings introduce a greater element of flexibility, allowing the participation mode of various parties to be blended according to the circumstances of the particular case. They offer a compromise position which sits between the rigid choices of the hearing being conducted either fully remotely or fully attended.

The adaptability of a hybrid format facilitates versatile case management in these uncertain times where social distancing restrictions may be relaxed or tightened at short notice. A case for an amendment to the Civil Procedure Code for remote hearings which currently is made available for the aged, the infirm and the “pandanashin womenfolk” becomes stronger once the circumstances cease to be exceptional and become the “new normal”.

Provision will have to be

made for public attendance or virtual observation in order to comply with the requirement for transparent justice. A clear-cut policy is required to promote transparency and consistency in the process of determining which elements of a case are suitable to be heard remotely and which are not.

It is also imperative that such an amendment allows for agile adoption of new platforms and developing technological solutions as they arise. Parliament has an onerous responsibility to stay ahead of the curve in this respect while goading upon regulators and courts to properly maintain all acceptable standards of security and data-protection.

The way ahead will not be easy. As the saying goes: “First we make our habits, then, our habits make us”. Advantages of convenience and cost-saving outweighed the fair administration of justice in the past and it is important to ensure that they do not do so in the future. Remote hearings can be adapted into an effective and beneficial long-term initiative.

The justice delivery system must update itself in these testing times.

(The writer is an eminent jurist and columnist)



AND NOW WE WELCOME
THE NEW YEAR, FULL OF
THINGS THAT HAVE
NEVER BEEN
—RAINER MARIA RILKE



YOUR
WEEK
AHEAD

MADHU KOTIYA



ARIES March 21-April 19

This week your health will be at its best. You will experience harmony in your thinking and personality. You will be calm, friendly and support others. You give other people their space and are tolerant of their needs. You can create a safe and trusting environment for them and become their influence. This demonstrates a level of soft control and persuading others to your way of thinking. On the career front, long time challenges will be met. You will be focused on what you need to do. You will regain your self-confidence. On the personal front, you beam with happiness and enjoy the relationships. Your dreams have become reality and relationships will find a new meaning. Couples will experience a stronger bond.

Lucky number 14
Lucky colour Green
Lucky day Thursday



LEO July 23-Aug 22

This week you feel at ease on a physical level. The negativity of the past is diluting and your stamina and creativity are high. You are likely to work hard with a lot of enthusiasm to fulfil your dreams. New hobbies and interests will draw your attention. Common sense and practical approach will lead you to success. On the career front, work plans held up due to obstacles start opening up with fruitful results. You can afford to take the risk as you shall find takers for your plans. Your past investment of money and energy will start showing dividends. You are also able to do justice with your professional and personal responsibilities. Married will enjoy marital bliss. Couples staying separately will settle their disputes.

Lucky number 18
Lucky colour Silver
Lucky day Wednesday



SAGITTARIUS Nov 22-Dec 21

This week you need to listen to your body. Half of the problems are sorted out with your attitude, therefore be positive. If you're having health issues like back pain, low energy, or any other problem, do take care. Revisiting your spiritual rituals is on the card. It might be helpful to give you the time and space to get insight that might be healing for you. Career-wise, you seem to be in an offbeat mood and not satisfied in your current job, this is the right to switch the job. Prepare your resume, do research work, which company need your profile and prepare yourself for the interview. You are very sensitive and emotional this week. Even a small matter could make you cry. Your mood swings, over-demanding nature could irritate your partner.

Lucky number 8
Lucky colour Magenta
Lucky day Friday



TAURUS April 20-May 20

Let go of all the past worries and live in the moment. Depression, isolation and insecurity are the three enemies that are likely to cause harm. Try to keep these away from you. Your positive mindset will not only help in making you a successful person but also stay in great health. This week avoid red colour. On the career front, you are likely to discover a skill that was unknown to you all this while. With a new week, you are set on a new path, realising your potentials and weaknesses. Those who are looking to start their career may have to train themselves to specialise in one field. On the personal front, you tend to lose your temper at the slightest provocation and this will affect your relationships with your family and friends.

Lucky number 2
Lucky colour Pink
Lucky day Sunday



VIRGO Aug 23-Sep 22

You are behaving immaturely when it comes to your health and will suffer the consequences. This time you cannot afford to take pressure and anxiety. Take advice from a health professional. Take time out for yourself. Make a resolution that you will do some kind of physical exercise for at least 30 minutes. A good message for your career is on the cards. Your partner and you have a perfect understanding of professional matters and work for the same motive. Balance and determination are the keys to your success. On the personal front, your critical and analytical nature is at a peak. This may cause conflict in your love life. Let your partner grow and have a chance to express them.

Lucky number 20
Lucky colour Mauve
Lucky day Monday



CAPRICORN Dec 22-Jan 19

There is a sparkling and refreshing factor in your personality that makes you distinct. Your courage and risk-taking ability will open up new areas in life. You feel healthy and fearless. You have the enthusiasm to experience, discover and enjoy life. You believe in yourself and follow your heart. This is a time when you need to truly believe and have no room for fear. Career-wise, you feel there is personal growth in the profession. You reach a state of renewal and new beginnings, where each day is an adventure and each moment is lived to the fullest. Your emotional strength is the greatest tool to win all challenges in life, let it be personal or professional. Support of near and dear ones are on the cards. Have blind faith in your relationship.

Lucky number 19
Lucky colour White
Lucky day Tuesday



GEMINI May 21-June 20

This week you will take life easy and are not worried about anything at this time. Your irregular diet and unhealthy eating habits could take a toll on your health. You may face health issues like weight gain, lethargy and low stamina. Don't compromise on health. Exercise regularly to be on a good track. This week work will pick up speed. It will be important for you to keep your balance in every possible way. Seniors will high expectations from you. Do not let this make you nervous. Your communication is your tool, use it for everyone's good. On the personal front, you are optimistic. Your networking with people is strong. You will enjoy fulfilment in relationships. With your partner's emotional support, you will feel protected.

Lucky number 12
Lucky colour Peach
Lucky day Tuesday



LIBRA Sep 23-Oct 22

This week your health needs your attention. Avoid physical and mental stress. The balance between body, mind and soul is required. Some external negative forces are working against you. You may feel powerless as something comes to a crashing and sudden end, and you feel as if you are being attacked or backstabbed by someone else. On the career front, work is fine and you feel elated. New opportunities, new creative plans will be made, new projects open up in front of you. On the personal front, you may feel suffocated with no scope of self-expression in love. Those who are looking for love should have patience. This is not the right time. Those facing a rough time in married life should adopt the right attitude towards their marriage and partner.

Lucky number 11
Lucky colour Beige
Lucky day Sunday



AQUARIUS Jan 20-Feb 18

You tend to think with your heart, rather than your mind. You may lack rationality but you are highly intuitive. You are nurturing and caring for others needs. Females are likely to suffer from hormonal, thyroid or menopause related problems. In such case, get yourself checked and take medicine before it aggravates. On the career front, your personal values system and what you believe will bring you the ultimate fulfilment and happiness in your life. An appraisal or a very lucrative offer is on the cards. Try to look for opportunities that make you feel satisfied and that are aligned with your values. You have to do what feels right to you only. The week is good for your emotional happiness as well. The ultimate satisfaction of a long-term relationship is indicated.

Lucky number 15
Lucky colour Sky Blue
Lucky day Thursday



CANCER June 21-July 22

You are not health-conscious. Listen to your body and know what you are feeding it. If you continue to harm your body then your health might need immediate attention. It is advised to take on-time action, you may get healing with some homemade remedies otherwise you could make a big hole in the pocket. For the past few weeks, your focus was mainly on your financial security. On the career front, you will need to adapt to the existing set of beliefs that are already in place, instead of being innovative. Personally, this is the time to value relationships and understand that every bond in life has its meaning. If required, take help from a psychotherapist or a spiritual mentor to whom you will turn for wisdom.

Lucky number 17
Lucky colour Grey
Lucky day Saturday



SCORPIO Oct 23-Nov 21

This is a good week. You have both mental and physical agility and is full of anticipation. Those who are suffering from any ailment please know that you will recover very fast. Now you want to have fun with mental activities of all kinds, including learning, exploring, and researching. You are filled with fresh energy and feel like an avid learner and an excellent student. This will lead you to learn various skills. These will help you professionally as well. You could prove a smart salesperson for the company and with your skills, you have achieved some unexpected targets for the company you are working with. Your appraisal is likely. The grass is green on your personal front too. Those already in a relationship, it's very possible that it will deepen and become better.

Lucky number 13
Lucky colour Brown
Lucky day Saturday



PISCES Feb 19-March 20

This week be careful of wishful thinking. Things will become worse if you continue to stay in your dreams and fantasies. Stay away from bad habits and bad company. This is the time to live in reality and away from any kind of temptations. Professionally, you are likely to take your business into a partnership where you will experience understanding, harmony and big motives between two people. The seed sown now will blossom into a tree of appreciation. On the personal front, you are rich by heart and with your pocket too. The week just reminds you to appreciate the sensual, luxurious side to life that often makes life more pleasurable. You believe in quality over quantity and learning to enjoy a full and joyful life.

Lucky number 6
Lucky colour Purple
Lucky day Friday

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ASTROTURF

BHARAT BHUSHAN PADMADEO

Dhyana brings out one's best

Once mind settles down, following the process suggested in the previous issue, a favourable inner mental climate gets created which is suited to pursue *dhyana* in right earnest. For, our restive mind becomes free from all the inconsequential thoughts, many negative, playing at the sub-conscious level, go out of reckoning. Mind-space thus becomes available to absorb fresh educative inputs, objectively process fresh thoughts and conduct sensibly. You will still continue to have in store, thought seeds parked at deeper layer of mind that hold the key to your habit tendencies. To get over them, you need to move to the next stage of the process — Detoxification of Mind.

The process is purposely so designed as to consciously invoke all instore thought seeds that keep driving us crazy, so as to resolve them through fresh educative inputs. At this stage, Guru will give you a two syllable/words *mantra*. Now sit comfortably, close your eyes and turn your attention inwards. The focus has to be once again on the breath cycle — inbreath and outbreath. Now begin reciting the *mantra* inwardly — one syllable/word with inbreath and the other with outbreath. *Mantra* as such has no

religious implication; it actually has energy connotation. When you recite the opening syllable/word with the inbreath, you draw extra life forces from nature. That triggers the inlaid memory imprints registered in energy format — meaningful ones as positive energy and unseemly as negative energy. The churning that follows expels negative imprints, bringing into focus your limiting habit tendencies. Vibration of the second syllable/word helps drive away the negative energy. The process needs to be continued for at least 20 minutes every day. The two steps followed thus far correspond to *Pratyahara*.

It's time now to move on to work towards attaining the state of one-pointedness, which corresponds to '*Dharana*' the 6th step of Patanjali's 8 fold path. The process is designed to induce value to the thought process through self-reflection on fresh educative inputs and give a positive turn to mind. The process has two working tools — a fresh *Mantra* and an iconic figure carrying valuable educative import. The two have to be individual specific, as prescribed by the Guru, which is based on the callings of your inherent frame of mind, particularly its wanting area.



Mantra, you may know, is actually a set of syllables placed in a logical sequence to create a particular sound effect, which as a sequel to stress created and uttered by mouth is heard by ears, and apprehended by the mind. *Mantra* is so called, because it comprises of '*mana*' out of '*manana*' and '*tra*' out of '*trana*'. *Mana* in Hindi *lingua franca* means mind; *manana* implies reflection in mind; and *trana* stands for liberation. So chanting of *mantra* helps attain liberation from mental limitations. *Mantra* in fact is a radiant energy, rather a sound body of consciousness set in correspondence with the consciousness of related imagery in focus. Repeated chanting of the *mantra*, with focus on the related imagery, consciousness of the seeker comes to terms with the *mantra* and the imagery in focus. You may still continue to be confronted with distracting thoughts. Try to remain disengaged from them. For, unless you pay attention to something, it may not affect you. Also, try to bring your attention back again and again to your focal point. Gradually, the distracting thoughts may go out of reckoning. Let me add here that when the sound note of the *mantra* resonate to the

imagery in focus, over a period of time, you may get so involved, that distracting thoughts, if any, may go out of reckoning. When you get fully established in the process, your mind will become one pointed, and you may remain focused for considerably a longer stretch of time.

As you graduate further in the process, the seeker is in harmony with the imagery and its educative import, as well as the resonating *mantra*. As you further get established in the process, a stage is arrived at when the mind, the *mantra* and the imagery turn into a seamless awareness. The state of *dhyana* is thus arrived at. You may then remain effortlessly focused for long, and at will. Mind then comes out with its optimum best, when its fully expanded vision would know no limits. Wherever you pay attention, the underlying truth comes out intuitively.

With these words, I wish the valued readers to get geared up to grab the opportunities coming your way and brave challenges ahead in the New Year.

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