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DCGI OK's Covaxin, Covishield emergency use

Govt plans to give free jab to 30 cr by July 2021 with 3 cr health workers, doctors, corona warriors on a priority list

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Gearing up to launch one of the world's largest coronavirus vaccination drive any time soon, India on Sunday gave final approval for the emergency use of Hyderabad-based Bharat Biotech's Covaxin and the Serum Institute of India's Covishield. Both vaccines are being produced in the country.

India's approval of the UK-developed AstraZeneca/Oxford University jab follows Britain's recent approval of the vaccine. India plans to inoculate some 30 crore people on a priority list this year by July 2021 with three crore health workers, doctors, and front corona warriors to be given the free jab.

The country's top drug regulator DCGI in its presser on Sunday said, "Emergency restricted approval has been given for the two vaccine candidates and that it is paying close attention to the increasing cases of the UK's Covid-19 new strain in the country and was prioritising its threat while conducting clinical trials."

India's Drugs Controller General VG Somani said the

efficacy of the British-developed AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine is 70.42 per cent, though he did not give out the efficacy per cent of the jab developed by the Hyderabad-based biotechnology firm, Bharat Biotech.

Somani, however, described the Indian-developed Covaxin vaccine as "safe which provides a robust immune response." He said the Indian vaccine was approved "in the public interest as an abundant precaution, in clinical trial mode, to have more options for vaccinations, especially in case of infection by mutant strains."

Somani also did not take any question from the reporters except saying, "We'll never approve anything if there is slightest of safety concern. The vaccines are 100 per cent safe. Some side effects like mild fever, pain, and allergy are common for every vaccine. It is absolute rubbish that people may become impotent."

As per the official release, the Subject Expert Committee (SEC) met on Friday and Saturday had made its recommendations in respect of the accelerated approval process



request of the SII, Bharat Biotech International Ltd as well as about phase-III trials of Cadila Healthcare Ltd.

India, which has recorded the second-highest number of infections in the world with more than 10.3 million confirmed cases to date, killing nearly 150,000 held nationwide drills on Saturday to prepare more than 90,000 healthcare workers to administer vaccines

across the country.

The DCGI said both manufacturers had submitted data showing their vaccines were safe to use and shared that SII has presented a recombinant chimpanzee adenovirus vector vaccine (Covishield) encoding the SARS-CoV-2 Spike (S) glycoprotein with technology transferred from AstraZeneca/Oxford University.

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Desi shot for restricted use during trial period

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

Amid concerns raised by various quarters regarding the efficacy of the Covaxin indigenously developed by Bharat Biotech that is yet to complete phase 3 trial, the DCGI said it will be used in restricted cases and was approved "in public interest as an abundant precaution, in clinical trial mode, to have more options for vaccinations, especially in case of infection by mutant strains."

"We'll never approve anything if there is slightest of safety concern.

"The vaccines are 110 per cent safe. Some side effects like mild fever, pain and allergy are common for every vaccine.

"It is absolute rubbish that people may become impotent," he said at a Press conference here.

However, the doctors and research experts were not con-

vinced as they termed it 'a dangerous step' given that details of Stage 3 clinical trials were yet not available.

They argued that the problem is that the Government in its eagerness to promote 'vocal for local' notion has bypassed key parts of the standard drug and vaccine-development protocol and have questioned DCGI's claims that "it is 110 per cent safe".

Experts also warned that the decision may lead to distrust among people regarding vaccines and that it may become difficult for the Union Government to defend it in the international fora.

Dr Rahul Bhargava, Director (Institute of Blood Disorder and Bone Marrow Transplant) Fortis Hospital, Gurgaon said that the Government is trying to modify the protocols related to phase three trials.

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Row over approval, Cong wants no nod till successful trials

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The grant of approval to Bharat Biotech's Covid-19 vaccine for "emergency use" has kicked a major controversy with several senior Congress leaders raising serious concern over the way the approval has been granted. The party has officially lauded the scientists and researchers for the achievement.

Senior Congress leaders and former Union Ministers Anand Sharma, Jairam Ramesh and Shashi Tharoor sought to know from the Health Minister why mandatory protocols and verification of data "had been dispensed with".

Samajwadi Party leader Akhilesh Yadav had on Saturday termed the anti-Covid vaccine to be rolled out in the country as a "vaccine of the BJP" and said he would not

take the shot. On Sunday, the former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister said the Covid-19 vaccination programme is a "sensitive process", and the Government should not treat it as a "cosmetic" event as it is a matter of lives.

Sharma, who heads the Parliamentary panel on Home Affairs which dealt with the issue at length, said the matter of granting authorisation for vaccine use needs to be taken up carefully as no country has dispensed with the mandatory phase 3 trials and verification of data.

In its report submitted on December 21 to Rajya Sabha chairman and Vice President M Venkaiah Naidu, the committee noted that the CDSCO has given no emergency use authorisation in the past.

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Farmers brave cold as rain ruins tents, blankets

Delhi records 14.8 mm rainfall at 5.30 pm

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Following the overnight rainfall in the national Capital, the farmers protesting and camping at city borders witnessed waterlogged tents, soaked firewood and blankets. The continuous rainfall throughout the day also led to waterlogging at agitation venues and water also entered in the tents of the farmers.

Heavy rain lashed across the national Capital on Sunday leading to waterlogging in some parts of the city. According to a meteorological department official, the minimum temperature in the city settled at 9.9 degrees Celsius, while the maximum settled at 15.8 degrees Celsius. The humidity oscillated between 100 and 82 per cent. The Safdarjung observatory, which provides official figures for the city, recorded 14.8 mm rainfall at 5.30 pm, while the Palam weather station recorded 5.3 mm and Lodhi Road recorded 18.6 mm rainfall.

Meanwhile, the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee (AIKSSCC) on Sunday said despite extreme cold conditions and heavy downpour, which has made wet and soggy clothes and bedding,



A view of farmers protest site during rain at Ghazipur Border in New Delhi on Sunday

the protesting farmers are in high spirits. "Farmers continue to be in high morale and are consolidating forces. All four major protest sites are being coordinated, more forces are joining in and protests in other places are continuing," said AIKSSCC.

Following the rainfall, the farmers on Sunday said they are ready to face any problem, be it heavy downpour or storm, they will not leave this place under any condition until their demands are met.

Rainwater also entered into their makeshift camps at Burari ground and the protesters were seen draining the water out and rearranging their belongings to

prevent from soaking in water. At Tikri border, Bharatiya Kisan Union Ugrahar leader Sukhdev Singh, said arrangements made by farmers to brave the cold weather are not helping much because of rains and subsequent waterlogging.

Veerpal Singh, a protesting farmer, said their blankets, clothes and wood are soaked. "Farmers clothes are soaked due to waterlogging caused by rains. Besides, we are facing difficulties to cook food as rain water has also soaked firewood. We do have an LPG cylinder but not everyone here has it," he said.

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Chinese firm bags contract for RRTS project 6 months after boycott sentiments

Shanghai-based STEC emerged lowest bidder last year in global bids

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

At a time the "boycott China" chorus has been getting louder, China-based Shanghai Tunnel Engineering Company (STEC) has been awarded a contract to construct 5.6 km underground stretch from New Ashok Nagar to Sahibabad of the Delhi-Meerut Rapid Rail Transit System project.

A major controversy had erupted in June last year after the STEC emerged as the lowest bidder for a contract worth Rs 1,126 crore for the construction of the 5.6-km tunnel on one of the stretches of the Delhi-Meerut RRTS project amid a standoff between India and China along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh. The National Capital Region Transport Corporation (NCRTC), which is executing the country's first Regional Rapid Rail Transit System (RRTS), said the contract was awarded following the set procedure and guidelines.

"Approvals have to be taken at various levels for bids that are funded by multilateral agencies. This bid was also awarded following the set procedure and guidelines," the NCRTC said. Now, all the civil work tenders of the 82-km-long Delhi-



Ghaziabad-Meerut corridor have been awarded and the construction is going on in full swing to commission the project in time, an NCRTC spokesperson said.

Five national and multinational bidders including L&T, Tata Projects Limited took part in the bid. The NCRTC had invited global bids for the first underground civil construction package in November last year and the technical bids for this contract package were opened on March 16.

The scope of work includes design and construction of twin tunnels near New Ashok Nagar DN Ramp to Sahibabad UP Ramp and one underground station at Anand Vihar. The tunneling work has to be completed in 1,095 days after issuance of the letter of acceptance (LOA) by NCRTC.

The 82-km-long corridor is being funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and procurement is governed by the guidelines of the bank and the Government.

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23 killed in Ghaziabad after roof of cremation ground shelter caves in



Rescue operation carried out by NDRF personnel after the complex roof of a crematorium collapsed due to heavy rain at Muradnagar in Ghaziabad on Sunday

UP CM announces ₹2 lakh ex gratia to kin of each of deceased

ASHOK NIRWAN ■ GHAZIABAD/MURADNAGAR

In a tragic incident, at least 23 people were killed and several others injured after a roof of a shelter at a cremation ground at Ukharsli village in Muradnagar in Ghaziabad district collapsed on Sunday.

The roof collapsed when several people had taken shelter at the structure while it rained. Most of them were relatives of Yadaram, who was being cremated at that time.

Rescue workers sifted through the rubble for hours to ensure that more victims were not trapped there.

A National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) was also sent to the spot in Muradnagar's Ukharsli village.

Apart from the 23 dead, 20 others are admitted at different hospitals, officials said on Sunday evening.

They added that the number of the injured could be higher as some others were taken away from the site by their relatives.

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath expressed grief over the loss of lives. He also announced ₹2 lakh as financial relief for the families of each person killed.

Police said they have identified the bodies of 14 deceased persons out of the 23 dead. They have been identified as Omkar (45), Neeraj alias Bunty (40), Joginder (42), Sunil (44), Om Prakash Arya (68), Robin, Pramod (34), Nitin Chauhan (34), Pappu Singh (45), Babu (45), Akshay (48), Vinod (58), Dilip Batra (68) and Mayank (18), all residents of Muradnagar district.

The CM directed the Divisional Commissioner of Meerut and Additional Director General of Police (ADGP) Meerut zone to submit a report in this connection. The CM also directed officials to give financial assistance of ₹2 lakh to the kin of each of the deceased.

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2 Scindia loyalists return as Ministers in MP's Cabinet expansion

PNS ■ BHOPAL

The Shivraj Singh Chouhan-led Madhya Pradesh Cabinet was expanded on Sunday with the induction of two loyalists of BJP leader Jyotiraditya Scindia, whose exit from the Congress in March last year triggered the fall of the 15-month-old Kamal Nath-led dispensation in the State.

Governor Anandiben Patel administered the oath of office to Tulsiram Silawat and Govind Rajput, who returned to the Cabinet after a gap of more than two months. With their induction, the current strength of the State Cabinet went up to 31.

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Alappuzha world's capital in ivory artefacts

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ KOCHI

Alappuzha in Kerala is known as the Venice of the East thanks to the rivers, placid backwaters and lakes dotting the region. The beach along the Arabian Sea and the canals meandering along the city has made it a popular tourist destination.

Unknown to most people, Alappuzha, the nerve centre of India's coir industry, is home to the world's largest collection of artefacts and art works made of ivory, crystal, porcelain and exotic wood. Not only that, the city has the largest private collection of Swarovski, Lladro, Capo de monte art works.

An initiative by Betty Karunakaran, who could be addressed as Kerala's cultural czar, has evolved into a

treasure house which outsmarts the best individual collection anywhere in the world.

The visitors' diary at Revi Karuna Karan Memorial Museum bears comments substantiating this observation. Connoisseurs of art works and avantgarde artists like Bose Krishnamachari were left spellbound after watching the museum, conceived, realised and even curated by Betty.

This museum is a tribute by Betty to her loving husband late Revi Karuna Karan, the doyen of modern coir industry in India. "His grandfather Krishnan and father Karunakaran were into coir business. Revi took off from where they left," explained Betty in a tete-a-tete with *The Pioneer*.

Both Krishnan and

Karunakaran were regular travellers all over the world as part of the coir business.

Karunakaran had his education in Europe, the UK and the USA and was the first global citizen of Kerala. Revi too had his education from Europe and the USA.

"Revi was travelling most of the time to Europe, Africa and the USA as part of the family business. The number of coir factories owned by the family shot up to nine during his tenure. He was honoured by Air India as the most frequent flyer. I accompanied him in all his business tours. While he was discussing business with his clients, I chose shopping and that too shops and museums famous for collection of artefacts," reminisces Betty.

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CAPSULE

CRACKDOWN ON 7,000 GST EVADERS, 187 HELD

New Delhi: Armed with data analytics and information from agencies, the Government has launched a massive crackdown on GST evaders, initiating action against 7,000 entities including arrest of 187 — a campaign that contributed to buoyancy in tax collection, Finance Secretary Ajay Bhushan Pandey said on Sunday.

CHINA EXPANDS POWER OF XI-LED MILITARY

Beijing: China has revised its National Defence Law, expanding the power of its armed forces headed by President Xi Jinping to mobilise military and civilian resources to defend its national interests both at home and abroad.

FORCIBLE RELIGIOUS CONVERSION OF WOMAN

3 Muslim men wrongly framed in case: UP police

Bareilly (UP): Two days after a case was lodged against three Muslim men for the alleged forcible religious conversion of a 24-year-old woman in this Uttar Pradesh district, police on Sunday said they were incorrectly framed.

"On September 9, 2020, she left home along with a man named Abrar. Subsequently, a complaint of abduction was lodged at the Faredpur police station. The woman stayed with Abrar in Delhi's Tughlaqabad for around 15 days and then returned home," Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) of Bareilly Rohit Singh Sajwan told PTI.

The case against the three Muslim men was registered on January 1.

"According to the complainant, on December 1 last year, when the girl was returning home in Faredpur, Abrar, along with his cousins Maisur and Irshad, tried to forcibly convert her religion for 'nikah'. But the police have found that the accused were not at the spot on that day. According to the evidence collected by the police, the allegations levelled against the three men by the woman and her maternal uncle were wrong and the matter will be dismissed in accordance with

provisions of law," the SSP said.

He, however, added that the charge against Abrar of issuing threats to the woman at her in-laws' place is being looked into.

"On December 11, the maternal uncle of the woman got her married in the Aonla area of the district. Abrar went to the woman's in-laws' place and told her to come to Faredpur soon or else, she will face difficulties. This is being examined and if the allegation is found to be true, action will be initiated against Abrar," the SSP said. The woman's parents are no more. **PTI**

Delhi event against UP 'love jihad' law postponed after police deny permission

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

In view of the guidelines issued by Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) due to COVID-19, the Delhi Police on Sunday denied an event planned against the Uttar Pradesh 'love jihad' law at Jantar Mantar. The organizer said that it was postponed after they were denied permission by Delhi Police.

The event, titled 'India Against Love Jihad Law', was scheduled at 12 noon wherein interfaith couples were expected to tell their stories. Love jihad is a term coined by Hindutva groups for Hindu girls being allegedly forced to convert to Islam in the guise of marriage.

Political analyst Tehseen Poonawalla, who is leading the 'India Against Love Jihad Law' initiative along with social scientist Akriti Bhatia and lawyer Mani Chander, said they will hold the

event next Sunday, that is, January 10.

"A police officer told us they had 'orders from above' to not allow 'such couples' to hold an event. I want to ask what do they mean by 'such couples', all we wanted to do was celebrate love and togetherness with some music. But Delhi Police is not working as per the Constitution," said Poonawalla.

In a letter to Poonawalla, the city police denied the permission to hold the event citing the Delhi Disaster Management Authority's (DDMA) guidelines to control the spread of COVID-19.

A senior police official said permission was denied for the event in view of the guidelines issued by DDMA, according to which, all social, academic, sports, cultural and other gatherings are prohibited to prevent and control the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic.

Poonawalla said if the event won't be allowed next Sunday, his team would protest in front of the house of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"If they will not allow it again, we will go sit in front of the PM's house... then the parliament and the Supreme Court. How long will they stop us?" he asked.

The Uttar Pradesh government passed the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance, 2020 on November 28 which aims at curbing forcible or fraudulent religious conversions, including those for the sake of marriage.

Subsequently, the Madhya Pradesh government passed the Religious Freedom Bill, 2020 which provides for prison term of up to 10 years and fine of Rs 1 lakh for conversion through marriage or by any other fraudulent means.

Students to answer questions for 80 marks in Class 10 Odisha board exams

Bhubaneswar: The Odisha Government on Sunday said that students will answer questions for 80 marks in each paper instead of 100 marks in the state board examinations this year.

Fifty of that 80 marks will comprise objective questions in OMR (optical mark recognition) format and the remaining 30 marks will be subjective. School and Mass Education Minister SR Dash said.

However, the Board of Secondary Education has decided that the overall valuation in each paper will be for 100 marks, Dash said adding that 20 marks will be evaluated on the basis of the percentage secured by an examinee from the given 80 marks in a particular paper.

The state government had on Saturday said that the annual board exam for class 10 students will be held from May 3 to 15.

The results will be announced within 45-50 days, the minister said, adding that the government has already issued notification for opening the schools for classes 10 and 11 students from January 8. **PTI**



A woman walks past a mural on aquatic life, painted by Navi Mumbai Municipal Corporation (NMMC) as a part of city beautification project for 'Swachh Survekshan 2020', in Navi Mumbai on Sunday **PTI**

20-year-old woman given triple talaq in UP's Barabanki

Barabanki (UP): A 20-year-old married woman from Uttar Pradesh's Barabanki district has accused her husband of giving triple talaq on the phone from abroad over demand for more dowry, police said on Sunday.

The woman lodged a complaint in this regard on Saturday with Additional Superintendent of Police (North) R S Gautam, after which he directed officials to probe the matter and file a report.

Citing the complaint of the woman, the police said that she got married to a 28-year-old man from Kushinagar three years ago. **PTI**

Delhi Police arrests absconding father-son duo for duping investors of over ₹2 crore

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Economic Offences Wing (EOW) of Delhi Police has arrested father and son, duo, for allegedly for inducing and duping investors to the tune of more than Rs two crores in the name of lucky draw scheme.

The accused has been identified as Bhuvnesh Gupta (59) while his son has been identified as Vivek Gupta (34), residents of Delhi's Uttam Nagar area.

According to Dr O P Mishra, the Joint Commissioner of Police, EOW, a First Information Report (FIR) was registered after a complaint was received in

which the complainant Prabhat Gupta and other victims alleged that the firm Shree Mohini Jewellers and its beneficiaries Bhuvnesh Gupta, Vivek Gupta and their other relatives, induced them and other persons in the name of lucky draw scheme.

"The alleged persons misrepresented to them that it was a government approved scheme and showed them certain government agency papers. As the alleged persons were running a Jewellers shop in the area, the victims believed them. In the month of June 2017, the alleged persons introduced two schemes," said the Joint CP.

"In the first scheme, every member had to deposit Rs 3,000 per month and in the second scheme, each member had to deposit Rs. 75,000 per month for a period of 20 months. They also offered costly items like car, Air Conditioner and fridge as prize money in these schemes," said the Joint CP.

"The alleged persons also prepared and distributed the pamphlets regarding the schemes. They also held 18 draws up to November 18, 2018 but on November 29, they shut their shops overnight and ran away from the locality after collecting approx Rs 2.21 Crores from multiple victims," said the Joint CP.

Row over approval, Cong wants no nod...

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The report suggested that all necessary and mandatory requirements must be duly fulfilled and all trial phases completed.

"The Health Ministry needs to give cogent reasons for dispensing with the mandatory protocols and requirements in this case, since it involves the health and safety of those front-line workers who will be vaccinated under the restricted category," Sharma said on Sunday.

"The restricted use emergency authorisation for the Bharat Biotech vaccine presently undergoing Phase 3 trials raises bonafide concerns. Standard protocols and mandatory requirement of publication of data on safety and efficacy which is reviewed and verifiable is important for the integrity of the process," said the former Commerce Minister.

Tharoor said the approval is premature and Covaxin's use should be avoided as it could be dangerous.

"The Covaxin has not yet had Phase 3 trials. Approval was premature and could be dangerous. Dr Harsh Vardhan should please clarify. Its use should be avoided till full trials are over. India can start with the AstraZeneca vaccine in the meantime," tweeted Tharoor, a former Minister in then Manmohan Singh Government.

Jairam Ramesh asked Health Minister Harsh Vardhan to clarify why internationally-accepted protocols on phase 3 trials "are being modified". "Bharat Biotech is a first-rate enterprise, but it is puzzling that internationally-accepted protocols relating to phase 3 trials are being modified for Covaxin. Health Minister Harsh Vardhan should clarify," he said on Twitter.

However, Congress chief spokesperson Randeep Surjewala tweeted, "Kudos to our scientists and researchers of Bharat Biotech on approval of the indigenously developed corona vaccine and Serum Institute and its scientists too. India has always led the way in path-breaking innovations in the past and will continue to do the same. Great start for New Year."

2 Scindia loyalists return as ...

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The number of members in the council of ministers in MP cannot exceed 35. During their brief oath-taking ceremony held at the Raj Bhawan, Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, Protest Speaker Rameshwar Sharma and several ministers of the state cabinet were present.

A public relations officer of Raj Bhawan on Sunday said that the resignations of two other ministers, Imarti Devi and Girraj Dandotia, who lost the November 3 Assembly bypolls, have been accepted a few days back. This is the third expansion of the state cabinet ever since Chouhan took over as the chief minister for the fourth term in March 2020 after the collapse of the Congress government. Silawat and Rajput had been inducted into the cabinet in April last year during its first expansion. However, they had to step down in October as they were not members of the state legislature because the coronavirus pandemic delayed the bypolls.

There is a provision that a non-MLA, who got inducted in the cabinet, should get elected to the State Assembly within six months. The second expansion of Chouhan's cabinet took place on July 2 last year with the induction of 28 ministers, including a dozen loyalists of Jyotiraditya Scindia. The first expansion was held on April 21 last year wherein five ministers, including Silawat and Rajput, were inducted. Silawat and Rajput were among the Congress MLAs who had resigned and joined the BJP with Scindia in March last year.

In the Assembly bypolls held in November, the BJP had won 19 out of the 28 seats, while the opposition Congress had bagged nine. Silawat and Rajput had won the bypoll from Sanver and Surkhi constituencies respectively. **PTI**

Farmers brave cold as rain ruins tents, blankets

From Page 1

Farmer leader Abhimanyu Kohar, who is a member of Sankyukt Kisan Morcha, said farmers have waterproof tents but they cannot protect them from biting cold and waterlogging.

"The situation is very bad at protest sites due to rain which has caused waterlogging. There is so much cold after the rains, but the government is not able to see our misery," he said.

Gurwinder Singh, who is camping at Singhu Border, said there is waterlogging at some places as civic facilities are not up to the mark but asserted that the weather will not dampen the spirit of farmers who have been protesting for over a month.

"Despite facing several problems, we will not move from here until our demands are met," he said.

Dharmveer Yadav, who is camping at Ghazipur border protest site, said farmers will not move an inch from their agitation venues.

The Met department has forecast cloudy sky, light to moderate rain or thunderstorm accompanied with gusty winds 20-30 kmph on Monday. It also predicted possibility of hailstorm at isolated places. The maximum and minimum temperatures would be at 18 degrees and 10 degrees Celsius, respectively, on Monday, it said.

Heavy rains led to waterlogging in Pul Prahladpur Underpass, Vasant Kunj and Swami Nagar.

Talking about meeting with the Government on January 4, the AIKSCC said the success of the proposed talks depends entirely on the repeal of the three Farm Acts.

"There has been much speculation about procedures for repeal of the Acts. AIKSCC clarifies that it can be done by an Ordinance followed by a Parliamentary repeal and the Constitution provides for the Government and Parliament to make as well as repeal laws. They are neither time consuming, nor complicated. If the government has the will, it is a matter of only a day or two. The main hurdle is the political will of the BJP led NDA government. The main question is - does the government stand with corporates or the farmers?" said AIKSCC.

23 killed in Ghaziabad after roof of cremation...

From Page 1

Union Minister VK Singh, who is a Member of Parliament from Ghaziabad, and several senior police and administration officials, visited the accident site. According to District Magistrate Dr Ajay Shankar Pande, the incident happened when the people of Dayanand Colony near Ukhralsi village were going to cremate the body of 62-year-old Yadram at the local Shamshah Ghat.

Among those who died were journalist Mukesh Soni's 22-year-old son Digvijay Soni. Following the incident, the CM also took cognizance of the incident of roof collapse in Muradnagar, Ghaziabad and instructed the District Magistrate and Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) to reach the spot immediately and conduct relief and rescue operations. UP's Minister of State for Health and local MLA, Atul Garg also reached the hospital and took stock of the situation and treatment of the injured.

He directed the hospital administration to take any carelessness in treating the injured.

Desi shot for...

From Page 1

"We could have given go ahead to the vaccine developed by the Pfizer and Serum Institute of India as they have conducted needed studies. Biotech is still undergoing requisite trial and giving go ahead on the basis of present data can be harmful for the people."

"Completely unaware of any data on efficacy of Bharat Biotech vaccine," Dr Gagandeep Kang, an infectious disease expert told a news channel adding that it will be a stretch to say the vaccine will work against the UK strain of Covid. Her statement came even as AIMS Director Dr Randeep Guleria said that Covaxin can be used as a backup. The All India Drug Action Network (AIDAN) called for withdrawal of nod to the Covaxin. "In light of the intense concerns arising from the absence of efficacy data and hence the limited regulatory review of the vaccine candidate, the implications of public rollout of an untested product, and lack of transparency we urge the DCGI to reconsider the recommendations of the SEC in granting the REU approval to Covaxin," it said.

The only data for humans, available through publication pre-prints, are for safety and immunogenicity from Phase 1 and Phase 2 trials, across a total of 755 participants. In the interest of transparency it will be in

the fitness of things that the trial data on the basis of which decisions have been taken by the SEC are immediately made public. It is also not clear under which provisions of the extant law the SEC has recommended for grant of REU approval and in "clinical trial mode" at that, AIDAN said.

"The hypothesis being propagated that the whole virion inactivated vaccine is likely to be effective against mutations of the virus is not being supported by any efficacy from the trial because no data have as yet been generated in the Phase 3 trial. Yet this appears to have been used to justify the totally non-sequitur decision which has no basis in the science of rational vaccine development," it said.

Dr Randeep Guleria, who is also member of the national task force on the coronavirus management in the country, said "in an emergency situation when there is a sudden increase in cases and we need to vaccinate, Bharat Biotech vaccine will be used. It can also be used as a backup when we are not sure how efficacious the Serum Institute vaccine is going to be."

"Approval clearly says 'emergency situation' keeping in mind the circulating variant strains and at the same time, they have to continue the trial and get the data in. Once that data comes in, we will be more confident as far as safety and efficacy is concerned," he said.

Chinese firm bags contract...

From Page 1

According to the ADB's procurement guidelines, vendors from all member countries of the bank are eligible to participate in the bidding process without any discrimination.

The NCRTC had invited bids for the construction of the tunnel from New Ashok Nagar to Sahibabad of Delhi Ghaziabad Meerut RRTS corridor on November 9, 2019. Five companies submitted technical bids and all the five bidders qualified in the technical bid evaluation.

In September last year, the Union Housing and Urban Affairs Ministry had unveiled the first look of the RRTS train, the design of which is inspired by Delhi's iconic Lotus Temple.

It can attain a top speed of 180 km per hour on the Delhi-Ghaziabad-Meerut corridor.

Delhi-Meerut RRTS project is an 82.15-km-long, under construction, semi-high speed rail corridor and connects Delhi-Ghaziabad-Meerut. As per NCRTC, it is one of the three rapid-rail corridors planned under the Regional Rapid Transport System (RRTS) project.

With a maximum speed of 160 km/h (99.42 mph), the distance between Delhi and Meerut will be covered in around 62 minutes.

Alappuzha world's capital...

From Page 1

The net result led to the establishment of the museum. A stroll along the museum takes the visitor to a trip to the ancient world. A "Churulan Vallam" (single seat manually operated small boat) welcomes the visitor. The Churulan was the mode of transport between the islands that dot the backwaters and lakes of Alappuzha's landscape. Then there is the 1948 model Buick Super car imported from the USA by Revi's father Karunakaran. "This was the car in which I and Revi travelled from my house at Kollam to this house after our marriage function," said Betty. The car has been maintained in an immaculate condition even now. The Swarovski and Lladro collections feature some of the breath-taking creations which bear the signature of the magic fingers that carved them out. "Though the statues are made out of marble, crystals and ivory, they do have life in them and elevate us to the world of divine love," said S Sasidharan, a business man from Virudhunagar in Tamil Nadu who travelled all the way by car to catch glimpse of the collection.

Sasidharan was enthralled by the Laadro statues as well as the uniquely designed and carved liquor bottles and containers. Betty had travelled to more than 138 countries and rare artefacts from these places adorn the museum. It is the style in which they have been arranged that add to the beauty of the collections. "The journeys remain unfinished. The trip to Antarctica got botched up in 2019 due to a hailstorm. I have to visit the north and south poles," said Betty.

The boat races in the Punnameda River are long gone... they have become a ritual over the years. But the RKK Museum compensates for that shortcoming.

DCGI OK's...

From Page 1

"The firm submitted safety, immunogenicity, and efficacy data generated on 23,745 participants aged 7 years or older from overseas clinical studies. The overall vaccine efficacy was found to be 70.42 per cent. Further, Serum was granted permission to conduct Phase-II/III clinical trial on 1,600 participants within the country."

"The firm also submitted the interim safety and immunogenicity data generated from this trial and the data was found comparable with the data from the overseas clinical studies. After detailed deliberations the SEC has recommended for the grant of permission for restricted use in emergency situation subject to certain regulatory conditions. The clinical trial ongoing within the country by the firm will continue," said the DCGI in the statement.

About Bharat Biotech's Whole Virion Inactivated Corona Virus Vaccine (Covaxin) being developed in collaboration with ICMR and NIV (Pune), the statement said from where they received the virus seed strains has well established track record of safety and efficacy.

"The firm has generated safety and immunogenicity data in various animal species such as mice, rats, rabbits, Syrian hamster, and also conducted challenge studies on non-

human primates (Rhesus macaques) and hamsters.

"All these data has been shared by the firm with the CDSCO. Phase I and Phase II clinical trials were conducted in approx. 800 subjects and the results have demonstrated that the vaccine is safe and provides a robust immune response."

"The Phase III efficacy trial was initiated in India in 25,800 volunteers and till date, 22,500 participants have been vaccinated across the country and the vaccine has been found to be safe as per the data available till date," said the DCGI in the statement.

The SEC has reviewed the data on safety and immunogenicity of the vaccine and recommended for grant of permission for restricted use in emergency situation in public interest as an abundant precaution, in clinical trial mode, to have more options for vaccinations, especially in case of infection by mutant strains. The clinical trial ongoing within the country by the firm will continue, as per the statement.

Serum and Bharat Biotech vaccines have to be administered in two doses. All the three vaccines have to be stored at 2-8° C.

"After adequate examination, the CDSCO has decided to accept the recommendations of the SEC and accordingly, vaccines of Serum and Bharat Biotech are being approved for restricted use in emergency situation and permission," said the DCGI.

PUBLIC NOTICE

Public at large is hereby informed that my client Smt. Sarada Anuja Wife of Late Sri Som Nath Ahuja declared that she has transferred her property at B-38, Gopal Nagar, Azadpur, Delhi-110033 is in sound and disposing and without under influence operation of fraud and due of natural love and affection of the donor, towards the Donees i.e. Sri Pankaj Ahuja S/o Late Sri Som Nath Ahuja & Sri Tarun Ahuja S/o Late Sri Som Nath Ahuja i.e. the mentioned property through relinquishment Gift Deed executed by Smt. Sarada Anuja Wife of Late Sri Som Nath Ahuja W.R.T. this property she is the absolute owner of the property. If somebody has any objections regarding this property or will please contact me, within 10 days at Advocate Amarandra K. Dubeey, (Em. No. D-200/2019) 501A, 5th Floor, Usha Kran Building, Commercial Complex, Azadpur, Delhi-110033 Mob.: 9599801188.

Central Coalfields Limited
A Miniratna Company
(A Subsidiary of Coal India Limited)

NOTICE

"All the tenders issued by CIL and its Subsidiaries for procurement of Goods, Works and Services are available on websites of Coal India Ltd. www.coalindia.in/respective Subsidiary Company (CCL, www.centralcoalfields.in), CIL e-procurement portal <https://coalindiatenders.nic.in> and Central Public Procurement Portal <https://eprocure.gov.in> in addition, procurement is also done through GeM Portal <https://gem.gov.in>"

UJVN Limited
H.O.: "UJJWAL", Maharani Bagh, G.M.S. Road, Dehradun-248006
Telephone: 0135-2763808 Fax: 0135-2763508
CIN No. UJ40101UR2001SGC025866, Website: www.ujvnl.com

Letter No.: 07 **Tender Notice** Date: 02.01.2021

Office of the Executive Engineer (Maint.), Chilla Power House via Haridwar, Pauri Garhwal (Uttarakhand), invites sealed tenders from interested parties. Brief summary of tender is given below:
i) NIT No. 21/EEM/2020-21 (ii) NIT No. 22/EEM/2020-21
Name of work- i) Supply, Installation, Testing and Commissioning (SITC) of 5 Ton x25Mtr Electric wire Rope Hoist at Chilla Power House.
ii) Repairing of 4 No. Stator Air Coolers of Chilla Power House
Estimated cost: (i) Rs. 12,90,000/- (ii) Rs. 9,95,920/-
Date of availability of bid document: 04.01.2021 from 16:00 Hrs on website Last date for submission of tender: 27.01.2021 upto 16:00 Hrs For fuller & further details, kindly visit our website. The tender documents can be downloaded from the Nigam's website www.ujvnl.com
Executive Engineer (Maint.), Chilla

"AVOID WASTEFUL USE OF ELECTRICITY"

Covid-19 positive cases fall below 500 in city: Jain

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Citing the corona health bulletin, Delhi Health Minister Satyendar Jain on Sunday said for the first time, positive cases were less than 500, and the positivity rate was on a continuous decline.

According to the Minister, the outbreak contained but advisable to wear a mask and follow all precautions.

On the protocol that will be followed for vaccine for which DGCI has give approval, he said that in the first phase, healthcare and frontline workers, people over 50 plus age or with co-morbidity will be injected.

"In the first phase, 500-600



covid centres will be made which will be further escalated to 1000," he said, adding, "even after de-escalation of covid

beds, there will still 10,500-11,000 available. As far as the shutting down of covid centres is concerned, the Delhi

Government is treading very cautiously and is not making decisions in a haste."

Delhi has reported 494 positive cases and the positivity rate was 0.73 percent. "For the first time in the last 7 and a half months, the number of cases has gone below 500. After 17 May 2020, this is the lowest number of cases. Positivity rate has fallen to 0.73 percent implying that in every 1000 tests conducted, 7 positive cases are detected. Testing is still being conducted on a large scale."

"We have just been made aware that the vaccines developed by Bharat Biotech and Serum Institute of India have been given approval. Delhi

Government is making all the arrangements. The protocol will be that health care and frontline workers, people over 50 years of age or with co-morbidity will be injected in the first phase of the roll-out. Delhi has 3 lac healthcare workers, and 6lac frontline workers. The vaccine will be first rolled out to these 9 lac people," Jain added.

A dry run had conducted in three different types of centres- government hospital, private hospital and government dispensary situated in Delhi.

"Storage facilities have been made. Ultimately, 1000 centres will be made. In the first phase, we will make 500-600 centres," Jain said.



Farmers' protest will continue till rollback of new agri laws: Tikait

PARVESH SHARMA ■ GURUGRAM

Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) leader, Rakesh Tikait, who reached the protesting site in Gurugram on Sunday to support the farmers ongoing stir in the national Capital while addressing the people at the protesting site said that the farmers agitation will

not end till the government rolls back the new agriculture laws.

Tikait alleged that the new farm laws have been made for the benefit of the capitalists. He said that till the demands of the farmers are not accepted, the farmers will stay in Delhi and keep protesting against these laws. He said that soon Rajasthan farmers will reach

the Delhi border. The Samyukt Kisan Morcha, Gurugram should help them in all possible ways.

On this, President of United Front Gurugram, Chaudhary Santokh Singh, assured that all possible help will be given to all the farmers who come from Rajasthan.

Bharatiya Kisan Union General Secretary, Yudhveer Singh, who was also present at the protest site, said that the government is misleading the farmers. He said that the government should abolish the three laws.

In a joint statement, Santokh Singh said that despite the bitter cold, hundreds of workers from several workers' organizations have been sitting on a dharna in support of the demands of the farmers.

Singh said their support to the farmer's brother will continue till the roll back of the new agriculture laws.



RISING LEVELS OF DUST AND AIR POLLUTION

Three commissioners of MCDs summoned

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Delhi Government's House panel on Sunday summoned three commissioners of the three municipal corpora-

tions after receiving complaints on rising levels of dust and air pollution in different parts in Delhi.

Mechanical sweeping of roads have been recommend-

ed to control dust pollution major factor in polluting air, expressing concerns on this the Environment Committee of the Delhi Legislative Assembly's chairperson Atishi said that

dust is the major contributor to Delhi's pollution, Delhi people are unable to breathe yet MCD is not doing mechanical sweeping.

"Committee has received several complaints from different parts of the city regarding rising levels of dust and ensuing air pollution caused by the manual sweeping of roads being carried out by the respective corporations, she added.

All three MCD - North, South and West commissioners have been asked to file a report, on the implementation of NGT orders and TERI recommendations, use of MRS machines, and steps taken to eliminate manual sweeping of roads in Delhi.

Atishi had said that the MCDs must submit a complete report on the use of MRS machines in the city and any other recent steps taken by the MCDs to improve their efficacy or eliminate manual sweeping.

On receiving continuous

complaints from across Delhi regarding rising levels of dust due to manual sweeping, the Committee sought clarification from MCD commissioners on the non-adoption of mechanical sweeping despite NGT orders.

Atishi also said that the Environment Committee has received several complaints from different parts of the city regarding rising levels of dust and ensuing air pollution caused by the manual sweeping of roads being carried out by the respective corporations.

Atishi said, "The Committee received several complaints from different parts of the city regarding rising levels of dust and ensuing air pollution caused by the manual sweeping of roads being carried out by the respective corporations. The panel had asked three MCD commissioners to submit detailed steps taken by the MCDs to stop dust pollution in Delhi."



Vehicle lifter held in G'gram, dozen cases solved

Gurugram : The Gurugram police have arrested a vehicle lifter and claimed to have solved around two dozen cases of vehicle theft which the culprit along with his accomplice had committed multiple locations in Gurugram.

Police said on Sunday, the stolen vehicles have already been recovered from the possession of the culprits.

The arrested accused has been identified as Wasim a resident of Nuh district.

"Two dozens of stolen motorcycles have been recovered from the possession of the arrested accused. The accused was arrested from Bhondsi area in Gurugram, by the Gurugram police following a secret input," said Subhash Boken, spokesperson of the Gurugram police.

In connection with the crime, a complaint of vehicle theft was filed by Suresh the complainant, a resident of Jamalpur in Gurugram at

Stolen vehicles have already been recovered from the possession of the culprits. The arrested accused has been identified as Wasim

Bilaspur police station on November 4, 2020.

During police questioning, the kingpin, Wasim confessed to vehicle theft incidents. Which he along with accomplices committed at multiple locations of Gurugram.

"He was a habitual offender. On his direction the other gang members had executed the crime in the city. The accused will be taken on police remand for further questioning. Further investigation is on," said Boken.

Man beaten to death in Raghur Nagar

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A 27-year-old man was beaten to death by a group of people in west Delhi's Raghur Nagar. The incident occurred on the intervening night of Saturday-Sunday.

The deceased has been identified as Satender, a resident of Janta Colony in Shivaji Vihar.

According to Deepak Purohit, the Additional Commissioner of Police of the West district, Satender along with his friends Nitin and Manish had an altercation with Vicky on the intervening night of Saturday and Sunday.

"Later, Vicky and his associates assaulted the victim. Satender was rushed to Guru Gobind Singh Government Hospital, where he was declared brought dead by doctors," said the Deputy Commissioner of Police.

"A case has been registered and the motive behind the incident is being ascertained," said the Deputy Commissioner of Police.

Height of Ghazipur landfill site reduced by 12 m: Gambhir

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Member of Parliament (MP) from East Delhi, Guatam Gambhir on Sunday claimed that the height of the Ghazipur landfill site has reduced by 12 metres due to sustained efforts made in the last one year.

The landfill site where garbage from East Delhi Municipal Corporation (EDMC) areas is dumped, was saturated since 2002 and had attained a height of 65 metres.

"The EDMC has deployed 15 trolleys to process the legacy waste by excavating the dump. Then it is transported to trolleys for segregation. Machinery including excavators, trucks, loaders were deployed 24x7 to dig the waste and transport it to trolleys for segregation," said an EDMC official.

According to Gambhir, since day one of becoming East Delhi MP, his top most

priority has been to ensure a substantial reduction in the Ghazipur landfill which is a source of pollution and misery for the people of the constituency.

"Multiple meetings with various authorities, use of crores of rupees from my MP LAD fund and tremendous efforts put in by EDMC, have finally helped reduce the height of the landfill at the top by 12 metres," said Gambhir.

"After almost one and a half years we are finally witnessing the initial results of our hard labour and the garbage mountain is reducing. I would like to tell East Delhi people that this is just the beginning and we will not give up till we completely remove this gigantic dump," said Gambhir.

"Arrangements were made to transport the inert material after processing to NTPC Badarpur for its biodiversity park while the refuse derivative fuel (RDF) is sent to a waste to energy plant," he said.

AAP accuses BJP-ruled civic bodies of corruption

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

Targeting the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) ruled municipal corporations, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) senior leader Durgesh Pathak said that the MCDs are involved in corruption in the waste segregation process and have paid Rs 1450 more per ton to private contractors for segregation and lifting of road track material from the waste.

"MCD used to pay this money from its own pockets, without forming any process or any calculation for this Rs 3250 per ton. They took out a tender when an objection was raised by MCD officials in April 2020. When the tender process was completed the rate that came about was Rs 1800 per ton. Which means they were paying about Rs 1450 per ton for the process and did a scam worth crores of rupees," he added.

Demanding investigation, he further said that mayors, councilors and BJP leaders have a very important role to play in this corruption and strict action must be taken

against them.

"The NDMC mayor claims that they do not have the audit report, but he knows that the mayor has the report but is avoiding answering questions," the AAP leader said, adding, "An audit report of Bhalswa landfill has come and the entire audit report prepared by the MCD officials is a proof of corruption of the BJP."

"On Saturday, we told you that the MCD rented 50 cleaning machines at a rent of Rs 180 crores for a period of 5 years, and the same machines can be bought at an amount of Rs 8.5 crores. The BJP had no answer on this, instead they said that they haven't received any audit report. Mayor sir, if you do not have the audit report I will send it to you even though I know that you have it because I have got the audit report from your office itself."

"The same audit report has another big corruption ordeal. After the process of the waste segregation in the machines, the MCD pays money to private contractors to lift and sell all the stones and road track material found in the

waste on a ton per truck basis. They paid Rs 3250 per ton of road track material to send it ahead. MCD used to pay this money from its own pockets, without forming any process or any calculation for this Rs 3250 per ton.

When the MCD officials raised an objection, they took out a tender for this process. When the tender process was completed the rate that came about was Rs. 1800 per ton. Which means that they were paying Rs 3250 per ton from their pockets instead of Rs 1800 per ton, they were paying about Rs 1450 more per ton for waste segregation.

They sold thousands of tonnes of waste and paid Rs 1450 more per ton for waste segregation. If you calculate, this is a scam worth crores of rupees, and this is the money that could have been used for paying salaries to MCD employees. They decided along with the contractors without due process and kept on paying Rs 3250 per ton and reduced it to Rs 1800 per ton. when MCD officials raised objections " Pathak added.

DDA launches housing scheme with 1,354 flats

Costliest house worth ₹2.14 cr

New Delhi: The new housing scheme of the DDA was launched on Saturday with 1,354 flats on offer, the costliest ones being worth Rs 2.14 cr in the high-income group category.

Maximum number of flats - 757 - have been offered in the MIG category, the official said.

The scheme is completely online, done through the newly developed AWAAS software of the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) from processing of application to possession of flats, a senior official said.

The scheme was virtually launched by Delhi Development Authority Vice Chairman Anurag Jain.

Under the scheme, over 1,350 flats are on offer for various categories at locations such as Dwarka, Jasola, Manglapuri, Vasant Kunj and Rohini, they said.

HIG, LIG and EWS/Janta categories, the number of flats on offer are 254, 52 and 291 respectively, according to the information shared in the brochure of the scheme.

HIG flats are available in 3 BHK and 2 BHK categories; while MIG ones are in 2 BHK category.

In 3 BHK category of HIG, 215 flats are on offer in Jasola, Pocket 9B in the price range of Rs 1.97 cr to 2.14 cr, the brochure said.

In the same category, 13 flats are on offer in Vasant Kunj in the price range of Rs 1.43 cr to Rs 1.72 cr, it said.

MIG flats are located in Dwarka, Vasant Kunj, and Rohini, while EWS ones in Mangalagiri, officials said.

The scheme was approved recently during an online meeting of the authority, the highest decision-making body of the DDA, chaired by Delhi Lt

Governor and DDA Chairman Anil Bajjal.

The applications under the scheme can be sent till February 16, the DDA said.

The applicant will have to visit DDA only for the purpose of execution deed.

Eligible allottees may avail benefits under credit-linked

subsidy scheme under PMAY (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana) - Housing for All (Urban) the DDA said.

Since, a number of concessions are being offered under the EWS category, the allottees in this category will not be permitted to sell or transfer or otherwise part with

the possession of the flat in any manner for a period of five years from the delivery of possession, it said.

The last DDA Housing Scheme was launched in March 2019, offering nearly 18,000 flats under four categories - 488 (HIG), 1,555 (MIG), 8,383 (LIG) and 7,496 (EWS).



Govt sets up Tamil academy to promote Tamil language, culture

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

The Delhi Government has set up Tamil academy to promote Tamil language and culture. On Sunday, Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia appointed Ex-MCD councillor and current member of Delhi Tamil Sangam N. Raja as the Vice-Chairman of the academy.

The newly set-up academy will soon be allocated an office space with all the necessary infrastructure. "Delhi is a culturally rich city where people from all parts of the country live and work. It is this diversity that forms Delhi's vibrant and cosmopolitan culture. Delhi has a large population of people from Tamil Nadu and we want to present a platform to the people of Delhi to get the taste of the art and culture of Tamil Nadu. I am glad that many notable people like the newly elected Vice Chairman

N. Raja came forward and joined hands with us to establish this academy," said Deputy CM Sisodia who also holds the charge of the Art, Culture and Language Department.

On the occasion, Raja said, "The Tamil language and culture have a long tradition in the history of Indian culture as well as in Delhi. With the formation of this academy, we will kick-start a new journey of preserving the language in Delhi and promote it too."

The Department of Art, Culture and Language of the Delhi govt has decided that the new academy will introduce various awards to promote and reward the good works of people in Tamil language and culture.

The government will also provide language courses through this academy. The Delhi government will also celebrate and organise cultur-

al festivals for the people of Tamil Nadu.

Raja has a longstanding involvement in preserving and promoting the Tamil language and culture.

He has been actively promoting the language through the Delhi Tamil Sangam, of which he is a current member.

The Delhi Tamil Sangam frequently organises music, literary and dance events to promote the culture of Tamil Nadu, and has provided the stage to several budding Bharatnatyam dancers as well as its exponents, which is the classical dance form of the state. Raja is also a member of the Malai Mandir Trust, and has held the position of MCD councillor of ward no 64 twice, from 2007 to 2018.

He also holds the position of General Secretary of the Adarsh Navvyuk Ramlila Committee.

PM hails DCGI vaccine nod

Approval for vaccines accelerates India's journey to be Covid free: Modi

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Stating that the "road to a Covid-free nation is open", Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated the nation and thanked the scientific and healthcare community on Sunday after the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI) officially approved Oxford-AstraZeneca and Bharat Biotech's Covid-19 vaccines for emergency use. For its part, the BJP described the Opposition's criticism and doubts over the vaccine as unwarranted and "politically motivated".

Taking to Twitter, Modi said the announcement marks a "decisive turning point" in India's fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. He said every Indian would be proud that both the vaccines are "made in India".

"A decisive turning point to strengthen a spirited fight! DCGI granting approval to vaccines of Serum Institute of India and Bharat Biotech accelerates the road to a healthier



A decisive turning point to strengthen a spirited fight! DCGI granting approval to vaccines of @SerumInstIndia and @BharatBiotech accelerates the road to a healthier and COVID-free nation. Congratulations India. Congratulations to our hardworking scientists and innovators.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

BJP leader and its IT Cell head Amit Malviya described the criticism as unwarranted saying vaccines have undergone all required trials.

He said the Modi Government had been taking all the right steps for Covid-19 containment and excellently managed the crisis with one of the lowest death rates in the world. "We did better than the developed countries including America," he said.

Union Minister Giriraj Singh also hit back at the Opposition saying it is politically motivated and the criticism of the vaccine is made for

"other reasons".

Samajwadi party leader Akhilesh Yadav had on Saturday said he would not take the "BJP vaccine" which did not go down well within the Opposition ranks itself with the likes of NC leader Omar Abdullah coming out in support of the vaccine.

While the BSP too was quick to support the vaccines, its supremo went public in welcoming the DCGI nod and congratulating the scientific fraternity. She urged the Government to make the vaccines available to the poor free of cost.

On Sunday in a damage control exercise Yadav said the ruling party should not make a "spectacle" out of Covid-19 vaccination and should launch the inoculation drive only after making solid arrangements in advance.

Taking to Twitter, Yadav also asked the Government to announce the dates on which economically weaker sections of the population will be vaccinated.

Govt cannot see sufferings of annadatas, says Sonia

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

A day before the final round of talks between the Centre and the protesting farmers over the controversial farm laws, Congress president Sonia Gandhi on Sunday launched a scathing attack on the Modi Government saying that for the first time since independence such an "arrogant" Government has come to power which cannot see the sufferings of the "annadatas".

Demanding that the new farm laws be immediately withdrawn unconditionally, Sonia said Governments and their leaders who ignore public sentiments in a democracy cannot govern for long and it is now quite clear that the protesting farmers will not bow in the face of the Centre's policy of "tire and pushover".

The Congress has been seeking the repeal of the three new farm laws, alleging that they will ruin farming and the farmers while the party is supporting the farmers' agitation against the legislations.

"There is still time, the Modi Government should leave the arrogance of power and immediately withdraw the three black laws unconditionally to end the agitation of the farmers who are dying in the cold and rain. This is Rajdhama and a true tribute to the farmers who have lost their lives," Sonia Gandhi said.

The Modi Government should remember that democracy means protecting the interests of the people and the farmers-workers, she said. "Along with the people of the country, I am also disturbed seeing the condition of the 'annadatas' who have been agitating for 39 days at the borders of Delhi in the bitter cold and rain in support of their demands," she said.

In the wake of the Government's apathy, so far, more than 50 farmers have lost their lives with some even tak-



ing the step of committing suicide due to the Government's neglect, mentioned Sonia. "But neither the heartless Modi Government relented nor the Prime Minister or any other Minister uttered a word of consolation till today. I pay my respects to all the deceased farmer brothers and pray to the Lord to give their families the strength to bear this sorrow," the Congress president said.

"Since independence, this is the first such arrogant Government that has come to power in the history of the country that, leave alone people, cannot even see the sufferings and struggles of 'annadatas'," she said further.

It seems that ensuring profits for a handful of industrialists has become the main agenda of this Government, Sonia alleged. The Government has presented these laws as major agriculture sector reforms aimed at helping farmers and increasing their income, but the protesting unions fear that the new legislations will leave them at the mercy of big corporates by weakening the MSP and mandi systems.

The grand old party also accused the Centre of showing apathy as the Food Corporation of India's

Chhattisgarh unit was not lifting the rice stocks and asked whether the procurement was "halted" because the Government's "suit-boot friends" were not involved in managing storage in the State. At a AICC Press conference Congress spokesperson Gourav Vallabh said that despite a pre-emption by the FCI to procure 60 lakh metric tonnes of rice under the central pool for the kharif season, Chhattisgarh has not received a final consent.

The Chhattisgarh Government started procurement on December 1, and has procured 47 lakh tonnes from 12 lakh farmers so far, but the State is yet to receive a consent from the Government of India, despite several requests, he said. This would impact close to 21.52 lakh farmers, Vallabh said.

"This is a clear case of complete apathy towards farmers who are fighting for their rights and to save their dignity but the Government seems to be occupied in filling the pockets of their friends. If the Government is not willing to procure the volumes pre-intimated by them, even when the protests are ongoing, what can we expect from the Government once all this settles down?" he said.

CDS reviews situation along LAC in Arunachal

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Amid the ongoing tension at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) for the last nine months, Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Bipin Rawat on Sunday concluded a two-day visit to forward areas near the LAC in Arunachal Pradesh. The tour marked one year of his tenure as the newly created post of the CDS.

During his extensive visit to remote forward posts and airbases in the eastern sector, he reviewed operational preparedness of the armed forces. They are deployed in adequate numbers since the stand-offs with China started in May.

More than one lakh troops from India and China are facing each other at the 1,700 km long LAC in Ladakh. Not willing to take any chances, India has ramped up its military efforts all along the 400 km long LAC stretching from Ladakh in the west to Arunachal Pradesh in the east. The two countries have held several rounds of military and diplomatic level parleys to break the logjam at the border but have failed.

On the second day of his visit, Rawat interacted with the Army and Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) personnel deployed along the Subansiri valley in Arunachal Pradesh.



Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat during his visit to forward post along Subansiri valley in Arunachal Pradesh on Sunday

The CDS lauded soldiers for adopting innovative surveillance measures for locally developed technology. He also lauded the defence preparedness of the personnel to face any challenge. Official said here on Sunday, Rawat said he was satisfied by the high morale and motivation of all ranks.

On Saturday, the CDS visited forward air bases in the eastern sector besides the forward posts in Dibang valley and Lohit sector. All these posts in the forward are air-maintained.

Complimenting the soldiers for their readiness, Rawat said only the Indian soldiers could remain vigilant under such challenging situations. They were also willing to go beyond the call of duty to safeguard the borders, the CDS

said. The post of the CDS came into being exactly one year back with Rawat as the senior most general among the three Services chiefs assuming the new responsibility. He is the single-point adviser on military affairs to the political leadership. The CDS is also responsible for achieving synergy among the Army, IAF and Navy for operational effectiveness and proper utilisation of the resources.

The CDS is also tasked with ushering in reforms in the military to enable the armed forces to fight modern day warfare in an effective manner. Moreover, he has to ensure that the allocated budget is utilised by the forces for fast modernisation and maintain the tempo of operational readiness.

Terror outfit vows to check demographic change in J&K, justifies killing of businessman

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Pakistan-backed terror outfit The Resistance Front (TRF) vows to check any demographic change in Jammu & Kashmir and justified the killing of a businessman earlier this week in Srinagar.

Branding the Sikh businessman as part of the demography change in the Valley through the "settler colony" project, the outfit vowed to eliminate all such people intending to settle in Jammu & Kashmir.

The outfit also branded such people as agents of the

RSS and will not be treated as civilians.

Claiming the killing of Aizaz, Athar and Zubair on Friday by the security forces for their association with it as not true but paid tributes to them.

The TRF is a front of the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammad that has floated it to deny its involvement in terror in the Valley and the Indian hinterland.

Through a renewed bid to revive terror amid sustained elimination of terrorists, the outfit is seeking to gain traction amongst the youth to recruit them into their fold.

Rice procurement restricted at last year's level as per policy: Centre

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

After Bhupesh Baghel Government's allegations, the Ministry of Consumer Affairs on Sunday said that some States including Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh were found to be giving incentive so the Central Government procurement was restricted to quantity which was procured in the past without bonus/incentive.

It has been decided to allow 24 lakh MT of rice to be delivered to Food Corporation of India (FCI) under central pool during the kharif mar-

keting year 2020-21 which is equivalent to the quantity as allowed in previous years.

"Central Government is following a uniform policy and supporting farmers across the Country. Same is followed in Chhattisgarh procurement. During KMS 2020-21, the Government of Chhattisgarh had also published an advertisement/press release on 17.12.2020 detailing the Rajiv Gandhi Kisan Nyay Yojana that they will procure paddy from the farmers @₹2500/- per quintal during KMS 2020-21 by paying ₹10,000/- per acre which is a form of indirect

incentive over and above the MSP which is as good as bonus on procurement of paddy," it said.

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel had on Thursday spoken to Prime Minister Narendra Modi over phone and informed him about the delay in permission for paddy procurement in the Kharif marketing year 2020-21.

In a letter to PM Modi, Baghel had said the Centre had given "in-principle approval" for depositing 60 lakh metric tonnes of rice in the central pool after the custom milling of paddy procured from the farm-

ers of the state in the Kharif marketing season.

"Following the approval, the State Government started purchasing paddy on minimum support price (MSP) from December 1 and till now, about 47 lakh tonnes of paddy has been procured from 12 lakh farmers. But necessary permission for delivery of rice after custom milling of the purchased paddy to the FCI for the central pool is still awaited from the Centre's Food and Public Distribution Department," the letter stated.

As per the latest data by the

Ministry, the Government bought a record 498.95 lakh MT of paddy in its ongoing procurement operations, 24.49 per cent more than it did last year. Out of the total purchase of 498.95 LMT, Punjab alone has contributed 202.77 LMT which is 40.64 per cent of total procurement, followed by Haryana and UP.

"About 64.07 lakh paddy farmers have benefitted from KMS procurement Operations with MSP value of ₹94,202.64 crore. A quantity of 75,78,832 cotton bales valuing ₹22,208.01 crore procured benefitting 14,81,064 farmers," it said.

Govt proposes regular surveillance for leprosy

ARCHANA JYOTI ■ NEW DELHI

With leprosy still a public health concern — at least one lakh new patients being detected annually — the Government has proposed regular surveillance of the disease and doling out an incentive of ₹1,000 to health workers for the screening rounds.

The Union Health Ministry recently released the operational guidelines aiming to intensify the screening on yearly or twice-a-year basis in select areas depending on the leprosy prevalence rates there.

However, villages or urban areas that have not recorded any leprosy cases for three years or longer will not be included in the screening. But

the health workers there will receive incentives of up to ₹250 for the detection of a leprosy case and up to ₹600 to ensure the patient completes the treatment, as per the guidelines issued by Union Health Minister Dr Harshvardhan.

Though India had in 2005 declared leprosy "eliminated", defining the threshold as when the country's prevalence rate fell below one per 10,000 population, cases continue to pop up even among children showing that transmission is happening in the community.

The new guidelines aims to widen the effort for case detection through regular household screening, citing high prevalence in certain pockets in several states and

Though India had in 2005 declared leprosy "eliminated", defining the threshold as when the country's prevalence rate fell below one per 10,000 population, cases continue to pop up even among children showing that transmission is happening in the community

the challenge of diagnosing leprosy among the urban poor.

Screening has been proposed once a year in areas with prevalence rates lower than one per 10,000, and twice a year in areas with prevalence rates higher than one per 10,000. Any area with even a single child patient will be subject to two screenings a year, as per the guidelines.

Welcoming the move, Dr Vivek Lal, CEO of Sasakawa-India Leprosy Foundation (SILF) said that of course active surveillance is very important as the patients may not even realise that he/she is suffering from the disease and may sit through the condition till it turns into visible deformity.

Also, its high time that all type of health workers and doctors even those from the private sector are roped in and made awareness about the disease so that appropriate treatment could be given to the patient at the earliest, Dr Lal said.

Despite various efforts, India continues to account for 60 per cent of new cases reported globally each year

and is among the 22 "global priority countries" that contribute 95 per cent of world numbers of leprosy warranting a sustained effort to bring the numbers down. The Government's recent strategy of innovative Leprosy Case Detection Campaign (LCDC), has paid results in the detection of 34,000 new cases in 2016 from highly endemic pockets, which accounted for 25 per cent of annual new cases.

Of the total new cases detected, almost 50 per cent were multibacillary leprosy and the child rate was about 8.7 per cent, which was similar to the previous year's figures, both indicating continued transmission of leprosy in the community.

ON EVE OF TALKS WITH FARMERS

Tomar meets Rajnath to discuss Govt strategy to end deadlock

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

A day before the crucial seventh round of talks between the Centre and protesting farmer unions, Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar met Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Sunday and discussed the Government strategy to resolve the current crisis at the earliest, sources said.

Tomar discussed with Singh "all possible options" to find a "middle path" to resolve the crisis, sources added.

Singh, who served as Agriculture Minister in the

erstwhile Atal Bihari Vajpayee Cabinet, has emerged as a key troubleshooter and is working mostly behind the scenes on this issue.

Protesting farmers who have been camping at Delhi borders for the last 39 days braving bone-chilling cold and now rains have threatened to intensify their protest if their two major demands — repeal of the three new farm laws and legal backing for the minimum support price (MSP) — are not accepted by the Government in the January 4 meeting. Rains since Saturday night

led to waterlogging at the agitation venues, but the unions asserted that "we will not move from here until our demands are met".

After five rounds of inconclusive talks, the Government and 40 farmer unions reached some common ground during the sixth round of negotiations on December 30 to resolve protesting farmers' concerns over rise in power tariff and penalties for stubble burning, but the two sides remained deadlocked over the main contentious issues of the repeal of the three farm laws and a legal guarantee for MSP.

Western disturbance to impact many parts of India

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

As the western disturbance lies over central Pakistan and near Jammu & Kashmir, cyclonic circulation over south western Rajasthan along with moisture feed from Bay of Bengal and Arabian sea will lead to widespread rain over northwest, central India, internal Tamil Nadu southern Karnataka and snowfall in the middle and higher hills till January 6.

"The Western Disturbance near Jammu & Kashmir is moving ahead. This system was not very effective but it gave light rain at some places on the mountains. Now an active western disturbance has reached north Pakistan which will reach Jammu & Kashmir from January 3 and affect the weather for the next two-three days.

There is already a cyclonic circulation over South Western parts of Rajasthan. Along with this, a trough is formed from northeastern parts of Arabian Sea to Rajasthan." Skymet, a private weather broadcaster, said.

In addition, a cyclonic circulation is over Chhattisgarh and adjoining areas. Due to the effect of these systems, humid winds from the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea are reaching the plains states of North



India. The weather in North India has changed due to the combined effect of all these systems.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) issued warning for heavy rain and snowfall in Himachal Pradesh. However, the IMD issued a "yellow" weather warning of heavy rain, snowfall in middle and higher hills on January 4, and thunderstorm and lightning in the plains and lower hills from January 4 to 5.

Further, it has issued "orange" warning of heavy rain and snowfall in middle and higher hills on January 5. Gondla experienced 21 cm snowfall, followed by Koksar 13

cm, Pooch 10 cm, Manali 9 cm, Sumdo 8 cm and Kalpa 6 cm, the IMD said. Chanchal in Shimla district received about two-feet snowfall.

Meanwhile, Manali witnessed 11 mm rain, followed by Keylong 9 mm, Bilaspur 8 mm, Dharamshala 7 mm, Chamba 6 mm, Palampur and Kasauli 5 mm each and Shimla and Solan 3mm each. Besides, the tribal district of Lahaul and Spiti's administrative centre Keylong continued to be the coldest place in the state at minus 6.1 degrees Celsius.

Rain and thundershowers occurred at a few places in western Uttar Pradesh while Banda was the coldest place in the state where the mercury dipped to 5.4 degrees Celsius. Very light rains also occurred in parts of eastern Uttar Pradesh, with the meteorological department predicting thunderstorm in some places of western UP on Monday.

A blanket of snow covered Kashmir on Sunday as most areas received moderate snowfall, cutting the valley's surface as well as air connection with the rest of the country.

Congress appoints 344 office bearers in TN to revive party

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ CHENNAI

Having failed repeatedly in its attempt to regain the power which it lost to the DMK in 1967, the Tamil Nadu Congress Committee has devised a strategy to address the discontentment among the leaders and cadre of the party in the State. Saturday saw the All India Congress Committee appointing 344 office bearers to the TNCC to navigate the Grand Old Party in the upcoming election to the Legislative Assembly.

Since the leader of the alliance, the DMK, had made it known that it would contest at least 200 assembly seats out of the 234 at stake, it is not known how much the Congress would be allocated during the seat sharing exercise.

"The defeats suffered by the Congress in the Bihar assembly election has weakened the party's bargaining power. The chances of the Congress getting even the 40 seats it was allocated during the 2016 election look bleak," said Kolahala Srenivasan, author and

political commentator.

There are strong parties like the CPI(M), CPI, VCK, Muslim League and fringe groups in the DMK-led front which would not settle for anything less than two digit figures.

"The Congress High Command saw the writing on the wall and appointed each and everybody in the party something or other. So all are contended," said Sam Rajappa, veteran scribe and commentator.

According to the list released by the AICC General secretary K C Venugopal, the TNCC would have 32 vice-presidents to assist the president, 57 general secretaries, 104 secretaries, 56 election committee members, five ex-officio members and 32 district committee presidents. In addition to this, all former TNCC presidents who are alive have been honored with designations. This include K S Alagiri, EVKS Elangovan, K V Thangabalu, S Thirunavakkarassar, M Krishnaswamy, R Prabhu, EMS

Natchiappan and Ruby Manoharan.

Kumari Ananthan (88) is the father of Telangana Governor Dr Tamilisai Sounderajan and brother of late H Vasanthkumar, the Kanyakumari MP who succumbed to Covid-19 recently.

Karti Chidambaram MP and son of Congress strongman P Chidambaram, having failed to make it to the list gave vent to his feelings through the social media questioning the viability of such a jumbo list.

"This jumbo committee serves no purpose. None will have any authority, which means no accountability," Karti posted in his social media page.

But Rajappa observed that the Congress High Command could have included some more names in the list so that there would not be any kind of discontentment in the party. "They may not be able to enjoy the fruits of power as the DMK would never allow them anywhere near the corridors of power," he said.

Terror module busted, arms seized in Poonch

PNS ■ JAMMU

A joint team of security forces in Poonch on Sunday recovered a third consignment of arms, ammunition and grenades after busting a terror module with the arrest of three over ground workers from Dabbi area of Mendhar in Poonch.

The recovery includes one pistol, three pistol magazines, thirty five bullets and five hand grenades, police said. This terror module is a part of the "Jammu and Kashmiri Force" which is being operated from POJK.

According to police, "the Jammu and Kashmiri Force apart from terror activities is now also attempting to target religious places with an aim to trigger communal tension in the Jammu region". The total recovery made so far include 13 grenades, 03 pistols, 05 pistol magazines, 105 pistol bullets, 04 Pakistan made balloons, 01 flag of Tehreek ul Majahideen Jammu and Kashmir and 18 posters of J&K Gazanavi Force.

According to a spokesman of the Jammu and Kashmir police, "the Jammu and Kashmir police in Poonch district along-with Army have made a



third consecutive recovery of arms, ammunition and grenades after the recent busting of a terror module and arrest of three terrorist associates in Mendhar area."

Earlier, on December 28 last year, three terrorist associates were arrested in Balakote area near LoC where six hand grenades were recovered from

their possession.

The trio were identified as Mustafa Khan son of Yasir Khan resident of Galuta, Mohammad Yaseen son of Walyat Khan and Rayees Ahmed son of Mohammad Iqbal, both residents of Dabbi Balakote.

During sustained interrogation of the trio, some more vital clues were developed after which the Police team and Army launched an operation in Dabbi village located ahead of LoC fence in Balakote from where another consignment of arms, ammunition and grenades were recovered.

In the first recovery of six hand grenades that was made from the arrested three persons, it was revealed that grenades were to be lobbed on religious places in Ari and Mendhar town area of Poonch district.

The second recovery was made from Dabi village wherein two pistols, seventy bullets and two grenades were recovered.

"The handlers from across used to drop the consignment in hidden patches near the LoC and these arrested terrorist associates then used to pick it up for further carriage in hinterland," police spokesman added.

BCCI president doing well, may undergo more angioplasty

PIONEER NEWS SERVICE ■ KOLKATA

BCCI president Sourav Ganguly who on Saturday underwent angioplasty after suffering a mild heart attack during a workout session at his Behala residence was doing fine on Sunday and would not require any by-pass surgery, doctors visiting him said.

Three arteries of Ganguly suffering from myocardial infarction was more than 90 percent blocked. While angioplasty was done in one artery a decision would be taken on the two others on Monday, doctors said.

Ganguly's elder brother and former cricketer Snehasis said that renowned cardiologist Dr Devi Sethi had been contacted and he might come to Kolkata on Monday following which a decision would be taken.

Mega hydro power projects MoUs signed to make J&K power surplus

PNS ■ JAMMU

To make J&K a power surplus region in the country, Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) were signed for implementation of much awaited Mega Hydro Power projects, including 850 MW Ratle HEP and 930 MW Kirthai-II HEP, besides execution of long pending Sawalkot HEP (1856 MW), Uri-I (Stage-II) (240 MW) and Dulhasti (Stage-II) (258 MW) on Sunday.

The MoUs were signed between Power Development Department (PDD), J&K; National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) Ltd. and J&K Power Development Corporation, in the presence of Raj Kumar Singh, Union Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Ministry of Power, New & Renewable Energy and Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship; Manoj Sinha, Lieutenant Governor of J&K.

With the signing of these MoUs, J&K is expected to attract investments worth Rs 35,000 crore in the

power sector to ensure the region's energy security and 24-hour power supply to the people of J&K.

The numerous hydro resources of Jammu & Kashmir are capable of generating 14,867 MW power but the potential had not been fully exploited, and only 3504 MW power was being generated till now.

The works started now will ensure that another 3498 MW power is generated in the next three to four years.

As per the provisions of these MoUs, the projects will be handed over back to Jammu and Kashmir after 40 years of commercial operation which was not in case of earlier projects allotted to NHPC Limited.

The occasion also witnessed inauguration of as many as 19 important projects of PDD aimed at greater generation, efficient transmission and better distribution of power supply in J&K during the Mega inauguration ceremony.

Speaking on the occasion, the Union Minister of State



(Independent Charge) for Ministry of Power, New & Renewable Energy, Raj Kumar Singh assured extending every support of the GoI to the J&K Government for various reforms in the power sector.

Hydro electric potential successfully ushered the era of development in various states including Sikkim & Himachal Pradesh. J&K should replicate the model. According to the national average, electricity in rural areas is 20 hrs and in urban areas is 22-23 hrs. J&K too will reach the milestone if the pace of development is kept the same, he added.

Locals will be trained and given employment in NHPC ventures;

besides NHPC will see for development of small hydro projects also, he maintained. "We have to do our bit of duty to see electricity reaching every household 24x7", said the Union MoS.

During his address, the Lt Governor, Manoj Sinha observed that the MoUs signed today would attract investments worth Rs 35,000 crore for Jammu & Kashmir power sector and ensure the region's energy security and 24-hour power supply to the people of J&K.

"J&K is taking a quantum leap from being power deficit to becoming power surplus in the next four years. For uninterrupted power supply, this is the most significant

move by the J&K government", said the Lt Governor.

Out of the two agreements, the NHPC would work in association with the administration at the first and the languishing Sawalkot project would be handed over to NHPC for completion under the second.

The project has been perpetually postponed since its conception in 1984 and was expected to generate 1856 MW power, he added.

SN Sahai, Union Secretary Power; BVR Subrahmanyam, Chief Secretary; Abhay Kumar Singh, Principal Secretary Power and Information Department Rohit Kansal, Chairman & Managing Director, NHPC; Suresh Kumar, Chairman Chenab Valley Power Projects Limited (CVPPL); A.K. Choudhary, Managing Director, CVPPL; Raja Yaqoob Farooq, Managing Director, JKPCDC were present on the occasion.

Maha logs 3,282 new Covid cases

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

The Covid-19 daily death tally in Mumbai plummeted to three on Sunday, even as the deaths in Maharashtra dropped to 35 and the state logged 3,282 infections.

A day after the country's commercial capital recorded seven deaths, the number of deaths slid further to three, while the metropolis logged 581 new infections as against 593 infected cases registered on Saturday.

With 3 fresh infections, the Covid-19 toll in Mumbai rose from 11,132 to 11,135, while the total infections climbed from 2,94,660 to 2,95,241.

Similarly, with 35 fresh deaths in the states, the total number of deaths in the state went up from 49,631 to 49,666. With 3,282 fresh infections, the total number of infected cases climbed from 19,38,854 to 19,42,136.

As 2064 patients were discharged from the hospitals across the state after full recovery, the total number of people discharged from

the hospitals since the second week of March this year went up to 18,36,999. The recovery rate in the state dropped marginally from 94.64 per cent to 94.59 per cent.

Meanwhile, the number of "active cases" total cases in the state rose from 53,137 to 564,317. The fatality rate in the state stood at 2.56 per cent.

Pune district, which continued to be the worst-affected city-district in Maharashtra, saw the total number of cases increase from 3,73,727 to 3,74,272, while the total number of deaths in Pune went up from 7767 to 7,770.

Thane district remained in the third spot - after Pune and Mumbai - after the total number of infections rose from 2,55,248 to 2,55,678, while the total deaths climbed from 5590 to 5593.

Of the 1,29,58,502 samples sent to laboratories, 19,42,136 have tested positive (14.99 per cent) for COVID-19 until Sunday. Currently, 2,47,972 people are in home quarantine while 2,969 people are in institutional quarantine.

Owaisi meets Muslim religious leader in Bengal

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

Mamata Banerjee's biggest dread and alleged "vote cutter of BJP" is at last in Kolkata. All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimen (AIMIM) chief Asaduddin Owaisi on Sunday commenced his political inking in Bengal with a visit to largest Muslim congregation of the State Furfura Sharif where he met the order's deputy chief Pir Zada Abbas Siddiqui before expressing his desire to contest Assembly elections in Bengal.

Emerging from a meeting with Siddiqui the AIMIM chief said his party would not only concentrate on Malda and Murshidabad, the two Muslim-majority districts of the State but also other regions, particularly those where the minorities have a decisive presence.

This is Owaisi's first visit to Bengal following after he announced his plans to contest elections in the state.

Often dismissed by the Chief Minister as "BJP's vote cutting machine," Owaisi said "we are a political party and have every right to contest elections anywhere in India... we also have rights to form coalitions for that purpose and no one can stop us from doing so."

When asked to comment on Banerjee's recent allegations that he was not a "vote cutter of BJP," and his

flowing would only be limited to the Urdu-speaking minority, the AIMIM leader said, "I am here to meet Siddiqui sahib who is elder to us in experience and I am ready to form an alliance with him in order to work for a common purpose."

Rejecting the Chief Minister's charges he said, "I challenge the Trinamool Congress chief to provide answers to my open questions... what was she doing when Gujarat was burning... she should also answer as to how the BJP could win 18 seats from Bengal in the parliamentary elections though we were not in the fray then."

On his party's alleged negative role in the Bihar elections he said "empirical evidence shows that in seats where we fought 9 were won by the NDA and we won 5 seats... so how our party could impact the voting pattern the way that is being suggested."

On the issues his party would like to focus on he said "we will raise a whole lot of issues including under development of Bengal, political empowerment, political partnership (read with the minorities), communal peace etc."

AIMIM State secretary Zameerul Hasan said "Owaisi wanted to keep the meeting a secret as we were apprehensive that the TMC government would stop him from exiting the air-

port. However that fortunately did not happen. From Kolkata airport, he went straight to Hooghly to meet Abbas Siddiqui."

In real terms Bengal has more than 28 percent Muslim votes that influences the voting pattern of more than 100 out of 294 seats. AIMIM's presence in Bengal may not augur well for the ruling Trinamool Congress which has for the past one decade been thriving primarily on the minority votes.

In the changed polarized circumstances where the difference between the BJP and the TMC in terms of vote percentage is mere 2 percent the Hyderabad outfit's presence could spell disaster for the ruling outfit experts say.

However, TMC leader Sougato Roy once again iterated that "AIMIM will not be able to do much harm to the TMC as its presence will be confined to a limited Urdu-speaking section." But when reminded that he was holding meeting with the Furfura Sharif Roy said "the Muslims of Bengal know what Mamata Banerjee has done for them... they will remain with her instead of joining Owaisi who has come to add to the divisive politics that is being played by the BJP... I call upon all the Muslims to unite reject his party and unite behind TMC and Mamata Banerjee."

DMK has last laugh as Rajinikanth decides not to launch political outfit

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ CHENNAI

The DMK had the last laugh when reigning superstar Rajinikanth declared last Monday that he would not launch his political outfit as he had told his fans earlier in December 2020. On December 3, 2020, the actor accompanied by his close friend Tamiluruvi Manian and newly appointed coordinator Arjunamurthy announced from the forefront of his Poes Garden residence that "it will be now or never". Everything associated with Tamil Nadu will change and we will see a new Tamil Nadu," the actor had said on that Monday noon.

But within four weeks he made a volte-face and said that doctors had advised him not to go ahead with the formation of political party. Rajinikanth was acting in "Annaathe", his latest venture, the shooting of which was progressing at Hyderabad when his blood pressure started showing big fluctuation and was admitted to a corporate hospital. He was discharged after three days and the doctors advised him complete bed rest.

The climax of Mission-R started unfurling the moment Rajinikanth returned to Chennai

amidst expectations by his fans that the important announcement would come at any time now. On Sunday December 27, 2020, the Rajini Fans Association issued a release asking his fans and followers not to be carried away by reports that the actor may dump his political plans. By Monday noon, the announcement was out about the actor making a final bow before his political fans.

The movie Annaathe is being produced by Kalanidhi Maran, the grand nephew of former DMK president and chief minister late M Karunanidhi. Arjunamurthy, who joined Rajini's political bandwagon was a close associate of late 'Murasoli' Maran, nephew of late Karunanidhi and father of Maran brothers, Dayanidhi and Kalanidhi. Arjunamurthy, who was a hitherto entity in Tamil Nadu shot into fame when he joined the BJP's intellectual cell and later cast his lot with Rajini. This is the same Arjunamurthy, who had been demanding that "Murasoli" Maran should be honoured with Nobel Prize for Peace.

Dayanidhi, the younger of the Maran brothers, who is also a former union minister, had denied reports linking Murthy to his late

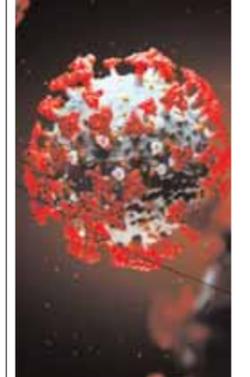
father. "There is a false news published in media that Arjunamurthy was an associate or advisor to my late father Murasoli Maran. This is completely untrue. No such person had been an advisor to my father."

But Dayanidhi's denial had to be taken with a pinch of salt as he had issued a legal notice to New Indian Express and S Gurumurthy for disclosing reports about the functioning of an illegal telephone exchange from the former's private residence in Chennai while he was the union minister for communications. It has been more than ten years and a Chennai court is hearing the illegal telephone exchange case.

And third, Soundarya, Rajinikanth's second daughter is married into the family of a DMK leader late SS Ponmudi. Soundarya's second husband Visagan, a businessman is the son of SS Vanangamudi, younger brother of Ponmudi, who was close to M K Stalin, the DMK chief. One of the reasons cited for Rajinikanth exiting the political arena before making the entry is said to be family pressure.

Tamiluruvi Manian, described as Rajinikanth's Man Friday, refused to be drawn into any discussion on the topic.

Number of active cases in AP falls to 3,000 level



Amaravati: The number of active Covid-19 cases in Andhra Pradesh fell to the 3,000 level even as the state added 232 fresh cases and saw 352 recoveries and four deaths in 24 hours ending 9 am on Sunday.

The State COVID-19 chart now has 8,83,082 confirmed positives, 8,72,897 recoveries and 7,115 deaths so far, a health department bulletin said.

The active caseload was 3,070, it said.

Six districts reported less than 10 fresh coronavirus cases each in a day and three more below 20.

The current hotspot districts of Chittoor and Krishna reported 56 and 40 new infections, followed by West Godavari 31 and Guntur 27.

Chittoor, Guntur, West Godavari districts also reported one more COVID-19 fatality each, along with Visakhapatnam.

Prakasam, Srikulam, Kurnool districts have less than 100 active cases each while Vizianagaram has the lowest (36).

Three more districts have an active caseload of below 200 each.

Only Krishna district has 510 active cases, the highest in the state, followed by Guntur 475.

J&K witnesses fresh spell of snowfall

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

The Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir was painted 'White' after a fresh spell of snowfall on Sunday.

In Kashmir valley, the tourist hotspots of Gulmarg and Pahalgam along with Srinagar and other district headquarters including North Kashmir district of Kupwara witnessed moderate to heavy snowfall resulting in grounding of almost all the flights.

The traffic on the Jammu-Srinagar National Highway also remained suspended following heavy accumulation of snow near Jawahar Tunnel area. Deputy Commissioner, Ramban in a tweet said, "due to heavy snowfall and shooting stones at several locations traffic remains suspended. Public is advised to avoid travel on the

highway."

In Srinagar, barring one, all incoming and outgoing flights were cancelled due to poor visibility and accumulation of snow on the runway following light to moderate snowfall since early this morning," a senior airport official said.

In Jammu region, the cave shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi, tourist resorts of Patnitop and hilly districts of Doda, Kishtwar and Ramban also witnessed snowfall.

The Met department had already forecasted widespread snowfall in many areas of the valley on Sunday and Monday with heavy snowfall at isolated places.

A Met department spokesperson said a fresh Western Disturbance (WD), which originated from the Arabian Sea and approached



A vehicle moves slowly on a snow-covered road after a fresh snowfall, in Srinagar, on Sunday

The deployment begins

Distributing various vaccines to combat Coronavirus in India will be an unprecedented logistical challenge



Make no mistake, there will be problems that will emerge during the deployment of various vaccine candidates for the 1.3 billion Indians. That is why the Health Ministry is wisely asking all State Governments to conduct dry runs on select frontline and healthcare workers so that the problems and, more importantly, bottlenecks — whether those are in storage or distribution, or even the process of injecting millions of people expeditiously — can be identified and rectified before the large-scale deployment actually begins. To this end, Saturday saw a nationwide rehearsal to discover and plug the loopholes, if any. Across India, the

dry run was conducted at 259 sites in 116 districts with nearly 96,000 trained vaccinators. However, it would be prudent to understand that not all problems can and will be recognised at the moment, and some might emerge later on, including that of people having adverse reaction to the vaccinations. That is why Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself spoke out and warned Indians to not fall prey to misinformation about the vaccination programme. Even Union Health Minister Dr Harsh Vardhan assured the nation that the Government would not compromise on any protocol in approving a vaccine and appealed to people not to be misguided by rumours regarding the safety and efficacy of the shots. In the years past, we have seen how the misinformation about polio drops, specifically within a particular community, delayed the roll-out of the anti-polio programme. That said, we should take heart from the overall success of the polio campaign in the 2000s. This time, though, we don't have either the luxury of time or the need to inoculate just a small proportion of the population. Even if only those particularly susceptible are inoculated first — including frontline health workers, police staff and municipal workers in addition to the Armed Forces — one is talking tens of millions of doses just in India's metropolitan areas.

There will be a steady stream of stories of people who will be denied the vaccine due to the lack of appropriate paperwork; there will be other stories of corruption in the process and there will be stories of unbelievable ineptitude and there might even be stories about deaths due to adverse reaction to the vaccines. Some of these stories will attack the foundations of the vaccination programme, some might even attack the vaccines themselves. Some of these stories will need to be told but we should read and watch such stories with our eyes and ears open and use our brains to sift out some of the ridiculous claims. We have for years cribbed and whined about fake news and how that phenomenon is impacting democracy, but fake news and misinformation in the case of healthcare can be fatal. Not only should technology majors such as Facebook and Google do their utmost to curb such bits of misinformation, the media companies will have to exercise extreme editorial restraint, of the sort they do during wartime, and the Government must keep an eye out on the information flow. This should not be misconstrued, although it will be by some, as an attack on the media. But if we want a successful vaccination programme and return to some sense of normalcy, this is essential. We wish the Union Health Ministry, the various pharmaceutical companies producing the vaccines and the State Governments deploying the vaccines, the very best of luck going into the dry run. We also hope and pray that there are no untoward incidents and all unforeseen hiccups can be dealt with promptly. All of us need and want the dry run to be a success so that the big job of vaccinating millions of Indians can start as soon as possible.

Dubai is open, & safe

The UAE has suffered two COVID-19 surges but done a good job in containing the virus, reporting only 662 deaths



While almost all of the popular global tourist destinations are currently reeling under the massive blow the COVID-19 outbreak has delivered them, there are select places, albeit very scarce, that have got back on their feet and are welcoming visitors. After all, the world spent the past 10 months sitting bored at home, in self-isolation, self-captivity or, worse, quarantine. It's no wonder, then, that the spirit is impatiently missing a return to and connect with the outside world: The breeze, open skies, grainy beaches, shopping, the walks; basically the urge to just escape somewhere. But the million-dollar question is: Is there really such a safe place yet? Dubai comes to mind as the most prominent of such rare addresses; the most populous city in

the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has reopened to visitors, though a valid health insurance and negative COVID test are still mandatory for all arrivals. But the call of the "City of Gold" doesn't mean that the lure of the lucre has made it heedless of the hygiene and health considerations in these times of the abominable, omnipresent virus. The UAE has suffered its own COVID-19 surges, peaking in May and again in mid-September, but has a relatively low incidence rate compared to most urban centres. It has done a good job in containing the virus, with only 662 deaths recorded as of December 30. The UAE initiated a swift lockdown early on and, after adopting virus prevention measures, Dubai's resorts have re-opened as swiftly — and safely. It means the visitors must also embrace safety checks and protocols. Having had to wear a mask on board the airplane, the arrivals need to do the same in every public space or face a 3,000 dirham (\$817) fine. This includes taxis, currently allowing just two passengers unless it's a minivan or the Careem app, and on Dubai Metro; sterilised and running as usual but with mandatory distancing. Thanks largely to early, comparatively strict movement directives, sterilising procedures and group gathering limits, Dubai is back to something approaching normality. In hotels, Perspex panels shield resort check-in desk staff and, in some cases, luggage is spray-sanitised on entry. Some other retreats operate a walk-through sanitiser tunnel. The city is religiously following all health-related norms, procedures and measures to ensure that every single tourist's health concerns are rigorously and vigorously addressed; and while those masks can prove irritating in the UAE heat, it's good to know you're in a country with a relatively low infection rate. Also, the visitors should be at home with the smell of sanitiser; the dispensers are everywhere and everyone is expected to use them. All of the above can be lessons for India to emulate, though the conditions vastly differ.

But what makes this aberration doubly delightful is that several other popular destinations, viz; California, Los Angeles, New York City, England and Brazil, among others, are still deep in the throes of the pandemic which is showing no signs of abatement. While the latest reports suggest that even the hospitals in California — otherwise an attractive tourist destination for most part of the year, what with Hollywood, Disneyland, Yosemite National Park and the Golden Gate Bridge — are "at the brink of catastrophe", the number of Coronavirus deaths has surpassed the 25,000-mark as the ongoing surge of patients swarms hospitals and pushes the healthcare staff to the breaking point as they dread another wave after the holiday season gets over. Similarly, Brazil too had downplayed the COVID threat with President Jair Bolsonaro calling it a "little cold" but his denialist attitude ensured that Brazil currently has approximately 7.3 million cases of infection and 1,87,000 deaths, and the graph isn't showing any signs of heading south anytime soon. As for England, the less said, the better. Even before South Africa, the island nation had become the first country globally to report the mutated — and reportedly far deadlier than the Wuhan virus — strain; causing it to suspend outbound international flights, and the world was understandably eager to return the favour.

Academia's wish list

Apart from the fiscal expectations from Budget-2021, the educationists want more autonomy in developing regulations, norms and standards for schools



CHANDRA BHUSHAN SHARMA

The stakeholders of school education are anxiously waiting to see what the Union Budget of 2021 has in store for the stratum. Since we have got a new National Education Policy in July 2020 (NEP 2020), it is expected that funds will be allocated for the establishment of a statutory body by the name of School Education Commission (SEC) for streamlining the schooling sector, and that there will be rational disbursement of the budget pie. The NEP may not be able to bring about any positive difference in the absence of a professional body for running schools across the nation. It is expected that Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman will consult educationists from the higher and school education fields separately and then reach a decision rationally.

There are nearly 33 crore children in schools and approximately 8 crore students engaged in higher education in India. The school education consists of 12 years of education whereas higher education consists of three years of undergraduate and two years of master's programme. Besides, a few select students opt for the research degree programme. Higher education, thus, consists of at least three to five years of studies. Once the recommendations of the NEP 2020 are implemented, the total period of schooling — after the three years of pre-school are added — will consist of 15 years and the duration of higher education will shrink to just four years.

Similarly, there are nearly 1 crore teachers engaged in schools and, after the three years of pre-schooling are added, nearly 18 lakh new teachers will be added to the total number of existing teachers. The number of teachers in higher education, however, is much less. To decide the norms and standards of higher education in the country, we have a University Grants Commission (UGC) but we rarely realise that there is no such organisation which decides the norms and standards for education in schools. To put it simply, school education is for the masses whereas higher education is largely for the elite.

The Schooling Network
 We have been examining the various education boards for assessing and certifying learners for the secondary and senior secondary levels. The Central



Government has two boards — the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) for general students and the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) for non-formal learners. Most States in India have their own examination board for assessing and certifying learners in their State. The mandate of the boards is to conduct examinations and certify the students taking the tests. These boards are not academic bodies which have the domain knowledge to design and develop curriculum or textbooks. The CBSE also assesses learners for admission to technical institutes. Some State examination boards as well as private institutes conduct entrance tests for admission to technical colleges of their respective States.

It is apparent that these boards are established to conduct examinations but they are not organisations with the academic domain knowledge which can help them decide about the academic content and the norms of these examinations. To decide on the content and pedagogy, we have the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) which is an "autonomous" but subordinate body of the Ministry of Education (MOE). The NCERT works under the direct supervision of the Education Ministry. Since it may not be prudent to comment on the functioning

of the NCERT, suffice it to say that we have not been able to produce children who feel proud of our country and wish to serve this great nation. According to a recent report, most board topping students are settled abroad. The first desire and dream of every school pass out, it seems, is to migrate to a developed country. The design of curriculum and the curriculum framework, one of the major responsibilities of the NCERT, is definitely under question. Similarly, the research on schooling, another major responsibility of the NCERT, is questionable.

None of these organisations is a "statutory" body, so the norms designed by these are not mandatory for enforcement by the rule of law. We need a statutory body (created by an Act of Parliament) to decide on the regulations related to schools. **The Government School Network**
 It may not be incorrect to say that overall, the Government schools have not performed well, with the exception of the Kendriya Vidyalayas (KVs) and the Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas (JNVs). From time to time, a few Government schools in some States show promise but, with the passage of time, they again plunge into mediocrity as the administrator is transferred out. The first choice of most parents invariably is a private school for the

education of their children. The Governments make their own norms and implement them through their own schools but they have failed to compete with the private schools. The expenditure per child in an average Government school is much higher than per child studying in private schools; however, the learning outcome is quite the opposite.

Prayer to Finance Minister
 It is not suggested that the Government's control should be completely withdrawn but there must be autonomy in developing regulations, norms and standards, which can be enforced upon the Government and private schools alike.

In a recent judgment, the Allahabad High Court (Writ — Case No. — 19287 of 2020) has pronounced a verdict against the decision of the CBSE not to permit change in name, saying: "...the Rules as framed by the CBSE do not have any statutory flavour and cannot be considered to be the 'law' as required for placing reasonable restrictions on the rights enshrined under Article (19)(1)(a), in terms of Article (19)(2) of the Constitution of India."

Therefore, autonomy from the Government's interference is required but, at the same time, there should be regulations in place which give freedom to the teachers and principals of private schools to work in an "exploitation-free" environment. The teachers and principals in a large number of privately managed schools (and some Government schools as well) work under severe exploitative conditions. This will end only if there is a statutory body to regulate the schooling system. This may not suit the political party in power but this is urgently and desperately required to build a strong nation. It is expected that the Union Finance Minister will consider allocating a separate Budget for the establishment of the School Education Commission in the upcoming budget and mark a landmark change towards formulating a Bharat-centric education.

(The author teaches at the School of Education, IGNOU. The views expressed are personal.)

SOUNDBITE

In the first phase, free vaccine will be provided across the nation to most prioritised beneficiaries, including 1 crore healthcare and 2 crore frontline workers.
Union Health Minister
 —Harsh Vardhan



We are ready to develop with the US a relationship based on coordination, cooperation and stability. We know that some in the US are uneasy about China's rapid development.
Chinese Foreign Minister
 —Wang Yi



I look forward to the audiences looking past the numbers game, separating the wheat from the chaff, and rewarding genuine talent in addition to kindness, meritocracies and fair play.
Singer
 —Sona Mohapatra



Rotation and rest are going to be an integral part of managing the next phase of games. We are going to have to be quite flexible and adaptable in terms of selection.
England captain
 Joe Root



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Vaccination challenge

Sir — In a vast country like ours with such a large population size, administering COVID-19 vaccine is a herculean task. The eventual deployment of vaccine in a country of 1.3 billion will be a logistical and administrative challenge like no other.

As India gears up to launch the world's largest immunisation drive, Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan on Saturday said that 1 crore healthcare workers and 2 crore frontline workers would be given free vaccine in the first phase of the inoculation drive. The Centre had earlier given directions to conduct a dry run on Saturday. The Centre plans to vaccinate nearly 30 crore people in the first phase of the inoculation drive. The vaccine will also be administered to nearly 27 crore elderly persons with comorbidities.

The Central Government is up to the task of immunising such a huge section of people and providing free vaccine. This is an unprecedented masterstroke by the Centre, which the nation's people will not forget for a long to come.
CK Subramaniam
 Mumbai

Govt must defuse the standoff with farmers

It is shocking and shameful that all the attempts by the protesting farmers and Central Government to reach a negotiation over the recently introduced farm laws have failed and thousands of farmers, women and children are sitting on dharna at Delhi's borders since more than one month, braving the chilly winters. The farmers are adamant on the repeal of three new legislations enacted in September and a legal guarantee on the Minimum Support Price (MSP) while the Government is not ready to concede to their demands.

Dozens of farmers have reportedly lost their lives while a cultivator allegedly died by suicide at a farmer protest site in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh. The matter is very serious as the protest is likely to spread like wildfire across the nation. The farmers, mainly from Punjab and Haryana, are protesting in these chilling winters at various borders, including Singhu, Tikri, Chilla and Ghazipur of the national Capital. Farmers have threatened to intensify their protest if the talks with the Government fail. The seventh round of talks between farmers and Centre would be held on Monday. The farm leaders have announced "Desh Jagriti Abhiyan", a fortnight-long campaign, rallies and dharna to be held between January 6 and January 12.

The Central Government must defuse the situation and accept the demands of the protesting farmers to end the stalemate, failing which the farmers would continue to die at the borders and the situation will continue to worsen. It is in the best interest of both the sides that the Government acts quickly and finds an amicable solution to the existing crisis.
Bhagwan Thadani
 Mumbai



The Central Government must defuse the situation and accept the demands of the protesting farmers to end the stalemate, failing which the farmers would continue to die at the borders and the situation will continue to worsen. It is in the best interest of both the sides that the Government acts quickly and finds an amicable solution to the existing crisis.

Bhagwan Thadani
 Mumbai

Remove bottlenecks

Sir — The historical Chandni Chowk area in the national Capital is being redeveloped but despite crossing the deadline for work completion, quite a bit of work is still pending and awaiting final touches by the civic authorities.

This is largely owing to certain bottlenecks and other glitches which are best known to the authorities concerned as the reasons for the delay. The entry and exit points at the Red Fort Crossing, connecting Chandni Chowk, are yet to be given the finishing touches. Only one side of the two-sided road is being used for both entry and exit. That too, with several roadblocks and a temporary gate which is usually closed between 9 pm and 9 am when vehicular traffic is allowed into the area.

The redevelopment must also include making the area encroachment-free. The overcrowded market has become a haven for encroachers.
Madhu Agarwal
 Delhi

Leaders must lead
 Sir — With the nation set to launch the world's largest immunisation drive, the President, Vice-President and the Prime Minister must set an example by volunteering to undergo immunisation first.

This will help in allaying the fears that have gripped the minds of people regarding the

side-effects and the efficacy of the anti-COVID vaccine. People cannot be blamed for their apprehensions as even the pharma companies coming up with the vaccines have not vouched for their 100 per cent efficacy.

Further, there are also no claims from the pharma giants that the vaccines are devoid of serious side-effects. Under such

circumstances, top political leaders should voluntarily opt for immunisation to boost the morale of millions of Indians. Joe Biden, the US President-elect, has received the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine live on television and reassured Americans of its safety.
Tharcus S Fernando
 Chennai

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

Confusion compounded

It is obvious that skill development in servicing instruments has not kept up with the efforts put into pushing the demand for products



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

Culture defines several behavioural traits and explains many social groupings. However, the concept of culture itself is elusive. Many notable thinkers, including the likes of poet TS Eliot, attempted to define it but left the discourse incomplete. Herein comes the role of thought. The components of the definition of an idea or word may be elusive, incomplete or both. However, everyone knows with some approximation what it means when the word is used. The meaning becomes clearer when it is used in a context and there is a shared approximation in its use. However, this approach cannot work in a product maintenance situation.

From issues of verbal or ill-equipped fuzziness would arise a multiplicity of approaches to an obvious reality. Whereas this could work in matters of definition of "culture" this kind of mindset cannot work in matters of product specificity. That requires precision and the ability to diagnose with exactitude. However, characteristics which govern perception acquire the trappings of reality. They also become the assumptions of further logical exploration, as in the case of culture. Hence, a premise which by itself is an approximation becomes the foundation of logical derivations. It also, at times, becomes the bedrock of other definitions and work approaches.

An illustration would help explain the point. Any discussion on Indianness inevitably starts veering towards culture. Irrespective of differences of opinion, most people have a gut understanding of the making of an Indian. To put it more directly, an Indian and an Arab, in a conversation with each other, can be easily distinguished.

Further India (which has a defined identity and an amalgam of many subcultures with a substratum of identifiable traits) has no one city as its cultural capital. It just has an identifiable political Capital. India had several cultural conglomerates recognised as cultural centres through centuries. The plurality of definition works in this case but not in a product situation. Trouble arises when the mental conditioning of one situation starts permeating a totally different context. Confusion is compounded when this break does not impact sales of given products because the product that is being acquired is often for upping the "status index" rather than for efficiency of work.

In France for example, the situation is different. Paris is not only its political capital but the cultural capital, too. Hence India and France even though identifiable nation States have different frameworks of cultural and techno-political operation. This has its impact on technological product orientation. The matter could be ignored if vagueness in culture did not influence the skill formation behaviour of another sector, that is maintenance of technological products.

Consider the all-pervasive drumming up which is going on in India on digitalisation. From *Netflix* to iPhones, from visualisation products to Information Technology ones, the market is flooded with numbers, brands and other varieties. The manufacturers are laughing all the way to the bank because at any one point of time there can be five to six generations of say, either handsets or television sets available. People buy various products not necessarily out of any deep understanding of their defining features but also because of the status that goes with their acquisition. If you have two handsets of a given brand of different generations, both of them loaded with telephone numbers or ID details, both of them would be open to storing the data in the cloud. If the customer presses the key for "sync" a merging of the numbers or connect-catalogues would take place. If someone, then, called on a number both the phones would start ringing and then you might as well have only one handset.

The outlets, even in metropolitan cities, may not be able to handle this issue. One then proceeds to a given service centre where, possibly, a professionally-trained storekeeper has moved over as the technical head. S/he tries her/his best to work through trial and error. Sometimes this ability of stumbling through works, sometimes it doesn't. As a result, a serious amount of money invested in two handsets gets tied-up. Yet all this does not seem to affect sales. It is obvious that skill development in servicing these instruments has not kept up with the efforts of pushing the demand for the products. Yet few see this as a problem. Else the manufacturers, the distributors or the users would be attempting to sort out this major shortcoming in servicing. Is it possible that this culture of accepting the inability to define clearly and trying to survive by trial and error has permeated the product world, too? Is it possible that this absence of clarity of definitions and roles has given to the Indian market of technological products a strange veneer? The jury is yet to return with a solution to these complex contradictions and show the way to a composite approach.

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

THERE IS A PERCEPTION THAT BENGAL ELECTIONS ARE MARKED BY BLOODSHED. PEOPLE ARE AFRAID THAT VIOLENCE MAY MAR THE FORTHCOMING POLLS.

—WEST BENGAL GOVERNOR
 JAGDEEP DHANKHAR

POINTCOUNTERPOINT



THE GOVERNOR FEELS COMPELLED TO MAKE SOME COMMENT EVERY DAY. HE SPEAKS LIKE A SPOKESPERSON OF THE BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY.

—EDUCATION MINISTER
 PARTHA CHATTERJEE

Agents of change

The Business Correspondent model has shown promise by bringing a network of tech-enabled banking agents into poor and underserved rural communities



MOIN QAZI

Finance is one field where we have witnessed significant innovations in recent decades and this has transformed our society in many ways. One of the most promising innovations in the field of financial inclusion is the Business Correspondent model in which they serve as retail agents for banks providing services at locations other than a bank branch or ATM. India has traditionally been an under-banked country, with a financial system that doesn't work for the poor and hard-to-serve populations. One key reason for this is that most transactions are conducted in cash. Brick-and-mortar outlets make cash-based services difficult and expensive. Even State-owned banks have balked at reaching rural and poorer parts of India.

Even though, there has been a huge uptake of digital banking in recent years, cash remains a crucial part of most people's lives. The very small deposits and loans of lower-income customers make them unprofitable for banks which use traditional conventional models. Moreover, the cost of opening branches or setting up ATMs in remote locations tends to be high. Many rural dwellers still live too far from bank branches to make accounts viable for them. Also, rural customers usually deposit and borrow small amounts, making the business they bring to banks less lucrative. The main problem is Indian banks and other financial service providers haven't found a way to serve poor customers located in far-flung areas and still make a profit. For years, India's banking system struggled to reach these individuals with products that can significantly improve their financial lives and integrate them into the mainstream financial system. Now, alternative distribution approaches are emerging. The global revolution in digital payments has created new opportunities to connect poor and rural households with affordable, convenient and reliable financial tools.

One such approach — the Business Correspondent or agent model — has shown promise by bringing a network of tech-enabled banking agents into underserved communities. Agent networks, a distribution channel that relies on individual entrepreneurs under a franchise-like model, is an effective way to provide banking services. Also known as agent banking or correspondent banking, it has enabled banks to reach remote customers. It involves use of technology, such as payment cards or mobile phones, to identify customers and record transactions electronically and, in some cases, to allow customers to initiate transactions remotely. The entire framework hinges on technology-enabled remote banking logged into the system in a brick-and-mortar bank.

The agent model typically involves a person providing support as an extended arm of the bank. This is an important piece in the financial ecosystem and a key touch point that enables banks to expand their outreach dramatically at a substantially lower cost. The network leverages technology for maximum outreach in the assisted mode of banking through point of service handheld devices, mobile phones, biometric scanners and even micro ATMs which can be accessed either through AEPS (Aadhaar-enabled Payment Services) or a debit card. Easy-to-reach micro ATMs for stripped-down banking services such as cash deposits, loan repayments, transfers and withdrawals are a revolutionary tool for a low-cost banking infrastructure.

Business Correspondents are typically grassroots entrepreneurs who serve as contractual representa-



“MEANINGFUL FINANCIAL INCLUSION WILL BE POSSIBLE IN INDIA ONLY IF BANKING AGENTS PROVIDE QUALITY SERVICES WITH TRANSPARENCY AND DIGNITY TO THE COUNTRY'S UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS. BUT AGENTS NEED FINANCIAL STABILITY FOR THEMSELVES BEFORE THEY CAN BE EXPECTED TO EXTEND FINANCIAL INCLUSION TO THE UNBANKED AND SERVE A NEW GENERATION OF ACCOUNT HOLDERS”

tives of the sponsor bank and are authorised to conduct specified business on its behalf. They are compensated through fees and commission paid by the sponsor, which also takes care of their training needs.

These agents, who help banks acquire and serve customers, have worked under what is essentially a franchise model. Bank agents are typically required to invest significant upfront capital in the business and are encouraged to leverage their personal connections and credibility within the local community to stake demand.

This model provides substantial cost benefits to the provider, as the agent incurs the majority of start-up costs and most ongoing costs are variable and commission-based. The agent model also features some important non-financial benefits. As the retail face of the business, agents can provide customer assistance in a way that most ATMs cannot. This is especially valuable in communities with low rates of overall and technological literacy.

The model was introduced in 2006 by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to allow banks to employ local people as third-party, non-bank agents to travel door-to-door to provide banking services to local communities. The agent model proposes that in areas inaccessible to banks, entities such as grocery stores, telcos, snack parlours, petrol pumps, lottery outlets, public utilities and companies with a retail network which potential customers use for their daily needs, can be authorised to perform financial operations.

Financial services firms need to weave local contexts in their business models in order to serve the communities successfully. Closer integration with the community, through models like Business Correspondent banking, also helps in bringing about a greater appreciation of the

challenges faced by them. In a country as vast and diverse as India, deeper understanding of the market can only come if firms have a widespread distribution network and recruit locally. In order to serve their customers better, financial services firms need to be present in local markets and have employees who are familiar with the cultural and economic nuances of the community in which they work.

The agent networks served as the last line of resistance during the ongoing pandemic. Following the nationwide lockdowns, the Centre announced two relief packages under the 'Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana' amounting to \$260 billion, an estimated 10 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), for the vulnerable. Agents played a significant role in its implementation, as Government subsidies were credited directly to the accounts of beneficiaries.

The channel has led to the creation of a mass market for affordable, accessible, convenient and sustainable financial services for low-income people and small-scale entrepreneurs in remote areas which lack bank branches, but do have other retail outlets and post offices that already have the reach needed to access target customers. These outlets provide locations for a network of agents that can be used as low-cost delivery channels for providing financial services to people visiting them, especially in rural areas. Customers may have already developed a level of trust and confidence required for more habitual use of financial services.

The model has chronically suffered from low profitability and high churn. There is a high level of agent attrition on account of unattractive remuneration. Agents take on significant financial risk in starting their business. For an individual starting a mobile money business, upfront

costs — which include the initial cash required as well expenses such as furnishings, technology devices, licensing and security fee — are substantial.

In places that have significant population density that can drive decent volumes, agent networks will grow organically. However, whether an agent is located in an urban or frontier region, of course, is not the sole determinant of success. In all markets, additional factors can limit the development of networks. These include the lack of banking infrastructure required for rebalancing, regulatory requirements that make it challenging and time intensive to recruit agents, unreliable telecommunications networks and power grids, poor roads and other physical infrastructure.

The country needs a larger force of agents who are educated, motivated and savvy enough to effectively reach remote and challenging communities. But considering the work required for on-boarding these customers and orienting them to actively use digital services, the agents' compensation appears to be hardly worth the effort. On account of this, they tend to favour densely populated, well-monetised and oversaturated markets. The original model of doorstep banking has already given way to kiosk-based banking due to the increased work required of agents. Meaningful financial inclusion will be possible in India only if banking agents provide quality services with transparency and dignity to the country's underserved populations. But agents need financial stability for themselves before they can be expected to extend financial inclusion to the unbanked and serve a new generation of account holders.

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

Confessional monologues show we are living in the age of id

Political leaders now spend more time on cultural and moral issues and the self rather than on what they were once expected to do



NADEEM PARACHA

In his 1954 book *Jinnah: Creator of Pakistan*, H Bolitho writes that, in 1920 when Mahatma Gandhi's Indian National Congress and India's pan-Islamists came together to force the ouster of the British from the region through protests, Muhammad Ali Jinnah was not amused.

Bolitho describes Jinnah as someone who was steeped in the political and social traditions and ideas of British liberalism and constitutionalism. In 1916, Jinnah had worked as a bridge between the Congress and the Muslim League and invested a lot of energy in gaining some important political concessions from the British for the Hindu and Muslim polities of India. However, four years later, when Mahatma Gandhi's civil disobedience movement merged with the pan-

Islamic Khilafat Movement, Jinnah wrote a letter to Mahatma Gandhi warning him that these movements had the potential of unleashing religious and communal sentiments that would be hard to control and thus, lead to chaos.

Jinnah concluded his letter by writing, "what the consequences of this may be, I shudder to contemplate."

As opposed to Mahatma Gandhi's Indian nativism and performative spiritualism and the religiously-motivated impulsivity of the pan-Islamists, Jinnah was a 20th century Indian extension of the 'Age of Enlightenment'.

Also called the 'Age of Reason', it had evolved from various ideas and philosophies in Europe between the 17th and 19th centuries. It advocated the triumph of reason, science, individuality and democracy over religious ritualism, superstition, monarchism, feudalism and emotionalism. Enlightenment ideas and narratives had triggered dramatic revolutions in the US and France and ushered in modernity on the backs of rapid industrialisation, market economics, the rise of science and of philosophies which claimed that mankind's well-

being lay not in its chaotic passions and impulses but in the evolution and maturity of man's ability to apply reason and logic in whatever he did.

The resultant modernity was also the consequence of a rising middle-class that had rebelled against monarchism and the landed elite, replacing them with the ideas of democracy and an integrated economy which, in turn, had given birth to the concept of nationalism and the nation State.

Indeed, Enlightenment ideas and modernity were attacked by various differing schools of thought but once modernity and its ideals had catapulted several Western nations into becoming global powers, all opposing ideas were relegated to the fringes.

In 1920, Enlightenment ideals, and political, economic and social modernity were still at the centre of all governing models in the Western world. These ideals had also been adopted by various segments of the societies that were colonised by the European nation-States.

Modernity's critics hit back, accusing its cold logic of progress and its mechanised products for the carnage witnessed during World War-I (1914-

1918). The modernists, meanwhile, claimed that not enough had been done to subdue the primitive impulses that humans still harboured.

This idea was now rooted in the works of the enigmatic Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud. In his books and papers published between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Freud had concluded that conditions such as depression, hysteria, neurosis and even psychosis were because of repressed emotions. His daughter, Anna Freud, a psychologist herself, was of the view that these needed to be addressed through psychoanalysis in order to neutralise their destructive nature. When Jinnah warned Mahatma Gandhi in 1920, he was thinking like a modernist, advising him that the two aforementioned movements had the potential of unleashing deep-seated emotions that needed to be checked and replaced with a more responsible approach towards achieving political freedoms.

Contrary to what the anti-modernists had expected from the repeat of mass carnage during World War-II (1939-45), Western governments began to invest heavily in what Anna

Freud had been suggesting. This was based on evidence that the unabashed forces of fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany had embraced the anti-modernist ideas to romanticise the release of passions, impulses and emotions that were once regulated by the ideals of the Enlightenment. These caused the ultimate slaughter of millions of people who did not fit the irrational anti-modernist context of nationalist glory and racial purity.

Anna Freud's work came to the forefront as governments began to envision future polities trained to neutralise primitive impulses (the id) through a well-developed 'superego' i.e. moral conscience driven by reason. It was during this period that Pakistan came into being in 1947.

In his book *'Qissa Aik Sadi Ka'* Malik Ghulam Nabi, a former member of Jinnah's party, writes that, during a Muslim League convention in December 1947, a man came up and said to Jinnah, "We had told people, Pakistan ka matlab kya? La ilaha illallah (What does Pakistan mean? There is no god, but God)." To this Jinnah replied, "Please sit down. Neither I nor the working council of the party has

passed such a resolution. You must have raised this slogan to garner votes."

Here we see Jinnah again feeling uncomfortable with the idea of inner emotionalism dictating external human behaviour. However, according to Adam Curtis in *'The Century of the Self'*, when complexities of decolonisation entangled western powers in wars thousands of miles away and their economies began to nosedive, Anna Freud's ideas were turned on their heads.

From the 1970s onwards, "spiritual" and "psychological" movements emerged that encouraged the overt expression of repressed emotions. The self became more important than the whole. Politics shifted as well. According to Curtis, when it became tougher for politicians and governments to address societal complications arising from the new disposition and at the same time reconstruct economies, they began to appeal to people's inner feelings.

Emotions related to morality, desires, self-improvement and image began to be tapped, overriding policies that once looked to benefit societies as

a whole. This "postmodernist" approach, once the domain of advertising, has continued to dominate politics, now more than ever. For example, the recent presidential elections in the US were largely understood as a conflict between differing points of view on cultural issues associated with one's inner feelings about a just society that transcends monolithic concepts such as the economy.

On the Right as well as the Left/liberal sides, political and economic complications are now explained (as opposed to being addressed) in the language of emotions such as anxiety and fear.

Political and economic failures are being blamed on cultural, religious, racial and moral factors. Social media has given space for everyone to caress the Freudian concept of ego through confessional monologues about their inner selves. And the leaders have followed suit by spending more time delving into cultural and moral issues and the self rather than on what leaders were once expected to do. We are living in the age of the id.

(The views expressed are personal. Courtesy: Dawn.)

NEW DEFENCE LAW

China expands power of its military headed by Xi

Beijing: China has revised its National Defence Law, expanding the power of its armed forces headed by President Xi Jinping to mobilise military and civilian resources to defend its national interests both at home and abroad.

The new law, effective from January 1, weakens the role of the State Council, China's Cabinet headed by Premier Li Keqiang, in formulating military policy, handing decision-making powers to the Central Military Commission (CMC), the overall high-command of the two million-strong People's Liberation Army (PLA) headed by Xi, Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post reported on Sunday.

Xi, 67, has emerged as the Communist Party of China's (CPC) most powerful leader after its founder Mao Zedong, holding the posts of CPC General Secretary, head of the military besides the Presidency with prospects of a life-long tenure.

He is the only civilian leader in the CMC, packed with high-ranking military offi-



cials. The amendments for the National Defence Law (NDL) were passed by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) on December 26 last year.

The revised law came into force after the key conclave of the ruling CPC in November last year finalised plans to build a fully modern military on par with the US by 2027.

By the year 2027, which marks the centennial of the founding of the PLA, China will build a fully modern military, a goal that is in alignment with the national strength and will fulfil the future national defence need, official media reports earlier said.

The revised law specifically stresses the need to build a nationwide coordination mechanism for the mobilisation of state-owned and private enterprises to take part in research into new defence technologies covering conventional weapons, as well as the non-traditional domains of cybersecurity, space and electro-magnetics.

Military and political analysts said the new NDL aimed to strengthen the country's military leadership under Xi, providing it with the legal grounds to respond to the challenges of accelerating confrontations between China and the US. **PTI**

11 Hazara coal miners shot dead in Balochistan

Karachi: At least 11 coal miners from Pakistan's Shia Hazara community were killed and four others injured on Sunday by unidentified gunmen who initially kidnapped them in the restive southwestern province of Balochistan, in the latest targeted attack on the minority communities in the country.

According to police, the miners were on the way to work at Machh coal field when the unidentified gunmen kidnapped them and opened fire on them after taking them to the nearby hills, the Express Tribune reported.

Six of the miners died on the spot and five who were critically wounded died on the way to a hospital. Four others were also injured.

According to media reports, an initial investigation has revealed that the attackers identified the miners as being from a Shia Hazara community and the gunmen took them away, leaving others unharmed.

A heavy contingent of police, Frontier Corps, and district administration officials reached the site after the incident.

Prime Minister Imran Khan condemned the killing of 11 coal miners and termed the incident a "yet another cowardly [and] inhumane act of terrorism".



People from the Shiite Hazara community gather around the bodies of coal mine workers who were killed by unknown gunmen near the Machh coal field in Quetta, Pakistan **AP**

"The families of the victims will not be left abandoned by the [government]," Khan tweeted. "Have asked the FC to use all resources to apprehend these killers and bring them to justice."

Balochistan Chief Minister Jam Kamal Khan has condemned the incident and sought an inquiry report from the authorities concerned, the daily reported.

"Those who targeted these innocent coal miners do not deserve any concessions," he said. No group immediately claimed responsibility for the

killing but banned Sunni extremist organisation Lashker-e-Jhangvi has targeted the minority Hazara community in Baluchistan in the past. **PTI**

Eight police officials suspended over attack on Hindu temple in Pak

Peshawar: Eight police officials in Pakistan were suspended on Sunday for dereliction of duty after a Hindu temple was vandalised and set on fire by a mob led by members of a radical Islamist party in the country's restive Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province.

So far, 100 people have been arrested for their alleged involvement in the incident, the police said, adding that 45 were arrested on Sunday.

Over 350 people have been named in the FIR after the temple in Karak district's Terri village was vandalised and set on fire on Wednesday by a mob protesting against its expansion work.

Superintendent of Police (Investigation) Zahir Shah said that 100 people, including seven leading figures, have been

arrested in the case while efforts were on to arrest all the 350 nominated accused in the FIR.

The leading figures include Maulana Amanullah, Maulana Imdadullah, Maulana Matiullah, Maulana Muhammad Hakeem and Maulana Anwar Zaman.

The arrested accused were produced before an anti-terrorist court which sent them to three days of police custody.

District Police Officer of Karak Irfanullah Marwat suspended eight police officials on Saturday for dereliction of duty.

The temple, which also has a Samadhi of a Hindu religious leader, was attacked by the mob after members of the Hindu community received permission from the local authorities to renovate its decades-old building. **PTI**

Baghdad procession marks anniv of Iran general's death

Baghdad: A mock funeral procession in Iraq marked the one-year anniversary of the US drone strike near Baghdad that killed top Iranian general Qassem Soleimani and top Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

Thousands of mourners joined the march on the highway leading to the Baghdad airport Saturday evening where the strike that killed the two men took place. It was blocked with cars.

Posters of the dead men adorned both sides of the road, which was lined with tents that served food and drinks for those who walked the highway.

The scene of the bombing was turned into a shrine-like area sealed off by red ropes, with a photo of Soleimani and al-Muhandis in the middle, as mourners lit candles. Shrapnel marks were still

visible on the asphalt and walls in the area.

Soleimani headed Iran's Revolutionary Guard's elite Quds Force, responsible for the Islamic Republic's foreign operations and frequently shuttled between Iraq, Lebanon and Syria. His assassination dramatically ratcheted up tensions in the region and brought the U.S. and Iran to the brink of war.

The procession came as Iraq's military said that explosives experts with its naval forces successfully dismantled a mine that was discovered stuck to an oil tanker in the Persian Gulf two days earlier.

The statement on Saturday said Iraqi authorities have opened an investigation into the incident. No group has claimed responsibility for placing the mine. The announcement came a

day after Iraq confirmed reports by private security firms that a mine had been discovered attached to the side of a tanker rented from Iraq's Oil Marketing Company, known as SOMO, as it was refueling another vessel. It said that Iraqi teams were working to dismantle the mine.

Iraq has not provided further details, but the two private security firms said the discovery was likely a limpet mine on the MT Pola, a Liberian-flagged tanker.

A limpet mine is a type of naval mine that attaches to the side of a ship, usually by a diver-member of special forces. It later explodes, and can significantly damage a vessel.

The discovery came amid heightened tensions between Iran and the US in the final days of President Donald Trump's administration. **AP**

Pakistan cancels 2,00,000 fake citizen ID cards held by Afghan refugees

Islamabad: Pakistan has cancelled about 200,000 computerised national identity cards (CNICs) fraudulently held by Afghanisthan refugees.

Speaking to reporters in his home town Rawalpindi on Saturday, Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said: "We have data of 1.5 million Afghan refugees having legal status and about 800,000 Afghans living in the country illegally."

He said corruption in the issuance of visas was being tackled and the government was providing online visa facility to citizens of 192 countries.

"To eliminate the chances of corruption, we have launched online visa service as there are chances of corruption in manual processing of visas," he said, adding that over 200,000 visa applications were

received for online visas in a single day.

Meanwhile, Rashid said persons targeting the armed forces were doing so at the behest of foreign countries and action would be taken "within 72 hours" against those making "anti-army" remarks.

"We would defeat such disinformation against our country and state institutions," he said.

The Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) — an alliance of 11 Opposition parties — has been formed against the Pakistan Army's interference in politics and installing "puppet" Prime Minister Imran Khan through a manipulated election.

Already, a case was being registered against Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam Fazl leader Mufti Kifayatullah over his remarks on the army, he said. **PTI**

Seven held at Kathmandu airport for carrying fake Covid test report

Kathmandu: Nepal police has arrested seven migrant workers from the Tribhuvan International Airport here for attempting to travel to the UAE with fake coronavirus test reports.

According to a statement issued by Nepal Police Headquarters on Sunday, seven workers, who were about to board a Fly Dubai flight, were arrested on Saturday.

Senior Superintendent of Police Rajesh Nath Bastola said the arrests were made in coordination with the airline company. The arrested showed "suspicious behaviour" during the security check-in process, the police said, adding that the airlines company contacted the respective hospitals from where the reports were purportedly issued. The hospitals said the reports were not issued by them. **PTI**



Israeli police use water cannons to disperse West Bank Jewish settler youth during a protest against Israeli police after the death of Ahuvia Sandak in Jerusalem during the third nationwide coronavirus lockdown **AP**

Egypt, Ethiopia, Sudan resume talks over disputed dam

Cairo: Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan resumed their years-long negotiations Sunday over the controversial dam Ethiopia is building on the Blue Nile, officials said.

The resumption came six weeks after Khartoum boycotted talks in November, urging the African Union to play a greater role in reaching a deal over the disputed Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam.

The negotiations have centered on the filling and operation of the giant dam. Key questions remain about how much water Ethiopia will release downstream if a multi-year drought occurs and how the three countries will resolve any future disputes. Ethiopia has rejected binding arbitration at the final stage of the project.

The foreign and irrigation ministers of the three Nile Valley countries met online Sunday, said Ahmed Hafez, the spokesman of Egypt's Foreign Ministry. Sudan also confirmed the meeting.

Ethiopia's Water and Energy Minister Seleshi Bekele said earlier the meeting was called by South Africa, the current head of the African Union, and that US Observers and AU experts would attend. In November, Sudan did not attend a round of talks called by South Africa, arguing that the current approach to reaching a tripartite agreement on the filling and operation of Ethiopias dam had not yielded results.

Sudanese Irrigation Minister Yasser Abbas said at the time that the AU should do

more to "facilitate the negotiation and bridge the gap between the three parties."

Africa's largest hydroelectric dam has caused severe tensions between the three nations.

Egypt has called it an existential threat and worries that it will reduce the country's share of Nile waters. The Arab's world most populous country relies almost entirely on the Nile to supply water for agriculture and its more than 100 million people. About 85% of the rivers flow originates from Ethiopia.

Ethiopia says the \$4.6bn dam will be an engine of development that will pull millions of people out of poverty. Sudan, in the middle, worries about the effects on its own dams, although it stands to benefit from access to cheap electricity. **AP**

Johnson warns Covid-19 lockdown may get tougher

PTI ■ LONDON

Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Sunday warned that the current tiered system of lockdown to arrest the spread of Covid-19 may have to be toughened further as the UK grapples with the new strain of the coronavirus.

As teachers' unions have been calling for a nationwide closure of all schools for a few weeks due to the rapid spread of the new variation, Johnson insisted that parents should send their children to school from Monday in the areas where they remain open as the threat to young kids from the deadly virus is "very small".

However, he admitted that even stricter restrictions for the wider public may be on their

way in the coming weeks as the coronavirus cases in the country jumped by 57,725 this weekend, taking the death toll close to 75,000.

"Alas, restrictions may be about to get tougher," Johnson told the BBC, when asked about the lockdown.

"It may be that we need to do things in the next few weeks that may be tougher. I'm fully reconciled to that. I think the whole country is fully reconciled to that. There are a range of tougher measures that we might have to take."

"Schools are safe. It's very important to stress that. The threat to young people, kids, is very small. The risk to staff is very small. The benefits of education are so huge," the Prime Minister said.

Veteran US broadcaster Larry King in hosp with Covid

PTI ■ LOS ANGELES

Legendary talk show host Larry King has tested positive for coronavirus and is being treated at a hospital here, according to US media reports on Sunday.

Sources close to the 87-year-old former CNN interviewer said he has been at the Cedars-Sinai Medical Centre for over a week.

Representatives for King have not publicly commented on his hospitalisation, and details of his current condition are unclear.

"Larry has fought so many health issues in the last few years and he is fighting this one hard too, he's a champ," a source told CNN.

US virus death toll hits 3,50,000; surge feared

Baltimore (US): The Covid-19 death toll in the United States has surpassed 3,50,000 as experts anticipate another surge in coronavirus cases and deaths stemming from holiday gatherings over Christmas and New Year's.

Data compiled by Johns Hopkins University shows the US Passed

the threshold early Sunday morning. More than 20 million people in the country have been infected.

The US Has begun using two coronavirus vaccines to protect health care workers and those over 80 but the roll-out of the inoculation program has been criticised as being slow and chaotic.

Multiple states have reported a record number of cases



over the past few days, including North Carolina and Arizona. Mortuary owners in hard-hit Southern California say they're being inundated with bodies.

The US By far has reported the most deaths from Covid-19 in the world, followed by Brazil, which has reported more than 1,95,000 deaths. **AP**

Britons flying home to Spain caught in post-Brexit red tape

Madrid: Blame Covid-19 travel restrictions or Brexit but whatever the cause, some British citizens trying to return to their homes in Spain this weekend have been barred from boarding flights.

Airlines are refusing documents that before Brexit had been valid proof of the Britons' status as residents in Spain.

Their ordeal comes amid heightened travel restrictions due to a coronavirus variant that has been blamed for faster contagion in the UK and highlights the bureaucratic complexities resulting from Britain's departure from the 27-nation European Union.

Both Spanish and British authorities said Sunday that the green-colored certificate of EU citizenship with a foreign national identification number

issued by Spain is still valid for British citizens residing in Spain under the bilateral provisions that followed the U.K.S withdrawal from the bloc on December 31.

But the travelers say British Airways and Iberia have been refusing to let them board for the past two days. The airlines, part of the IAG group, didn't immediately respond to requests Sunday for comment from The Associated Press.

Around 300,000 British citizens are registered as permanent residents in Spain, although before Brexit, many more had been living full or part-time in the country without officially registering.

Patricia Moody, a 69-year-old retiree who has called the southern Spanish town of Zurgena home for nearly four years, was among a

group of at least nine people unable to board a Madrid-bound BA/Iberia flight from London's Heathrow Airport on Saturday.

Moody said she and her husband, who she says needs to see his doctor back in Spain, have spent 1,900 pounds (\$2,600) on getting tested for the virus, traveling to the airport and booking new tickets after they were refused boarding. Their second attempt was also futile.

"Throughout all the months of negotiating Brexit, we were always assured that nothing would change for us," she said. Referring to the airlines and authorities in both countries, she added: "It's horrendous and we are suffering because of their incompetence."

Following the discovery of the coronavirus variant in the

U.K., Spain, like many other European nations, has banned all travel from the British isles except for Spanish citizens and U.K. Citizens with residency rights.

Spain has been rolling out a new system to register permanent foreign residents called TIE but its suffering a backlog due to the high number of requests.

Spain's Ministry of Foreign Affairs told AP that under the circumstances both proofs of application for the TIE and the "green certificate" for EU citizens is still valid to travel for British residents under the new health restrictions in place until Jan. 19.

"This should not be happening," said the U.K. Embassy in Spain said in a Facebook post. "The Spanish authorities have today re-confirmed that the green residency document

will be accepted for travel to return to Spain, as stated in our travel advice."

But Sam Dakin, a 32-year-old English-language teacher based in Barcelona for the last four years, and his partner, who has been in the Spanish city for 8 years, said they needed more assurances before they could rebook flights.

The couple had been blocked from flying Saturday morning despite carrying their certificate and then were refused boarding on another flight Saturday evening that British Airways had initially said they could take.

"Just because the government adviser said that we could travel, we don't know whether that will happen when we turn up at the counters," Dakin said. "We just don't know where we were going to get answers." **AP**

Traders' body plans to reduce Chinese imports



FIANS ■ NEW DELHI

The Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT) on Sunday said it has targeted to reduce imports from China to Rs 1 lakh crore this year.

In a statement, the traders' body said it would run a programme this year to "liberate" the country's e-commerce business from the clutches of foreign companies.

"As part of its 'Boycott Chinese Goods' campaign from June 10, 2020, the CAIT has set the target of bringing down imports from China by Rs 1 lakh crore by the end of this year," the traders' body added.

CAIT also said it would urge the government on the

formation of e-commerce policy, National Retail Trade Policy, Traders Welfare Board at the Centre and all states, simplification of GST tax system and creation of a separate income tax slab for traders of the country.

It would urge the government for formation of a joint committee of officials and traders in all the districts and also seek the simplification of Food Safety and Standards Act.

CAIT's priorities would also include supporting women entrepreneurs. It would also make efforts for making the pension scheme more rational for traders, subsidised insurance scheme for traders and their employees, availing easy access of loan for traders

Private banks witnessed rise in NPAs in large borrowal accounts in FY20: RBI

FIANS ■ NEW DELHI

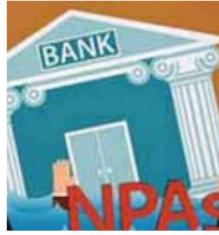
Private sector banks witnessed a rise in non-performing assets (NPA) in respect of large borrowal accounts with exposure of Rs five crore or above.

A recent report by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), cited that gross NPA ratio as well as the ratio of restructured standard assets to total funded amounts emanating from larger borrowal accounts in the public sector banks have gone down.

At the end of September 2020, large borrowal accounts constituted 79.8 per cent of NPAs and 53.7 per cent of total loans, it said.

"During 2019-20, PSBs' GNPAs ratio as well as the ratio of restructured standard assets to total funded amounts emanating from larger borrowal accounts trended downwards. On the contrary, PVBs experienced an increasing share of NPAs in respect of such accounts," it said.

Further, the share of special mention accounts (SMA-0) witnessed a sharp rise in September 2020, which, according to the report, may be an initial sign of stress after lifting of moratorium on August



31, 2020.

However, the share of other categories of SMAs i.e., SMA-1 and SMA-2 remained at a relatively lower level, it said.

The RBI report also showed that the decline in NPAs in the last financial year was achieved largely on the back of write-offs.

As per the data, that both public and private sector banks wrote off NPAs worth over Rs 2.37 lakh crore.

The banks' net NPA stood over Rs 2.89 lakh crore in 2019-20 as against Rs 3.55 lakh crore in 2018-19.

In terms of lenders, out of the total write-off of Rs 2.37 lakh crore, NPAs worth over Rs 1.78 lakh crore were written off by public sector banks, while private sector banks wrote off loans worth Rs 53,949 crore.

HDY: Transformational change

The North Eastern Council has been at the forefront of bringing about development in an area which faces several challenges. K Moses Chalai, Secretary, NEC tells Saimi Sattar about the roadmap ahead

hood projects are the core areas that NEC has taken up. Everything that it did was not perfect as the Council was still evolving. A third-party evaluation said that NEC has done its job though it could have been better.

One positive aspect is that NEC has a very strong goodwill of the States. The affection of the region towards it is also immense.

How has its role evolved?

It continues to do many things. NEC needs to see how it can continue to be relevant and useful while spearheading initiatives that were done in the past. There are a few initiatives which are trend-setters. Any organisation in the world in a democratic system, like a political party, has to go back to the people to say that it is still good and relevant after every four-five years. NEC has been given 50 years and it is very important that it is also subjected to this yardstick. As a part of the organisation, we are quite willing to step up and meet that challenge. Relatively, the resources of the Council have not gone up while those available to the States have increased dramatically. Definitely the resources need to commensurate the efforts of the NEC. However, it needs to be kept in mind that resource utilisation isn't easy. When the money comes in, it can't be just put in anywhere. There has to be proper planning and parameters have to be followed. But we do need to step up.

We should continue to work on power and basic infrastructure because there is still a need for these.

There is another role which was outlined by our Chairman, Home Minister, Amit Shah. He has said that 30 per cent of the NEC budget should be apportioned and provided to backward areas and deprived sections which have been left out. This has kicked in from this financial year. We are working and struggling as this is a new



area. Looking back, I agree that some portion of the resources need to go forward in blocks which have not seen NEC projects. The Council does not lag behind anyone in terms of output and outcome vis-a-vis resources in comparison with any government organisation. It is perhaps among the better ones as compared to other organisations under Central and State governments.

Any new areas that NEC should be focusing on?

Technology is definitely one area that needs to pick up. NEC should step into that area and do better. For instance, in bamboo, the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region (DoNER) are saying that, NEC needs to go all out and make it impactful. But for that resources are needed. The authorities in Delhi have promised that resources would be found to undertake projects in the area. The government in Delhi is impatient and wants to go big. The NEC is also conducting studies with the Ministry of DoNER, IIMS, NEDFI under the lead given by the PM. So, plans are being prepared for different subjects.

Do you see NEC's role expanding then?

Yes, and it should...

Dec FPI inflow at record high of ₹62,016 cr

FIANS ■ MUMBAI

As foreign portfolio investments (FPI) surged amid the pandemic, December 2020 recorded the highest-ever monthly inflow of FPIs at Rs 62,016 crore. FPI inflows into Indian equities surpassed the previous high of Rs 60,358 crore recorded in November 2020. This was the third consecutive month of net inflows.

The year 2020 also recorded

the highest-ever yearly net inflow of FPIs into equities at over Rs 1.70 lakh crore.

The foreign investments into equities came on the back of excess liquidity due to stimulus measures globally, weak dollar, and low valuation of stocks. In terms of purchase, FPIs initially preferred large cap stocks till October. Later on, they enlarged their purchases to include the mid and small cap segments, analysts said.

In terms of sectors, IT, pharma, banks, FMCG, metals, realty and oil & gas stocks were bought the most by FPIs in this year. Analysts noted that going ahead, FPIs may continue to concentrate in the Indian market for the next one or two quarters. Positive developments on the vaccine front to combat the novel coronavirus pandemic is also likely to boost investments. In 2020, the Indian stock market witnessed net

The year 2020 also recorded the highest-ever yearly net inflow of FPIs into equities at over ₹1.70 lakh crore

selling by FPIs during three months -- March, April and September. March was the worst month in terms of FPIs, with the highest net outflow during the year pegged at Rs 61,973 crore.

GST arm unearths ₹832 crore tax evasion by illegal 'pan masala' factory

FIANS ■ NEW DELHI

The Central GST Delhi West Commissionerate has unearthed evasion of taxes worth around ₹831.72 crore by way of manufacture and illegal supply of 'pan masala' without any registration and payment of duty.

The GST officials also arrested one person in the matter.

An official statement said that on the basis of the search at the premises of the manufacture, it was found that illegal manufacturing of 'gutkha/pan masala/tobacco product' was going on, evi-

denced by a godown, machines, raw materials and manufactured products at the premises.

Around 65 labourers were found working at the illegal factory. The finished product of gutkha was being supplied to various states in India. The searches resulted in seizure of finished gutkha and raw materials such as 'chuna, sada katha', tobacco leaves and valued at around Rs 4.14 crore.

"On the basis of evidence gathered, stocks seized and confessional statements recorded the total duty evasion is estimated to be approximately Rs 831.72 crore," said the Finance

Ministry statement.

The accused person has been arrested and produced before the Metropolitan Magistrate (MM), Patiala House Court on January 2 and has been sent to 14-day judicial custody. Further investigation was underway to identify the key conspirator/s of the case and to recover the tax dues involved.

As per the ministry, the Delhi zone has been making sustained efforts to check evasion of GST, leading to detection of Rs 4,327 crore in the current financial year and arrest of 15 persons in these matters.

Centre invites Eols for 26% stake sale in BEML

FIANS ■ NEW DELHI

The Government has invited expressions of interest (EOI) for the strategic sale of 26 per cent stake in BEML.

BEML is a 'Miniratna' Category-1 Public Sector Undertaking, under the administrative control of Ministry of Defence (MoD). The government currently holds 54.03 per cent stake in it.

"GoI proposes to disinvest its equity shareholding of 26 per cent in BEML out of its shareholding of 54.03 per cent by way of strategic disinvest-

ment to investor(s) along with transfer of management control," BEML said in a regulatory filing. The Centre appointed SBI Capital Markets Limited (SBICAP) as its transaction advisor to advise and manage the strategic disinvestment process. The filing said that the disinvestment process is to be implemented through open competitive bidding route. Interested bidders who meet the requirements as per the preliminary information memorandum may submit their EOIs on or before 5 p.m. of March 1, 2021.

Coal India capex utilisation over ₹8,000 cr till Dec, aiming at revised 13,000 cr target

PTI ■ KOLKATA

Despite its cash-flow issues, Coal India Ltd has already spent over Rs 8,000 crore as capital expenditure (capex) till December 2020 in the current fiscal, and is looking to meet a revised target of Rs 13,000 crore of such expense by the end of FY21, an official said on Sunday.

The capital expenditure target for the financial year 2020-21 was initially set at Rs 10,000 crore, the CIL official said.

The government has instructed the public sector companies to increase their capital expenses to boost the

economy which was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, he said. "With the achievements of our internal goals, the government has raised our capital expenditure target to Rs 13,000 crore."

"We have already crossed Rs 8,000 crore till December and will definitely surpass the Rs 10,000-crore mark. We will chase the new goal as this will help revive the economy," a CIL official told PTI.

The Maharatna PSU had spent Rs 5,023 crore till September this fiscal, which was 118 per cent utilisation of its half-yearly target.

The spending was made for procuring heavy earth-

moving machinery, setting up railway lines, development of sidings, exploration works and investments in joint ventures.

The major challenge for Coal India for accelerating capital expenditure has been the cash-flow issues, the official said.

Moreover, there has been a sluggish coal demand with over 50 million tonne stock at pitheads and 37 million tonne at thermal power stations, the industry sources.

"As against a stock requirement of 21 days, the power plants have coal for running units for 23-24 days. How will they buy additional coal?" they said.

Dry run of corona vaccine done at 19 centers in 7 districts of Rajasthan

Jaipur: Dry run (mock drill) of corona vaccination was done on 19 centers in 7 districts of the State. Information on the potential common adverse effects after vaccination and follow-up of the COVID protocol was given at all these centers. A total of 424 beneficiaries were run dry on selected centers on Saturday.

Medical and Health Minister Dr. Raghu Sharma said that in the first phase, dry run was started in 7 districts of the state with complete caution and scientific protocol. After this, a dry run will be done across the state in a phased manner.

He said that the first dry run was started at JK Lone Hospital in Jaipur. Medical Secretary Mr. Siddharth Mahajan and Principal of Saiwamingsh Medical College, Dr. Sudhir Bhandari kept a complete watch on the dry run. A dry run was conducted at the local level in the presence of district medical and concerned officials.

The Health Minister said that along with JK Lone Hospital in Jaipur, a run was run at Banipark Satellite Hospital, Achrol First Aid Center and Manipal Hospital.

Apart from this, dry runs were conducted at 2-2 of Bikaner, Jodhpur, Bharatpur, Karauli, Ajmer and 4-4 centers of Jaipur and Banswara. A total of 19 centers were run dry in the state.

This is how the practice of dry run

Dr. Sharma said that the rehearsal of the vaccine room and the monitoring room for the beneficiary was prepared by applying the Kovid vaccine in the first run. During this, the identity documents of the beneficiary were verified and entered by the vaccination officer. In mobile, the beneficiary was certified on the Kovin software and sent to the vaccination room for vaccination, where the vaccination process (demo) was completed by the vaccinator officer and the beneficiary vaccine was entered into the Kovin software.

He said that the beneficiary was kept under observation by the vaccination officer in the monitoring room for 30 minutes.

During the process of this dry run, the time taken to vaccinate a beneficiary and the time taken to enter the Kovin software was assessed and the process of operating the software was investigated.

Commerce Ministry seeks financial support from FinMin for VRS scheme

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Commerce Ministry has sought financial support from its finance counterpart to pay compensation to the employees of public sector trading firm MMTc (Metals & Minerals Trading Corporation of India) under its VRS scheme, sources said.

According to sources in the Commerce Ministry, which is the nodal ministry of MMTc, the ministry has sent a proposal regarding this to the

Finance Ministry. The company needs money to pay its employees who are opting for VRS (voluntary retirement scheme), and due to its weak financial conditions, MMTc is unable to pay the due amount, one of the sources said.

The ministry is hopeful that the Finance Ministry would consider the proposal positively, the sources said.

In July last year, MMTc's board had approved the VRS proposal for its employees.

Retail fuel prices remain unchanged across metros

FIANS ■ NEW DELHI

Oil marketing companies kept petrol and diesel prices unchanged for the 27th consecutive day on Sunday across the four metro cities.

In the national capital, petrol was sold for Rs 83.71 per litre. In Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata, the fuel was priced at Rs 90.34, Rs 86.51 and Rs 85.19 per litre respectively.

Retail prices of transport fuels have been the same ever

since they were last revised on December 7. Diesel prices in Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkata were Rs 73.87, Rs 80.51, Rs 79.21 and Rs 77.44 respectively. The OMCs have gone on a pause mode amid a rise in crude oil prices as Brent crude has been trading at over the \$50 per barrel mark on the back of commencement of vaccination drives in several countries to counter the pandemic along with expectations of a big pickup in demand.

Railways to run trains from Bengaluru city to airport

FIANS ■ BENGALURU

The South Western Railway (SWR) will operate a train service daily from Monday between the main city station and Devanahalli near the Bengaluru international airport to ferry air passengers both ways, an official said on Sunday.

"Two pairs of trains will operate from Monday between Krantivira Sangolli Rayanna (KSR) station in the city and the Kempegowda international Airport Devanahalli halt station. The fare is Rs 15 for

one-way trip," a zonal official told IANS.

The Bengaluru international airport is about 40km northeast of the city.

The first train will depart from KSR at 4.45 a.m. and reach the airport station at 5.50 a.m.

"Another pair of trains will run from Yelahanka station in the city's northern suburb to Devanahalli halt station on the Bengaluru-Dharmavaram route," said the official. The fare is Rs 10 for the one-way trip.

The railway board on Friday permitted the SWR to

operate three new diesel electric multiple unit (DEMU) trains to the airport.

"A regular train from Bengaluru Cantonment and Bangarpet in Kolar district will also stop at the Devanahalli halt station to pick passengers on its return journey via Yesvantpur," said the official.

"The train service will be much cheaper than bus and taxi fares between the city and the airport," added the official.



The airport operator will run shuttle service between the Devanahalli station and the airport terminal.

Trend Slazer

Be competitive in a positive way: Anil

After spending four decades in Bollywood, ANIL KAPOOR is still competitive, but not delusional.

"I think everybody should be competitive, but in a very positive way. I'm competitive but not delusional about myself. You have to be realistic and competitive," Anil said.

The actor walked into the industry with a small role in the 1979 Umesh Mehra directorial *Hamare Tumhare*, and went on to carve his niche balancing his stature as a bankable actor and a saleable star with performances including *Wah 7 Din, 1942: A Love Story, Mr. India*, among others.



'In my journey, I spent 12 years struggling. There were ups and downs in the beginning

of my career. The times of struggles can not be forgotten. I have learned a lot from those times too. I experienced a lot of things back then and that has helped me today. A man can also learn from bad and low days.'

—Nawazuddin Siddiqui

Actor DIA MIRZA has been at the forefront of conversations about climate change.



In her own life, the actor follows a greener, earth-centric lifestyle that includes segregating and composting waste, making the kitchen plastic free, upcycling old furniture, carrying a metal water bottle to shoots, using biodegradable toiletries and hygiene products and creating green pockets wherever possible.

According to her, the COVID-19 pandemic is a wake-up call and a distress signal. As the new year arrives, Dia outlines five, simple resolutions for sustainable living.

'I don't pin hopes on anything'

Hollywood star ISLA FISHER says she likes her life to be an open book, and not pin hopes on anything.

"I try to keep life as an open book and not really pin my hopes on anything. I don't know if that's healthy or not. I've just been like that since I was a kid," Fisher said.

"So, I've always been incredibly surprised that I'm employed, married and have a wonderful family. Everything feels like a bonus for me. It is nice to have goals and equally nice to let life and situations guide you towards new beginnings," added the actor.



SCALE IT UP

An online travel company reveals how Indians plan to travel this year

It's been a year of cancelled trips and missed experiences. This New Year, we can't wait to talk about what is on the horizon as we say goodbye to a very difficult year. 2020 has been a year like no other and while much has been said about the adversity, positive news around the vaccine rollout has also uplifted spirits helping all see a glimmer of hope. The pandemic has been a shape-shifting event when it comes to consumer behaviour and preferences. Shifting the travel search and booking data on MakeMyTrip over the last nine months, here are the definitive trends that will shape how Indians are going to travel this year.

REVENGE TRAVEL ON BUCKET LIST

Revenge is a dish best served cold and after having been left out in the cold for almost one full year – expect travellers hit the road with a vengeance. Travel is on top of mind as people look at making a fresh start. Searches on our platform related to travel destinations and activities reaffirm that travel may have slowed down but travel planning has been on in full swing for this year. People are going to spend time and effort planning their excursions for future travel this year relying on platforms that provide treasure trove of information and booking choices.

RISE OF SLOW, IMMERSIVE TRAVEL

The one thing that 2020 has taught us is to slow down and appreciate an unhurried life. So be it a work-ation, staycation or a weekend getaway, travellers are gravitating towards fuller and richer immersive travel experiences that allows them to connect, explore and



unwind. More and more people will prefer travel that balances their itinerary with a languid pace affording them the time to explore more while eliminating the stress of rushing around many places to tick the boxes.

MORE TAKERS FOR PREMIUM STAYS AND NON-HOTELS

Safety and hygiene have emerged as the new comfort and luxury in travel. The traditional in-stay checklist has now made way for questions like – does the stay ensure adequate social distancing, is there a private kitchen, can I have an extra room for help or support staff and so on. Post-COVID, travellers are looking for more control over their stay – leading many to opt for higher category hotels, premium homestays, independent villas and non-hotels that promise comfort of a vacation



while meeting additional requirements. So, if in 2019, one in every two Indian traveller was thinking of booking an alternative accommodation property (results from the survey conducted by MakeMyTrip's Consumer Insights team in October 2019), in 2021 more Indians will be booking villas, homestays, vacation rentals and non-hotels for their travel.

WEEKEND GETAWAYS TO BECOME THE NEW WEEKEND GOALS

Urban Indians were just warming up to the idea of weekend breaks in recent years but the pandemic seems to have flipped the switch for good. More and more Indians have tasted the fun of quick getaways during the pandemic induced travel restrictions and this travel habit is all set to become the norm. The online travel company has

seen a 70 per cent recovery in the short-haul leisure travel segment.

CONTACTLESS TRAVEL A REALITY

Post-pandemic, the travel and hospitality industry has made significant efforts to boost confidence among travellers by making services contactless as far as possible. From contactless check-in at airports and hotels; to ordering food and beverages and concierge services at hotels online, contactless offerings are becoming a norm more than an exception. In parallel, travellers are also warming up to the idea of using contactless services and also building appreciation for the tech-rich experiences that promise travel safety, upfront. Currently, on MakeMyTrip Limited, more than 2200 hotels offer contactless check-ins and the numbers are increasing every week.

A look forward

Sustainable, functional and easy-to-wear clothing has taken precedence at all levels. Here are a few fashion trends that may rule 2021



While 2020 was all about comfort and meaningful design which works well for work from home, loungewear and intimate gatherings, 2021 is expected to be a glamorous update of the same, forecast the experts.

Industry veterans shed light on trends that may rule this year.

Designer Kunal Rawal
Military tones are going to be huge in the coming year. Personally I've always been fond of a good tonal grey look, so 'Ultimate Gray' is a colour I highly recommend.

This year will see a rise in de-constructed utilitarian silhouettes, especially in chic neutral shades.

Pantone colours will dominate virtual runways. Both "Ultimate Gray" and "Illuminating" are colours that work well together as the sensibilities behind them are relatable.

Fashion Winners of 2020 were definitely silhouettes that were easy to lounge in. Comfort took charge over style, and as restrictions started easing up, menswear was championed by multi-utilitarian clothing that could easily transition from day to night.

Monica Shah of Jade by Monica & Karishma
I think comfort is going to be high on every bride's list of priorities when it comes to her bridal ensemble. We're going to see lighter fabrics and breezy silhouettes that not only facilitate movement but also make the bride feel completely at ease on her big day.

Another trend I see is that of experimen-



talism. Brides are going to be much keener to either deviate from what's seen as traditional or they're going to find ways to give their own unique touch to a traditional number.

Ensembles, even the modern ones, are going to have a distinct heirloom element to them. Techniques like *Ek Taar* and *Kasab* can be effortlessly woven to craft contemporary pieces that still carry that heirloom appeal. These are the kind of pieces that score high on comfort, personal significance and artisanal excellence.

Rina Singh, Designer and Founder of Eka and Eka Core

The idea this year has been to wear clothes to suit oneself and I strongly believe this trend will carry on in 2021 as well. I don't think there were any trends as such in 2020 as most of our time was spent at home. If at all, we could capture a trend for this year it would definitely be comfortable, wearable and meaningful design options in good textiles. Sustainable, functional and easy to wear clothing has taken precedence over impressing people through what you wear.

Dhruv Bogra, Country Manager India, Forever New

2020 saw comfort clothing and lounge wear as most preferred styles. Everyone wanted to be comfortable at home during the pandemic, however, with work from home and gradual opening up of social gatherings, high fashion prevailed with some key trends for 2020. These would be puff sleeves which is flattering for all body types, elegant satin dresses and high slits, playful cut out dresses and leather pants, are versatile and can be dressed up and down.

2021 is about comfort clothing translating through boyfriend jackets and khaki colours. It is going to be about glamour accentuated by waist cinching silhouettes. I see a lot of sorbet pastel tones and delicate florals, which are perfect for summer with ruffles, voluminous sleeves or polka dots. These timeless styles will be the front runner styles with vibrant scarves.

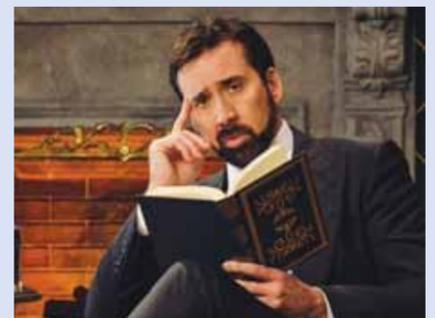
Avinash Mane, Commercial Head, South Asia, Lenzing Group

The sustainable fashion trends of the future are heavily influenced by the events of today, which could never have been predicted. We believe that the changing consumer attitude will continue to encourage the industry to embrace sustainability at all levels.

2020 has impacted every aspect of our lives. As we continue to battle the pandemic, the textiles and apparel industry worldwide experienced unprecedented disruptions. The pandemic has thrown light upon the urgent need for consumers and organisations to focus on sustainable choices, products and processes. And to that effect, sustainable fashion has accelerated to centre stage within the industry.

—IANS

WEBBED



HISTORY OF SWEAR WORDS

Nicolas Cage hosts this proudly profane, funny and engagingly educational series about the history and impact of the most notorious English swear words. The show releases on January 5 on Netflix.



LUPIN

Inspired by the adventures of Arsène Lupin, gentleman thief Assane Diop sets out to avenge his father for an injustice inflicted by a wealthy family. Starring Omar Sy, Ludivine Sagnier and Clotilde Hesme, the show releases on January 8 on Netflix.



BLING EMPIRE

Follow LA's wildly wealthy Asian and Asian American fun seekers as they go all out with fabulous parties, glamour and drama in this reality series. It releases on January 15 on Netflix.

MILES TO GO

Water crisis worsens in Poonch with no sustainable solution in sight. By ASIF MIR AABIS

As an immediate response to the intensifying water crisis in the country, a unified Ministry of Jal Shakti was launched in May 2019 by the Central Government — soon after attaining power for the second term. The previously existing departments and ministries were brought under this new ministry and within a month, on July 1, the government had launched *Jal Shakti Abhiyan* (JSA), an intensive campaign aimed at making water conservation a *Jan Andolan* (people's movement) through asset creation and extensive communication. It focusses on five aspects — water conserva-

tion and rainwater harvesting, renovation of traditional and other water bodies, reuse of water and recharging of structures, watershed development, and intensive afforestation.

In the initial phase, 256 water-stressed districts in the country were identified based on the critically low groundwater levels. In that phase, only one district from the newly formed Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir was included despite the serious water crisis faced by the people here. In its border district of Poonch, located 250 kilometers from Jammu, the shortage of water has intensified over the years with no sustainable solution in sight.

The issue has been covered extensively by the regional media but the voices of the villagers residing in the remotest corner of the country is missing from the national platforms. They walk for several kilometers on tricky moun-

tainous routes and in extreme weather to fetch drinking water. In Dhara village in Mandi tehsil in Poonch, the unavailability of safe drinking water is one of the prime concerns for its residents. They have been trying to raise their concerns with authority but to no avail.

Muhammad Rashid Mir, a resident of Ward No. 5, Dhara village informed that in 2008, a water line was laid in their ward from *Mohalla Jabri* to Miran. "It's been 12 years since this line was started. With no maintenance, pipes have burst now, and our land is being damaged due to water leaking from these pipes. So far, no repairing work has been undertaken by the concerned authorities," he said.

Reflecting upon the miseries that the locals have to go through, Irshad Lone, an educated young man from the same village shared, "During social events, horses are used to bring drinking water. Villagers collect rainwater to feed the cattle. But for daily purposes, women and children have to walk to distant places to

fetch water from natural spring. Even after walking for hours, they are able to collect only eight to 10 litres of water."

"In this long period of 12 years, no employee of the concerned department has made any official visit to listen to the concerns of the villagers," he added. Every time villagers would register their concerns in front of the officials they were returned only with fake assurances. The ground reality is different from the attempts made by the government at the larger scale.

As per Chaudhry Mohammad Saleem, a social worker from the village, the Jal Shakti Department should become more responsible towards the woes of the villagers. "Under the Lift Irrigation Scheme, as per official records, the construction of four water tanks was completed in 2016. In reality, however, the groundwork is still incomplete. Water is supplied from the water tank of *Mohalla Thandi Bani* but the water supply in the other two tanks which have been constructed in *Mohalla Thapla* and *Morban* has not been restored yet," he informed.

Describing the helplessness of the people of this village, local resident Javed Iqbal said, "Only once in ten years, water was pumped to check the leakage

of Thapla water tank. Today, only the structure adorns the village without actually serving the purpose of its existence."

As per the village Panch, Shabir Mir, "The department has laid a network of pipes in the village but there is no water. Our repetitive pleas have not resulted in any action." The association between villagers and government representatives, he believes, needs to be based on trust. He pleads the higher authorities to take the necessary action to correct things on ground. When the Junior Executive Engineer (JEE) was contacted, he informed that he has recently joined and suggested to contact the Assistant Executive Engineer (AEE) who, in turn, suggested that JEE can be contacted for the same.

As per a report published in a newspaper, with an average 40 per cent of the non-revenue water loss during the distribution process, J&K is heading for a drinking water crisis within a decade unless the management practises are not improved significantly.

The Central Government is trying to make people aware of Water and Sanitation Hygiene (WASH) and it is actually impacting and changing lives of people. However, until and unless, the local government institutions become more responsible towards such schemes, achieving the laid goals will always be challenging.

—Charakha Features



Monitor your thoughts

Take a pause and reflect on your ideas as they decide the degree of your happiness and satisfaction, says RAJYOGI BRAHMAKUMAR NIKUNJ JI

There was a time when energy and matter were considered to be separate things by scientists' all over the world. But later on researches in science revealed that atom which, was believed to be the smallest and indivisible particle of matter, consists of electrons, protons, neutrons, etc., which are small sparks of energy. It was also discovered that atom could be split up to release energy. These findings worked as a major breakthrough in the sphere of science and, coupled with some other discoveries, brought various scientific inventions. Further research into the theory and practise of electronics and the field of different forms of energy — light, sound, electricity and magnetism — enabled the ingenuity of man to take further big strides into domains, previously unknown by humans. All this resulted in a spate of highly sophisticated scientific contrivances and things such as spaceships, computers, television etc.



There is no doubt that all these researches enlarged the field of man's thought, broadened his vision, rang the death-knell of superstition and blind faith, yet they also resulted in giving a harmful bias to man's thinking as he became a little more conceited and engrossed with the pursuit of material things. And in this mad race after machines, computers and electronics, he even forgot about his own identity, so much so that he began to look upon himself as a mere robot. Things have now reached to a stage where many people do not believe in the existence of soul as they believe in matter or various forms of energy only. They think that man is nothing but a brain, functioning through the nervous system and the body. The brain, they say, is comparable to a computer and is worked by electrical impulses. Moreover, everyone will agree that this thought is abstract and dimensionless because we can imagine the sun and the far off galaxies and the regions beyond the galaxies almost within the same time. Also, thought cannot be construed or reckoned in scientific terms because it can fly into the past and the future, the dimensions of which cannot be covered in the concept of velocity. One can only guess and say that the velocity of thought is multi-umpteem billion years per impulse. But, one really must confess that, despite all the fund of knowledge of mind that psychology has placed at our disposal, one does not clearly know what thought or mind is.

Not many of us know that everything that is visible to us through our physical eyes today, every particle of matter that we can touch and feel now first had its blueprint in human mind. In other words, everything outside is a physical manifestation of what is inside. Therefore, everything in the universe was first born as a thought or a tiny sentient point or dot. A dot has no length, breadth or width, but it has immense power.

When a thought expands, depending upon its nature and quality, it can soothe one with peace and prosperity or disturb the self and others. Each thought brings along a chain of other thoughts of similar nature, and put together they can gain momentum to create desirable or undesirable results. While slow, light and positive thoughts can create a peaceful and prosperous world, chaotic and negative thoughts can be destructive. Hence, we should realise that a thought gives birth to an idea that may spread like wild fire or bring about a revolution. It is the mother of all change maybe for the better or worse. That is why the saying "Think of the devil and the devil is there" is appropriate because as soon as you create the devil in the mind, its arrival is inevitable.

Thought is not a form of material energy. It emanates from the conscious, superphysical and supernatural entity, called soul. Soul has no mass and weight. It has no time-dimension; it is eternal. So, thought can traverse all barriers and go to events of the remote past or the distant future. Mind is only another name for the consciousness of the soul. It refers to that faculty of soul which manifests in the form of volition, will, attention, cognition, etc. Whereas thought is a spiritual energy which also has a moral dimension and perceives and expresses sentiments and emotions.

Today we all are experiencing how the present era dominated by vices is promoting devilish tendencies. Hence, the speed and intensity of negative thoughts is much greater than the positive ones, which are very few. The major part of these positive thoughts fritters away before implementation due to a greater momentum of internal weak thoughts. Under such circumstances, practise of meditation lends power to our thoughts. It helps us realise our positive and pure intentions by reinforcing and re-programming them into our mind. It unleashes the positive capacity of our thoughts — the infinite power to visualise the most beautiful and realise it in this three dimensional world. It helps us to create an internal positive environment. In its most powerful stage, our mind could even transform the negative vibrations and situations into positive ones. So, take a pause to check what kind of thoughts are created in your mind for these will decide your degree of happiness and satisfaction. And these will shape the kind of world you are creating for yourself every moment. Monitor your thoughts to see what you are creating and what is being destroyed; what are the tendencies that are being watered and which are the ones that are being allowed to droop.



MAKE A DIFFERENCE

A workshop launches new resources to support the social and emotional needs of children, parents and other caregivers in families

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect children and families across India, Sesame Workshop — India and Viatrix Inc. has launched new resources to support the social and emotional needs of children, parents, and other caregivers in families.

The release of materials in English and other languages is designed to help young children talk through and name big feelings like stress and fear, encourage positive caregiving strategies and routines, and help families find ways to celebrate together when far apart.

Made possible by the support of Viatrix, the new global resources will reach families on six continents. "Together with Viatrix, we are providing strategies for children and families to cope with today's challenges and foster emotional wellbeing

for years to come," said Sonali Khan, Managing Director of Sesame Workshop, India.

"With so many routines upended, we want to help children and their caregivers across India manage big feelings and spend quality time with each other, even when apart."

The workshop that commenced in December saw new animations and activities on a rolling basis that will help caregivers with simple language and tact to talk to their children about the sudden change in their routines and how they can cope with their new reality while managing stress and anxiety.

In one video, Grover and his mom decide to make his grandmother's special family soup over videochat when they can't be together for their holiday celebration. In additional videos, Elmo and his mom talk



about big feelings and Elmo's dad helps him name and cope with the feeling of fear of getting sick. Additional topics

released on a rolling basis included keeping routines, spending special time together, and learning about persis-

tence. "Our work with Sesame Workshop stems from our mission to empower people

worldwide to live healthier at every stage of life," said Lara Ramsburg, Head of Corporate Affairs for Viatrix.

"From young children to parents, grandparents, and other caregivers, we hope these new resources will be of value to anyone who has experienced the emotional impact of the pandemic on their families. As we begin our journey, we're committed to supporting social impact initiatives and partnerships that have the potential to have a lasting, positive impact on patients, families and communities worldwide."

The resources launched as part of Sesame Workshop's "Caring for Each Other" initiative, was created in response to the uncertainty facing families during the COVID-19 pandemic, has reached families in more than 100 countries and 41 languages. —IANS



If you judge people, you have no time to love them. —Mother Teresa



WHAT CAUSES BLOOD OXYGENATION TO DROP?

The decreased arterial blood oxygen levels in many COVID-19 cases could be caused by infection in carotid bodies by SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for the pandemic, says a new study.

Carotid bodies, located on either side of the neck next to the carotid artery, detect the drop in blood oxygen and send signals to the brain to stimulate the respiratory centre.

The new research, detailed in the journal *Function*, relies on experiments that have revealed a high presence of the enzyme ECA2, the protein the coronavirus uses to infect human cells, in the carotid body. One of the pathophysiological characteristics of Covid-19 that most baffled the scientific and medical community is what is known as "silent hypoxemia" or "happy hypoxia."

Patients suffering this phenomenon, the causes of which are still unknown, have pneumonia with reduced arterial blood oxygen levels — known as hypoxemia.



GOOGLE TRACKER OF ALZHEIMER'S

Could alleviating Alzheimer's symptoms be one day as easy as wearing a Google Glass-like device? It could, if new research led by the University of Otago (New Zealand) bears fruit.

The researches are focusing on stimulating humans' sense of smell to prevent conditions such as Alzheimer's disease associated with memory problems.

The olfactory system, or sense of smell, is known to be dysfunctional in the early stages of Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease. It is also shown that proper olfactory function can play a key role in regaining consciousness after brain injuries. The Otago research centres around a wearable concept prototype — similar to Google Glasses — which produces small electronic pulses on the skin to stimulate the olfactory nervous system.



CASES OF JOINT PAIN UP BY 70 PER CENT

The lockdown induced by the COVID pandemic had brought life to a standstill. With movement restricted, the work-from-home culture took root and people were unwillingly forced to follow a sedentary lifestyle.

However, the impact of all this has started to come out in the form of escalated issues of knee and joint pains, while the winter has amplified such issues.

The Indian Spinal Injuries Centre (ISIC), set up by the Central government as a tertiary care hospital for spinal issues, said that it has witnessed a rise of 70 per cent of patients coming with autoimmune disorders like arthritis and new patients of knee, neck, back and joints pain amid the pandemic.

Dr Maninder Shah Singh, Senior Consultant, Chief Foot & Ankle Services at ISIC, told IANS that work from home culture has caused another pandemic, that of knee, joints and spinal issues.



GENES LINKED TO BRAIN DISORDER IDENTIFIED

Researchers have found that a common brain disorder called Chiari 1 malformation can be caused by variations in two genes involved in brain development.

The condition occurs when the lowest parts of the brain are found below the base of the skull.

About one in 100 children has this malformation, but most of the time such children grow up normally and no one suspects a problem.

But in about one in 10 of those children, the condition causes headaches, neck pain, hearing, vision and balance disturbances, or other neurological symptoms.

In some cases, the disorder may run in families, but scientists understood little about the genetic alterations that contribute to the condition until now.



VAPING LINKED TO MENTAL FOG

There appears to be a clear link between e-cigarette use and mental fog as two new studies have found that those who vape were more likely to report difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions than their non-vaping, non-smoking peers.

It also appeared that kids were more likely to experience mental fog if they started vaping before the age of 14.

"Our studies add to growing evidence that vaping should not be considered a safe alternative to tobacco smoking," said study author Dongmei Li, Associate Professor at University of Rochester Medical Centre (URMC) in New York.

The studies, published in the journals *Tobacco Induced Diseases* and *Plos One*, analysed over 18,000 middle and high school student responses to the National Youth Tobacco Survey in the US and more than 886,000 responses to the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System phone survey from US adults.



Oz 'fully expect' to play at Gabba

Wade says Australia don't prefer consecutive Tests at SCG as team India is not keen to travel to Brisbane in view of the stricter quarantine protocols



Top view of The Brisbane Cricket Ground which is commonly known as the Gabba

PTI ■ SYDNEY

Australia opener Matthew Wade on Sunday said his side would not like the scheduled final Test in Brisbane being shifted to Sydney even as reports emerged that India are reluctant to play at the Gabba because of stricter quarantine protocols there.

According to reports, the Indians are not keen to travel to Brisbane in view of the stricter quarantine protocols in Queensland and want to play back-to-back games in Sydney where the third Test begins on Thursday.

"I have not heard of this, but we obviously prefer not to (play back-to-back in Sydney). The schedule has been rolled out and we prefer to stick to that. Regardless, if that is a quarantine-based hotel, go to the ground, play and come back," Wade said in a virtual press conference.

"Cricket Australia have been firm that they will stick to the schedule that we rolled out at the start of the summer so we fully expect to play at Gabba. There is no secret that we would love to play at Gabba."

"Harder quarantine and stricter bio-security protocols will be there. But we are ready for more sacrifice and face more challenges," he added.

India has not won a single Test match at the Gabba. According to Australian media reports, the Indians are not happy at the possibility of going to another strict quarantine in Brisbane since they have already served 14-day quarantine upon entry to Australia.

The fourth and final match is scheduled for January 15. The four-match Test series is currently level at 1-1.

"From our position, there is no uncertainty, we are going to play at the SCG and then playing at the Gabba until we are told that it is going to change. So, we are rolling to the next game

expecting what is going to be. It is out of our control and there is nothing we can do." Wade said he expects star batsman Steve Smith to crack, very consistent and have bowled terrifically well, especially in Melbourne. Probably they got more spin and bounce, more than what we expected in first innings. That was a little bit of shocker, but we expected that to come into play.

something that selectors want me to keep doing more. I am comfortable doing. If I slide back down the order, I will do that also. I am ready from 1 to 7. I am happy to bat wherever playing games for Australia, I will take every run I get."

Wade said he is also prepared about the possibility of even being dropped. "Will (Pucovski) has come back into the squad, so whether they make that change straight away and I slid back down, or whether I don't play at all, who knows. I am not a selector but no indication at this stage and I prepare to bat where I have been batting and if I slide back down, I am comfortable there as well."

"I have really enjoyed opening, moving forward if that is

Full India squad, including isolated five, travelling to Sydney together

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The entire Indian cricket contingent, including the five players who are in precautionary isolation, will travel to Sydney for the third Test against Australia together in the same chartered flight on Monday.

The five players — vice-captain Rohit Sharma, opener Shubman Gill, stumper Rishabh Pant, pacer Navdeep Saini and batsman Prithvi Shaw — have not been barred from travelling with the team despite an ongoing investigation into an alleged bio-security protocol breach by them.

Cricket Australia, in a media release on Saturday, said it is probing the matter jointly with the BCCI after a video of the players at an indoor restaurant was posted by a fan, who identified himself as Navaldeep Singh on Twitter.

"If you carefully read the CA statement, they never said that it's a breach. They said that they are seeking to determine if it's a breach."

"So there is no restriction on these five players travelling with the team to Sydney. The entire team is flying tomorrow afternoon," a senior BCCI official said on conditions of anonymity.

Rahane is a born leader who's brave & smart: Chappell

PTI ■ SYDNEY

Former Australia skipper Ian Chappell, in a column for ESPNcricinfo, has said that Ajinkya Rahane's fine captaincy of the Indian team in the recently-concluded Melbourne Test came as no surprise to him as the Mumbaier is a "born leader."

Under Rahane, India made a remarkable comeback in Melbourne after their humiliating loss in the first Test in Adelaide, winning by eight wickets.

"It was no surprise that Ajinkya Rahane captained India flawlessly at the MCG. Anyone who saw him in charge in Dharamsala in 2017 would have recognised a man born to lead cricket teams," wrote Chappell.

In that match, India had beaten Australia by eight wickets in the fourth Test to wrap up the series 2-1.

"The moment that caught my attention in the Dharamsala match was the time Rahane called on debutant left-arm wrist-spinner Kuldeep Yadav when David Warner and Steve Smith were involved in a century partnership. 'This is a brave move' I thought, and it turned out to be a very smart one," he recalled.

Yadav quickly claimed the wicket of Warner, caught by Rahane at first slip, and that prompted a five-wicket slide for Australia to lose the match.

"However, there's much more to his leadership than just those

two important qualities. He is calm when things could easily get out of hand," said the former captain, who is a respected figure in world cricket.

"He has earned the respect of his teammates, one of the most important aspects of good captaincy. And he gets runs when they are needed, which adds to the respect his team has for him."

Chappell also praised the performance of Indian bowlers Jasprit Bumrah, R Ashwin and Mohammed Siraj as well as debutant Shubman Gill's show with the bat.

Despite the valuable performances from other Indian players, Chappell said "the Johnny Mullah medal-winning contribution from Rahane turned the match firmly in India's favour."

"The captain's century came at a time when India could easily have faded to a two-nil deficit, and it was this performance that gave his team the conviction that victory was attainable. A former resident of Mumbai told me his wife lip-read Rahane say the words 'Come on, India' when he reached his MCG century. That is another thing that defines Rahane's captaincy: he's all about the team."

Chappell said the tantalising series is far from over and despite the departure of Kohli and injuries to Mohammed Shami and Umesh Yadav, the visitors "have fewer selection headaches than Australia".



Ganguly out of danger but could require another angioplasty

PTI ■ KOLKATA

BCCI president and former India captain Sourav Ganguly, who underwent angioplasty after a "mild" heart attack on Saturday, is stable and his health parameters are normal, doctors said on Sunday.

He was diagnosed with three blocked coronary arteries on Saturday, following which a stent was inserted in one to remove the blockage.

"He had an uneventful last night and presently is Afebrile (not feverish). He is sleeping now," said a statement issued by the private hospital where Ganguly is admitted.

The celebrated former cricketer's blood pressure is 110/70 and oxygen saturation level is 98%, the statement added.

Doctors said they will be deciding on conducting another angioplasty after accessing Ganguly's condition.

"He will be requiring another angioplasty because of the triple vessel disease. But, that depends on how his condition is. He is, however, out of danger now," one of the doctors treating Ganguly had said on Saturday.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday spoke to Sourav Ganguly who underwent angioplasty after suffering a "mild" heart attack, and enquired about his health.

Official sources said Modi also spoke to the cricket administrator's wife Dona Ganguly.

Nortje, Elgar help SA boss day 1

2nd Test, Day 2
Live from 1:30pm IST
STAR SPORTS 1

AFP ■ JOHANNESBURG

Fast bowler Anrich Nortje took six wickets and opening batsman Dean Elgar batted confidently as South Africa took control on the first day of the second and final Test against Sri Lanka at the Wanderers Stadium in Johannesburg on Sunday.

Nortje claimed career-best figures of six for 56 as Sri Lanka collapsed to 157 after winning the toss and choosing to bat first on the pace-friendly Wanderers pitch.

Then the left-handed Elgar scored 92 not out as South Africa reached 148 for one at the close.

With Kusal Perera hitting an aggressive 60, Sri Lanka were on course to reach lunch with minimal damage on a pitch which usually offers assistance to the bowlers on the first morning.

But Perera was caught at gully off the medium-paced Wiaan Mulder 20 minutes from the interval, sparking a calamitous collapse from 71 for one to 84 for five before the break.

Nortje, who had made the first breakthrough of the match when he had Sri Lankan captain Dimuth Karunaratne caught behind in the tenth over, claimed four more wickets after lunch.

Nine of the Sri Lankans were caught



in the arc between wicketkeeper and gully before last man Ajitha Fernando was bowled by Nortje, backing away from a full ball after a series of short-pitched deliveries. Several of the batsmen contributed to their own downfall with loose strokes outside off stump.

Ajitha Fernando, making his debut, bowled impressively at the start of the South African innings, bustling in at a lively pace. He had Aiden Markram caught at second slip in an opening spell of one for 14 in seven overs.

But Elgar batted fluently and had solid support from Rassie van der Dussen in an unbroken second wicket stand of 114 which took South Africa to within nine runs of the Sri Lankan total.

AFP ■ CHRISTCHURCH

Kyle Jamieson took a five-wicket haul as New Zealand bowled out Pakistan for 297, anchored by a sterling 93 from Azhar Ali, on day one of the second Test against New Zealand in Christchurch on Sunday.

Jamieson, in only his sixth Test, had figures of 5/69, the third five-wicket haul of his career.

New Zealand won the toss and bowled first on the green strip and as Jamieson found bounce and movement to claim four wickets at one end, Azhar was defiant at the other as he established key partnerships for Pakistan.

After the early loss of Shan Masood, Azhar added 62 with Abid Ali, 88 with Mohammad Rizwan and 56 with Faheem Ashraf.

After holding the innings together for 172 deliveries, Azhar was caught at first slip by Ross Taylor off the bowling of Matt Henry who was called into the New Zealand side to replace Neil Wagner who broke two toes in the first Test.

It was an uncharacteristic shot from Azhar who, until then, had moved his feet and was prepared to leave most deliveries that did not require a shot, and when there were edges they fell safely.

He went to the middle early when Tim Southee accounted

Azhar takes Pak to 297

2nd Test, Day 2
Live from 3:30am IST
FANCODE APP



Pakistan's opener Shan Masood falls as he is given out LBW off Tim Southee during day 1 of the 2nd Test

for Shan Masood with a toe-crushing yorker in the third over and was there for the carnage when Jamieson came into the attack.

In a destructive three-over burst before lunch, Jamieson removed Abid Ali (25), Haris Sohail (one) and Fawad Alam (two) using his 2.3 metre (6ft 8in) frame to ruffle the batsmen with an awkward bounce which he mixed with testing full deliveries.

The delivery that accounted for Alam was almost

unplayable as it reared up forcing the batsman to put his hands up in a reflex action and the ball was gloved to wicket-keeper BJ Watling.

In the middle session Rizwan was in punishing form with 11 boundaries on his way to 61 off 71 deliveries, before he was caught in two minds by a fuller Jamieson delivery that came back at him and an inconclusive shot was edged to Watling.

After the tea adjournment, and once Henry had removed

Azhar, Jamieson returned to see off Ashraf who was out for 48 when he edged a ball outside off stump to Ross Taylor at first slip.

Zafar Gohar, on debut, reached 34 before Jamieson was back in action, this time to take the crucial catch at fine leg to give Southee his second wicket.

Trent Boult mopped up the tail taking the wickets of Shaheen Afridi (four) and Naseem Shah (12).

The New Zealand first innings will start on Monday.

Rani-led India leave for Argentina tour

PTI ■ BENGALURU

The Indian women's hockey team, led by Rani Rampal, on Sunday left the country for the tour of Argentina, looking to gain international match exposure after nearly a break of one year due to Covid-19 pandemic.

The Indian team was forced to train at the Sports Authority of India centre in Bengaluru for several months as international competition came to a halt due to the pandemic.

The Indian team is scheduled to play four matches against the world number two Argentina side (January 26, 28, 30, 31). Before that, it will play two matches each against Argentina's junior and B sides.

"It feels amazing to be touring again. We have worked very hard on our game in the last few months and the time has come for us to execute our skills in an international match," skipper Rani said ahead of departure.

"Playing in international matches is going to be a bit dif-



Rani Rampal poses for photo before leaving for Argentina

ferent this time, since we will be in a bio bubble, however, the team is excited to be back on the field in the best possible manner at the moment," she said.

Hockey India and the host country's national association have created a bio bubble for both the teams.

The Indian team will stay at a hotel where there will be provisions for separate rooms/halls for all the meals, team meetings and sessions.

Inter hit Crotona for 6

Lautaro hat-trick leads Nerazzurri to eighth straight Serie A win

AP ■ MILAN

Lautaro Martínez netted a hat-trick to help Inter Milan beat relegation-threatened Crotona 6-2 and move top of Serie A for a few hours at least on Sunday.

Martínez could have had four if his second attempt had not gone down as an own goal by Crotona defender Luca Marrone.

Romelu Lukaku and Achraf Hakimi also scored in a strong second-half performance from the Nerazzurri.

Inter moved two points above city rival AC Milan, which visits Benevento later where it will face former star player and coach Filippo Inzaghi. Crotona slipped to last place.

All 20 Serie A teams are in action on Sunday as the Italian league resumes after the winter break.

Inter had ended last year on a streak of seven successive league victories but was surprised when Niccolò Zanello headed Crotona into the lead in the 12th minute.

Martínez equalized in the 20th and thought he had another 11 minutes later but Marrone got the last touch on Nicolò Barella's ball across the box.

Vladimir Golemi leveled shortly after from the spot after Arturo Vidal had fouled Arkadiusz Reca.

Vidal had also been at fault for Crotona's opener and he was taken off at halftime.

Inter often performs better in the second half and so it proved again as Martínez restored his side's lead in the 57th with a powerful shot into the top left corner.

Lukaku had played a part in the buildup and the former Manchester United forward marked his 50th Serie A appearance with a goal of his own seven minutes later, turning and holding off Sebastiano Luperto to fire in Alessandro Bastoni's long ball over the top.

Martínez completed his hat-trick in the 78th, heading in the rebound from close range after Crotona goalkeeper Alex Cordaz had saved Ivan Perišić's strike. Hakimi capped a fine day for Inter, three minutes from time.

ATTACKING ATALANTA
Duván Zapata scored

twice as Atalanta beat Sassuolo 5-1 to close in on its opponent in the battle for the top four.

Sassuolo slipped to fifth, two points behind fourth-place Napoli after Gennaro Gattuso's side won 4-1 at Cagliari despite playing 18 minutes with 10 men after Piotr Zielinski was sent off following two yellow cards.

Atalanta moved up to sixth, a point behind Sassuolo.

Atalanta wasted several opportunities but was 2-0 up at halftime following goals from Zapata and Matteo Pessina and it ran riot in the second half.

Zapata doubled his tally four minutes after the break and Robin Gosens and Luis Muriel extended the home side's lead before Vlad Chiriches netted a consolation for Sassuolo.

Elsewhere, Edin Džeko scored the only goal as Roma beat Sampdoria 1-0 to remain third, six points behind Inter.



Atletico regain top spot

AFP ■ VITORIA-GASTEIZ

Atletico Madrid returned to the summit of LaLiga as Luis Suarez's dramatic 90th-minute goal sealed a 2-1 win over Deportivo Alaves on Sunday.

Diego Simeone's side dropped to second following Real Madrid's 2-0 win over Celta Vigo on Saturday, but a fourth consecutive top-flight victory restored a two-point advantage over their city rivals with still two games in hand.

Marcos Llorente put the visitors ahead after 41 minutes with his latest long-range effort — his five from outside the penalty area since the beginning of 2020 more than any other LaLiga player.

Alaves brushed off Victor Laguardia's 63rd-minute red card to pull level six minutes from time through Felipe's outrageous own goal, but Suarez popped up at the death to snatch a memorable win for Los Rojiblancos.

On Saturday night, Real Madrid jumped to the top with a 2-0 home victory over in-form Celta Vigo.

Lucas Vazquez headed in a cross from Marco Asensio at the far post in the sixth minute, barely a minute after Real centre back Nacho had cleared a shot by Celta striker Iago Aspas off the line.

Vazquez returned the favour in



the 53rd minute, laying a diagonal ball into the path of Asensio with the visiting defence in disarray. Asensio drove his shot into the roof of the net.

It was Celta's first loss since Eduardo Couet took over as manager on November 12, ending a run of seven games unbeaten that had lifted them from the relegation zone to eighth in the table.

With Real Madrid in control, coach Zinedine Zidane took off Asensio, Luka Modric, Dani Carvajal, Toni Kroos and, right at the end, captain Karim Benzema and brought on Eden Hazard and Fede Valverde, who are returning from injuries, and youngsters Martin Odegaard and Vinicius Junior.