

OPINION 6
TRENDS TO
LOOK OUT FOR**WORLD 8**
GUNMEN KILL TWO WOMEN
JUDGES IN AFGHAN CAPITAL**SPORT 12**
AXELSEN, MARIN
WIN THAI TITLES

CHANDIGARH, MONDAY JANUARY 18, 2021; PAGES 12 ₹2



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447 adverse jab events, mostly minor

Of 3 needing post-vaccination care, 2 released, 1 stable in hospital; on 2nd day of drive, 17,072 vaccinated against Covid, total rises to 2.24L; side effects like fever, headache minor, says Govt

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

A total of 2.24 lakh people received Covid-19 vaccine in the first two days of the countrywide vaccination drive that saw 447 cases of adverse events following immunisation (AEFI), the Union Health Ministry said on Sunday.

The Government also pointed out that the number of inoculations on day one in India on Saturday was the highest in the world, higher than the developed countries like the US, the UK and France.

"A total of 447 AEFI have been reported on January 16 and 17, out of which only three required hospitalisation. Most of the AEFI reported so far are minor like fever, headache, nausea," the Ministry's Additional Secretary Manohar Agnani said while addressing a Press briefing here.

"One of the hospitalised beneficiaries is under observation at AIIMS Rishikesh and is stable. Two others have been discharged from Delhi's Northern Railway hospital and AIIMS Delhi," he said. Agnani said a total of 2,24,301 beneficiaries have been vaccinated till January 17 as per provisional reports, adding that 2,07,229 of them received the jabs on day one of the drive.

Though the official did not share the State-wise dis-



tribution of the AEFI cases, according to various reports on Saturday evening AEFI were reported in Delhi (52), Maharashtra (22), West Bengal (14), Rajasthan (21), and Telangana (11). Some reports also said 13 cases were from Haryana.

The adverse reactions which are being closely tracked through the Government's surveillance framework, are defined by the WHO as "any untoward medical occurrence which follows immunisation and which doesn't necessarily

have a causal relationship with the usage of the vaccine. The adverse event may be any unfavourable or unintended sign, abnormal laboratory finding, symptom or disease".

Agnani said today being Sunday, only six States conducted vaccination drives and in 553 sessions a total of 17,072 beneficiaries were vaccinated. The six States were Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Manipur and Tamil Nadu.

He said a meeting was held with all States and Union

Territories on Sunday to review the progress of the drive, identify bottlenecks and plan corrective actions in the backdrop of technical glitches reported from some session sites like the failure of CO-WIN platform to function.

The Government said the shots will be offered first to an estimated one crore healthcare workers and around two crore frontline workers, and then to persons above 50 years of age, followed by persons younger than 50 years of age with associated comorbidities.

Doctors fear irregularity in approval, urges Govt to make vaccine data public

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

A network of doctors from across the country has alleged that emergency urgent authorisation (EUA) approval given to the vaccines — Covishield and Covaxin — is beset with "several irregularities" and asked the Government to make public all the relevant vaccine data.

"This would enable scientists and health workers to make informed choices regarding administration of vaccines for self and community in general," said the medical professionals under the banner of the Progressive Medicos and Scientists Forum (PMSF).

The doctors have demanded the rollback of approvals for EUA and choice be given to the healthcare workers (HCWs) to choose the vaccine without any fear or riders such as linking vaccinations with travel advisory restrictions.

"Better approach will be to

have an option strategy rather than opt out strategy. The continuation or eligibility for working as HCWs should not have any precondition of Covid vaccination, as is being done in a few countries," said PMSF president Dr Harjit Singh Bhatti in a memorandum to the Government.

Also, the forum said the clinical trials phase-3 data should be evaluated in transparent manner as and when available for India for both vaccines and the decision to grant EUA may be revisited once the phase 3 trials are completed.

The DCGI had early this month gave EUA to the two vaccines developed respectively by Serum Institute of India and Bharat Biotech following which vaccination drive has been launched in the country from January 16.

However, the forum alleged that the whole process of vaccine authorisation has been highly opaque and apparently unscientific.

Farmers' tractor march intact, but won't hit R-Day



Farmers raise slogans during their protest against the new farm laws at Ghazipur border in New Delhi on Sunday

AP

Protest rally on Outer Ring road; plea in SC against scheduled march

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Reiterating their demand for repealing new agriculture laws, the farmers' union on Sunday said they will go ahead with their proposed tractor parade in Delhi on Republic Day. The rally will be held on the Outer Ring Road and will be peaceful. They also alleged that the National Investigation Agency (NIA) is filing cases against those who are part of the protest or supporting it.

Meanwhile, the authorities had moved the Supreme Court seeking an injunction against the proposed tractor march or any other kind of protest by farmers which seeks to disrupt the gathering and celebrations of the Republic Day on January 26. The matter is pending in court.

"We have decided that we will carry out a tractor parade on the Outer Ring Road in Delhi on the Republic Day. The parade will be very peaceful. There will be no disruption of the Republic Day parade. The farmers will put up the national flag on their tractors," said Yogendra

Yadav, farmers' union leader at the Press conference at Singhu Border on Sunday evening. Another farmers' union leader, Darshan Pal Singh, alleged that the NIA is filing cases against protesters and its supporters. "All farmer unions condemn this," Pal said, referring to the NIA summons reportedly issued to a farmer union leader in a case related to the banned Sikhs For Justice outfit.

Thousands of farmers, mainly from Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, have been protesting at various border points of Delhi for over a month now demanding repeal of the three laws — the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, and the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act.

SC-appointed panel on farm laws to hold first meeting on Jan 19

New Delhi: The Supreme Court-appointed committee on the three new farm laws is scheduled to hold its first meeting on January 19 at Pusa campus here, its member Anil Ghanwat said on Sunday.

CAPSULE

VETERAN MUSICIAN USTAD GHULAM DIES



Mumbai: Legendary Indian classical musician and Padma Vibhushan awardee Ustad Ghulam Mustafa Khan passed away on Sunday afternoon at his residence here. He was 89. Khan's daughter-in-law Namrata Gupta Khan told PTI that the veteran breathed his last at 12.37 pm at his Bandra home.

SPAT OVER RENAMING AURANGABAD IN MAHA

Mumbai: The Shiv Sena and the Congress, which are ruling allies in the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government, on Sunday sparred over renaming Aurangabad city, with the Uddhav Thackeray-led party saying it is not "secular" behaviour if one finds "cruel and religiously blind" Mughal emperor Aurangzeb "dear".

SENA TO FIGHT POLLS IN WEST BENGAL: RAUT

Mumbai: The Shiv Sena has decided to contest the upcoming Assembly elections in West Bengal, party MP Sanjay Raut said on Sunday. He said the decision to contest the polls has been taken after holding discussions with Maharashtra Chief Minister and Sena president Uddhav Thackeray.

UK invites Modi to G-7 summit, Boris may visit India before June

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Britain has invited Prime Minister Narendra Modi to attend the high-profile G-7 summit there in June and indicated that Prime Minister Boris Johnson may visit India before the conclave. Johnson was supposed to be the chief guest at this year's Republic Day but cancelled the visit due to the situation created in his country due to a new strain of coronavirus.

The summit, which has leading countries like the US, UK, Italy, Canada, France, Germany, Japan and the European Union as members, is likely to discuss the current raging pandemic, climate change and open trade. Apart from India, Australia and South Korea are the other countries invited to take part in the G-7 summit as guests. It is scheduled to take place in Cornwall.

Giving details of the invitation, an official statement by the British High Commission here on Sunday said, "Prime Minister Johnson will use the first in-person G7 summit in almost two years to ask leaders, including Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, to seize the opportunity to build back better from coronavirus, uniting to make the future fairer, greener and more prosperous."

TMC placates Shatabdi with key party post

After being appointed party V-P in Bengal, Roy vows to ensure BJP's defeat in polls

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Days after she threatened rebellion, three-time Trinamool Congress MP Shatabdi Roy was appointed Vice President of the party's Bengal unit on Sunday.

On Friday, Roy indicated she was ready to cross over to the BJP, but after a meeting with fellow MP Abhishek

Banerjee, who is Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's nephew, she cancelled her Delhi trip. Roy had indicated she could meet Home minister Amit Shah during her Delhi stay, triggering speculation that she was ready to ditch the TMC.

Roy said she "welcomed the decision" and that she would work hard to ensure the defeat of the BJP in the forthcoming election. "If you take up the matter concerning the party with the top leadership, it is addressed. This development proves that," she was quoted by news agency PTI.

On Friday the TMC bat-




tled to persuade Roy — who retained Birbhum in the 2019 election despite colleagues losing neighbouring seats to the BJP by huge margins — to remain in the party.


Meanwhile, the BJP has

decided to continue "carpet-bombing" on the TMC till this year's Assembly elections are over, party insiders said adding the saffron outfit is lining up a number of "parivartan rallies" led by some senior national leader or the other in February. Party sources said Shah who was scheduled to come to Bengal on January 18 would visit the State on January 30-31 when he will hold organisation-level meetings as well as rallies.

Party president JP Nadda too will lead a number of rallies in February and efforts are on to rope in Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath for an intensified campaign.






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GST FRAUD

Haryana Police recovers over ₹112 cr

89 ACCUSED ARRESTED BY CRIME BRANCH

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

In a well-coordinated operation against Goods and Services Tax (GST) scamsters, Haryana Police on Sunday said it has busted four major gangs related to issuing or registration of bogus firms involved in fake invoice bills scam which defrauded the Government exchequer to the tune of over ₹464.12 crore.

The nexus of the fraudsters was active not only in Haryana but across the country.

The crackdown on GST fake invoice scam has also led to the recovery of over ₹112 crore and unearthing fake GST Identification Numbers (GSTIN).

A total of 72 police cases have been filed so far in which 89 accused have been arrested by the Crime Branch. Among the total arrests, 40 cases have been registered majorly against the accused namely Govind Sharma, Gaurav, Anupam Singla and Rakesh Arora.

Director General of Police (DGP) Manoj Yadava said that these persons issued fraudulent



invoices to numerous firms and companies without actual supply of goods through fraudulent e-way bills (GST related challans for transporting consignments) and facilitated fake (Income Tax Credit) ITC entitlement on GST portal through GSTR-3B form.

It has also been revealed that fraudulent ITC worth crores of rupees has been passed by these gangs using fake GST invoices, e-way bills and with the help of forged bank transactions. During the course of investigations, it has also come to light that out of

the arrested persons, some are white-collar economic repeated offenders. Police has also blocked inadmissible ITC worth of ₹97.22 crore in Excise and Taxation Department, the DGP said.

A total of 21 FIRs against fake firms belonging to Govind gang active in Panipat and adjoining areas were lodged in year 2019 while other three gangs involved in major GST evasion were booked between 2018 and 2019. Police has so far blocked ITC of these gangs to the tune of over ₹80 crore in Excise and Taxation

Department. The DGP informed that the major goods involved in these GST invoice scams were scrap, iron and steel articles, cotton-yarn, paper etc. The drive against the GST evaders and ITC fraudsters is expected to intensify and more arrests are likely to be done in near future, he said.

Investigations of these cases are in progress to identify other beneficiaries to recover the tax liability, he added.

Giving details about their modus operandi, the DGP informed that maximum fraudsters in these gangs used to first register fake firms on GST portal in the name of gullible people and then generate fake invoices, bills of these firms by using software apps like BusyApp, TallyApp, Shkun Software etc. and then uploading these bills to generate e-way bills on GST portal.

Maximum number of e-Way bills which were generated by these fraudsters were found to be fake on verification by the Crime branch. These e-Way bills mentioned vehicle numbers related to ambu-

lances, government vehicles, motorcycles, private owned vehicles which are to be used for commercial purposes. On further inquiry, the bank account numbers which were shown in GST registration form of bogus firm were also found dubious and the fraudsters used another bank account gateway to deceive authorities, he said.

Other modus operandi involved the change of Directors or Proprietors, their addresses, mobile numbers, PAN cards, email addresses every financial year to deceive authorities concerned, he added.

Mohd. Akil, DGP crime said. “The Police has conducted a statewide drive against GST fake invoice fraud and requested the department concerned to provide all the records.”

As the beneficiaries (ITC claimants) are from various parts of Haryana and other states too, we are coordinating with our counterparts to track the culprits involved in the fraud, he added.

Party MLAs to meet State Election Commissioner today

Baldev Sirsa, the president of Lok Bhalai Insaf Welfare Society, citing “family engagements” as a reason for his non-appearance before the NIA, requested the national probe agency to give a date after February 7. “I will not appear before the NIA now because I will be busy in my granddaughter’s wedding and can appear before the agency only after February 7,” he said. However, the farmers’ out-fits have condemned the summons while dubbing the summons as “Government’s pressure tactics”.

SEVERAL BJP LEADERS JOIN AAP

AAP Punjab unit on Sunday gained a major boost when several BJP leaders joined the party in the presence of senior party leader and the Leader of Opposition in the Vidhan Sabha Harpal Singh Cheema.

Punjabis doing their bit to support farmers

MONIKA MALIK ■ CHANDIGARH

Punjab is enthusiastically gearing up for ‘January 26 tractor march’ at Delhi. Even as the farmers and their families are camping at the Delhi borders — notwithstanding bone-chilling winters — for almost two months now, the villagers, gurdwaras, common men, employees, and others are doing their bit to make this “march” successful.

Making their contribution in the farmers’ ongoing struggle demanding repeal of the Centre’s three new farm laws, the people of Faridkot Kotli village in Sangat block of Bathinda district have prepared fiber sheets to protect the protesting farmers from water

cannons, lathis, rubber or plastic bullets in case of any altercation with the security forces.

The sarpanch (village head) of Arakwas village near Lehragaga in Sangrur district has issued a diktat to all villagers to ensure participation of one family member in the tractor march else face fine.

Not staying behind, the gurdwaras in Punjab’s several villages are also making announcements encouraging people to come out in large numbers to join the January 26 tractor march and contact the gurdwara managements.

That was not all! Training to the womenfolk to drive tractors, conducting rehearsals for the march, modifying tractors with increased engine

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As per the decision taken by the farm leaders in Delhi, the tractor parade will be carried out with the National Flag on tractors on the Delhi’s Outer Ring Road on Republic Day, causing “no disruption to the official Republic Day ceremony”

capacity, ensuring availability of diesel tanks, spare-parts, tools, mechanics, among other things are part of the hectic preparations going on for the “mega show”.

“I have asked all the vil-

lagers to take part in the tractor parade. If any person from the village does not take part in the parade along with his tractor, he will be fined from ₹2,100 to ₹5,100. Besides, if any member of a household does

Farmer leader Baldev Singh, singer Deep Sidhu skip appearing before NIA

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

A day after the National Investigation Agency (NIA) issued summons to a farmer leader Baldev Singh Sirsa and Punjabi singer-actor Deep Sidhu as witnesses to a case registered on December 15, 2020, they skipped appearing before the probe agency on Sunday.

In all, the NIA had summoned at least 40 people for questioning in a case related to a ‘banned’ pro-khalistan outfit ‘Sikhs for Justice’ registered in Delhi by NIA on December 15, 2020, under stringent provisions of law, including UAPA and sedition. Of these, 12 are activists supporting the farmers’ ongoing agitation against the Centre’s three new farm laws demanding its repeal.

Among those issued notices include Baldev Singh Sirsa — who has been representing the farmers’ in meeting with the Union Ministers, Deep Sidhu — an actor-singer who had steered Bollywood star turned politician Sunny Deol’s election campaign during 2019 Lok Sabha polls in Gurdaspur, Jasbir Singh Rode — former jathedar (head priest) of Sikhs’ highest temporal seat Akal Takht, Baltej Pannu — a radio and TV journalist working with the US and Canada-based media organizations, among others.

Baldev Sirsa, the president of Lok Bhalai Insaf Welfare Society, citing “family engagements” as a reason for his non-appearance before the NIA, requested the national probe agency to give a date after February 7. “I will not appear before the NIA now because I will be busy in my granddaughter’s wedding and can appear before the agency only after February 7,” he said.

However, the farmers’ out-fits have condemned the summons while dubbing the summons as “Government’s pressure tactics”.

“The Centre wants to derail the agitation. But we will continue our struggle for the repealing of the laws. Many people who are associated with the farmers’ agitation have been sent these notices,” said Sirsa.

Notably, the farm unions had earlier also raised the issue of NIA summoning those who have supported agitation with three Union Ministers — Narendra Tomar, Piyush Goyal and Som Parkash — during the ninth round of talks on January 15; and Tomar had “promised

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to look into the matter”.

The farmers’ unions have now decided not to appear before the NIA and to take up the NIA summons issue first with the Union Ministers during their January 19 meeting.

Actor Deep Sidhu, who has backed the protest against the Centre’s agriculture laws, has accused the Government of trying to ‘intimidate’ the protestors.

Activist and UK-based television journalist Jasveer Singh, Balwinder Pal Singh, Sukhpreet Singh Udhoke, Karnail Singh, Mandeep Singh, Paramjit Singh, Ranjit Singh, Surinder Singh, Pardeep Singh, Inderpal Singh Judge, Naresh Kumar and cable TV operator Jaspal Singh, are among others who have also received the NIA summons.

The NIA probe focuses on use of several NGOs for funding the Khalistani campaigns, particularly spearheaded by banned outfit Sikhs for Justice (SFJ), abroad for organizing on-ground campaigns and demonstrations outside Indian missions in the UK, the US, Canada, Germany and other countries.

PUNJAB MINISTER LAMBASTS CENTRE, DUBS IT AS “A DEVIOUS PLOY”

Senior Congress leader and Cabinet Minister Sukhjinder Singh Randhawa on Sunday slammed the Union Government over notices by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) to the farmers and those lending support to the farmers protest.

“The farmers who feed the entire nation with his blood, sweat and toil cannot be cowed down by such empty threats which would be to very costly for the ruling dispensation at New Delhi,” quipped the Congress leader

Pointing out, Randhawa said that the notices by NIA are part of a devious ploy by the BJP Government to weaken the farmers’ movement being waged on the borders of Delhi.

“This is not the first time since the last six and half years’ tenure of the NDA Government that government agencies have been misused for political purposes,” he said.

Terming the current period as the “darkest” in the annals of India’s democracy, Randhawa said that the constitutional institutions and independent Government agencies are being grossly undermined to achieve narrow political goals.

“BJP employs strong arm tactics to browbeat its opponents into submission and now this new satanic move would prove to be a disaster. Congress party and the State Government would always stand by the farmers and stoutly oppose such autocratic tactics,” said Randhawa, averring that there is no alternative left for the Centre except to repeal these black farm laws.

SUKHBIR CONDEMNS CENTRE FOR SUMMONING KHALSA AID FOR QUESTIONING BY NIA

Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) president Sukhbir Singh Badal on Sunday said that it was condemnable that the Central Government did not find anything wrong with Khalsa Aid when it provided humanitarian aid in Gujarat but had unleashed the National Investigation Agency (NIA) on the NGO for stepping in to help farmers agitating peacefully on the borders of Delhi.

“How is it possible that an organization, which is acclaimed by the country earlier, has suddenly turned bad simply because it has chosen to help farmers? Summoning people associated with Khalsa Aid by NIA is a clear sign of frustration. The Centre thinks it can weaken the farm protest by such intimidatory measures. Little does it know that the Kisan Andolan is only getting stronger due to these repressive steps,” said Sukhbir, while talking to the mediapersons in Ferozepur.

Bird ringing programme at Pong Dam takes a hit due to bird flu

NISHU MAHAJAN ■ CHANDIGARH

The bird ringing programme, aimed at collecting information on bird’s migratory patterns has failed to take off at Pong wetland this year due to the outbreak of avian influenza-H5N1 in Himachal.

The bird ringing project was launched in Himachal in 2013 with an aim to collect information on bird’s migratory patterns, survival rates and monitor if any particular species show signs of decline. For this, the Forest Department had established a state-of-the-art bird ringing station at Pong wetland in Kangra district.

Bird ringing is done by clipping a bird with a small metal ring to study and understand the routes they use to fly, their migration patterns and resting sites. The metal ring with a unique alpha-numeric code is placed on the legs of



birds.

Pong Dam Lake, which is known as migratory birds’ paradise hosts more than one lakh migratory birds every winter season. However this year, 4921 birds have till now died at Pong wetland due to the

outbreak of bird flu.

Since the detection of bird flu at Pong Dam on January 4, all kinds of human and live-stock activities have been banned in one km area around the lake which is declared as alert zone (red zone) while the

next nine km area has been declared a surveillance zone.

The annual avian census conducted at Pong Dam in January and February has also been suspended for now.

“Due to the outbreak of bird flu, the bird ringing pro-

The bird ringing project was launched in Himachal in 2013 with an aim to collect information on bird’s migratory patterns, survival rates and monitor if any particular species show signs of decline. For this, the Forest Department had established a state-of-the-art bird ringing station at Pong wetland in Kangra district

gramme could not begin at the Pong wetland this year. The ringing process usually begins in January after the arrival of migratory birds at the water body,” said Rahul Rohane, Deputy Conservator of Forests,

Wildlife Division, Hamirpur while talking to The Pioneer.

21 carcasses of migratory birds of different species were reported on Sunday taking the total toll to 4921 birds due to avian influenza at Pong Lake. The wetland area is currently under surveillance and the rapid response teams are carrying out sanitization exercise in the affected area, he said.

The situation is improving as mortality of birds has declined in the last five days but the wetland area would remain closed till further orders, he added.

Giving details of the bird ringing programme, Rohane said that 113 birds including both migratory and native species were ringed at Pong wetland area in 2020 before the Covid-19 had hit the country while 645 birds were ringed in 2015.

The main objective of the bird ringing programme is to

collect long-term ringing data during each spring and autumn migration period, to increase knowledge about the migration of birds, collect data to know about population changes in birds, and to improve conservation status of native species, he said.

The Pong Dam, also known as Pong Reservoir, Pong Dam Lake and the Maharana Pratap Sagar is a well-known wildlife sanctuary and one of the international wetland sites declared in India by the Ramsar Convention.

The annual winter bird counts each January since 1999 have recorded totals of between 70,000 and 150,000 wetland birds descending on the lake. During the January 2020 census exercise, as many as 1.15 lakh birds of 114 species were recorded at the Pong Dam Lake. The figure included 1,04,032 migratory waterfowls of 60 species, 10,377 resident

water birds of 30 species and 1,292 birds of 24 other local species.

According to a report of birds ringed at Nagrota Surian at Pong wetland, 369 birds were ringed in January 2015, of which 36 (9.8 percent) were re-trapped in February 2016. No foreign-ringed bird was trapped.

The report stated, “Till date, the most-trapped species have been the Siberian race of Common Chiffchaff (59), a long-distance migrant, followed by two resident species, Yellow-eyed Babbler (54) and Oriental White-eye (36), although the latter is also a winter visitor from higher altitudes. The highest re-trapping rates of resident birds were for several babbler species and the Jungle Prinia. Other resident species re-trapped were single individuals of Pied Kingfisher, Asian Barred Owlet and Long-tailed Shrike.”

AHEAD OF 10TH ROUND OF TALKS

Discuss farm laws clause by clause: Tomar to kisan

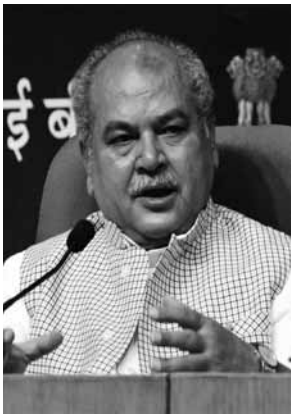
PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Ahead of the 10th round of talks, scheduled on January 19, Union Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar on Sunday again urged the agitating farmers to give up their 'stubborn' stand on the new farm laws and come for a clause by clause discussion. Tomar said most farmers are in favour of the farm laws and the Government will hold the next round of discussion on this on Tuesday.

The farm laws were put on hold by the Supreme Court earlier this week amid a 53-day protest by farmers at the borders of Delhi. Saying it was "extremely disappointed" by the Government's handling of the crisis, the court had also formed a committee of agricultural experts to deal with the issue, which has, however, been rejected by the farmers.

Tomar, who left for his constituency by Hazur Sahib Nanded-Amritsar Superfast Express, was seen sharing langar from co-passengers of Sikh community -- a gesture which comes amid the ongoing protests by farmers from Punjab against the agri laws.

"Most of the farmers and experts are in favour of farm



SC-APPOINTED COMMITTEE TO HOLD MEET ON JAN 19
The Supreme Court appointed committee over farm laws is likely to hold its first meeting on January 19. According to Anil Ghanwat, one of the four members has backed out of the committee." If the apex court does not appoint a new member, the existing members will continue," he said.

laws. After the Supreme Court's order, the laws can't be implemented," he said.

"Now we expect that the farmers discuss the laws clause-wise on January 19 and tell the Government what they want other than the repeal of the

"MOST OF THE FARMERS AND EXPERTS ARE IN FAVOUR OF FARM LAWS. AFTER THE SUPREME COURT'S ORDER, THE LAWS CAN'T BE IMPLEMENTED," HE SAID

laws," he added, reiterating the Government's demands for a clause-by-clause discussion.

The Government had sent a proposal to the farmers "in which we agreed to address their apprehensions regarding mandis, traders' registration and other things". The Government had also agreed to discuss the laws on stubble burning and electricity "but the farmers' unions only want repeal of the laws," Tomar said.

Cong questions Centre's vaccination policy

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Congress on Sunday posed four questions to the Centre over its vaccine policy and pointed out that vaccinations are an 'important public service and not a political or business opportunity'.

The grand old party questioned the pricing of the vaccination and alleged that it's costly as compared to the rest part of world where the same vaccination is being administered.

Among the four questions were issues regarding the prices of the Covishield and Covaxin doses and the Centre's decision to allow the exports of one of the vaccines before immunising everyone in the country.

"Vaccine Development & Mass Immunization were neither events' or publicity stunts but important milestones in the service of the people". While the country stands united in providing immunization against Corona virus to our Frontline Corona Warriors' i.e. doctors, health workers, police personnel & others, let us remember that vaccinations are an important public service and not a political or business opportunity," Congress chief spokesperson Randeep Singh Surjewala said at AICC Press conference.

Surjewala said the PM and his Government need to answer important questions.

"Who will get free Corona vaccine? How many people will get free Corona vaccine? Where will you get free Corona vaccine?" he asked as he pointed out the Government's order for the vaccine doses will be inadequate.

The Congress general secretary also asked why should the Government pay ₹95 more to Bharat Biotech for a vaccine that has been "developed with the expertise & experience of scientists of Govt owned ICMR".

"Why should Modi Govt pay more for a vaccine that has only been tested on 755 individuals & is yet to be cleared after Phase II trials. Should the price of such a vaccine not be cheaper than the AstraZeneca-Serum Institute?" he questioned.

Surjewala then came to the price of Serum Institute's vaccine in the open market as he cited the chief executive of the Pune-based company Adar Poonawalla saying that they will sell Covishield for ₹1,000/dose in the open market or "2,000/dose for 2 doses required for every individual." "Isn't Modi Govt duty bound to ensure purchase of all "Covishield Doses" at 200/dose and enable the people to purchase at this price rather than 1,000/dose?"

When AstraZeneca has promised supply of vaccine "at no profit", why is Serum Institute being

permitted to charge 1,000/dose, when they are supplying to Govt at 200/dose? he asked further.

The last question was on the government's permission to SII to allow the export of its vaccine "without immunisation of India's population". "Corona Vaccine For All should be the stated policy of Modi Govt.

However, Modi Govt's approach on Free Vaccination or alternatively Cost of Vaccination', Cost to Exchequer', Profit Margins of Companies' etc for India's remaining 135 Crore people is completely opaque and shrouded in secrecy," Surjewala said.

"Time for Prime Minister. Shri Narendra Modi & his Govt to come forward and answer," he added.

The opposition party has been critical of the government with senior Congress leader Manish Tewari and Union health minister Harsh Vardhan sparring on Twitter on Saturday, the day Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the country's mammoth inoculation drive. Tewari had raised questions over the emergency use approval given to the indigenously-developed vaccine Covaxin and Vardhan hitting back alleging that the Congress leader was only passionate about spreading rumours.

COVID VACCINES Indian scientists, doctors did miracle: BJP chief

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

BJP president JP Nadda on Sunday appreciated the country's research scientists and doctors for beating timeline for preparing 'made in India' anti-coronavirus vaccines and start 'world's biggest' vaccination drive.

"Usually it takes years to develop a vaccine. But Indian scientists and doctors have done a miracle by developing two 'Made in India' vaccines for the world's biggest vaccination drive", the BJP Chief said a day after vaccination of frontline health workers was kicked off by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

He said several countries are in talks with Indian Government and Corona vaccine manufacturers to get the Corona vaccine at the earliest in order to "save their citizens."

"The fact that Covid vaccine was successfully developed and manufactured in India and we successfully started the world's biggest Corona vaccination drive is the solid proof of the prowess, great capabilities and scientific genius of our

doctors and scientists who have all the capabilities and knowledge to be at the top in the world", he said.

BJP Chief said the last assault on Coronavirus has begun with the start of the massive vaccination drive under the leadership of the Prime Minister.

Nadda who is also a former union health Minister said the emergency use of the vaccine was started "only when scientists and health experts were very sure about the efficacy and safety of the 'Made in India' vaccine".

He sought people "not to listen to any false propaganda, fake news and rumors about the vaccine."

"Today the entire world is looking towards India with hope and aspiration of getting Corona vaccine soon.

"India, which manufacturers and supplies more than 60 % of vaccines to the world, is fast emerging as a hub of Corona vaccine. It is a matter of great pride and satisfaction for every Indian that India will play a decisive role in saving humankind from the Corona pandemic", he said.

Record 534 kms NHs constructed in last week

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Ministry of Road Transport & Highways (MoRTH) has created a record by constructing 534 km of National Highways (NHs) in the last week commencing 8 January.

The Ministry has constructed 8,169 km of National Highways (NHs) from April 2020 to 15 January 2021 in the current financial year 2020-21, i.e. with a speed of about 28.16 km per day. During the same period in the last fiscal, 7,573 km roads were constructed, with a speed of 26.11 km per day, according to a statement by MoRTH.

The Ministry is hopeful that with such pace it should be able to cross construction target of 11,000 km by 31 March.

The Ministry also awarded

NH projects of 7,597 km during this period (April 2020 to 15 January 2021). In 2019-20, projects of 3,474 km were awarded during the same period. Thus, the pace of award has also more than doubled this fiscal. In total, projects of 8,948 km of roads were awarded in 2019-20 while 10,237 km of roads were constructed.

The achievement assumes significance given the fact that the first two months of the current fiscal were lost due to nationwide lockdown in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic. The Ministry has taken several initiatives to increase the pace of construction. The pace of construction is expected to increase further in the remaining months of the current financial year, which are conducive for construction activities.



Use of regional languages increased during 2018-2020 in Upper House

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The use of regional languages in the proceedings of Rajya Sabha increased manifold during 2018-2020 with Sanskrit emerging as the fifth widely used language among the 22 scheduled languages after Hindi, Telugu, Urdu and Tamil.

Chairman M Venkaiah Naidu has been regularly urging the members of the House on the use of regional languages during the proceedings.

According to research done by the Rajya Sabha secretariat, while Hindi and English are the widely used languages during the proceedings of the House, the use of 21 other scheduled Indian languages (other than Hindi) has increased to over five times (512 percent) per sitting in 2020 over that of the 14-year period between 2004 and 2017.

During this period, four languages - Dogri, Kashmiri, Konkani and Sonthali - have been used for the first time since the Rajya Sabha came into being in 1952 and another six languages - Assamese, Bodo, Gujarati, Maithili, Manipuri and Nepali - have been used after a long gap.

Rajya Sabha members spoke in 10 scheduled languages (other than Hindi) in the House on 269 occasions during 923 sittings between 2004 and 2017 at the rate of 0.291 per sitting, the Rajya



From 2013 to 2017 spanning over 329 sittings, members spoke only in 10 regional languages (other than Hindi) on 96 times, all limited to debates

Sabha secretariat said.

In 2020, 49 interventions in regional languages were made during 33 sittings at the rate of 1.49 per sitting, marking an increase to 512 per cent.

From 2013 to 2017 spanning over 329 sittings, members spoke only in 10 regional languages (other than Hindi) on 96 times, all limited to debates. However, during 2018-20 with 163 sittings, regional languages were used 135 times

including 66 interventions in debates, 62 Zero Hour and seven special mentions.

After becoming the Chairman of Rajya Sabha in August 2017, Naidu has been urging the members of the House to speak in their respective mother tongue in the spirit of the federal nature of the House.

While announcing the availability of simultaneous interpretation facilities in all the 22 scheduled languages in July 2018, he himself spoke in 10 languages in the House.

The number of times the regional languages (other than Hindi) were used during 2013-17 (329 sittings) and 2018-20 (163 sittings) respectively were - Tamil (32 and 18), Telugu (19 and 33), Urdu (19 and 24), Bengali (6 and 17), Sanskrit (0 and 12), Marathi (3 and 6), Odiya (5 and 6), Kannada (2 and 5), Punjabi (2 and 3), Malayalam (2 and 0) and Assamese (0 and 2).

ITBP launches smart classes for schoolchildren in Naxal areas



PNS ■ NEW DELHI

In probably the first such initiative by a paramilitary, the ITBP has started 'smart' classes for local schoolchildren in Naxal-affected Hadel village under Kondagaon, Chhattisgarh to impart Internet-based education through audio-visual medium.

"The classes have been started for remotely located village children in Naxalism-infested area Hadeli and adjoining peripheral villages in district Kondagaon, Chhattisgarh. These classes are organised by ITBP jawans of 41st Battalion of the Force only to enhance the student's knowledge taking the help of online audio-visals. The classes are also taken with the help of electronic equipment such as computers and projectors,"

Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) spokesperson Vivek Pandey said.

These evening classes are taken by ITBP personnel who are graduates and have experience and knowledge to organise such classes. Apart from this, various online learning videos on YouTube and other such platforms, help of e-learning websites are also taken to teach the students by giving them enough opportunities to learn and practice, Pandey said.

"It is envisaged that the value addition in learning of one and a half hours capsule course on a daily basis would in future enable the students to pursue higher studies and would help children to understand the methods of e-learning and virtual online classes. Some 50 students are being

benefited from the initiative," he said.

All these classes are organised through Internet connections of the jawans. As the mobile signal is weak, jawans put their mobile phones on height through bamboo/ tree trunk/ tree where it receives a network and it is connected through Wi-Fi hotspot to the laptop used for smart classes which is projected on a big screen through the projector. Sound is delivered through 'bluetooth' speakers, he said.

In the course of imparting education to the local children; the jawans, in turn, are gradually learning the local Halbi language from the school-children. Knowledge of the local language would be handy for the jawans in operational tasks in the area, officials added.

Centre confirms avian influenza in MP, Chhattisgarh, U'khand

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Centre on Sunday said Avian Influenza has been confirmed in crows at Panna, Sanchi, Raisen, Balaghat, and in birds at Sheopur (crow, owl) and Mandsaur (swan, pigeon) districts of Madhya Pradesh; Bastar (crow, pigeon) and Dantewada (crow) districts of Chhattisgarh; and in crow samples from Haridwar and Lansdowne forest range of Uttarakhand.

Additionally, in Delhi, Heron sample in Rohini have been tested positive for avian influenza. The Ministry of Animal Husbandry said that culling of poultry birds is underway in Maharashtra and Haryana, while fresh cases of bird flu have been confirmed in poultry in Mumbai as well as in the Mandsaur district of Madhya Pradesh. The samples have been sent to the designated laboratory for testing.

According to the ministry, samples tested from Rajasthan and Gujarat have been found negative for avian influenza.

In Maharashtra, deaths of



836 different birds were reported on January 16 across the state and samples have been sent for bird flu tests in laboratories in Pune and Madhya Pradesh's Bhopal. In Beed in Marathwada and Gondia in Vidarbha, 50 poultry birds each died while 32 other birds like herons, sparrows and parrots, as well as 59 crows, including 33 from neighbouring Thane, also died in the state on Saturday.

The Maharashtra Animal Husbandry Department have started a toll-free helpline for farmers to report any unusual mortality of birds. The state government has put requisite information about the disease in line with the revised Avian Influenza Action Plan 2021, it added.

The culling operation of poultry is continuing in the epi-

centers of Haryana. Further, the ministry said rapid response teams (RRPs) have been deployed in Madhya Pradesh.

The ministry in its latest report on Bird Flu, requested state governments to 'rethink' their decisions to impose a ban on the sale of poultry products and urged them to allow sale of poultry items sourced from the non-infected areas/states. "It is reiterated that the consumption of well-cooked chicken and eggs is safe for humans. Consumers should not heed to baseless rumours that are unscientific and often lead to confusion," it said. The Centre, in its report, mentioned that poultry meat cooked at more than 70 degree Celsius for 30 minutes inactivated the virus and is absolutely safe to consume properly cooked poultry meat and eggs.

So far, bird flu has been confirmed in 11 states -- Chhattisgarh, Delhi, Maharashtra, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana and Gujarat.

COVID-19 A, O blood groups appear to be protective: Study

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Use of private transport, lower-exposure occupations, smoking, vegetarianism and 'A' or 'O' blood groups appeared to be protective, according to a pan-India serosurvey conducted by the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research in its nearly 40 institutes in the country.

The survey found that those with blood group with 'B' and 'AB' blood groups and those using public transport were at a higher risk of catching the infection.

For its study, the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) took samples of 10,427 adult individuals working in its laboratories or institutions and their family members, based on voluntary participation, to assess the presence of antibodies to SARS-CoV-2.

The study which was piloted by CSIR-Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology (IGIB), Delhi said of the 10,427 individuals, 1,058 (10.14 per cent) had antibodies against SARS-CoV-2.

A follow up on 346



seropositive individuals among the samples after three months revealed 'stable' to 'higher' antibody levels against SARS-CoV-2, but declining plasma activity for neutralizing the virus, Shantanu Sengupta, senior scientist at IGIB and one of the co-authors of the paper said.

A repeat sampling of 35 individuals, at six months, revealed declining antibody levels while the neutralising antibody remained stable compared to three months.

However, both the normal antibody as well as the neutralising antibody were much above the required threshold, he said.

"Our finding that smokers are less likely to be seropositive is the first report from the general population and part of growing evidence that despite COVID-19 being a respiratory disease, smoking may be protective," the study said.

The paper also cites two studies from France and similar reports from Italy, New York and China, which reported lower infection rates among smokers.

Along with demographic information, possible risk factors were evaluated through self-filled online forms with data acquired on blood group type, occupation type, habits including smoking and alcohol,

FOR ITS STUDY, THE COUNCIL OF SCIENTIFIC AND INDUSTRIAL RESEARCH (CSIR) TOOK SAMPLES OF 10,427 ADULT INDIVIDUALS WORKING IN ITS LABORATORIES OR INSTITUTIONS AND THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS, BASED ON VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION, TO ASSESS THE PRESENCE OF ANTIBODIES TO SARS-COV-2

diet preferences, medical history and transport type utilised.

"The study found that higher seropositivity was found for those using public transport and with occupational responsibilities such as security, housekeeping personnel, non-smokers and non-vegetarians," Sengupta said.

"The presence of such antibodies is a reliable marker of infection and recovery. However, some infected people may not develop antibodies," Anurag Agrawal, IGIB director, and one of the co-authors of the paper said.

"Use of private transport, lower-exposure occupations, smoking, vegetarianism and

'A' or 'O' blood groups appeared to be protective, using seropositivity as a surrogate for infection," the paper added.

Sengupta said this is for the first time that a study has been done in India wherein individuals have been monitored for three months (35 individuals) to six months (346 individuals) for antibodies including those with probable neutralising activity. This is the first such cohort survey, he said.

"We conducted both the normal antibody test and neutralising anti-body test to understand the prevalence and duration of antibodies," he said.

Sena to contest Assembly polls in West Bengal: Raut

PTI ■ MUMBAI

The Shiv Sena has decided to contest the upcoming Assembly elections in West Bengal, party MP Sanjay Raut said on Sunday.

He said the decision to contest the polls has been taken after holding discussions with Maharashtra Chief Minister and Sena president Uddhav Thackeray.

“So, here is the much-awaited update. After discussions with Party Chief Shri Uddhav Thackeray, Shiv Sena has decided to contest the West Bengal Assembly Elections. We are reaching Kolkata soon...!! Jai Hind, Jai Bangla!” Raut tweeted.

He said the decision to contest the polls has been taken after holding discussions with Maharashtra CM and Sena president Uddhav Thackeray

He, however, didn't specify the number of seats the Sena will contest in West Bengal.

Elections to the 294-member WB assembly are due in April-May this year.

The Sena is in power in Maharashtra along with the NCP and Congress under the aegis of Maha Vikas Aghadi.

Maha: After 2-day suspension, vaccination to resume tomorrow

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

The Covid-19 vaccination drive, which came to be suspended in Maharashtra late on Saturday night owing the glitches in the CoWin software, will resume on Tuesday.

In a late Saturday night tweet, Mumbai Municipal Commissioner Iqbal Singh Chahal announced that the Vaccination drive would remain suspended on January 17 and 18.

The CoWIN application, which was used to tally the vaccine beneficiaries, was erratic throughout the first day on Saturday, thus delaying the entire vaccination drive at several locations.

Chahal said it was mandatory for all to register themselves on the CoWin app before they could be called for the vaccine jab. Informed official sources said that efforts were on to rectify the problems in the CoWin app after which registration will begin and the Vaccination drive will resume by Tuesday.

CPM activist alleges electoral frauds by party in Kerala's local body polls

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

A prominent CPI(M) activist has come out in the open alleging that massive fraud was committed by the party leaders and cadre during the recently held local body elections in the State.

Prof K M Sreekumar, a CPI(M) activist who was posted as the presiding officer of a polling station in Kasaragod district during the local body election, alleged in a complaint to the State election Commission that K Kunhiraman MLA from Uduma threatened him with dire consequences when the former objected to electoral fraud being committed by party cadre.

“People who had cast their votes were turning up again and again to cast votes in the name of other voters. There was large scale bogus voting and when I objected to it, the local CPI(M) leader asked me not to intervene. When I stood my ground, the MLA turned up and asked me to look after what was happening inside the polling booth and not to create problems.

When I insisted in checking the identity of the voters, the MLA threatened to chop off my legs,” said Prof Sreekumar in his social media posting.

Prof Sreekumar, who heads the CPI(M) controlled teachers' union of the Agricultural University, said that the entire polling staff on duty was from the party itself. “This is to facilitate bogus voting and this has been the precedence in this part of the State,” said the professor.

Northern Kerala, especially the districts of Kannur, Kasaragod and the northern region of Kozhikode are infamous for the “party villages” which are controlled and administered by the CPI(M) irrespective of who rules from Thiruvananthapuram, the capital city. The panchayats in all party villages are under the control of the CPI(M) which decides who should file nomination papers.

“These villages are out of bound for persons belonging to other parties. It is the writ of local party commissars which run in these villages,” said Kunhikannan, author and political

commentator belonging to one of the villages.

Dr T P Senkumar, former chief of Kerala Police who retired as recently as 2017 from the Indian Police Service has written about the frauds committed by the CPI(M) in elections. “Young IPS officers who were put on election duty in these regions have told me about massive bogus voting by certain people in all elections. When they questioned the propriety behind these malpractices, the officers were threatened with dire consequences by the CPI(M) leaders,” Dr Senkumar wrote in his memoirs.

The bogus voting in party villages by CPI(M) activists have been mentioned by Balakrishnan Chammancherry, a retired government official, in his autobiographical novel “Elegy by Village Goddesses”. “Both men and women compete with each other in casting maximum number of bogus votes. It has become a ritual in this part of the world,” says the novel based on the political murders committed in the party villages.

6 killed as bus comes in contact with live wire in Rajasthan

Seven of the injured were rushed to Jalore district hospital while the other injured were sent home after preliminary treatment

Jaipur: A total of six persons were killed and seven injured in Rajasthan's Jalore district when a bus caught fire after coming in contact with a high tension wire of 11,000 volts, police said on Sunday.

The bus was on its way to Ajmer (and Beowar situated near it) from Nakoda pilgrimage on Saturday late night when the incident happened. The bus apparently lost its way while following the google map and reached a small village.

While making its way through the narrow lanes of the village, the bus came into contact with the high tension wire.

The conductor tried to remove the high tension wire, however the current soon passed into the bus through him, leaving six persons dead as the bus caught fire.

The deceased include the driver and the conductor

Seven of the injured were rushed to Jalore district hospital while the other injured were sent home after preliminary treatment.

Police officials told IANS that Jain families were on their way back to Ajmer and Beowar after offering prayers in the Nakoda temple.

However, while following the Google map, the bus reached the Maheshpura village, seven kilometers from Jalore and was followed by another bus.

While one bus caught fire, the other bus following it stopped and passengers from this bus rushed to help after seeing the tragic accident.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot expressed their grief over the accident. **IANS**

Central Rly to run Mumbai-Delhi Rajdhani daily from tomorrow

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

In what comes as a new year gift to the passengers, the Central Railway will run Rajdhani Express (No 22221/22222) daily between Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus (CSMT) in Mumbai and Hazrat Nizamuddin railway station in Delhi, from Tuesday (January 19).

The Rajdhani Express is one of the most prestigious trains run by Indian Railways, connecting the national capital with other important cities of the country. Fully air-conditioned, these trains are super-fast and halt only at prominent stations.

Rajdhani Express, which had its inaugural run on January 19, 2019, was a bi-weekly train earlier with one First AC, three AC 2-Tier, 8 AC 3-Tier and one pantry car. It used to depart from CSMT every Wednesday and Saturday at 14.50 hrs and reached Hazrat Nizamuddin at 10.20 hrs next day, halting at Kalyan, Nasik Road, Jalgaon, Bhopal, Jhansi

and Agra Cantt.

The demand for this train increased to such an extent that from twice a week, the frequency of the train was increased to 4 times a week from 13.9.2019. This train was also flagged off on September 14, 2019 from CSMT. The train used to run with One First AC, 5 AC-2 Tier and 11 AC-3 Tier and one pantry car.

The year 2020 threw another big challenge in the form of the Covid-19 pandemic and in the better interests of the passengers and employees, the Central Railway suspended mail / express and suburban trains in its efforts to minimise the spread of corona infection.

Post the lockdown and in course of the unlock period has once again for the benefit of its passengers, the Central Railway started the Rajdhani Express service as a special train from December 30, 2020. This special train with revised numbers 01221 / 01222 ran 4 days a week with the same composition and halts and from 9.1.2021, it was



given halt at Gwalior also.

The Central Railway began the year 2021 on a positive note and on the second anniversary of Rajdhani express, it has decided to extend the run of this train from 4 days a week to daily. This will surely benefit lakhs of passengers travelling to the Capital

city as well as the halt stations of this prestigious train.

Currently, this train leaves Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus Mumbai at 16.00 hrs daily and arrives Hazrat Nizamuddin at 09.55 hrs next day. In the return direction, it leaves Hazrat Nizamuddin at

16.55 hrs daily and arrives at CSMT, Mumbai at 11.15 hrs the next day.

According to a CR statement, bookings can be made at all computerised reservation centres and on website www.irctc.co.in. For detailed timings at halts of the above

Rajdhani superfast special train, passengers can visit www.enquiry.indianrail.gov.in or download NTES App.

“Only passengers having confirmed tickets will be permitted to board this special train. Passengers are advised to adhere to all norms, SOPs

related to COVID19 during the boarding, travel and at destination,” the statement added.

Rajdhani Express became India's first train to run on Push-Pull technology empowering the Government's “Mission Raftar” thus achieving another milestone in Railway history.

CR's expressed its appreciation to art when in December-2019, the pantry coach of Rajdhani Express became a canvas-on -wheels, displaying beautiful, hand-painted art of historical sites in route of the train, adorning the sides of the coach.

This was followed by theme based WAP-7 locomotives- a unique initiative to promote new, improved and latest Push-Pull technology by sketching various World Heritage sites like The Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj terminus, The Taj Mahal, The Red Fort etc, on the electric locomotives. All these creations were painted by artistes and employees of Central Railway.

Now, robots to deliver medicines to Covid patients in Assam hospital

Guwahati: Now robots would deliver medicines and essential services to Covid-19 patients at a hospital in Assam, officials said here on Sunday.

The robots designed by the Guwahati-based Yantrabot Technologies Pvt Limited with remote controllable robotic vehicles would deliver food, medicines and other essential services to Covid-19 patients as well as patients with other extremely contagious diseases inside the isolation chambers of the quarantine facilities.

Assam Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal on Saturday handed over two robots to the Principal of Dibrugarh-based Assam Medical College and Hospital (AMCH), Sanjib Kakati, to use them for delivering food, medicines and essential services to Covid patients.

An official release said it is part of the Covid-19 infrastructure equipment grant sponsored by the Rotary Foundation of Rotary International, Rotary Club of Dibrugarh and Bangladesh's Rotary Club of Dhaka Royal under the support of “Global Grant”.

Sonowal thanked co-founder Arunjyoti Borgohain of Yantrabot

Technologies Pvt Limited for designing the robot. The Chief Minister said the two robots would have a huge role in rendering care to patients in the hospitals.

Meanwhile, in a first-of-its-kind in northeast India, a robot developed by young scientist Harjeet Nath from Tripura University was deployed in a government Covid Care Centre in May 2020 to deal with Covid patients.

Nath has made the robot from locally available material, including scrap. He has named it as 'WAR-BOT' to fight the war against the Covid-19 pandemic.

Nath's aim was to assist the frontline health workers, including doctors, in taking care of the coronavirus patients from a distant place. The young scientist in July 2020 donated the robot to the Tripura Medical College and Dr B.R. Ambedkar Memorial Teaching Hospital. The medical college had used the robot at the 250-bed Covid Care Centre in Hapania, on the outskirts of the capital city Agartala. Tripura Medical College Professor and in-charge of the Hapania Covid Care Centre, Shib Sekhar Datta, said the robot was useful to some extent. **IANS**

BJP to ‘carpet-bomb’ TMC with ‘parivartan’ rallies in Bengal

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

The BJP's has decided to continue “carpet-bombing” on the Trinamool Congress till this year's Assembly elections are over, party insiders said adding the saffron outfit is lining up a number of “parivartan rallies” led by senior national leaders in the month of February.

According to party sources, Home Minister Amit Shah who was scheduled to come to Bengal on January 18 would now visit the State on January 30-31 whence he will hold organisation-level meetings as well as rallies.

Party president JP Nadda too will lead a number of rallies in February and efforts are on to rope in the likes of Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath too for an intensified campaign.

The BJP may bring in Prime Narendra Modi as early as in March to intensify its campaign in Bengal, sources said adding Shah, Nadda, Bengal BJP observer Kailash Vijaybargiya, party vice-president Mukul Roy, Shiv Prakash and Amitavo Chakraborty and others met the Home Minister's residence last week to assess the so-called tide in favour of the BJP and it was decided that the party should apart from continuing its attack on the Trinamool Congress strengthen the booth-level organisations particularly in the areas where it did not fare well in the 2019 general elections.

The BJP surprised the critics in the parliamentary polls winning 18 out of 42 Lok Sabha seats wrestling 16 from the ruling out-

fit.

Meanwhile, in a bid to continue its pressure on the TMC the BJP on attacked it for indulging in “vaccine theft” with Vijaybargiya on Sunday accusing the State Government of vaccinating its own leaders and workers instead of the medical staff for which corona vaccines have been procured.

“Like in post Amphan situation when the TMC men stole relief materials now they are stealing vaccine,” Vijaybargiya said showing how the Trinamool leaders were getting themselves vaccinated in place of the health workers.

The BJP leader said so after reports that TMC's North Dinajpur MLA M Singha and Barrackpore municipal chairman Uttam Das had got themselves vaccinated bypassing the corona warriors. “We got ourselves vaccinated because we wanted to allay fears about the vaccine among the people,” the TMC leaders said.

Taking a dig at Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee for allowing such irregularities to take place Bengal BJP president Dilip Ghosh on Sunday said that “Didi is crying hoarse against so-called shortage of vaccine whereas her own leaders and party men are looting them from hospitals ... as if they want to survive without considering for the others.”

Reacting to his remarks Bengal Minister Firhad Hakim said “vaccine belongs to the people and has been prepared by tax payers money it is not anyone's paternal property... everyone has right to get vaccine.”

Corrupt officials, leaders involved in IndiGo manager's murder: Bihar MP

Patna: Four-time Lok Sabha MP and Jan Adhikar Party (Loktantrik) President Pappu Yadav has levelled sensational allegations on the nexus of corrupt officials, politicians and mafia in Bihar who may be involved in the murder of IndiGo Airlines manager Rupesh Kumar Singh.

“Five days since the incident, there is no headway into the investigation of Rupesh Singh's murder and it indicates a nexus of corrupt officials, leaders and land, sand and liquor mafia,” Yadav said.

“As per our information, Rupesh Singh was reportedly involved in tenders of Public Health Engineering Department (PHED) and electricity departments. He was part of a company which managed to obtain a licence for a canal in Darbhanga.

These could be the reasons behind his murder on the orders of unknown nexus in Bihar,” Yadav added.

“The matter needs to be investigated thoroughly by an independent agency monitored by a sitting judge of the high court,” Yadav said.

He said if the Bihar government wants to make the state crime-free, it should identify persons involved in land, sand and liquor mafia and their properties should be recommended for investigation by the Enforcement Directorate.

“They are by and large involved in criminal incidents in Bihar and are shielded by political leaders and officials,” he said.

He said the annual income of the Nitish Kumar-led government through liquor revenue was Rs 4,000 crore before a blanket ban was

implemented in the state in 2016. Now corrupt officials and leaders are earning double the income through it.

Yadav also levelled allegations on two senior IAS officers holding posts as Principal Secretary and District Magistrate (DM), respectively. He said the former was the CMD of Bihar State Power Holding Corporation Ltd (BSPHCL) in 2018 and had sent five non-qualified women to foreign countries for training on state government's expenses.

While the latter had given arms licences to 70 persons having criminal records when he was the Katihar DM.

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) enquiry is currently underway against him and he is on leave right now. **IANS**

Man held for sharing obscene videos with girls

Pilibhit (Uttar Pradesh): A 30-year-old man has been arrested by the cybercrime branch of the Pilibhit police for sharing 'obscene videos and pictures messages' with girls on their mobile phones.

The police arrested Mohammad Taslim of Basher Khan locality, following a complaint by one of the victims.

According to police, Taslim, who is a TV mechanic, used to collect mobile numbers of girls from Facebook and WhatsApp groups. He had also obtained the SIM card on a fake ID.

SHO of Pilibhit Kotwali police station Shrikant Dwivedi said the accused has been booked under section 294 (doing obscene act publicly) of the IPC and 67 of the Information Technology Act.

“He has been sent to jail,” the SHO added. **IANS**



Tourists visit Taj Mahal amid dense fog during a cold winter morning, in Agra on Sunday

PTI

It's here!

India kick-starts the world's biggest inoculation drive to beat Coronavirus but we must still follow the protocol

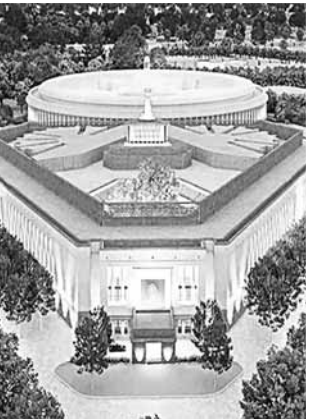


Time: A little after 11 am on Saturday. The nationwide anti-COVID vaccination drive began with a sanitation worker at Delhi's All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), who became the first person in the country to receive a shot. "I was not reluctant (to get the vaccine shot)... people should not be afraid," Manish Kumar said. It was thus that nearly a year after reporting its first case of Coronavirus, India kicked off the world's largest immunisation drive against COVID-19 when Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the offensive at the click of a button through video conferencing. As part of its plan to bring the pandemic under control with two locally-produced vaccines, Covishield and Covaxin, the Government inoculated lakhs of healthcare and frontline workers, such as sanitation and security workers, to a collective sigh of relief that this could finally be the beginning of the end of the COVID-19 trauma. The next in line are Indians above the age of 50 or those considered as high-risk individuals due to pre-existing medical conditions. Around 100 persons received a vaccine at each of the 3,006 sites across India on the first day. As feared, there were some glitches but it's nothing considering the vast topography of the nation. Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan visited the vaccination sites at Sir Gangaram Hospital and AIIMS, Delhi, and described the COVID-19 vaccines as "*sanjivani*" in the fight against the accursed virus as he urged people not to heed hearsay and, instead, put their faith in experts and scientists. "It's a historic day. We have been blessed by the Prime Minister all through our fight against COVID-19. It's the largest Coronavirus vaccination programme in the world," Vardhan said. "We have been able to put up a valiant fight against the disease during the past year. Adopting a pre-emptive and proactive strategy has resulted in a good performance. We have probably the lowest fatality rate in the world," he said. In a message to the nation's population, he said that nobody should indulge in spreading or believing rumours pertaining to the efficacy of either vaccine.

In the national Capital, the vaccination exercise was carried out at 81 sites across 11 districts. Six Central Government hospitals — AIIMS, Safdarjung, RML, Kalawati Saran Children Hospital and two ESI hospitals — had been chosen as sites for the drive. Besides these, Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narayan Hospital, the Delhi Government-run GTB Hospital, Rajiv Gandhi Super Speciality Hospital, DDU Hospital, BSA Hospital, Delhi State Cancer Institute and the ILBS Hospital are among the vaccination sites. Then there are private facilities — Max Hospital, Fortis Hospital, Apollo Hospital and Sir Ganga Ram Hospital — which have also been chosen as sites for the exercise. However, many people at the RML Hospital were apprehensive, with some of them reluctant to go for the shot, and then there were others with mixed feelings. Dr Sharmila (name changed) of the hospital, who has been working in the COVID department, said: "I am scared as the vaccine's efficacy is not yet proved but this is my best bet. It is my leap of faith... I will take the plunge. Dr (Randeep) Guleria (AIIMS director) has also taken the shot; I believe in him." The day was also not bereft of politics — with Congress spokesperson Manish Tewari training the guns at the Government and referring to the Norway incident where 23 deaths occurred after taking the anti-COVID jab manufactured by Pfizer — but we, as a people, strongly believe that such bumps would not be able to derail the massive campaign that aims at achieving health for all its citizens.

Recasting Delhi

Narendra Modi wants to leave his imprint on central Delhi; the new Central Vista will be quite a mark



On the auspicious day of Makar Sankranti, the day millions of Indians worship the Ganga, construction began on India's new Parliament building, the first of several projects that will define New Delhi in the latter half of the 21st century. Many individuals and organisations have questioned as to why such an expensive infrastructure undertaking is being started now, as India's economy limps back into action following the pandemic. The fact is that large infrastructure projects have always been used by nations, whether it was Germany or Japan following the World War 2 or the United States during the Great Depression, to turbo-charge economic recovery as these projects provide large volumes of

employment and leave behind a considerable legacy. Delhiites themselves have never denied heritage its place — Rajput, Islamic, European or Colonial — and made it a part of their living history, one where Lutyens' Delhi is a key chapter. The cluster of offices would undoubtedly change the skyline as we know it and their ramped-up security would rob us of an indulgent spread in the heart of the city. But was this particular infrastructure project needed?

There is a simple answer to this, asking anyone who has either worked or has visited any major Government office in New Delhi. While the buildings of Lutyens' yore are amazing pieces of architecture, structures like the North and South Block are awfully dilapidated and the post-Independence buildings such as Shastri Bhawan and Udyog Bhawan are downright awful. They are inefficient as modern working spaces and, worse still, environmentally unfriendly in terms of energy consumption. These buildings needed a thorough revamp at the very least and one could argue that they needed to be broken down and rebuilt. And it is the latter path that this Government is undertaking. However, as the Supreme Court has pointed out, this has to be done thoughtfully so as not to destroy the history and heritage dating back over a century when the colonialists rebuilt the Capital in the 1900s. But to argue that India does not need this, because it is Narendra Modi and his Government who are undertaking such a project, is nothing more than petty jealousy. The same people would have made completely different arguments had a Congress-led administration carried out the rebuild. India's Parliament too needs an urgent makeover. The Central Vista revamp is massive as it envisages a new triangular Parliament building with a seating capacity for 900 to 1,200 MPs and synergised administrative blocks, to be completed by August 2022. On its part, the Government had been arguing for a makeover of this part of Lutyens' Delhi for its functionality and efficiency, claiming that it would create spaces for a more streamlined operation of Ministry offices and free up more citizen-friendly spaces. It is the Modi regime's attempt to overwrite our Colonial past and redesign an institution as wholly Indian, as representative of its people and epoch-making simply because no Government had thought of this before. While the existing building, based on the 9-12th century CE circular Yogini temples, is a tremendous structure and a temple in its own right, if India is to have a larger Parliament that is representative of her population, a new building is essential. It was vital that this rebuild happens and while the public relations could have been better, this reconstruction of Delhi was needed. And it will leave Narendra Modi's mark on Delhi for years to come, whether some people like it or not.

Trends to look out for

China will remain saboteur number one of global recovery in 2021 even though the new decade brings optimism and new vaccines



BINDU DALMIA

A cautious and forced optimism pervades the start of 2021. As Lenin aptly said: "There are decades when nothing happens, and then there are weeks when decades happen." The year 2020 was one such when the velocity in medical science and tech adaptation crammed a decade's evolution into a single year.

That the vaccine would be the panacea for the economic woes of 2020 is not certitude, given the emergence of the mutating COVID-II strain. A second cycle of virulence could further burden healthcare systems, severely reversing the economic recovery. Confronted with multiple challenges, recovery even in the developed world is not anticipated before 2021 end despite their Governments' sustained stimuli on all three fronts: fiscal, monetary and credit. This is because the COVID-induced hysteresis will keep the growth rates suppressed much after the crisis recedes, as it did during the 2008 financial meltdown.

Set against the grim spectre of job and income losses and the inequality exacerbated by the crisis, there have been only two gainers during the lockdown of 2020: China as a country, and the American big tech oligarchs as a business class. Today, Apple, Amazon, Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Netflix and Twitter's combined market capitalisation is \$8 trillion, which is more than double the size of India's national GDP. This is attributed to big tech's stakes in the online world of contactless social media and e-commerce which helped them increase their net worth by a whopping 30 per cent, to touch \$4 trillion.

And China's export-led economy rebounded the fastest due to being able to fill the void in global supply-chain disruptions as the country remained on a manufacturing overdrive while the rest of the world was in lockdown mode.

Broadly, the predictive global contours of change in 2022 will be seen in the spiralling of sovereign debt to GDP ratios; a partial revival of globalisation and a return to multilateralism with the advent of Joe Biden; a high rise in manufacturing productivity levels, yet conversely, a shrinkage in job creation due to digitisation and AI-led automation; and permanent changes in consumer behaviour.

Another dominant concern at the start of the year is with the surreal valuations of global stock



markets due to surplus liquidity infused by the Central bank's quantitative easing. This will likely fuel the next asset bubble and lead to a repeat of the 2008 phenomenon once stimulus measures are withdrawn toward the end of the year.

There are other anticipated trends that are likely to play out in the economy with the consumer and with corporates in 2021. For one, there are fears that the very country that unleashed the virus could sabotage global recovery by covertly unleashing another virulent strain so that the offender nation retains its economic heft.

And, sadly, the optimism is further watered down due to the lack of a unified action plan amongst like-minded coalition partners or allies to rein in an expansionist China. A multilateral and punitive response is needed to hold China accountable for subverting a rules-based economic international order and calls for an international backlash for its abuses on maritime and territorial incursions as also for the grotesque human rights abuses on Uighurs, or for the Chinese Communist Party's crackdown on democracy in Hong Kong and Tibet.

China's treatment of business magnate Jack Ma being browbeaten to "embrace supervision" (the Chinese synonym for detention) should have sent shock waves to the global

investor community. But, to the contrary, the West is hesitant to decouple from China. While the Biden Administration will persist with Trumpian-era tariffs and technology restrictions on China, the attraction of the Chinese market for the US and the EU investors is too strong to cut the cords of economic activity on grounds of geopolitical aberrations alone. The EU, which is the largest trading bloc, has recently approved a comprehensive investment agreement while American fund houses continue to solicit Chinese savers retirement funds.

When the strongest democracies are in descent and disarray, it has the propensity to embolden rogue dictators. More so after the theatre of the absurd that played out at Capitol Hill with Trump's "Be there, be wild" melee that pushed lawmakers to invoke the 25th Amendment to remove a sitting President from office. A weakened US then portends ominous signals in being able to contain an aggressive China, which does not augur well for free market economies.

And if the Capitol Hill was under siege, a similar kind of anarchy is being played out on the borders of the Capital of the largest democracy in the world, with the non-negotiable stance of the farmers' protest nearing two months. Anarchist trends in democracies are now a symptom of a deeper underlying

malaise, with a thin line demarcating excessive freedom of expression or the right to dissent from chaos, vandalism and lawlessness.

Dominant India-centric themes expected to play out

Coming to India, while the economists predict a strong rebound, it is important not to confuse rebound with growth in "absolute" terms. The World Bank estimates the growth in India to recover to 5.5 per cent in FY22, so the recovery from a lower base naturally quantifies as a higher rise. Herein, the speed of the vaccines' rollout and their efficacy will of course increase economic activity due to increased mobility, which will drive recovery in the non-farm sectors with the exclusion of the contact-intensive services sectors.

According to a McKinsey report, "Indian businesses have the potential to create economic value of about \$635 billion by 2030 if they can tap into the shifting preferences of Indians aspiring to a higher standard of living". The areas identified for quantum leaps are in businesses that provide higher-quality urban environments, cleaner air and water and more convenience-based services in the new ideas-based economy which can potentially create millions of productive jobs.

Another dominant trend is one of growing indignation against the "privately owned,

unelected, unaccountable American tech companies, who can unilaterally exclude anyone on Earth out of the internet". The other countries must unite to regulate these monopolistic internet giants who evade taxes in host countries, have a predatory, buy-out strategy towards startups which pose a threat to them in order to curb competition and have now self-appropriated the right to restrict freedom of expression at will.

Lastly, mainstreaming Environment, Social and Governance (ESG) will be one of the enduring hallmark business trends of post-pandemic prioritisation. The ESG verticals can vary from supporting sustainable natural materials, water conservation and CO2 reductions or espousing social causes such as human rights and poverty alleviation. We have to recognise that zoonotic diseases will continue to rise till the time we do not shift to sustainable production and consumption patterns.

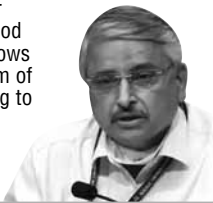
Peering through the fog of uncertainty, it is impossible to conjure what the post-vaccine world will look like. But, for sure, what we will encounter on the other side of the tunnel will in no way resemble the pre-COVID world order.

(The writer is an author, columnist and Chairperson, NCFIL, at Niti Aayog. The views expressed are personal).

SOUNDBITE

Mild infection after vaccination is a good sign because it shows the immune system of the body is reacting to the vaccine.

AIIMS Director
Dr Randeep Guleria



The world must act with far greater solidarity. Sadly, the impact of the pandemic has been made worse by the absence of a global coordinated effort.

UN Secretary-General
Antonio Guterres



Salt is a very sweet story about a woman who is an artist and her husband who is an engineer. Their relationship is sweet but comes with a pinch of salt.

Actor
Rituparna Sengupta



That's an irresponsible shot from Rohit Sharma. You've just hit a boundary a couple of deliveries earlier, why would you play that?

Former Indian captain
Sunil Gavaskar



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Low-profile R-Day is good

Sir — This refers to the editorial '*Virus shadow over R-Day*' (January 16). The Modi Government had committed a mistake by extending an invitation to UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson in November last year, when both the countries were struggling hard with the raging COVID-19 pandemic.

The Government should have concentrated more on dealing with the contagion rather than inviting dignitaries for the R-Day. Finally, Johnson declined the invitation and expressed regrets for his inability to visit Delhi due to the mounting COVID-19 cases at home.

There were days when people would walk and paddle with their children at the India Gate to witness the parade. Instead of organising the R-Day parade this year, the PM should have paid tributes to the martyrs at the National War Memorial and Amar Jawan Jyoti at India Gate. At a time when the pandemic has wreaked havoc, key celebrations should be observed on a subdued note.

N Subramanian
Delhi

Privacy is the price for social media freedom

This refers to the editorial '*Privacy Matters*' (January 16). On privacy and freedom, I would like to say that "When anything is free, your freedom is the price". Anti-apartheid and human rights activist Desmond Tutu had said: "When the missionaries came to Africa, they had Bible and we had land. They said 'let us pray'. We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had a Bible and they had land."

Likewise, when social networking giants came, they had WhatsApp and Facebook and we had our freedom. They said it's free and we closed our eyes. But when we opened it, we had WhatsApp and Facebook and they had our freedom. Our attempts to save our privacy and freedom by switching over to other platforms like Signal and Telegram will not be of much help. The majority of people, including the very old and young, have become addicted to these social media platforms and happily share their personal details; thus compromising their privacy.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the scenario, but for worse. Online classes for students have now become the norm but it is a setback to the privacy of

Puducherry suffers

Sir — The people of Puducherry are fed up of the tussle between the Government, led by Chief Minister V Narayanasamy, and Lt Governor Kiran Bedi. Ever since the former IPS officer took charge as Puducherry's L-G in 2016, the tussle between Narayanasamy and her has done no good to the

administration or the people.

The ego war between them has no precedence in the history of the Union Territory. The duo has clashed over major as well as trivial issues. Narayanasamy would have been a much relieved man if the Centre had recalled Bedi. The 'obstructionist' in Bedi is an extension of her police career and the AAP stint. The L-

G should know she merely shares power with the CM and his cabinet and she is not the 'power'. Bedi has tried to usurp the domain of the Government by picking holes in the Government's ambitious rice scheme. Amid the power tussle, the UT and its people are suffering.

Ganapathi Bhat
Akola

Need to be reasonable

Sir — The ninth round of talks between the farmers and the Government remained inconclusive due to the adamant attitude of both. Farmers are rigid on their demands whereas Centre is ready for only some changes in the laws but not their revocation.

There seems no chance of any form of settlement in the future, too. Farmers need to be wary of self-styled intellectual activists who have wormed their way into the dispute. Farmers are unreasonable in not accepting the Supreme Court-appointed panel.

They seem to be motivated more by their animus against the Government rather than the welfare of the farmers. Thousands of farmers are protesting due to apprehensions that with the introduction of the new laws, the Minimum Support Price (MSP) would get abolished and there will be no *mandi* system. The Government should allay their fears and convince them that they would not be left at the mercy of the big corporates.

Yash Pal Ralhan
Jalandhar

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

A new medium of expression

When the pandemic struck the world, it took several months to realise how dramatically the nature of communication would change



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

The most common topics on which training programmes are held are leadership, communication, management of self and so on. In a programme on communication one of the essential topics is to explore the relationship between the message and the medium. One of the commonest statements is: "The message is the medium and the medium is the message." Typically, if a notice board is a medium and the message conveys affection or is proposing a marriage, no one uses a notice board for such a communication. The softer messages are usually more appropriate to convey with a flourish or a card, note, in person and in today's world on a personal chat. This would add a certain degree of gentility.

In the choice of the medium, too, there are at times flourishes that are used. Typically the use of calligraphy with a thick nib goes well with certain sentiments. There was a time in courts where after writing a death sentence, the judge would break the nib to underscore that he considered the task distasteful and did not want to write another such verdict. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on such approaches or sentiments. Messaging online has become a universal medium demanding some appreciation of technology and some familiarity with the computer keyboard and smartphone keypads. Those with a receding vision or limited understanding of the workings of the keyboard and smartphone increasingly face less tolerance.

Technology itself is a recent phenomenon in public spaces in India. In the early '70s even a photocopier was unknown in most public spaces of learning institutions. A microfilm reader was the acme of technology in an archival space which couldn't cope with heavy binding or with pages that were getting too brittle for regular use. Five decades down the line, even the storage disc has undergone multiple changes in size, density and machine.

Similarly, recording instruments have evolved, too. Those who could not detect how totally extinct an extant technology of storage could become, lost much data. That is a story which has often unravelled silently, with very little to evoke even a small interest in the theme of a technology which gets outdated with time. Indeed there were disc manufacturing enterprises enjoying a flourishing business, that were almost wiped out before they realised what hit them. New chapters on return on investment had to be written and the short, half-life of technology was difficult to keep pace with for most businesses. As a result, the impact was huge on Information Technology-related businesses and many suffered losses.

When the COVID pandemic struck the world it took several months to realise how dramatically the nature of communication would change. There was something rolling out which had no space in conventional learning, skilling or training. There was a mass exodus to online processes. Those who got left out belonged to a bygone era or were on the fringes of society.

Online learning, skilling, training were not all that new but never was it such a "no-choice" situation. I was a member of a policy group of educational governance dealing with management education, about 30 years ago. The role demanded me to become the chairman of a sub-committee on technology in management education. One of the recommendations was that online technology in management education would be a matter of bandwidth availability. Nearly 30 years later, many of the semi-baked management professionals were discovering that "online teaching is quickly becoming bandwidth intensive." It was also being discovered that reliable connectivity to the internet and multiplicity of web servers would be needed for prompt "net response and reliable service." The message was simple: The lack of a clear sense of direction when it could have happened led to a crash crescendo. Responding to this crash crescendo became fanciful and *avant-garde*. The truth was, it was a response to a miserable learning situation which no one was expecting or was prepared for.

Hence, what was often projected as a modernisation of the learning process had strong possibilities of becoming a learning disaster. Skilling was equally affected. What can be shared in skilling on the online medium would not be adequate for "operational skilling", simply because of the need to focus on competencies.

Similarly, the process of training landed in the deep end. Any person in the profession of training would know that there is very little substitute to personalised interaction, particularly in a short learning event like training. More problematic fallouts of such a situation can be flagged. For the present, suffice it to say that even the need to limit the losses in such sudden shifts — voluntary or otherwise — is slow to be registered or be acted upon. Hopefully some in the profession will awaken to this need, sooner than others.

(The writer is an internationally acclaimed management consultant. The views expressed are personal.)

MANISH TEWARI AND THE CONGRESS ARE ONLY PASSIONATE ABOUT SPREADING DISTRUST AND RUMOURS (ABOUT THE COVID VACCINE).

—UNION HEALTH MINISTER HARSH VARDHAN

POINT COUNTERPOINT



IT'S NOT FEAR-MONGERING. SEE WHAT HAPPENED IN NORWAY. IT MAY BE A DIFFERENT SHOT BUT DO NOT HIDE BEHIND VACCINE NATIONALISM.

—CONGRESS LEADER MANISH TEWARI

Mobile money is new cash

The Coronavirus pandemic has shown that the trend towards greater digitalisation of financial services in the country is here to stay



MOIN QAZI

Mobile finance finds itself at an inflection point as the world continues to tackle the socio-economic fallout of the COVID-19 crisis. In these critical times, mobile money has helped governments in navigating the financial dystopia and addressing the practical challenge of delivering affordable and efficient financial services. Mobile currency is as an effective and physical distance friendly option to avoid cash, which can act as a carrier of the Coronavirus. Contactless digital payments at the point of sale with the help of facial recognition, Quick Response (QR) codes or near-field communications (NFC), drastically reduce the possibility of the spread of the contagion.

Digitisation has turned a smartphone into a wallet, a chequebook, a bank branch and an accounting ledger. The ubiquity of the mobile phone has made it possible to deliver financial services to people for whom a bank account is a distant dream. Frictionless, real-time payment through smartphones is already ensuring that the financially excluded section is thinning fast. Mobile transactions can create the next wave of financial inclusion if we prudently address the concerns of consumers.

For instance, people in far-flung areas of the country and remote villages are now able to make payments, deposit money, transfer funds, receive social benefits and wages and buy rations — affordably and reliably without the hassle associated with the opening of a bank account. In emerging and developing economies, millions have cellular phones but no bank accounts, credit cards or debit cards. For them, mobile money has begun filling the gaps in financial services. It serves as a lifeline, bringing those who currently lack access to banking into the financial mainstream.

Further, the penetration of cellular phones puts developing countries in an advantageous position where making a quantum leap in financial inclusion is concerned. For communities with low literacy levels and sporadic incomes, digital money can transform the socio-economic landscape. Mobile banking is enabling women to overcome common barriers. It reduces the need to travel long distances to access banking facilities and also ensures a level of privacy and security.

In reality, despite the best of intentions banks cannot afford to set up branches in every nook and corner of the country as there are logistical, economic and security constraints. The high cost of building infrastructure for bank branches has been a major obstacle in extending financial services to the poor and the underserved in remote locations. Cellular phone banking eliminates the problem of geographical inaccessibility and high set-up cost of bank branches.

Banks, mobile operators and third-party providers are all leveraging technologies on mobile phones to offer basic financial services at a lower cost than traditional banking allows. Several new types of delivery channels are emerging such as managers, agent networks, payment aggregators and others who are helping in building a more far-reaching and efficient digital finance ecosystem.

Digital mobile finance offers at least three major advantages over traditional financial

“THE ONGOING CRISIS IS CERTAINLY GOING TO TEST THE WAY VARIOUS PLAYERS IN THE DIGITAL AND FINANCIAL ECOSYSTEMS RESPOND. GOVERNMENTS MUST CLOSE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE TO REAP THE BENEFITS OF DIGITAL FINANCIAL SERVICES”



models. First, digital transactions are essentially free. In-person services and cash transactions account for a majority of routine banking expenses but mobile finance clients keep their money in digital form. They can send and receive money without incurring transaction costs from their banks or mobile service providers.

Second, mobile communication generates copious amounts of data which banks and other providers can use for developing more profitable services. It even acts as a substitute for the traditional credit scores.

Third, mobile platforms link banks to their clients in real time. This means that banks can instantly relay account information or send reminders and clients can quickly sign up for services on their own.

Further, digital footprints and transaction data can be of great help to assess individual creditworthiness. Mobile network operators are teaming up with banks, financial-tech companies and data analytics specialists to use the customer information to gauge their credit risk and offer microfinance products to some who would otherwise lack any proof of their capacity to repay a loan.

If the customer is a regular user of a digital money transfer service, the operator may also be able to assess how much disposable income they have.

In fact, mobile operators' data can be good enough to lower the lender's risk significantly, enabling interest rates to fall and making microfinance a more attractive proposition for small businesses and individuals.

But such success stories do not

happen in a vacuum. To begin with, everyone needs a cellular phone with an affordable data plan. It is entrusted upon governments and non-governmental organisations to extend mobile networks to remote areas. Governments must also ensure that networks between banks and telecommunications companies are interoperable otherwise, widespread use of mobile phones for financial services and payments would be impossible.

Mobile money transactions will also have to address the limitations which prevent countrywide adoption of the channel. Exchanging mobile money for cash can still be expensive. And digital and financial illiteracy are known to hinder adoption of digital mobile services. People in rural and remote areas may lack network coverage, easy access to money agents, or simply electricity. A robust identification system, widespread, consistent internet access and trustworthy ways to get money into digital formats could be important for digital payments to thrive.

Women's access to mobile finance is affected by the fact that fewer females possess a mobile phone as compared to men. The promises of mobile finance are certainly very seductive. However, the reality is much harder than we can imagine. It is easier to spread technology than to bring about extensive change in social and individual attitude.

Although mobile telephony might entail initial fixed costs, the variable costs associated with their use are significantly lower, enabling an overall reduction in transactions costs. Mobile

banking can be a strong income stream for telecom operators, helping them to counter slowing subscription growth and growing competition in traditional niches. The key is information technology spending in annual fixed costs for a mobile banking system. Again, that spending is significant for small providers, but is minimal for large players. This means financial firms looking to expand into emerging markets via mobile banking would require good financial stamina.

Since success is in everyone's best interest, mobile and financial industries and regulators should work collaboratively with each other to unlock the transformative social impact of cell phone money. It is only then that we will be able to deliver life-changing mobile financial services to millions of people across the world, who still have no access to traditional banking.

The pandemic has shown that the trend towards greater digitalisation of financial services in India is here to stay. The ongoing crisis is certainly going to test the way various players in the digital and financial ecosystems respond. Governments must close the digital divide to reap the benefits of digital financial services. This means finding the right balance between enabling financial innovation and addressing several risks: Lack of financial and digital literacy, insufficient consumer protection and unequal access to digital infrastructure and data bases.

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

To boycott, or not to boycott polls, that is the question

Radicals feel that shunning elections is vital to delegitimise a regime and claim the polls to be bogus. But evidence indicates that the cons outweigh the benefits



NADEEM PARACHA

On January 1, the multiparty Opposition alliance, the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) announced that it would participate in the forthcoming by-elections and did not rule out taking part in the Senate polls, too.

After completing the first phase of its protest movement with a flurry of large rallies against the Imran Khan Government, the PDM is now entering the second phase of its initiative to oust the Prime Minister. The PDM has been claiming that Khan's Government was installed through a rigged election in 2018 by the military establishment. The alliance sees Khan as a willing marionette of the establishment that, it claims, is pulling his strings.

The PDM's decision to contest the by-polls and then possibly the Senate elections is being looked at with suspicion by some analysts. Some of them are not very fond of Khan's regime (and vice versa). Yet, they haven't held back in explaining the possible move by the PDM as an attempt to strike a deal with the establishment to oust Khan without having to resort to more extreme measures. They see a clash emerging within the PDM between the Zardari doctrine and the Nawaz doctrine.

It was the Pakistani Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) chief Nawaz Sharif who initially set into motion the PDM's startling anti-establishment agenda, which has clearly unnerved the regime and its non-civilian backers. Asif Zardari, the chief of the PDM's second-largest party, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), has advised a more gradualist approach. It was on this advice that the PDM agreed to contest the by-elections. But certain observers believe that the PPP, which is heading the provincial Government in Sindh, is hoping to come to some sort of an understanding with the establishment.

The PDM's more radical sympathisers were expecting a clear boycott of the by-polls and the Senate elections. It has been a long-established understanding within the PPP that election boycotts do not work. In her 1988 biography 'Daughter of the East', former chairperson of the PPP, the late Benazir Bhutto, wrote that one of the biggest mistakes of her political career was the boycott of the 1985 elections held during the Zia-ul-Haq dictatorship.

At the time, her party was heading an alliance of anti-Zia parties, the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD). According to Benazir, MRD's boycott allowed easy access to pro-Zia elements to the corridors of power. Ironically, one of these elements was Nawaz Sharif.

In 2007, when an anti-Musharraf multiparty alliance, the Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (ARD), decided to boycott the 2008 general elections, Benazir disagreed with the decision. She insisted that the boycott would facilitate General Musharraf to continue ruling the country as a dictator, with the help of parties that were already supporting him in the Parliament.

For Benazir, a boycott would have aided these parties to retain their hold on the Assemblies and continue to legitimise the Musharraf regime. Benazir was able to convince Sharif's PML-N to contest. Both the parties not only went on to win the majority of seats in the elections, but were also able to gather enough clout to force Musharraf to resign.

In a 2017 essay for the *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, G Buttorff and Douglas Dion wrote that the decision to take part in elections organised by an authoritarian set-up often poses a dilemma for parties opposed to such a set-up. The question is, will their participation in elections, which are likely to be engineered, legitimise the polls, or will a complete boycott of the elections fortify the possibility of the boycotting parties gaining political influence? Benazir believed that MRD's 1985 boycott relinquished its political influence to those who were handpicked by Zia to strengthen his position.

According to Dion and Buttorff, one of the main reasons that parties boycott elections is to expose "the bogusness" of a tampered electoral process. This is the reason being put

forward by those who want the PDM to boycott the by-elections and Senate polls. They believe no elections in Pakistan can be trusted to deliver a fair verdict if they continue to be "engineered" by the establishment and held by a "hybrid regime" like the one headed by Khan. But Dion and Buttorff add that the other reason parties sometimes boycott elections is that they fear "devastating electoral losses."

This reason can be understood on two levels. First, parties can tactically boycott elections if they believe that their vote-bank has weakened. Instead of confessing to this, they announce that they are not taking part in the polls because they fear it will not be fair. The Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) boycotted the 1997 elections because, as exhibited by the rout the party suffered in the 1993 polls, its vote-bank had shrunk considerably.

The party felt that another rout could plunge the outfit into a serious existential crisis. The JI also boycotted the 2008 elections. Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), too, boycotted the same elections because, at the time, it was a tiny outfit with no electoral influence —

even though, along with the JI, the PTI claimed that it was boycotting the polls because they were being held by a dictatorship. However, in 2002, both the JI and the PTI had taken part in elections held during the same dictatorship. Second, even parties with strong vote banks can withdraw from elections because they believe that their defeat, engineered by fraudulent polls, can dent their reputation. The PML-N harboured this fear in 2007. Benazir helped Nawaz overcome this fear, despite the fact that the PPP could have easily won Punjab had the PML-N not participated in the 2008 polls. The goal was to continue having at least some influence and presence, even in an engineered Parliament headed by a common foe.

To Dion and Buttorff, an elections boycott aims to disrupt a set-up that Opposition parties do not trust. The boycotting parties believe that once the electoral process is proven as bogus, those engineering it would be forced to back down. But this is rarely the case.

A study by Matthew Frankel of elections boycotts in various authoritarian set-ups from 1990 onwards,

shows that boycotts were unable to trigger any serious disruption, and many parties that had boycotted elections returned to contest them despite the polls being held by the same regimes they claimed were undemocratic.

According to Frankel, many boycotts lead to neither reform nor regime change, and leave Opposition parties worse off than they would have been had they participated. In a 2010 policy paper for the Brookings Institute, Frankel writes, "The boycotting party often becomes completely detached from the organs of power, setting itself up for further setbacks."

In her book 'Faith in Moderation', the political scientist Jillian Schwedler writes that, if the holding of elections offers a way for authoritarian regimes to maintain power, it also opens up a host of new opportunities for the regime's opponents. Once in, the Opposition has a better chance of utilising non-electoral options to push out a regime, than it has after completely shutting itself out through a boycott.

(The views expressed are personal. Courtesy: Dawn)

Biden-Harris inauguration event kicks off with Kolam drawings

Washington: Kolam, a traditional Indian art form of drawing geometric patterns on the floors as a sign of welcome, was part of the virtual kick-off ceremony of the inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden and his deputy Kamala Harris, who traces her origin to Tamil Nadu where these auspicious designs adorn almost every household.

In Tamil Nadu, where Harris has roots, women draw Kolams on the ground to invite health and prosperity into houses where they are displayed.

Pictures of thousands of Kolam tiles were on Saturday woven into a video to welcome Biden and Harris in the spirit of 'Presidency for All' and to showcase the multi-cultural heritage of America.

More than 1,800 individuals from across the US and many from India participated in the online initiative to create thousands of Kolam designs to celebrate the historic event.

"Many believe Kolams symbolise positive energy and new beginnings. People of all ages from various communities collaborated from their homes to create tiles with eco-friendly materials. What started out as a local project spread way beyond our expectations," said Shanthi Chandrasekar, an award-winning multimedia and multidisciplinary artist from Maryland who took the initiative along with several others.

The initial idea was to have these Kolam patterns from across the country in



front of the White House as a symbol of good beginning to the new administration.

The Washington DC police gave permission to the organisers to have it near the Capitol Hill around the inauguration venue. However, due to the unprecedented security measures that have been enforced in Washington DC, the permission was cancelled.

Pictures of thousands of Kolam tiles were on Saturday woven into a video to welcome Biden and Harris in the spirit of 'Presidency for All' and to showcase the multi-cultural heritage of America.

A date for the installation after the inauguration will be set up after a go-ahead from the

local security, said Sowmya Somnath who is part of the Inauguration Kolam 2021 organising team in her volunteer capacity.

Washington DC Public Schools arts director Mary Lambert and visual arts manager Lindsey Vance joined Chandrasekar to combine thousands of Kolam drawings made by people from many different backgrounds to welcome Biden when he takes office in a few days.

Hundreds of artists, citizens and students from across the country collaborated online to combine thousands of local pieces.

"This is what we wanted when we planned to have thou-

sands of Kolam tiles in front of the White House," said Somnath.

Students from 10 public schools in Washington DC participated in making the art.

Lambert said the District of Columbia Public School arts curriculum focuses on equity and believes cultural representation is an important part of that effort.

"This project provided an opportunity for our students to learn about another culture and the math skills needed for creation in the arts. As well, an opportunity to express their identity through visual arts and to see that united with others from around the country," said Lambert. **PTI**

Kamala Harris to be sworn in as US VP by Justice Sonia Sotomayor

Washington: Kamala Harris, who will script history as the first female, first Black and first South Asian US vice president on Wednesday, will be sworn in by Justice Sonia Sotomayor, the first Hispanic justice in the US Supreme Court.

The 58-year-old vice president-elect was inspired by Justice Sotomayor's background, ABC News reported, ahead of the presidential inauguration event on January 20.

They have both previously served as former prosecutors - Harris in California, Sotomayor in New York. Sotomayor, 66, is third female justice in US Supreme Court history.

During her victory speech Harris weaved in an adage from her mother, Shyamala Gopalan Harris, who often told her she would be the first to do many things, but urged her to open doors for others.

"While I may be the first woman in this office, I will not be the last," said Harris in November.

For the historic day, Harris has chosen to be sworn in using two Bibles. One previously belonged to Regina Shelton, who was like a second mother to Harris and her sister Maya.

Harris and Maya often visited Shelton's house after school while their mother was still at work as a breast cancer researcher. Shelton lived two doors down from Harris' home. Harris used Shelton's Bible to take the oath of office to be attorney general of California and later to become a United States senator, CNN reported. **PTI**

Gunmen kill two women judges in Afghan capital

Kabul: Gunmen fired on a car in northern Kabul on Sunday, killing two women judges who worked for Afghanistan's high court and wounding the driver, a court official said.

It was the latest attack in the Afghan capital during peace talks between Taliban and Afghan government officials in Qatar.

Supreme Court of Afghanistan spokesman Ahmad Fahim Qawim, said the women were judges who worked for the high court but he did not identify them by name.

No one claimed responsibility for the attack and Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said the insurgent group wasn't responsible.

The Afghan government has repeatedly blamed the Taliban for targeted killings in recent months and the insurgent group accuses the government of staging the killings to spoil the peace process.

The Islamic State group has



An Afghan journalist films the site where gunmen fired in Kabul, Afghanistan on Sunday **AP**

claimed responsibility for multiple attacks in the capital in recent months, including on educational institutions that killed 50 people, most of them students. IS has also claimed responsibility for rocket attacks in December targeting the major US base in Afghanistan. There were no casualties.

The Taliban and the Afghan government earlier this month resumed peace talks in Qatar. Negotiations were off to a slow start as the insurgent group continues attacks on Afghan government forces while keeping their promise not to attack US and NATO troops. **AP**

Kremlin critic Navalny departs Berlin on Moscow-bound flight

Berlin: Leading Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny departed from Germany on Sunday to return to Russia, where he faces the threat of arrest, after recovering from his poisoning in August with a nerve agent.

Navalny, who announced on Wednesday that he planned to return, said he was "very happy" as he boarded a plane in Berlin bound for Moscow's Vnukovo Airport.

It remains to be seen what reception awaits him in Moscow. On Thursday, Russia's prison service said that he faces immediate arrest once he returns.

Navalny, who has blamed his poisoning on the Kremlin, charged that Russian President Vladimir Putin was now trying to deter him from coming home with new legal motions. The Kremlin has repeatedly denied a role in the opposition leaders



Alexei Navalny and his wife Yulia onboard a flight to Moscow, at the Airport Berlin Brandenburg (BER) in Schoenefeld, near Berlin, Germany on Sunday **AP**

poisoning.

At the end of December, the Federal Penitentiary Service, or FSIN, warned Navalny that he faced time in prison if he fails to immediately report to its office in line with the terms of a suspended sentence and pro-

bation he received for a 2014 conviction on charges of embezzlement and money laundering that he rejected as politically motivated. The European Court for Human Rights had ruled that his conviction was unlawful. **AP**

Iran asks watchdog not to publish 'unnecessary' Tehran nuke details

AP ■ TEHRAN

Iran urged the United Nations' nuclear watchdog to avoid publishing "unnecessary" details on Tehran's nuclear programme, state TV reported Sunday, a day after Germany, France and Britain said Tehran has "no credible civilian use" for its development of uranium metal.

The report quoted a statement from Iran's nuclear department that asked the International Atomic Energy Agency to avoid publishing details on Iran's nuclear program that may cause confusion. "It is expected the international atomic energy agency avoid providing unnecessary details and prevent paving ground for misunderstanding in the international community, the statement said. It did not elaborate.

On Saturday, Germany,

France and Britain pressed Iran to back off its plan to develop uranium metal, calling it "the latest planned violation" of its 2015 nuclear deal with world powers.

The goal of the deal is to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear bomb, something Iran insists it does not want to do.

"Iran has no credible civilian use for uranium metal," they said in a joint statement. "The production of uranium metal has potentially grave military implications."

On Thursday, the IAEA said Iran had informed it that it had begun installing equipment for the production of uranium metal.

It said Tehran maintains its plans to conduct research and development on uranium metal production are part of its "declared aim to design an improved type of fuel."

Guatemala tries blocking caravan of 9,000 Honduran migrants

Guatemala City: Guatemalan soldiers blocked part of a caravan of as many as 9,000 Honduran migrants on Saturday at a point not far from where they entered the country seeking to reach the US border.

The soldiers, many wearing helmets and wielding shields and sticks, formed ranks across a highway in Chiquimula, near the Honduras border, to block the procession of migrants. Guatemalas immigration

agency distributed a video showing a couple of hundred men scuffling with soldiers, pushing and running through their lines, even as troops held hundreds more back.

Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei issued a statement calling on Honduran authorities "to contain the mass exit of its inhabitants."

On Friday, the migrants entered Guatemala by pushing past about 2,000 police and sol-

diers posted at the border; most entered without showing the negative coronavirus test that Guatemala requires.

"The government of Guatemala regrets this violation of national sovereignty and calls on the governments of Central America to take measures to avoid putting their inhabitants at risk amid the health emergency due to the pandemic," Giammatteis statement continued. **AP**

Cargo ship sinks in the Black Sea; 3 dead, 6 rescued

AP ■ ISTANBUL

A cargo ship sank off Turkey's Black Sea coast on Sunday, leaving at least three people dead, Turkish authorities said. Six others were rescued.

The transport ministry said the Palau-flagged ship named Arvin had anchored off the port of Bartin in northern Turkey due to bad weather, before breaking into two pieces and sinking.

Emergency workers saved at least six crew members and reached the bodies of two others, the ministry's naval branch said on Twitter. **PTI**

Violent youth protests hit Tunisia amid economic turmoil

AP ■ TUNIS

Police used tear gas to disperse violent protests led by disgruntled youths in several Tunisian cities overnight, including in the capital of Tunis and in the seaside city of Sousse.

Tunisians in general are angry that the North African country is on the verge of bankruptcy and has dire public services. And many feel disappointed that on the 10-year anniversary of the revolution that ousted autocratic President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali there is little to show in terms of improve-

ment.

Police swooped in as shops and banks were looted and vandalised, arresting "dozens" of youths, according to state news agency TAP.

Protesters blocked roads by burning tires and threw stones and other objects at police and businesses, according to the Interior Ministry, which said the situation was now "calm" across the country on Sunday.

Videos circulating on social media showed dramatic chases down alleys between groups of young people and the police who used tear gas to disperse them.

Deaths, self-immolation draw scrutiny on China tech giants

Hong Kong: E-commerce workers who kept China fed during the coronavirus pandemic, making their billionaire bosses even richer, are so unhappy with their pay and treatment that one just set himself on fire in protest.

China's internet industries already were known for long, demanding days.

With millions of families confined at home, demand surged and employees delivered tons of vegetables, rice, meat, diapers and other supplies, often aboard scooters that exposed them to sub-freezing winter cold.

For white-collar workers in the technology industry, pay is

better than in some industries but employees are often expected to work 12 hours a day or more.

The human cost caught public attention after the deaths of two employees from e-commerce platform Pinduoduo, known for selling pindu produce at low prices.

Their deaths prompted suggestions they were overworked. In an indication of high-level concern, the official Xinhua News Agency called for shorter work hours, describing long hours of overtime at the expense of employees' health as an "illegal" operation.

Renewed concerns over dire working conditions for

delivery drivers also came to the forefront when a video circulated on Chinese social media showing what it said was a driver for Ele.Me, part of e-commerce giant Alibaba Group, setting himself on fire to protest unpaid wages.

The controversy is a blow to the image of internet industries that are transforming China's economy and generating new jobs. They have made some of the founders among the world's wealthiest entrepreneurs.

During the heights of the pandemic, the fortunes of the biggest, including Alibaba founder Jack Ma and Pinduoduo founder Colin

Huang, swelled as online consumer spending boomed.

In a video widely circulated on Chinese social media, 45-year-old delivery driver Liu Jin poured gasoline and set himself on fire outside a distribution station for Eleme in the eastern city of Taizhou, shouting that he wanted his money.

Others snuffed the flames and rushed him to a hospital, where he is being treated for third-degree burns on his body.

Details of Liu's complaint could not be verified and Eleme did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Separately, a 43-year-old delivery driver collapsed on the

job and died last week while delivering food for Eleme.

The company said in a statement that it will give 600,000 yuan (\$92,700) to the driver's family and raised its insurance coverage for drivers to that level.

Its statement said Eleme "had not done enough in terms of accidental death insurance, and needs to do more."

The issue was highlighted again after a Pinduoduo employee surnamed Tan committed suicide after taking leave from the firm to return to his hometown, less than two weeks after a 22-year-old employee surnamed Zhang in Urumqi collapsed while walk-

ing home from work with colleagues, and later passed away.

Pinduoduo, China's third-largest e-commerce firm, released statements saying it was providing assistance and support to the families of the two employees who died. Shanghai authorities also are reviewing working hours, contracts and other conditions at the company.

The deaths raised an outcry on social media, with many people suspecting that they were a result of overwork.

Chinese social media users blasted the country's technology sector, criticizing not just Pinduoduo for a culture of long hours but pointing out that this

was an industry-wide problem, with similar company cultures seen at most of China's large technology companies.

They also revived a national debate over the tech sector's so-called "996" working culture, in which employees often work from 9 am to 9 pm six days a week.

Companies sometimes pay huge bonuses to some employees, enticing them to work more overtime.

"We must strive to succeed in pursuit of dreams, but the legitimate rights and interests of workers cannot be ignored or even violated," said state-owned Xinhua News Agency in a post on microblogging site

Weibo.

The issue has also cast a spotlight on the working conditions of delivery drivers, who are under heavy pressure to get orders to customers quickly and at times make less than 10 yuan (\$1.55) per delivery.

If they fail to meet deadlines, fines imposed can range from as little as 1 yuan (\$0.15) to as much as 500 yuan (\$77.30) if a customer lodges a complaint.

As part of the gig economy, such delivery workers often do not get the benefits provided to full-time employees, such as social or medical insurance. **AP**

‘Economy may contract 25% in current fiscal’

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Indian economy is not recovering as fast as the Government claims and the country's economy may contract 25 per cent in the current financial year, noted economist Arun Kumar said on Sunday.

Kumar further said that due to a big decline in the GDP during the current financial year, the budget estimates have gone completely out of gear and, therefore, there is a need to correct the Budget.

"India's economic growth is not recovering as fast as the government is showing because the unorganised sector has not started recovering and some major components of the services sector have not recovered.

"My analysis shows that the rate of growth will be (-)25 per cent in the current financial year because during lockdown (during April-May), only essential production was taking place and even in agriculture, there was no growth," he told PTI in an interview.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has projected the Indian economy to contract 7.5 per cent in the current financial year, while the National



Statistical Office (NSO) estimates a contraction of 7.7 per cent.

Also, according to the NSO, the Indian economy contracted by 23.9 per cent during the April-June 2020 quarter and recovered faster than expected in the July-September 2020 quarter as a pick-up in manufacturing helped GDP clock a lower contraction of 7.5 per cent. Kumar, a former professor of economics at JNU, said the government's own document that provided April-June and July-September quarters GDP (gross domestic product) figures said there will be a revision in the data later on.

He predicted that India's fiscal deficit will be higher than it was last year and the state's fiscal deficit will also be much higher.

"Disinvestment revenue will also be short. Tax and non-tax revenues will be short," Kumar said.

He said India's economic recovery will depend on several factors including how quickly vaccination can be done, how quickly people can go back to their work.

"We are not going back to the 2019 level of output in 2021. Maybe in 2022, after the vaccination is done, we will recover back to the 2019 level of output in 2022," Kumar said.

He added that the growth rate in the coming years will be good because of low base effect, but the output will be less than 2019.

Asked whether the government should relax the fiscal deficit target in the upcoming Budget, Kumar said, "It has been argued since July that the government should allow the fiscal deficit to rise and spend more and give money to the unorganised sector and in rural areas."

On India recently imposing fresh restrictions on foreign direct investment (FDI) from countries that share land border with India, he said, "It is a knee-jerk reaction". If you look at the past three-four years, all the start-ups had big investments from China, Kumar added.

US business advocacy group urges Nirmala to lower tariff in Budget

PTI ■ WASHINGTON

A top India-centric American business advocacy group has suggested Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman to lower tariff in the Union Budget if the country wants to compete with China-backed mega free trade agreement.

Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). China and 14 other countries in November last year established the world's largest trading bloc that represents roughly 30 per cent of the world's GDP and population.

India walked out of the mega free trade agreement as negotiations failed to address New Delhi's outstanding issues and concerns.

The members of RCEP are 10-nation bloc ASEAN (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia), China, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

"If India can focus on a much more predictable environment from a policy framework it will give more confidence to the investors. Bringing a sense of transparency in policy making also sends a very



positive signal. And if India is going to be competing, especially with the RCEP, then it has to look at lowering its tariff," Mukesh Aghi, president of US India Strategic and Partnership Forum (USISPF) told PTI.

Pointing that in the last 12 months tariffs in India have been going up and up, he said, "What it does is yes, it protects a local industry, but it doesn't make them competitive. So, it is important to protect the local industry, but at the same time, it is important to make them more competent intervals. Lowering of tariff is important."

In a recent submission to the Union Finance Minister, USISPF recommended specific measures to improve direct and indirect tax collection, which will promote private

investment and ensure fiscal and monetary stability.

"On the direct taxation side, we recommend specific amendments to facilitate activity in the digital economy, reduce tax and depreciation rates to boost investment, clarify carry-forward and loss-off-set rules, and streamline regulations related to withholding tax, indirect transfer, and dispute resolution," USISPF said.

"For indirect taxes, we recommend amendments to address challenges with deferred duty payments, simplify various processes and procedures, and align customs regulations more closely with actual industry practices. Together, these changes will free up much-needed investment capital, make it easier for companies to manage their tax liabilities, and provide a needed boost to the economic activity during the next fiscal year," it added.

To increase MSME access to finance in India, USISPF has recommended specific steps to promote supply-chain financing, subsidise the insurance of MSME loans, improve the assessment of MSME credit risk and loan disbursement, and facilitate faster settlement of claims between healthcare providers and insurers.

Luxury car makers seek reduction in taxes on automobiles in next Budget

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Luxury car makers Mercedes-Benz, Audi and Lamborghini expect the government to lower taxes on automobiles in the upcoming Budget, saying the premium segment of the auto industry has not been able to grow due to high taxation besides being hit hard by coronavirus.

Any hike in taxes on luxury cars will hit demand and prevent recovery from the disruptions witnessed last year, according to senior officials of the companies.

"Anything which is a deterrent to the demand in the sector we should stay away because at the end that will cause problem," Mercedes-Benz India Managing Director & CEO Martin Schwenk told PTI.

He was responding to a query on the company's expectations on the tax front from the government in the upcoming budget.

Seeking a reduction on taxes on the auto sector, Schwenk said,

"Already the auto industry is highly taxed...From the import duties to GST and cess which is 22 per cent (on luxury cars). I think the target



should actually be to support the growth of the sector and reduce tax. We should try find an avenue."

Expressing similar sentiments, Audi India head Balbir Singh Dhillion said the challenges for the luxury car segment, which is recovering from the Covid-19 induced disruptions, in 2021 are "more or less the constants from the past".

"One is of course the high taxation on luxury cars, including cess. That remains a challenge because what it has done is that it has not let luxury cars grow beyond 1 per cent (of the total automobile markets in India). It is just hovering around 1 per cent and in last year 2020 it could have dropped probably 0.7-0.8 per cent. That (high tax) remains the biggest challenge," he added.

Demand to rationalise GST on food delivery business to 5%

Kolkata: The restaurants and food delivery sector has demanded that goods and services tax (GST) on home delivery of food be reduced to five per cent from 18 per cent now to boost the \$3 billion segment, industry officials said.

Customers taking food delivery at their home or office are paying 13 per cent higher price on the same food and beverages compared to customers who are walking down to restaurants as the dine-in tax rate is 5 per cent, they claimed.

"The online food delivery sector in India has been growing by leaps and bounds. It is currently worth \$2.94 billion and is growing at a CAGR of 22 per cent. However, the tax complications arising due to the GST is likely to pose a roadblock to this growth," Fooza Foods founder and managing director, Dibyendu Banerjee told PTI.

"The high GST rate of 18 per cent on online food delivery service providers and ineligibility of credit of such GST charged to the restaurants have an adverse impact on the growth of the sector. A reduc-

tion in GST rates will keep food costs affordable and create more jobs in the sector while furthering the government's initiatives," he said.

However, restaurateurs said a high commission of 23-24 per cent by food delivery platforms have turned out to be a pain point even for several months of reopening after lockdown, footfall for dine-in had not normalised.

"For us, post Covid lockdown our home delivery sales got revered to 60 per cent which was 40 per cent earlier. With inability to raise prices, our bottomline is getting hit for higher commission fees despite sales had reached closer to pre-covid levels," Platter Hospitality director Shiladitya Chaudhury said.

However, he remained optimistic that after a few months once vaccination reaches the mass, the dine-in customers will return.

"Scalability of business will be most impacted. Growth plans via new franchise outlets for marquee restaurants will be less feasible. PTI

Real estate sector seeks input tax credit on development of leased commercial assets

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Government should allow commercial real estate developers to set off GST paid on inputs like cement from the tax liability on rental income to avoid double taxation and give a boost to the office market to help India maintain its advantage in various sectors like IT and startups, realty firms and consultants said on Sunday.

In its Budget recommendation for the 2021-22 fiscal year, industry body CII has demanded that Section 16 read with Section 17(5) of the CGST Act should be amended to enable the real estate players to avail ITC (input tax credit) on procurement of goods and services during the construction phase where the said immovable property is intended for commercial leasing or renting.

The denial of ITC, leads to blockage of funds for a real estate player, it said.

"In case of commercial leasing of properties and outlets at malls, the renting of such premises attracts 18 per cent which is available as credit to the client. Disallowance of credit during the construction



phase leads to the increased cost of construction, working capital loss, increased financing costs impacting the entire supply chain," CII said.

Tata Realty & Infrastructure Ltd MD & CEO Sanjay Dutt mentioned that as per current GST provisions, input GST credit during the construction phase (for commercial properties) is not available for set-off against output GST liability from earning of rental income.

"In other words, the GST charged on input services (like procurement of cement, steel, works contract services, etc) is required to be capitalised to the cost of construction. Since the

input GST rates on this score are significantly high (in the range of 18% to 28% for cement, steel and other big-ticket items), the developers are losing/foregoing substantial cash flows on this score," Dutt told PTI. He demanded that input tax credit should be allowed in commercial real estate properties meant for leasing purposes.

"It would immensely help the commercial real estate developers in conserving significant cash flows and help developers to sustain themselves...If such input GST is permitted to be utilised to be off-set against the output GST liability," Dutt said.

FinMin looks at BIC model after RBI raises concern over zero coupon bonds for PSB recap

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Finance Ministry is looking at other avenues for affordable capital infusion, including setting up of a Bank Investment Company (BIC), as the RBI has raised concern over the issuance of zero coupon bonds for recapitalisation of public sector banks (PSBs), sources said.

Setting up BIC as a holding company or a core investment company was suggested by the PJ Nayak Committee in its report on "Governance of Boards of Banks in India".

The report recommended transferring shares of the government in the banks to the BIC which would become the parent holding company of all these banks, as a result of this, all the PSBs would become 'limited' banks. BIC will be autonomous and it will have the power to appoint the board of directors and make other policy decisions about subsidiaries.

The idea of BIC, which will serve as a super holding company, was also discussed at the first Gyan Sangam bankers' retreat organised in 2014, the sources said. They added that

it was proposed that the holding company would look into the capital needs of banks and arrange funds for them without Government support.

It would also look at alternative ways of raising capital such as the sale of non-voting shares in a bid to garner affordable capital.

With this in place, the dependence of PSBs on government support would also come down and ease fiscal pressure.

To save interest burden and ease the fiscal pressure, the Government decided to issue zero coupon bonds for meeting the capital needs of the banks.

The first test case of the new mechanism was a capital infusion of ₹5,500 crore into Punjab & Sind Bank by issuing zero-coupon bonds of six different maturities last year. These special securities with tenure of 10-15 years are non-interest bearing and valued at par.

However, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) expressed concerns over zero-coupon bonds for the recapitalisation of PSBs.

The RBI has raised some issues with regard to calculation of an effective capital infusion made in any bank through this instrument issued at par, the sources said.

Since such bonds usually are non-interest bearing but issued at a deep discount to the face value, it is difficult to ascertain net present value, they added.

As these special bonds are non-interest bearing and issued at par to a bank, it would be an investment, which would not earn any return but rather depreciate with each passing year.

Parliament had in September 2020 approved ₹20,000 crore to be made available for the recapitalisation of PSBs. Of this, ₹5,500 crore was issued to Punjab & Sind Bank and the Finance Ministry will take a call on the remaining ₹14,500 crore during this quarter.

With mounting capital requirement owing to rising NPAs, the government resorted to recapitalisation bonds with a coupon rate for capital infusion into PSBs during 2017-18 and interest payment to banks for holding such bonds started from the next financial year.

Newsprint cost up 20% in 3 months

Publishers seek waiver in customs duty

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Cost of paper used to publish newspapers and magazines has jumped 20 per cent in the past three months due to demand-supply imbalance following the pandemic, prompting news publishers to rush to the government seeking waiver of 5 per cent import duty to help cut cost.

An industry that was facing headwinds from a slowing economy even before the pandemic, was hit hard when most readers stopped buying news-

papers and magazines on fears of them being carriers of viruses. While there are no medical studies that have established the virus transmission theories, sales did not pick up even after lockdown restrictions were relaxed, industry leaders said.

Now, the rising cost of newsprint — created due to a drastic fall in supplies after 3 million tonnes of manufacturing capacities were either closed or converted to brown paper grades worldwide — has dealt a second blow that is threatening the survival of the industry.

Indian Newspaper Society (INS) President L Adimoolam said most newspapers have stopped sending the hard copies to the rural areas with readership of less than 50

copies, to reduce the distribution cost.

In a representation to Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, INS has suggested cutting customs on import of newsprints.

They also want a fiscal stimulus package for the industry or raising tariffs of government advertisements by 50 per cent.

"If working out a stimulus package for print media is difficult at this juncture, DAVP (Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity) may please consider releasing advertisement for all its departments to all publications with an increased tariff of 50 per cent, which would be highly helpful for the industry as a whole," the INS representation said.

It has also sought extension of the validity of RNI (Registrar of Newspapers for India) Circulation Certificates up to March 31, 2022, which will enable DAVP rates to remain the same till next year.

It is estimated that the print media would take two-three years to recover from the current situation, the INS added.

Adimoolam told PTI, "The government helped a few industries (during the pandemic) with stimulus packages. We are (also) expecting some stimulus."

Several newspapers have responded to the situation by cutting costs that included shutting down editions, reducing the number of pages and laying off staff.

Excise duty collection jump 48% this fiscal on record hike in taxes on petrol, diesel

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

While the pandemic pumelled tax collection across the board, excise duty mop-up jumped 48 per cent in the current fiscal on the back of a record increase in taxes on petrol and diesel, that more than made up for the below normal fuel sales.

Excise duty collection during April-November 2020, was at ₹1,96,342 crore, up from Rs 1,32,899 crore mop-up during the same period in 2019, according to data from the Controller General of Accounts (CGA).

This despite the fact that over 10 million tonnes less diesel — the most used fuel in

the country — was sold during the eight months period.

Diesel sales during April-November 2020, stood at 44.9 million tonnes as compared to 55.4 million tonnes a year back, according to data from the oil ministry's Petroleum Planning and Analysis Cell (PPAC).

Petrol consumption too was lower at 17.4 million tonnes, compared to 20.4 million tonnes during April-November 2019.

While Goods and Services Tax (GST) apply on most products since its introduction in 2017, oil products and natural gas has been kept out of its preview. Excise duty, which accrues to the centre, and VAT

that goes to the state government, are levied on their sale.

Industry sources said the jump in excise duty was primarily because of a record increase in taxes on petrol and diesel during March and May last year.

The government had raised excise duty on petrol by ₹13 per litre and that on diesel by ₹16 a litre in two tranches to mop up gains arising from international crude oil prices falling to a two-decade low.

With this, the total incidence of excise duty on petrol rose to ₹32.98 per litre and that on diesel to ₹31.83 a litre.

Petrol costs ₹84.70 a litre in Delhi and a litre of diesel comes for ₹74.88.

Quarterly earnings, vaccine rollout key factors for market this week: Analysts

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The domestic equity market will be largely guided by the ongoing quarterly earnings as well as global cues in the coming week and indices may witness volatility in the run-up to the Budget, according to analysts.

Besides, investors will keep tracking latest developments and trends on the COVID-19 pandemic front, especially the vaccine rollout in the country.

"Going ahead, the market could be volatile given the ongoing earning season and the weak global cues. Run-up to

the Budget would also add to the volatility," said Siddhartha Khemka, Head — Retail Research, Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd.

Market experts said there will be stock-specific action as the earnings season unfolds.

Some of the major earnings announcement this week are from Bank of Maharashtra, Bajaj Finance, Federal Bank, Asian Paints, Bajaj Auto and Reliance Industries Limited.

Meanwhile, the country's largest private sector lender HDFC Bank on Saturday reported a 14.36 per cent jump

in consolidated net profit to ₹8,760 crore for the December quarter.

"Along with the weak global market, this week, the domestic market will shift its focus on the banking and finance sector as major banks and NBFCs are to release their quarterly results. Markets can be volatile going forward including concerns over how will the Union Budget be?," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Financial Services.

Traders said as the vaccine rollout begins, there may be plenty of swings in stock prices.

FPIs invest ₹14,886 cr in first half of Jan

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Foreign portfolio investors (FPI) put in ₹14,866 crore in Indian markets in the first half of January with participants expecting strong third-quarter results by companies.

As per depositories data, FPIs invested a net ₹18,490 crore into equities but pulled out ₹3,624 crore from debt segment between January 1-15.

This translated into a total net investment of ₹14,866 crore during the period under review.

The strong flows are on account of the positive bias towards emerging markets and because of strong third-quarter

earnings thus far besides decreasing domestic Covid-19 cases, said Rusmik Oza, executive vice president, head of fundamental research at Kotak Securities.

The forthcoming US stimulus could be another trigger for positive FPI bias towards emerging markets and India, he added.

"The earnings season is expected to be very strong going forward which along with budget expectations could keep sentiment alive and FPI flows also positive," Oza said.

Giving an overview of emerging markets, Oza said that the start of calendar year has been mixed for emerging

markets".

Countries apart from India that are witnessing positive FPI flows are Taiwan, Thailand, Brazil and South Africa, while favourites of FPIs like South Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam and Philippines have seen outflows since the start of this year, he noted.

Harsh Jain, co-founder and COO at Groww, said that earlier, investors were putting money in a few select bluechip stocks but as their valuations climbed, more investors are now looking towards smaller companies and even outside the large-cap category to invest in.

Going forward, focus of

FPIs on domestic front would continue to be on the active covid case count coming further down and the economy getting back on growth trajectory, said Himanshu Srivastava, associate director — manager research, Morningstar India.

There has been improvement in the macro economic environment which has so far ensured that FPI flows remain intact, he added.

He further said that worries about rising covid infections in several parts of Europe and US could play spoil sport as this could lead to investors turning risk averse if the situation deteriorates.

BharatPe raises ₹139 cr debt from Alteria Capital, ICICI Bank

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Fintech company BharatPe on Sunday said it has raised ₹139 crore (about \$20 million) in debt from venture debt firm Alteria Capital and ICICI Bank that will be used to strengthen its lending business and provide credit to merchants.

Founded by Ashneer Grover and Shashvat Nakrani in 2018, BharatPe offers merchants a single interface for all UPI apps like Paytm, PhonePe, Google Pay, BHIM, Mobikwik, Freecharge and others. It also facilitates loan facility for its merchant partners. Speaking to PTI, BharatPe co-founder and CEO Ashneer Grover said ₹90 crore in debt came from Alteria Capital, while the remaining ₹49 crore was from ICICI Bank.

"We have raised funds from ICICI Bank at a competitive interest rate of less than 9 per cent. We are aggressively building our lending vertical and our loan book is currently at ₹400 crore."

"With this infusion, we can double down on our efforts and we expect the loan book to grow to ₹700-750 crore by the end of March 2021," he added.

Grover said BharatPe had set a target of disbursing ₹1,000 crore of loans in 2020-21, of which ₹800 crore has already been disbursed.

"The latest tranche of debt raised will help further build the lending business and enable credit for millions of businesses, across the length and breadth of India," Grover said.

Trend Blazer

Kajol cherishes her bond with mother

KAJOL cherishes her special bond with her mother, veteran actor **Tanuja**, and says she truly understood her only after she had a daughter.

"I only understood my mother after I had my daughter. I always loved my mother, always admired her and thought she was amazing. But after I had my daughter, I remember calling up my mother and having this whole crying conversation with her, and telling her that 'I know how much you love me today,'" Kajol said.

Recalling the conversation, Kajol continued, "I told her, 'Today, I understand what all you gave up for me, how you felt about everything in life just because you had me in it and how everything changed for you.'"



'It's not that I didn't get offers at the national level. I did some films, too, but I didn't want to neglect my regional language. I always felt that my language is so beautiful and we make such great films, and that I come from the land of Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, Bimal Roy, and Aparna Sen, who are already recognised globally. That's where I also carved my niche.'
—**Rituparna Sengupta**

AMIT SADH plays the protagonist in the forthcoming web series *Jeet Ki Zidd*. The actor says the story, set against the backdrop of the Indian Army Special Task Force and based on a true story, is more than just about valour. It is a story of hope and passion, he points out.



"It is the story of one of our Kargil war heroes, Major Deependra Singh Sengar, and how he followed his dream to be part of the Special Task Force since childhood. There comes a time in his journey where he and his wife goes through the darkest phase — he lost his physical strength — and yet he did not give up," Amit said.

I am anything but political: Drew

Actor **DREW BARRYMORE** feels she is finding her voice on Instagram, but only regarding things that are not related to politics.

"At my very core belief, I am anything but political and then 2020 happened and the whole world changed and we did have something that united all of us, a pandemic, which wasn't political until it absolutely was political," Barrymore said.

"I've been finding my voice on Instagram for years, but usually about pretty tame things, beauty, love and fun, positivity and joy but let's face it, social media is now the most powerful thing we have," she added.



A women-first social networking app reveals how single Indians are planning on dating in 2021 now that India has unlocked and lifted restrictions across states. Basis a nationwide survey conducted by Bumble, there are some interesting data and insights regarding the dating preferences.

Virtual dating is the new norm

The recent nationwide survey found that after connecting with people virtually, 83 per cent of single Indians are comfortable to meet up with their connections in-person. The study also reveals that 40 per cent of single Indians will opt for virtual dating in 2021.

Indians now going on pre-dates more than ever

Single Indians now go on 'pre-dates' where they explore virtual dating for the first time

The social network

A dating app reveals how single Indians are planning to find companionship during the year



and use video dates to get to know one another before meeting in-person. The app's internal research found out that 78 per cent of single Indians feel the

need to build trust before meeting in-person, which has given rise to 'slow dating' that means people are taking more time to get to know each other better.

Ideal first IRL dates in 2021

For those who are meeting in person, the pandemic has changed the way they approach dating with a majority (47 per cent) preferring more low-key first IRL dates as staying indoors (at their home, their partner's or a friend's place) is the top choice for first in-person dates. Once comfortable to step out, going on a long drive remains a favourite among single Indians (43 per cent) along with meeting at a local cafe/tea shop. Dinner dates at a restaurant (41 per cent) is the next favourite for a great first IRL date choice.

Dating choices and preferences

When it comes to making a connection online, education and career choices top the list of preferences that matter most to single Indians, followed by dating intentions. However, the top most deciding factor when meet-

ing someone in-person is compatibility (23 per cent).

Making boundaries and comfort levels clear

To help navigate new rules of dating in 2021, the app's new badges give its community the opportunity to communicate what kind of dates people are looking for: virtual, socially-distanced or socially-distanced with masks. This helps with the potentially awkward conversation by allowing the community to search for people who are dating in the same way as them. Globally, more than one million people have used the app's new feature on their profile. People who share what kind of dates they are comfortable with through the app's new dating badges see a 43 per cent increase in the average number of monthly matches than those who don't.

Samarpita Samaddar, Bumble India PR Director, said,

"Single Indians are now feeling a strong desire to build trust online before meeting in real life with virtual dating becoming the new norm in India. In fact, over 540 million messages have been sent on the app in India between January and November, 2020. We saw a 38 per cent rise in the use of video chats and voice calls with people spending roughly 20 mins on average on video and voice calls.

As India continues to unlock, we're seeing an emerging trend of people getting excited about the prospect of dating in real life again in 2021. At the same time, there's still nervousness about what the future holds. We will continue to support our community in India to write their own stories and take charge of their dating journeys."

(The research was conducted by YouGov between December 2 to 10, 2020 in India.)

LIGHTS AND MIRRORS

Want a clutter-free home decor setup within a budget? Here's how

Re-modelling your home is a strenuous task and can take months to complete, especially if you have a nine to six job. But with ingenuity and without buying expensive things, your home can get a perfect makeover just by adding lights and mirrors to give it more sophisticated appearance.

Heena Jain, Head Design Consultant, WoodenStreet explains the ways and positions, where you can place the mirrors to give your space a luxury makeover.

MIRRORS

Mirrors can never be enough in a house if you want to create something fascinating in a low budget. There are various rooms in the house that can be changed with a tinge of mirrors and lights.

Living room: Buy a mirror that is large in size and has bulky border line. Choose a bright colour or according to your home decor theme. A living room has many places to accommodate a large mirror but find a place where, the window is in the center. Position the mirror carefully and remove everything that is excess on the eyes. It will expand the symmetry of the room and will create an illusion of a hall.

Dining room: Dining rooms generally do not entertain mirrors but if you have made your mind on it, then bring a square shaped designer mirror that goes well with the kitchen. If you have a dining table in or close to your kitchen, then it will be more appropriate to use a mirror on the side end of the table or a cabinet would be perfect. The mirror creates an effect of more people while you dine.

Bedroom: The bedroom is the most suited place for a hanging a mirror. Now, it depends on the room dimensions and space available to choose what type of mirror suits your bedroom. If the room is spacious then, you can opt for flowered shaped circular mirror on the back wall of your bed. If your room size is small then bring an average sized mirror and place it near the window, which will scatter the light throughout the room.

Hallway: It is reasonable to hang a mirror in the hallway or lobby but in an artistic manner. Go for a small set of mirrors in symmetrical shapes and it will instantly compliment your hallway.

LIGHTS

The functionality of a light is far more crucial then we think, because whatever decor you decide to implement in your home, until there is alleviated lighting, your interiors will not be up to the mark. Therefore, lights play a major role in



highlighting what's behind the door.

Living room: The usual ceiling lights in your home only highlight the furniture with a faded sparkle, while if you go for an ambient lighting, such as, a table lamp, wall mounted lamp or a hanging lamp then it acts like a spot light and highlights the perfections of your decor. The major reason behind choosing perfect lighting is that it doesn't light up every corner of the house rather it creates an effect of organised space for any outsider. For living room, choose some hanging lights like chandelier or fancy lamps, right around the corners of ceiling fan. It will reimburse the light on the furniture with yellow and orange shades, so your space look akin to a luxury boutique hotel.

Dining room: This is the place where the light is required the most, and people do quite the opposite because they think it is an unnecessary expenditure. But it is not true at all, as light brighten up the entire dining area, and makes it convenient to relish the drinks and food. If you have a separate dining room area then go for wall mounted lights, which deliver an opulent vibe to the area. If you have interconnected

kitchen and dining table then choose some floor lamps that compliment the kitchen cabinets and dining table. You will see for yourself, the difference in organisation before and after the makeover. It is the added advantage of proper and smart lighting, that percolates the lights through reflective surfaces and builds an apparition that classifies the space.

Bedroom: The lights in bedroom should be selected very carefully as it marks personal territory. Try and keep your bedroom organised so that lights will impose a kinetic effect on the decor of the space, which in turn demarcate organised and unorganised area. It is very important to keep the light source adjacent to the walls, in order for the light to scatter. There is already a source of ambient lighting in your bedroom — the side table lamp. But you have to bring in some hanging lights for low lighting and tidy space.

Hallway: The hallway is the most visited space of the home, as it connects every room in the house. Yet, we put the most terrible lighting in the hallway, because it is hardly occupied in terms of possessions, but it shouldn't be like that.



Purchase some fancy and designer wall mounted lights that will transform the place.

Every house has its particulars, but it doesn't mean you have to remain unorganised and untidy all the time. The lights

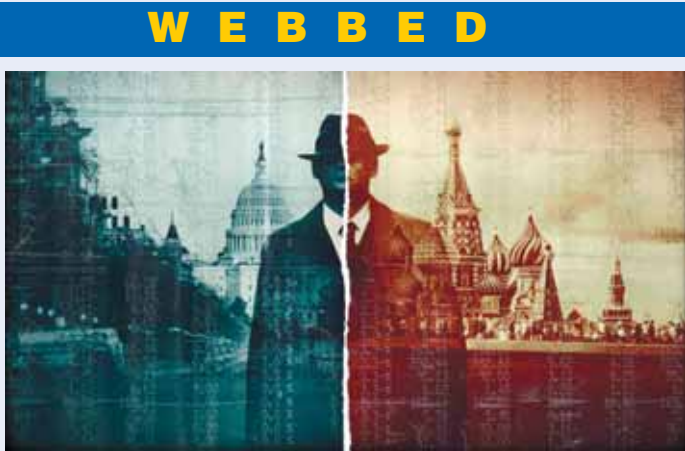
and mirrors do have the capacity to present your home in more chic way. Eventually, rooms need to be organised with various furniture like cabinets and chest of drawers or wardrobes as well.

—JANS



DAUGHTER FROM ANOTHER MOTHER

After realising their babies were exchanged at birth, two women develop a plan to adjust to their new lives: creating a single — and peculiar — family. Starring Ludwika Paleta, Paulina Goto and Martín Altomaro, the show releases on January 20 on Netflix.



SPYCRAFT

The spy game is a serious business, and throughout history, the tools and technologies developed for it have mattered as much as the spies themselves. The show releases on January 20 on Netflix.



CALL MY AGENT!: SEASON 4

At a top Paris talent firm, agents scramble to keep their star clients happy — and their business afloat — after an unexpected crisis. Created by Fanny Herrero, the fourth season releases on January 21 on Netflix.



Did you know that Jammu and Kashmir have a very important place in power generation? Well, the estimated hydro power potential of the UTs are around 20,000 Megawatts (MW), of which about 16,475 MW have been identified. This comprises 11,283 MW in Chenab basin, 3,084 MW in Jhelum basin, 500 MW in Ravi basin and 1,608 MW in Indus basin. One can pretty much imagine how many benefits it can bring along with it. Undoubtedly, an increase in demand for power suggests growth of the economy i.e. industrialisation, modernisation and improvement in basic amenities, further creating countless opportunities for the people of the region.

But, even today, there are so many areas where the power supply conditions are worse and need to be

A CAUSE OF CONCERN

Jammu and Kashmir face crippling power cuts, especially during winters. While there might be some progress, electricity shortage continues to haunt the region and is a major constraint in the development of the economy, shares HENA RANI

improved soon. The Valley faces crippling power cuts, especially during winters. If we talk about the Sumbora village of Pampore tehsil, located in Pulwama district of Jammu and Kashmir, the power supply lines in Alamdar colony and Akram Dar mohalla have been tied with the

branches of trees. In such a scenario, the life-giving trees become the agents of death. The worn-out wooden poles and stranded conductors pose grave threat to the lives of residents. The locals alleged that they are living under constant fear due to these conditions. They have persuad-

ed the concerned department to install proper electricity poles in the area so that the power supply can be restored in all seasons without any obstruction and can be escaped from any incident that could occur in the present distorted and dilapidated condition of the power supply.

However, not surprisingly, the concerned department did not pay any attention.

The Sumbora village is located on the banks of river Jhelum at a distance of 22 km from Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir, and 12 km from Pulwama. However, the villages there, are still deprived of the electricity poles, which open the truth of claims of so-called development in this advanced age. Abdul Rehman, an 80-year-old resident of the colony, said, "We have been requesting the power department to replace the dangling and damaged electric wires, but our pleas were not heard and the problems persist. We have even bought the electricity wires with our own money since there have been many incidents of people getting injured after coming in contact with these power lines."

"Another hard reality is that these wooden poles were installed ages ago and now, they are decayed and rotten. Whenever the wires break, we, the locals, fix it ourselves. The condition of the wires have become very critical, which is no less dangerous," Rehman added.

A resident of the same colony, Bashir Ahmed Dar, shared, "Every month we get electricity bills but whenever the weather changes, the power lines usually get damaged and the concerned department doesn't seem to care about it. We had also submitted a request letter in February 2020 complaining about both - the electricity wires and poles but till date, we have not received any response from the team."

The locals of the region fear that power lines may lead to a catastrophe at any time. The ground situation is grim and the reality looks quite different than the claims of the power department. Sohail Ahmad Dar, also a resident of the village, expressed his concern that the electric lines touch roofs of houses and trees on roads, endangering people's lives as well as their property.

Another local, Nargis Jozi, said, "While there might be some progress, power shortage continues to haunt the region and is a major constraint in the development of the economy."

The administration has assured the residents many times for proper arrangement of power supply but so far, the promise has not been fulfilled. The locals are eagerly waiting for their demands to be met. Well, it's high time that the concerned department wakes up from its slumber before one more precious life gets lost due to these improper and dilapidated power supply lines.

—Charkha Features



Teachings from the past

The world depends upon dharma to maintain order and will be on your side if you live righteously, says RAJYOGI BRAHMAKUMAR NIKUNJ JI

In the beginning of the *Mahabharata*, there was neither any ruler nor were the people who need to be governed. Instead, it was *dharma* that protected one man from the other. At that time, there were no boundaries and no demarcations of territories nor were there any kind of divisions. Whereas, in today's time, we have many states, based on the principle of 'one language one state', or 'one religion one state' or 'one geographical territory one state'. But, in earlier times, people used to believe in one language and one religion. So there was no 'state' in the modern sense of the term. Instead, the whole world was one state.

Similarly, when the *Mahabharata* says that it was '*dharma*' which protected one from the other or which worked as a factor for coherence and growth, it means that people, earlier, had noble intentions, good behaviour and high character. Their mindset, proclivities and dealings ensued from their sattvic and gentle nature. Their thoughts, words and behaviour were practically as such that they did not generate any problems or crime. So the word *dharma* used in the present text is not to be interpreted in the sense it is interpreted today because there were, then, neither any priests, scriptures, any acts of worship or rituals. Rather, people lived with a practical sense of good behaviour for they had innate goodness. Since people lived with the feelings of love, amity and peacefulness, there was no need of any penal laws as there was no crime.

The *Mahabharata* further tells us that after a period of time, there arose confusion among people in regard to obligation of one person towards the other, which led to vices like greed, anger and revenge. Slowly, people thought of possessing what did not belong to them. This greed manifested in the form of unrestrained desires so much so that people lost all sense of limit to satisfying their lust or greed. This clouded their judgement so that they now could not discriminate between what is right and wrong or what may be said and what must not be said. All these trends, in course of time, led to a state of anarchy, where the powerful oppressed the weak and the rich and the forward classes harassed the poor and the backward. It was in these ages that there arose the necessity of kings, recognition of territories of kingdoms, penal laws, armies, weapons and more.

Now, the present age is at the fag end of *kaliyuga*, also known as 'the iron age', when



millions of people have formed armies. Trillions of rupees are, today, spent over maintenance of these armies and manufacture of arms and ammunition. There is so much greed at the individual as well as international level. This has taken the form of anger, tension, hatred and jealousy. As a result of these vices, every powerful country is planning an attack on a weaker country and threaten their sovereignty.

The *Mahabharata* clearly states that it is mutual trust and understanding that sustains a society. Hence, if the people do not have trust in the head of state/country and vice-versa, then the kingdom soon perishes. Trust according to *Mahabharata* is sustained by *dharma*, which is another name for truthfulness. So if people or the king do not speak the truth and are not trustworthy, then that society does not last long. We see both these characteristics in the present-day society. The government thinks that people in general are cunning, liars and unfit for trust and the people have a deep-rooted feeling that the government is unreliable, undependable and unworthy of their trust. These are the signs that indicate that the world is on the verge of a huge destruction. In other words, the era of truth, honesty, trust and love, will dawn soon. This is possible if people now adopt such measures as make their intellect clean of the dirt or rust of vices, such as greed, anger, lust, ego, attachment... They must now practise a discipline that makes them upright, sincere, gentle, noble and humane. They must follow a course that changes their *sanskaras* and gives them altogether a divine nature. Now, it is for each one of us to decide as to what kind of future we want for us as well as our future generations.

EMBRACE GREEN SPACES

Being outdoors can improve mental health by lowering levels of depression and anxiety, keeping lockdown blues at bay, say researchers

If you want to beat lockdown and social distancing blues, head to green spaces and switch off TV, computer and smartphone as this will dramatically improve your mental health, say researchers, including one of Indian-origin, as several countries including the UK impose fresh restrictions amid surge in COVID numbers.

Being outdoors, particularly in green spaces, can improve mental health by promoting more positive body image, and lowering levels of depression and anxiety.

A new study, published in the Journal of Happiness Studies, said that spending time outdoors and switching off our devices is associated with higher levels of happiness during a period of COVID-19 restrictions.

"Our results are important in this context because they show that being able to spend time outdoors under conditions of lockdown has a beneficial impact on psychological well being," said co-lead author



Viren Swami, Professor of Social Psychology at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU).

"Being outdoors provides opportunities to escape from the stresses of being confined at home, maintain social relationships with others, and engage in physical activity - all

of which can improve mental health."

Jointly led by academics from Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) in the UK, the Karl Landsteiner University of Health Sciences in Austria, and Perdana University in Malaysia, new research exam-

ined how levels of happiness during a national lockdown were affected by being outdoors, the amount of daily screen time and feelings of loneliness.

Using an experience sampling method (ESM), the researchers measured levels of

happiness amongst a group of 286 adults three times a day, at random intervals, over a 21-day period.

This allowed the participants to provide data in real-time rather than retrospectively, helping to avoid recall biases.

The team found that levels of happiness were higher when participants were outdoors rather than indoors.

In addition, more daily screen time and higher levels of loneliness were both associated with lower levels of happiness.

The impact of loneliness on happiness was also weaker when participants were outdoors.

"While lockdowns can help slow down the transmission of Covid-19, research has also shown that prolonged periods of lockdown take their toll on mental health," Swami said.

"Our findings have practical health policy implications. Given that further lockdown restrictions have now become necessary in the UK, public health messages that promote getting some fresh air instead of staying indoors and staring at our screens could really help to lift people's mood this winter," Swami elaborated.

—IANS

Do something today that your future self will thank you for.
—Sean Patrick Flanery

SMOKING LINKED TO SUBARACHNOID HEMORRHAGE

Adults who smoke or who are genetically predisposed to smoking behaviours are more likely to experience a serious type of stroke called subarachnoid hemorrhage (SAH), researchers say.

The study, published in the journal 'Stroke', indicates that those who smoked half a pack to 20 packs of cigarettes a year have a 27 per cent increased risk of SAH.

SAH is a type of stroke that occurs when a blood vessel on the surface of the brain ruptures and bleeds into the space between the brain and the skull. It mainly affects middle-aged adults and has high rates of complications and death.

"Previous studies have shown that smoking is associated with higher risks of SAH, yet it has been unclear if smoking or another confounding condition such as high blood pressure is a cause for stroke," said researcher Guido Falcone, assistant professor of neurology at Yale University in the US.



METABOLISM MAY PLAY ROLE IN RMMD

Researchers have found that certain metabolites — small molecules produced by the process of metabolism — may be the predictive indicators for persons at risk of recurrent major depressive disorder (rMMD).

The findings, published in the journal Translational Psychiatry, indicated that the accuracy of this prediction was more than 90 per cent.

"It's a small study, but it is the first to show the potential of using metabolic markers as predictive clinical indicators of patients at greatest risk and lower risk for recurring bouts of major depressive symptoms," Naviaux added.

rMMD is a mood disorder characterised by multiple symptoms in combination — feelings of sadness or hopelessness, anger or frustration, loss of interest, sleep disturbances, anxiety, slowed or difficulty thinking, suicidal thoughts and unexplained physical problems, such as back pain or headaches.



EVEN ONE DRINK MAY UP ATRIAL FIBRILLATION RISK

People who regularly drink a modest amount of alcohol are at an increased risk of atrial fibrillation, a condition where the heart beats in an abnormal rhythm.

The study published in the European Heart Journal found that compared to drinking no alcohol at all, just one alcoholic drink a day was linked to a 16 per cent increased risk of atrial fibrillation over an average (median) follow-up time of nearly 14 years.

"These findings are important as the regular consumption of alcohol, the 'one glass of wine a day' to protect the heart, as is often recommended for instance in the lay press, should probably no longer be suggested without balancing risks and possible benefits for all heart and blood vessel diseases, including atrial fibrillation," said researcher Renate Schnabel, a professor at the University Heart and Vascular Center, Hamburg-Eppendorf in Germany.



DISCRIMINATION UPS ANXIETY RISK

Regardless of genetic risks, exposure to discrimination in life plays a significant role in developing anxiety and related disorders, suggests a new study.

Published in the Proceedings of National Academy of Sciences journal, the study determined that even after

controlling genetic risk for anxiety, depression and neuroticism, people reported greater discrimination experiences.

"The results demonstrate that discriminatory experiences can potentially cause stress and mental health problems regardless of the genetic constitution of the individual," said researcher Adolfo G Cuevas, an assistant professor at Tufts University in the US.

The team said the findings demonstrate that alleviating the impact of discrimination has the potential to improve mental health within the overall population.



STRESS IN EXPECTING MOTHERS IMPACT CHILDREN

Expecting mothers, stop worrying or taking any kind of stress as it may affect your baby's chance of developing disease, a new study suggests.

Psychosocial factors creating stress such as lack of social support, loneliness, marriage status or bereavement may be mutating their child's mitochondrial DNA and could be a precursor to a host of diseases, the researchers at the University of Cincinnati in the US said.

"There are a lot of conditions that start in childhood that have ties to mitochondrial dysfunction including asthma, obesity, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism," said the lead researcher, Kelly Brunst, Assistant professor at the varsity.



NO STOPPING INDIAN NEWCOMERS

Thakur, Sundar 7th-wicket stand ensure India aren't out of Brisbane Test

4th Test. Day 4

Live from 5:00am IST

SONY TEN 1, 3 & SIX

PTI ■ BRISBANE

Debutant Washington Sundar and Shardul Thakur punched above their weight with splendid half-centuries to keep Australia at bay and India bullish after an engrossing third day's play in the series-deciding fourth Test here on Sunday.

Australia's openers — David Warner (20) and Marcus Harris (1) — saw out six overs, and extended the home team's lead to 54 by stumps after India's first innings ended at 336.

However, Australia's lead could have been much more had it not been for a delightful 123-run partnership for the seventh wicket between Washington (62) and Shardul (67), who defied and then attacked the rival bowling attack with gusto.

Pacer Josh Hazlewood finished with a well-deserved 5/57 for Australia, a reward for consistently bowling with an impeccable line and length at a brisk pace.

Symbolising the courage shown by the visitors, now rendered almost second-string owing to a plethora of injuries suffered by their top players through the four-match series, Washington and Shardul mixed caution with aggression to bail their team out of a precarious 186 for six.

First, they turned unlikely saviours after three soft dismissals pushed India on the back foot, and in the final session, the two opened up and went after the world-class Australian attack.

If his nine fours were not enough, Shardul bludgeoned off-spinner Nathan Lyon, holder of 397 wickets, for a maximum over long-on to reach his maiden Test fifty in style in only his second match.

In fact, Shardul opened his



account with a hooked six off the world's number one bowler, Pat Cummins.

Playing in his first Test, Washington too soon got to his maiden fifty in the traditional format while finding the fence seven times and clearing it once.

He became the first visiting cricketer in Australia in 74 years

to grab three wickets and smash a half-century on debut. The one before him was also an Indian, Dattu Phadkar, who made 51 while batting at No 8 and took three wickets during a 1947/48 tour.

Earlier, Washington and Shardul did not let Australia run away with the game after

Hazlewood sliced through India's middle-order with the wickets of Mayank Agarwal (38) and Rishabh Pant (23) at the start of the second session.

At tea break, India trailed Australia's first-innings total of 369 by 116 runs at the Gabba.

This was largely due to the fight put up by Washington

Winning over Aussie crowd was Shardul's inspiration

PTI ■ BRISBANE

When Shardul Thakur stepped out to bat on Sunday, rescuing India from a precarious 186/6 was not the only target on his mind as he was also keen to impress the Australian crowd after being told how "rewarding" it would feel by coach Ravi Shastri.

India were staring down the barrel at 186 for six on the third day of the fourth Test but Thakur (67) joined hands with debutant Washington Sundar (62) for a combative 123-run seventh wicket stand which helped his team cut down Australia's first innings lead to just 33 runs.

"When I walked in, the situation was difficult I would not deny that. The crowd was cheering for Australians bowlers. But I remembered our coach Ravi Shastri saying right at the start of the One-day series that 'if you

perform in this country, you will be rewarded,'" Thakur talked about the inspiration behind the unfazed manner with which he batted.

"People will love you for your performances and that one thing was also on my mind that people are going love me.

Batting at number eight, Thakur impressed with his stroke-play, his drives coming straight out of coaching manuals.

"Eventually at the end of the day it would help my team, that was the biggest positive. These two things were on my mind. Crowd would make noise, but If I bat well, the same crowd will cheer for me," Thakur said at a virtual post-play press conference.

Cheered, he definitely was by not just the crowd but also his teammates, who gave him a standing ovation on his way back to the dressing room.

and Shardul who played their strokes without worrying about the end result, frustrating the high-quality Australian attack with their carefree approach.

However, India were in a spot of bother before their counter-attacking act.

If the visitors lost the big wicket of skipper Ajinkya Rahane (37) to a poor shot at the stroke of lunch, they were dealt another blow right after the break when the persevering Hazlewood lured Agarwal into a loose drive for Steve Smith to complete a catch at second slip on the rebound.

More trouble was in store for India as Pant failed to get past Cameron Green, who pulled off a sharp reflex catch at gully, after the batsman tried to work Hazlewood through that region.

At that stage Australia were still ahead by 183 runs.

This was after Mitchell Starc induced a thick edge off Rahane for Matthew Wade to complete a comfortable catch in the slip cordon after the India captain had gotten away with similar shots twice in the first hour of play.

It was a shot that the seasoned Rahane could have definitely avoided.

Earlier, Cheteshwar Pujara (25) added 43 runs with Rahane before falling to a near unplayable delivery by Hazlewood in only his second over of the day.

Until Pujara's dismissal, the experienced duo raised hopes of a big partnership by negotiating the formidable attack in the first one hour of play.



PTI ■ BRISBANE

India fast bowler Shardul Thakur had a nightmare of a Test debut in 2018 as he got injured after bowling just 10 balls but on Sunday said his dream came true after doing well with both bat and ball in the ongoing fourth Test against Australia here.

Shardul took three wickets with the ball in Australia's first innings and then top-scored for India with a 67 as he got involved with Washington Sundar (62) in a fine rear-guard fightback to keep India in contention.

"It was not easy to bowl those 10 balls and get injured. I went back and grinded out in domestic cricket and whatever opportunities I got," Shardul said in an interview taken by senior spinner Ravichandran Ashwin, posted on *bcci.Tv*.

"Waiting for two years to play Test cricket again and getting the wicket (of Marcus Harris) in the very first ball, it is a dream come true. I am happy to contribute to the team's cause."

In October 2018, Shardul was forced to leave the field due to a groin strain after bowling just 10 deliveries on the first day of the second Test against the West Indies in Hyderabad.

But on Sunday, he and Washington rescued India from conceding a huge lead to Australia. After India were reduced to 186 for 6 in reply to the hosts' 369, the duo stitched 123 runs for the seventh wicket and defied the Australians for 36 overs.

In fact, Shardul began his innings with a six and also got to his half-century by hitting a stunning six.

Asked about it, he said, "At that point of time I was not looking to hit a six but it was more of a reaction. I saw the ball and played it instinctively. It came out well for me. I am happy about it."

On the cover drives he hit, Shardul said, "Honestly, I have not done practice for that but it was one of the days when I was batting really well. I did not want to miss any opportunity and any loose ball. I felt like putting it away. That is it."

Washington said Shardul was trying to hit a six off Nathan Lyon and he was not surprised when his batting partner reached to his 50 with a six.

For Washington, it was also a memorable debut as he got his first Test wicket in the form of Steven Smith and then got a half century.

Asked about it by Ashwin, Washington said, "Test cricket is the toughest format. I am very happy to start off in this fashion. God's grace and a lot of support from the family."

Another debutant, pacer T Natarajan said he did not try too much for his three wickets in Australia's first innings.

"I did not try too much. I came around the wicket because the plan of the team was that."

Eng need 36 runs to win 1st Test

AFP ■ GALLE

Sri Lanka rattled England with three quick wickets late on the fourth day of the first Test in Galle on Sunday, but the visitors remained favourites to win the match with just 36 more runs needed and seven wickets in hand.

England were expected to comfortably close in on a victory after Sri Lanka finished with 359 in their second innings, leaving visitors needing 74 to win.

But Sri Lanka struck early, with Dom Sibley (2) and Zak Crawley (8) falling to left-arm spinner Lasith Embuldeniya. Captain Joe Root was run-out for one after a mix-up with Jonny Bairstow.

Bairstow and Dan Lawrence, who was making his debut, took a nervous England to 38-3 as bad light brought an early end to proceedings at Galle International Stadium.

Earlier, England's spinners had claimed three key wickets to tighten the noose around the hosts in their second innings.

Off-spinner Dom Bess removed Dinesh Chandimal (20) and Niroshan Dickwella (29) while left-arm Jack Leach sent back Dasun Shanaka for



four.

Sri Lanka were bundled out for 135 runs in their first innings.

Angelo Mathews struck 71 after hitting his 36th half century in Tests to hold fort at one end after opener Lahiru Thirimanne made 111 to steady the innings. This was Thirimanne's second hundred of his Test career and his first in seven years.

Mathews was batting on 51 with Wanindu Hasaranga (3) at the break.

England, who made 421 in

their first innings on the back of a fine double century by Root, struck in the first over after lunch, with Bess having Chandimal caught at first slip.

Mathews stitched a 48-run partnership with Dickwella before the wicketkeeper-batsman nicked one behind off Bess.

England took a review against Mathews after the on-field umpire ruled not out to an lbw appeal from Bess. However, replays showed the ball was missing the stumps.

Axelsen, Marin win Thai titles

AFP ■ BANGKOK

Reigning Olympic champion Carolina Marin bolstered her chances of defending in Tokyo later this year after claiming the Thailand Open in Bangkok on Sunday over top seed Tai Tzu-ying.

Despite having a cold, fourth seed Viktor Axelsen was electric in the men's final against Hong Kong's Angus Long, ranked eighth, claiming the title in straight sets.

Spaniard Marin, 27, a former world number one, was an imposing force with razor-sharp smashes, clever net work and an unmatched level of aggression and agility.

She screamed in delight as she won match point in the second set after steam-rolling her 26-year-old opponent from Taiwan 21-9, 21-16 in 42 minutes.

The first non-Asian women's player to win an Olympic badminton Gold, Marin has faced an uphill battle to recover from a January 2019 knee injury in time to defend her crown in Tokyo.



Axelsen, meanwhile, took just 44 minutes to triumph 21-14, 21-14 over Long.

Indonesia's Greysia Polii and Apriyani Rahayu were too good for Thailand's Jongkolphan Kititharakul and Rawinda Prajongjai in the women's doubles final, prevailing 21-15, 21-12.

In the mixed doubles, top-seeded Thais Dechapol Puavaranukroh and Sapsiree Taerattanachai beat Indonesia's Praveen Jordan and Melati Daeva Oktavianti 21-3, 20-22, 21-18.

In the men's doubles Taiwan's Lee Yang and Wang Chi-Lin beat Malaysia's Goh V Shem and Tan Wee Kiong 16-21, 23-21, 19-21.

We faltered in execution: Hazlewood

PTI ■ BRISBANE

Australia speedster Josh Hazlewood on Sunday credited Washington Sundar and Shardul Thakur for taking India to a safe position with their century stand but rued the execution of home team bowlers in finishing off the visitors tail on the third day of the series-deciding fourth Test here.

"Yes, it is obviously a crucial partnership (between Shardul and Washington), but then we had them. I think, 6/200 around that mark, so we thought we (were) on top there but to be fair the guys batted really well," Hazlewood, who returned with figures of 5 for 57, said at the virtual post-day press conference.

"We didn't probably execute well as we could have in that period but (we) created a few little half chances. On any other day, hopefully we take those, but credit to those two guys (Shardul and Washington). They batted beautifully and I think it just shows the wicket is pretty good."

Hazlewood conceded that Australia let a few moments slip



in the day, which could have eventually made the difference.

"I thought the guys did bowl really well again and everyone else backed us up. Just let a few moments slipped, I think, and also a few half chances there. If we could have grabbed them, it could have made a little difference," the 30-year-old said.

Hazlewood said the match is at present evenly-poised and

a call on declaration in their second innings will be made taking into consideration all factors, including the weather.

"I think, the way it is set up, it is probably going to be both. Probably depends (on) who bats, if Davy (David Warner) bats a long time, things happen pretty quickly as we know. I think it will be pretty similar to maybe Sydney, three-three and half sessions, maybe four sessions," he said.

Napoli hit Fiorentina for 6

AFP ■ NAPLES

Lorenzo Insigne scored twice and set up another as Napoli thumped Fiorentina 6-0 on Sunday to move into third in Serie A.

Napoli got back to winning ways in their newly-named Diego Armando Maradona Stadium after falling to promoted Spezia in their last home match.

Insigne got the first goal after just five minutes following good work from Hirving Lozano and Andrea Petagna.

Fiorentina missed three chances to equalise, twice through Cristiano Biraghi, with Napoli keeper David Ospina denying Franck Ribery before the hosts notched three goals in the last nine minutes of the first half.

Petagna found Diego Demme to finish off, with Insigne then bursting through to set up Lozano for the third and Piotr Zielinski adding a fourth before the break.



Fiorentina could find no way past Kalidou Koulibaly and the Napoli defence.

Napoli were awarded a penalty after Gaetano Castrovilli fouled Tiemoue Bakayoko. Insigne converted from the spot for his ninth goal this season.

Substitute Matteo Politano completed the rout with a minute to go as Napoli got a major boost before next week's Coppa Italia against Juventus.

Napoli move ahead of Roma, who lost 3-0 to Lazio on Friday.

Milan lose Hernandez, Calhanoglu

Milan: Serie A leaders AC Milan will be without French defender Theo Hernandez and Turkish midfielder Hakan Calhanoglu for Monday's game in Cagliari after both returned positive tests for Covid-19, the club announced on Sunday.

AC Milan are already missing Croatian striker Ante Rebic

and Bosnian midfielder Rade Krunic, who have not featured since their positive tests on January 6.

It marks a new setback for Pioli, who is also without Ismael Bennacer, Alexis Saelemaekers and Matteo Gabbia, who are all injured, while striker Rafael Leao is suspended. **AFP**

Spurs pile misery on Blades

AFP ■ SHEFFIELD

Tottenham climbed back into the Premier League title race as Tanguy Ndombele's stunning strike sealed a 3-1 win against Sheffield United on Sunday.

Jose Mourinho's side took an early lead through a rare goal from Ivory Coast defender Serge Aurier.

Harry Kane's 19th goal of the season — the England captain's fourth in his last six games — increased Spurs' advantage before half-time.

David McGoldrick got one back for United in the second half, but Ndombele's sublime lob wrapped up the points at Bramall Lane.

The wonder-goal was the latest sign of Ndombele turning his Tottenham career around.

The 24-year-old's fine form is a stark contrast to his



struggles in his first season after arriving from Lyon, with Mourinho admitting the player had to change his mindset to get back on track.

Tottenham are on a seven-match unbeaten run in all competitions after winning at Bramall Lane for the first time since 1975.

With a home game against champions Liverpool looming next in the league on January 28, Tottenham still have a chance to mount a serious title challenge.

They sit fourth in the table, just three points behind leaders Manchester United, who were due to play third placed Liverpool later.

Meanwhile, after securing their first league win this season against Newcastle in mid-week, the bottom of the table Blades remain 11 points from safety after their 16th defeat of the campaign.

Mourinho's men made the perfect start as Steven Bergwijn's fierce effort was superbly tipped over by Aaron Ramsdale.

From the resulting corner, Aurier rose highest to meet Son Heung-min's delivery with a powerful header past Ramsdale to give Tottenham a fifth minute lead.

Tottenham have scored five goals in the opening five minutes of Premier League games this season, more than any other team.

Son nearly got on the scoresheet himself moments later when the South Korea forward fired against the post from Kane's pass.

With Tottenham on top, it was half an hour before Hugo Lloris had to make a save as he kept out Oliver Burke's shot.

Lloris had to save again from John Fleck's effort, but Kane doubled Tottenham's lead in the 40th minute.

Taking Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg's pass in stride and shrugging off Chris Basham's

challenge, Kane drilled a superb low strike past Ramsdale from 20 yards.

Kane's sixth goal from outside the area was more than anyone in the Premier League since the start of last season.

He threatened to add another long-range screamer to that list with a thunderous strike tipped over by Ramsdale early in the second half.

McGoldrick gave the Blades an unexpected lifeline when he got above Ben Davies to head home from Fleck's cross in the 59th minute.

Tottenham's habit of sitting back to defend those leads proved costly when they conceded late equalisers against Fulham, Wolves and Crystal Palace in recent weeks.

But Ndombele crushed any hopes of a United comeback in the 62nd minute.