

**LEGENDARY MUSICIAN USTAD GHULAM MUSTAFA KHAN DIES AT 89**

Legendary Indian classical musician and Padma Vibhushan awardee Ustad Ghulam Mustafa Khan died on Sunday afternoon at his residence in Mumbai. He was 89. Ustad Ghulam Mustafa Khan's daughter-in-law Namrata Gupta Khan told PTI that the veteran breathed his last at 12.37 pm. "Today morning he was fine. We had a 24 hour nurse at home. During his massage he vomited and I ran immediately his eyes were shut and he was breathing slowly. I tried connecting to doctors and when they came he had already died," Namrata said. She said the family is in shock due to his sudden death as he was keeping well.

**STATUE OF UNITY GETS MORE TOURISTS THAN STATUE OF LIBERTY: PM MODI**

More tourists visit the Statue of Unity in Gujarat than the Statue of Liberty in the US, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said on Sunday, adding almost 50 lakh tourists have visited the former since it opened two over years ago. In his address after flagging off eight trains to Kevadia from across India via video conferencing, PM Modi said that with increased connectivity over a lakh people will visit Kevadia daily, as per a survey. PM Modi inaugurated the Statue of Unity, billed as the world's tallest, in October 2018 on the occasion of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's 143rd birth anniversary.

**UK INVITES PM MODI FOR G7, SAYS BORIS JOHNSON TO VISIT INDIA "AHEAD" OF SUMMIT**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been invited by the United Kingdom to attend the G7 summit to be held in the country's Cornwall region in June. The group that includes the world's seven leading democratic economies -- UK, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the USA -- and the European Union, will discuss global issues like the coronavirus pandemic, climate change and open trade. UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who had cancelled his India visit for this year's Republic Day event because of the detection of the mutant strain of the virus in Britain, is likely to visit the country 'ahead of the G7', a press statement read.

**WON'T CALL OFF TRACTOR RALLY ON REPUBLIC DAY, SAY PROTESTING FARMERS**

The protesting farmers refused to call off their Republic Day tractor rally today, and said the probe by the National Investigation Agency is meant to break their big protest. Today, as the agency summoned 40 people -- including farmer leader Baldev Singh Sirsa -- for questioning in a case related to the banned outfit Sikhs For Justice, farmers alleged that the government has resorted to "atrocities". The government is opposing the tractor rally legally -- the matter will be heard by the Supreme Court tomorrow. "Action is being taken against those who cooperate in the movement," alleged a farmer leader.



447 cases of 'adverse events' over two days

2,24,301 beneficiaries given Covid vaccine till date

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

A total of 2,24,301 beneficiaries have been inoculated with COVID-19 vaccine so far, out of which only 447 adverse events following immunisation (AEFI) were reported, the Union Health Ministry said on day two of the nationwide vaccination drive on Sunday.

Addressing a press briefing, the ministry's Additional Secretary Manohar Agnani said out of the 447 adverse events following immunisation, only three required hospitalisation.

"Today being Sunday, only six states conducted vaccination drive and in 553 sessions a total of 17,072 beneficiaries were vaccinated," he said.

The six states where the vaccination drive was carried out on Sunday are Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Manipur



and Tamil Nadu, he added. Agnani said a total of 2,24,301 beneficiaries have been vaccinated till January 17 as per provisional reports, adding that 2,07,229 of them received the jabs on day one of the drive.

"A total of 447 AEFI have been reported on January 16 and 17, out of which only

three required hospitalisation. Most of the AEFI reported so far are minor like fever, headache, nausea," he said.

He said a meeting was held with all states and union territories on Sunday to review the progress of the drive, identify bottlenecks and plan corrective actions.

Prime Minister Narendra

Modi rolled out the world's largest inoculation drive against COVID-19 on Saturday and said the two vaccines being deployed will ensure a "decisive victory" for India against the pandemic.

11 'mild' cases in TS According to the Telangana government, 140 sessions of coronavirus vaccination were held in 33 districts of Telangana, among which 3,962 beneficiaries were vaccinated from a target of 4,296. Out of these, 11 mild AEFI cases have been reported.

The beneficiaries felt pain, giddiness and sweating which are the most common in any vaccination program.

Dr Srinivas Rao, Director of Public Health and Family Welfare told a news agency that Telangana had managed to vaccinate 85 per cent of total beneficiaries on the first day of the nationwide vaccination drive.

Veerraju wants DGP sacked

Demands probe into foreign funding to Churches

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

BJP state unit president Somu Veerraju demanded that the Chief Minister sack DGP Goutam Sawang for allegedly twisting facts on the attacks on Hindu temples. He also demanded that the state government launch an investigation and submit a report on the sources of funding of the several churches thriving across Andhra Pradesh.

Talking to reporters here on Sunday, Veerraju said that the so-called facts peddled by the DGP that a few BJP workers were behind some incidents of temple vandalism were false. He lamented that the government was arresting Hindus by foisting false cases, instead of catching the actual culprits.

He said that the pastor Praveen Chakravarty who was arrested by the police had openly admitted in several videos that he received lots of funds from foreign countries.

"These churches get funds from foreign countries in the name of social service. But, in the garb of social service, they hire pastors and involve in conversions luring innocent and gullible Hindus. What is the difference between pastor Praveen



BJP to launch yatra on Feb 4

Visakhapatnam: The BJP state unit has decided to launch a yatra on February 4 in protest against the ongoing attacks on Hindu temples.

The yatra will begin at Kapilatheertham and culminate at Ramatheertham covering all the places on the way where the temples have been desecrated in the recent times. The decision has been taken at the party core group meeting held in Vizag on Sunday.

Giving details about the yatra, Veerraju said that the yatra will be conducted initially for a week covering all the temples that were desecrated in the towns of Pithapuram, Antarvedi, Vijayawada, Nellore, Srisaalam.

The yatra is aimed at infusing confidence among the Hindus who were feeling threatened under the present regime.

2



India's demographic dividend needs to be leveraged: Naidu

5



NTR: The legend lives on

3



US biz advocacy group urges Minister Sitharaman to lower tariff in Budget?

8

TODAY**ALMANAC****Month & Paksham:**

Paush & Shukla Paksha
Panchangam

Trithi : Panchami: 09:13 am

Nakshatram: Purva Bhadrapada: 07:43 am

Time to Avoid: (Bad time to start any important work)

Rahukalam: 08:16 am - 09:40 am

Yamagandam: 11:03 am - 12:26 pm

Varjyam: 06:11 pm - 07:56 pm

Gulika: 01:49 pm - 03:13 pm

Good Time: (to start any important work)

Anurakalam: 04:40 am - 06:25 am

Abhijit Muhurtham: 12:04 pm - 12:48 pm

VUJAYAWADA WEATHER

Forecast: Sunny
Temp: 31/19
Humidity: 64%
Sunrise: 06:49 am
Sunset: 06:03 pm
Current Weather Conditions
Updated January 17, 2021 5:00 PM

Jagan to launch door delivery vehicles on January 21

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Chief Minister YS Jaganmohan Reddy will inaugurate 2,503 door delivery vehicles at Benz circle on January 21. The vehicles would deliver essential commodities to the beneficiaries under public distribution system (PDS) across the state.

The government's latest move will revolutionise the public distribution system as essential commodities will be delivered at the doorsteps of the white ration card holders from February 1.

Of the 2,503 vehicles, 817 are allocated to Krishna and 902 to Guntur districts, while the remaining 784 will be delivering services in West Godavari district. The state government will be launching as many as 9,260 special delivery vehicles across the state for delivering the essential commodities to the beneficiaries.

All the vehicles would reach their respective places by



January end and from February 1, the vehicles will be delivering quality rice and other essential commodities.

Necessary training has been imparted to the vehicle drivers and the authorities are planning to create awareness among the beneficiaries too.

The poor unemployed youths having valid driving license and persons from SC, ST, BC, EBC, Muslim, Christian and minority communities were given the oppor-

tunity to purchase the door delivery vehicles from the government on subsidy.

The beneficiary of the vehicles would bear 10 per cent of the vehicle cost and 60 per cent will be offered as loan by banks with six-year term, while remaining 30 per cent will be subsidy. The authorities are making all arrangements for the programme with all pre-cautionary measures, said the Civil Supplies Commissioner, Kona Sasidhar.

13,041 people vaccinated on Day-2

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

As many as 13,041 health workers received Covid vaccine shots on the second day of the vaccination drive in the state on Sunday, as per the information disclosed by the state medical & health department officials. The Centre has set a target of 27,233 people for administering vaccine for the second day.

The vaccination drive started at 9 am in 308 session sites, though it was planned to be conducted at 312 centres. Two persons - one in Krishna and another in Nellore district fell ill after vaccination. However, they recovered later.

On the first day, the corona vaccination process was successful in the state, the programme continued without any complications or adverse effects among people vaccinated in the state.



Idols stolen from Guntur temple recovered

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Guntur Urban police nabbed the culprit hours after he has stole two brass idols from a temple in broad daylight on Sunday.

An unidentified person entered Kusma Haranatha temple located near the Chamber of Commerce building in the busy Jinnah Tower centre in Guntur and stole two brass idols from the temple premises.

The temple representative, at about 10.30 am, found that two brass idols of Kusuma and Haranath were missing and informed the police. Guntur Urban SP RN Ammi Reddy said that police immediately swung into action after receiving the complaint. Three teams led by Guntur East DSP B Seetaramaiah were formed to crack the case.

BOWENPALLY KIDNAP CASE

15 more accused arrested

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

In all, 15 more persons among those involved in the sensational Bowenpally kidnap case were arrested by the Hyderabad police on Sunday, based on confessions of the key accused viz Bhooma Akhila Priya, N. Mallikarjun Reddy (32) and Boya Sampath (22).

The police have made significant progress in unraveling the case. Police have recovered incriminating pieces of evidence like toy pistol, mobile phones, vehicles and other objects and arms used in the commission of offence.

"Those arrested on Sunday include event manager Madala



Siddhartha who provided manpower for commission of offence and other accomplices directly involved in the abduction," said Anjani Kumar

Hyderabad City Police Commissioner. The arrested persons have been identified as Bojjagani Deva Prasad, Mogili Bhanu, Ragolu Anjaiah, Padiravanchandra, Pachigalli Raja, Banoth Sai, Devarakonda Krishna Vamshi, Devarakonda Krishna Sai, Devarakonda Nagaraju, Bojjagani Sai, Kandula Shiva Prasad, Meesala Srinu, Annepaaka Prakash and Shaik Dawood.

Investigations revealed that Devarakonda Krishna Vamshi, Kandula Shiva Prasad masqueraded as a constable in police uniform and participated in the offence.

Megalithic monument lies in a shambles

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

A lonely monument of the Iron Age, also known as the Megalithic period, located on the hilltop near Chandragiri in Chittoor district is facing a serious threat.

Based on the information provided by Sri Venkateshwara Bhakti Channel senior producer BV Ramana, Archaeologist and CEO of Cultural Centre of Vijayawada and Amaravati Dr E Sivanagi Reddy rushed to the spot and explored the Iron Age remains on a hillock at Tatikona, a tribal village located 3 km from Chandragiri, as part of the programme 'Preserve Heritage for Posterity'.

Dr Reddy noticed remains



of five monuments out of which four were totally damaged due to negligence.

Sivanagi Reddy, along with B V Ramana, identified the huge monument, known as Dolmen, built with stones that

support the large flat horizontal capstone measuring 10.0 x 10.0 ft with a thickness of 6 inches.

The burial was enclosed by round-shaped boulders.

Dr Reddy examined a few

Of the five megalithic monuments at Tatikona, four were totally damaged due to negligence.

paintings of human and animal figurines very small in size executed in white pigment on the underneath of the capstone datable to the 1 BC.

Dr Reddy sensitised the locals on the archaeological and historical significance of the monument and appealed to the state department of Archaeology and Museums to declare it as a protected monument to preserve it for posterity.

Monday Mirchi

What a colourful change!

A British politician once compared civil servants with 'white rats' that run away to safer places much before an earthquake or Tsunami. This trait certainly holds water in the case of IAS officers in India. As soon as the Dubbak bypoll result came out, some officers in Telangana State started airing their views about the 'present state of administration in TS'. After GHMC results were out, their voices gained more decibels. Some officers, short of wearing saffron attire, are confirming with their media friends to clarify their own wishful thinking that such 'anti-establishment' feelings could be pervasive in Telangana. Without wording it as anti-incumbent wave or some such newsy term, they are predicting 'far more negative results' for the ruling TRS party without mincing words. Believe it or not, even those who were earlier branded as dyed-in-the-wool hardcore pink party supporters, who had backed the Telangana movement that resulted in the formation of the separate state, are now expressing views that are quite colourfully different and quite contradictory. A couple of officers scaled up their self-promotional ladder by reconnecting with their old pals in BJP and offering support to them in the hope of 'big' and 'fetching' postings in future. Apart from this bottom-up approach of many ambitious babus, those believing in top-down approach are trying for an opportunity to talk to BJP brass in the state to express their solidarity with them. They are obtaining numbers from the right saffron 'brigadiers' to contact the self-proclaimed desh bhakts. All along this chameleon-like change, amid the snakes and ladders game in babudom, was unheard-of in a state where the regional party has had a vice-like grip over the administration over the past six years.

Meticulous Chief Minister!

When the new AP Chief Secretary Adithyanath Das issued an order on communal harmony and appointment of harmony committee in G.O. No.6, everyone in the administration was surprised to see it laced with political comments. Opposition parties raised a hue and cry over the comments in question since the order, after all, was intended to ensure peace. The non-official comments, made in what looks like an unofficial manner, would have hurt Adithya much more because of his track record. For, when Chandrababu was the chief minister and wanted to release 'White Papers' on each department with the underlying aim of maligning the previous governments, Adithya refused to do it. He neither polishes nor whitewashes government. He does his job, period. When Ajay Jain and others yielded by bringing out White Papers showing the previous governments in poor light, Adithya said nothing doing. Finally, the Irrigation Department, helmed by Adithya, came out with a White Paper that did not find anything wrong in the previous government's work and a deeply hurt Naidu, as a face-saving measure, did not attend the release function! Adithya's peers are still wondering how Adithya let go a GO issued in his name with political comments. A little bird told us that though Adithya had prepared the G.O. setting out only facts, the order was modified finally went it when to the Chief Minister who vetted it minutely and made several changes in its operative portions. The post-operative order was apparently not brought to the notice of the Chief Secretary. This, some self-respecting babus feel, his height of unofficial micro management.

A gift wrapped in time warp

TS Chief Minister K Chandrasekhar Rao

delighted 9.36 lakh state government employees on December 29, 2020 by announcing salary and pension hike as "New Year 2021 gift". The gift means substantial increase in salaries for employees and hike in pensions for retired employees (pensioners) as per new the Pay Revision Commission's recommendations. He also declared the government's intention to increase the retirement age for government staff from the existing 58 years to 60 or 61 years etc. However, perhaps believing in the dictum 'Intezar ka phal meeta hotha hain', he charged a committee with the specifics and modalities of handing over the gifts. This implied that the beneficiaries cannot open their gift wraps till there is a nod from the committee, which has to await a super nod.

The three-member committee, led by CS Somesh Kumar and comprising principal secretary (finance) K Ramakrishna Rao and principal secretary, water resources development Rajat Kumar as members, has still not found time to open the 'sealed cover' in which the PRC chairman, led by CR Biswal, submitted the PRC report to the CS on December 31. Such covers are not sealed with a kiss; yet, they have a lot of emotional content. The CM did give timelines for the panel to come out with its suggestions by the end of January 2021, after talking to representative of unions on matters such percentage of salary/pension hike, extent of enhancement in retirement age, revision of service rules, revised policy for promotions, and the strategy to be adopted to obviate legal problems while implementing zonal system etc. in the context of increased number of districts.

As of today, employees unions waiting to unwrap their gifts do not know whether the PRC 'sealed cover' was opened. The CS is deemed to be currently busy with the vaccine rollout. His peshi merely says 'CS has no time till January 21'. Will not staff know how sarkari timelines work? They don't expect to open their gift wrap in January. The gift wrap has taken the delight out of the gift as employees and pensioners have been waiting for the D-day July 2018.

Shout-out from the lopline

Babus shunted to the lopline need initiative to resume action, no matter if it is going to be in another arena. The posting of senior IPS officer RP Thakur as RTC MD has surprised bureaucratic circles, considering that his peers expected him to rot as Commissioner of Printing and Stationery -- a position he got as punishment hours after YSRCP Chief YS Jaganmohan Reddy had taken charge of the state as the Chief Minister on May 30, 2019.

According to the grapevine, a senior IAS officer, who had recently landed a 'top job', lent his support to Thakur, who comes next only to former intelligence chief AB Venkateswar Rao when it comes to babus hated by the pro-YSRCP group. Aides of Jagan such as Rajya Sabha member V Vijaysai Reddy and government advisor Sajjala Ramakrishna Reddy never tired of putting down Thakur and Rao for 'furthering the interests of TDP bosses, instead of doing their job of policing'. Rao was kept idle without any posting for months together. The silver lining for the hated group of babus is that Thakur at least got a posting. On deeper analysis they found that, while Rao has been fighting his suspension and cases filed against him by the government, Thakur quietly found favour with the current dispensation and got back on his feet. If policing for one party does not work, driving for another even in the wrong direction might.

Yours truly

UJALA: Krishna among 5 dists in India picked by Centre

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Krishna district in Andhra Pradesh and four other districts in other states - Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, Vadnagar in Gujarat, Nagpur in Maharashtra and Arrah in Bihar - have been chosen by the Centre to launch 'Gram UJALA' scheme in February.

Under the scheme, the state government will distribute LED bulbs to households in rural areas of Krishna district with the support of Union power ministry's Energy Efficiency Services Ltd (EESL) to promote energy efficiency to benefit every family.

The EESL will invest around Rs 450 crore to distribute four high quality LED bulbs to each household for replacement of conventional and inefficient bulbs. EESL will inaugurate the 'Gram Ujala'

scheme and distribute around 8.84 lakh LED bulbs in rural areas in Krishna district.

The energy department has requested AP Panchayat Raj and Rural Development to identify one or two mandal headquarters for the launching of the programme.

The State government has asked the officials to make the Gram Ujala scheme a grand success with an aim to create awareness among general public on the benefits of energy efficiency.

As part of this, local MPs and MLAs will also be involved in the programme to send strong message to people on practicing energy efficiency in everyday life.

'LED is a highly energy efficient lighting technology. Residential LEDs use at least 75 per cent less energy and last 25 times longer than incandes-

cent lighting in general," energy secretary Srikant Nagulapalli said.

Widespread use of LED lighting has the great impact on energy savings. The LEDs emit very less heat when compared with incandescent bulbs and CFLs which releases 90 per cent and 80 per cent of their energy as heat, respectively.

With performance improvements, LED bulbs can replace 40, 60 and even 75 watt incandescent bulbs.

The EESL will distribute 9 W LED bulbs at subsidised price.

"It is proposed to provide four high quality LED bulbs to each rural household in the selected five districts, including Krishna district in AP at a nominal price Rs 10 each.

The EESL will invest Rs 450 crore to distribute LED bulbs

in Andhra Pradesh," said Executive Vice-Chairman of EESL Saurabh Kumar in a letter to state energy department.

The Vice-Chairman has also said that Andhra Pradesh is considered to be one of the best states in the country in the areas of energy efficiency and promotion of renewable energy. AP is best performer in power sector, he said.

EESL Managing Director Rajat Kumar Sud has also discussed with the secretary on the Gram UJALA programme and explained about the commitment of EESL for energy efficiency activities in the country including Andhra Pradesh.

The entire investment for the Gram UJALA programme will be borne by EESL and there will be no financial burden on Discoms of the State government.

Idols stolen from Guntur temple...

Continued from pag e1

He said that a person was found suspiciously moving in Kudi Guddu Satram area. After a thorough check, police found the idols with him.

The police immediately arrested him and recovered the stolen brass idols. The accused, Polisetti Durga, 21 is a resident of Ninth lane of Kattavari street in Old Guntur area.

The SP said that Durga was a habitual offender and two cases, one in Guntur police station and one in Krishnalanka police station of Vijayawada, were registered against him.

He said that the police started a further investigation to know the motto behind the theft by registering a case.

The SP announced rewards to the police staff for swift action and arresting the accused.

13,041 people vaccinated on Day-2

Continued from pag e1

The vaccination process continued uninterrupted at 332 vaccination centres.

As many as 19,108 healthcare workers were vaccinated on Saturday, though the Centre set a target of giving vaccine to only 14,300 persons on the first day.

Andhra Pradesh has been at the forefront in conducting the vaccination programme. The state has excelled in containing coronavirus and also conducting Covid tests in the country.

Krishna district collector A MD Intiaz said that on second day, 2,700 health workers were given the first dose of Covid vaccine at 30 session sites in the district.

The collector inspected the vaccination process at GGH along with RDO



Khaja Vali, district immunization officer Dr Sharmista and others.

The Collector said that the vaccination programme was carried out smoothly without any adverse effects and opined that the vaccine would prove effective in controlling coronavirus.

In the first phase, 36,000 health workers will be vaccinated at 30 various sessions sites in the district. Later, he inspected the vaccine storage facilities.

Police arrested 15 accused

Continued from pag e1

It is pertinent to note that the main accused, masquerading as Income tax officials, kidnapped three real estate businessmen Katikaneni Praveen Kumar (50), Katikaneni Naveen Kumar (48) and Katikaneni Sunil Kumar (47), on Tuesday evening and abandoned them at Kokapet area during the wee hours of Wednesday.

After the victims were abducted, they were initially taken to 'safe house' -- guest of Bhargav Rao situated at Moinabad. There, threatening them with dire consequences, the gang members obtained the signatures of the businessmen on plain stamp papers and assaulted them with sticks.

Biden package backs gold, silver markets

As January 20 -- the day for transfer of power in the USA is rapidly approaching -- the situation there is becoming tense with each passing day. This is so because of the unprecedented violence on January 6, when the citadel of the oldest democracy, the parliament building known as Capitol Hill, was attacked by hooligans among outgoing US President Donald Trump's supporters. Obviously, such a situation is not conducive to smooth functioning of the economy. However, the announcement of US \$ 1.9 trillion economy package by the President-elect Joe Biden on January 13 provided the

much-needed support to gold and silver market. Consequently, New York gold closed at US \$ 1,851.00 (per ounce), while silver closed at 24.79 ounce). Platinum and palladium closed at \$ 1065.00 (per ounce) and \$ 2,271.00 (per ounce) respectively. Other economic parameters remained moderate. Brent closed at US\$ 54.84 (per barrel) while Crude MCX oil was quoted at 3,827 (per barrel). While Gold MCX stood at Rs.48,700.00 (per 10 gms), MCX Silver closed at Rs.64,940 (per kg), Copper MCX

closed at Rs.605.13 (per kg). Sensex and Nifty 50 closed at 49,034.67 and 14,433.70 points. Leading foreign currencies' exchange rates were: US \$: Rs.73.13, British Pound: Rs.99.37, Euro: Rs.88.34, Singapore \$: Rs.55.09, Swiss Franc: Rs.82.24, Australian \$: Rs.56.43, Saudi Riyal: Rs.19.43, New Zealand Dollar: Rs.52.22, Kuwaiti Dinar: Rs.241.47 and UAE Dirham: Rs.19.91, Japanese Yen: Rs.0.70 and Hong Kong Dollar: Rs.9.41. In local markets, standard gold (24 carats) declined by

Rs.2,170 and closed at Rs.49,640 (per 10 gms). Ornamental gold too followed suit and was quoted in the range of Rs.45,400 - 45,500 on the closing day. Silver (0.999) also declined and closed at Rs.69,700 (per kg). COMMODITIES The sentiment in principal wholesale commodity markets in the twin cities turned moderate. Rythu Bazaars and the various commodity markets located in Begum Bazar, Kishangunj, Mukthiyargunj, Risala Abdullah, Mir Alam Mandi, Dilsukhnagar, Kukatapally, Bowenpally and General Bazar recorded moderate trade volumes. During the week, common

pulses such as tuar dal, masoor dal, moong dal and urad dal and spices like chillies, ginger and garlic remained unchanged at their respective last week's closing levels, while staple foodgrains and common edible oils ruled firm. Common vegetables such as cabbage, cauliflower, ribbed gourd, snake gourd, lady's finger, cucumber, potatoes, onions, tomatoes, French beans and leafy vegetables remained unchanged. The NECC wholesale price of egg in Hyderabad further declined by Rs.45 and closed at Rs.375 (per 100). The highest price of Rs.458 was recorded at Surat while Hospet recorded the lowest of Rs.370.

BJP to launch yatra on Feb 4

Continued from pag e1

He had also demanded that the DGP Goutam Sawang tender apology to BJP for twisting facts related to attacks on temples and booking some of the party work-

ers. He had also set a deadline as January 20 for the DGP to tender an apology. Veerajulu lamented that the BJP, which has been building temples, was being painted as a party which is bulldozing the temples.

The core group meeting had also discussed at length about the upcoming Tirupati bypoll. The core group meeting assumed significance as attacks on Hindu temples heated up political landscape in the state.

HC UPADHYAY ■ HYDERABAD

January 11 and 12 of the year 2021 will go down in the history of our democracy as very trying days for the judiciary. For, it was on these two days that the highest court of the country faced the herculean task of maintaining balance between its Constitutional obligations and self-respect because both these vital elements faced a threat from 'anti-India' forces.

After having miserably failed, despite a month and a half of relentless efforts, to provoke the government to use force (which they deserved very much) against their 'five star' agitation, fashionably packed as the farmers' protests, the Khalistani, jihadi, terrorist and extremist elements took the 'judiciary' route via proxy petitioners to get a snub from the apex court for the government. Had the much-needed force been used to protect the fundamental rights of the non-protesting citizens by the authorities, the bogey of 'assault on democracy' would have been raised by the masters and managers of the so-called

farmers' agitation on international arena. What transpired in the Supreme Court on January 11 and 12 was indeed unprecedented. The Chief Justice, without mincing words, conveyed his concern for the women and old people protesting in the shivering cold and asked the counsel of the farmers to convey his message to protestors.

In a bid to diffuse the situation, the apex court temporarily suspended the three contentious laws which have been the central point of the tangle. The court also formed a four-member Committee to meet the protestors and study the pros and cons of the contentious laws and finally submit the recommendations to the court. While

the government readily agreed to the verdict, the defiant farmers not only dissented with the apex court but also cast aspersions on the neutrality of the Committee members nominated by the court. The self-styled messiahs of the country's farmers in utter disregard of the apex court declared that they reject the Committee and will not be a party to the deliberations by the said Committee.

Meanwhile, the ninth round of 'talks' of the government with the much pampered farmer-leaders too ended inconclusive on January 15. Now the tenth round has been scheduled for January 19.

Indeed, this issue has become a naughty riddle. When the so-called farmers touted as the 'Annadata', have in the most

unequivocal terms declared that they want nothing less than scraping of three laws, and the government too, is rightly on its firm wicket that it won't succumb to the former's demand, where is the question of holding any parleys running into now double digit?

The real face of the agitation has been recognized by the people of the country and it is a pity that the government of the day does not want to recognize. Calling the foodgrain cultivators as Annadata is also a kind of excessive pampering. Applying the same analogy, the weavers should be called, Kapda daata and the cobblers as, Joota Daata. In fact, every vocation and rendering of service is based on the economic principle of give and take. Therefore, there is no question of glorifying one occupation to the detriment of others. In fact, while a huge majority of real farmers who toil in the

fields get a pittance from agriculture, the 'five star' farmers, with tax-free income, are capable of indulging in the arm-twisting game.

Needless to say, divisive forces, under the garb of 'farmers', have a full play. The apex court ought to take a serious and urgent note of this and come down heavily on such criminal gangs. A few well-to-do farmers claiming no links with the anti-national forces may be given a chance to bundle out their tractors, washing machines, massage wares and automatic food preparing kitchen-wares within one hour, failing which the law-enforcing agencies should be given a free hand to tackle the situation. It is high time, we take a leaf or two from other democracies like USA, France, Spain, Britain and Australia where threatening mobs in recent times have been shown their right place.

SCBA president on moral resigns ground

The president of the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) Dushant Dave tendered his resignation on January 14, stating the term of the Executive Committee has already expired and as such, he has no moral right to continue in that position.

In a letter addressed to the Executive Committee, Dave said that, as the term of the Executive Committee had already ended, they had planned to hold virtual elections. However, due to reservations expressed by some lawyers, the same could not be done. He expressed deep gratitude to the Executive Committee while putting in his papers.

MANY Karnataka Courts to function normally

The Karnataka High Court has issued a modified Standard

Operating Procedure (SOP) stating that except for the specified seven districts, the rest of the districts in the State having less than 200 of Covid-19 active cases for last about 10 days will function in the normal manner as they were functioning prior to March 15, 2020. However, the courts will have to enforce 13 guidelines listed in the SOP.

TURKEY Mullah sentenced to 1,075 years' jail

Creating a sort of record, a Turkish court has sentenced a Muslim evangelist to 1,075 years in jail for sex crimes. Adnan Oktar, 64 was initially detained in 2018, along with more than 200 other suspects, as part of a crackdown on his group by the financial crimes unit of the Istanbul police. According to reports, he was convicted for crimes, including sexual assault, sexual abuse of minors, fraud and attempted political and military espionage. During the trial, Oktar

told the presiding judge that he had close to 1,000 girl friends. Along with him, two of his executives, Tarkan Yavas and Oktar Babuna, too have been sentenced to 211 and 186 years of imprisonment respectively.

Reeking of alcohol not 'drunk driving' In a recent judgment, the Kerala High Court has held that in order to attract the offence of drunken driving under Section 185(a) of the Motor Vehicles Act, the accused should have been subject to a breathalyzer or any other test, including a laboratory test, and his blood must be found to contain alcohol exceeding 30 mg per 100 ml.

The bench of Justice V.G. Arun in its order dated 8th January in a case of drunken driving, Manoj Kumar K Vs. State of Kerala, observed that the prosecution was based on the doctor's opinion who stated that the 'accused smelled like he had drunk' and observed that to prove the offence under Section 185 (a) of the MV Act, the aforementioned tests were mandatory.

Cement prices hiked to benefit Bharathi Cements, alleges TDP

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Telugu Desam Party spokesman Kommareddy Patabhi on Sunday alleged that the YSRCP government hiked cement prices only to benefit Bharathi Cements in which Chief Minister YS Jaganmohan Reddy's family owns 49 per cent stake. Chief Minister's wife Bharati was previously a director of the company.

He said that government's decision to hike cement price would impose a heavy burden on the common man up to Rs 350 to Rs 400 per bag. It would deal a blow to the already ailing construction industry in the State, he added.

Addressing a press conference, the TDP leader accused the Chief Minister of encouraging the cement companies' syndicate to indiscriminately hike



prices regardless of the fact that it was shattering people's dream of building their own houses. Patabhi demanded that the CM should form a Cabinet

Sub-Committee to bring down the cement prices immediately. A sharp hike to the tune of Rs 80 to Rs 100 per bag of cement was unacceptable, he

State government's decision to hike cement price would impose additional financial burden on the common man up to 80 to Rs 100 per bag, says TDP leader

lamented. Bharathi Cements was born out of the stench of corruption resorted to by Jaganmohan Reddy during his father former CM late YS Rajasekhara Reddy's regime.

Guv praises scientists, docs for vaccine

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Andhra Pradesh Governor Biswabhusan Harichandan on Sunday congratulated the Indian scientists who were behind the successful development, production and distribution of the two Covid-19 vaccines for vaccination programme's launch on January 16.

The Governor said that the scientists have fulfilled the aspirations of the people of the country by developing the vaccines and making them available to people within a very short period.

He also congratulated the officials of Medical & Health, Family Welfare departments and doctors in the state for successfully conducting the first phase of Covid vaccination programme for the benefit of healthcare professionals and frontline workers as per the guidelines of Central government.

Vellampalli flays BJP for targeting police department

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Endowments Minister Vellampalli Srinivas came down heavily on BJP State President Somu Veerraju, BJP MLC PVN Madhav and TDP Chief Chandrababu Naidu for targeting police department over the attacks on temples.

Speaking to the media here on Sunday, the Minister said: "It is unfortunate that instead of denying the allegations of involvement in temple desecration, BJP state president Somu Veerraju has written a letter threatening the Director General of Police, while MLC Madhav said that he would complain to the central Government."

The Minister said the DGP would provide evidence for the charges filed and that the government would take strict action if anyone tried for political gains by exploiting reli-



gious issues. Naidu has neither fear nor faith in God and has no moral right to speak on Hindus and temples, he added.

The Minister sought an explanation as to why Veerraju and Madhav were silent when 40 temples were demolished in Vijayawada during the previous government and when a chariot was burnt in Tadepalligudem. He questioned how the BJP could align with Pawan Kalyan who hurt the sentiments of Hindus.

The State government has handed over Antarvedi char-

iot blaze case to CBI on September 11, 2020, he said.

Condemning BJP' allegations that religious conversions were being done by government, the Minister said that government was extending financial assistance to archakas, pastors and imams without any bias.

Though the state government has formed SIT to investigate attacks on temples, opposition parties are trying to create communal divide for political gains, he alleged.

YSRCP government has so far sanctioned Rs 168 crore for the development of temples within 18 months after coming to power, while the previous government had sanctioned a paltry sum of Rs 150 crore between 2014 and 2019, he said. Also, Rs 70 crore has been sanctioned for development works of Kanakadurga temple in Vijayawada.

Pastor Praveen's comments expose attacks on Hinduism, says TDP

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Senior TDP leader Bandaru Satyanarayana Murthy on Sunday asked as to why the AP Police failed in preventing videos of pastor Praveen Chakravarthy from going viral. He had made derogatory comments against the Hindu religion in his videos.

Murthy alleged that the police did not take immediate action in the pastor's video case, but was arresting people who were posting comments on social media seeking protection of temples and idols.

The pastor's comments exposed the conspiracy behind conversions and ongoing attacks on Hindu temples in Andhra Pradesh, he bemoaned.

The DGP should explain to the people why he had not yet

DGP should explain why he had not yet ordered a inquiry into the dark activities of the pastor Praveen Chakravarthy, says TDP leader

ordered a detailed inquiry into the dark activities of the pastor Praveen Chakravarthy. All those who were behind Praveen's unholy activities should be identified and should be brought to book, he demanded. Addressing a press conference, the TDP leader deplored that temples were being vandalised indiscriminately under the Jaganmohan Reddy regime.

The TDP leader criticised the

police for not producing pastor Praveen before the media, though he was arrested four days ago. "The police should explain when they would share with the public the details of MLAs and CM's relatives who were behind the pastor's nefarious activities," he asked.

It was unfortunate that the ruling YSRCP Ministers, MLAs and MPs were not able to utter a single word on the pastor Praveen's arrest, he added.

Stating that pastor Praveen had links with CM's brother-in-law Bro Anil Kumar, the TDP leader said that all the conversion activities were going on under the direction of Chief Minister Jaganmohan Reddy. The police had wasted one full year without arresting the pastor despite his hate speech, he said.

24 held for attacking S-Is during festival

PNS ■ KAKINADA

The Amalapuram police on Sunday arrested 24 peoples for attacking two police sub-inspectors in two separate incidents during Sankranti festival, police sources said.

In the first incident, sub inspector Jaani Basha was attacked and sustained injuries when he tried to disperse the two warring groups in Nedunuru village of Aynavilli mandal on January 15 during the 'Prabhala procession'. Twenty persons involved in the attack were arrested.

In the second incident, sub inspector on patrolling duty was assaulted by rowdy elements in Amalapuram town on January 15. Four persons were arrested in connection with the case.

MLC candidate demands cancellation of CPS

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Krishna and Guntur districts Teachers' Legislative Council candidate P Venkata Mallikharjuna Rao said that he would raise voice seeking cancellation of the Contributory Pension Scheme (CPS) in Legislative Council.

He also assured that he strive to resolve the problems of teachers and would continue to support them.

Addressing the media on Sunday, Mallikharjuna Rao said that as an educationist, he had imparted quality education to students from 1993 to 2005 and even established a junior college.

He said, "I know the various problems being faced by teachers and lecturers of government aided, municipal,

Krishna and Guntur districts Teachers' Legislative Council candidate assured that he would raise voice seeking cancellation of the Contributory Pension Scheme (CPS) in Legislative Council.

gurukul, intermediate, degree, engineering, medical and ITI colleges.

The CM during the walkathon assured that CPS would be cancelled after coming to power and the Legislative Council would strive to resolve the issue.

The private teachers are facing many financial issues due to Covid crisis, he said and

assured that he would take their issues to the notice of the government.

He further said that he was contesting the Legislative Council elections in March as a candidate backed by the ACU and several teachers' associations.

NTU state president Ch Joseph Sudhir Babu, vice-president Ch Suresh Kumar and others were present.

APSRTC to run 540 buses to clear extra rush today

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

APSRTC ED Operations KS Brahmananda Reddy on Sunday said that RTC would be operating a total of 540 post Sankranti special buses will be operated on Monday.

Keeping in view the heavy rush after Sankranti festival, the APSRTC has planned to operate a total number of 2,475 buses to various destinations, according to APSRTC offi-

cials. The special bus service will be operated till January 18 to various districts in the state and various destinations in other states like Hyderabad, Chennai, Visakhapatnam and Bengaluru.

As many as 631 buses will be operated to Hyderabad alone on Sunday and Monday. The RTC has made elaborate arrangements to operate 59 buses to Vijayawada, 125 buses to Visakhapatnam, 142 buses to



Bangalore and 51 buses to Chennai from various districts.

Depending on the passenger rush, the number of buses will

be increased if needed, he said. Additional buses would be operated on Tuesdays and Wednesdays as per requirement, he added.

Earlier, the APSRTC had operated 3,607 special bus services as pre-Sankranti festival services. The RTC used to run special bus services during festivals for the convenience of the people as many people visit their native places.

The pre-Sankranti special bus services by the APSRTC started operations from January 8 to 14.

While 1,251 buses were operated from Telangana state to Andhra Pradesh, 433 buses were operated from Bangalore to AP.

As many as 133 services were run from Chennai to AP and an equal number of services were operated from other districts to Vijayawada.



TS venues come in handy for Andhra cockfight enthusiasts

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

Telangana-based cockfight enthusiasts hailing from Andhra Pradesh, who could not make it to their hometowns for the Sankranti festival due to various reasons, fell back on make-shift centres that emerged in Warangal and Khammam districts as well as on the outskirts of Hyderabad to place bets on cockfights organised during Sankranti festival.

According to observers, only about 20 per cent of those who regularly go to their hometowns for Sankranti from Telangana made it this year. The rest stayed back due to Covid and other reasons. Among those who stayed back, there are many who made it TS venues to indulge in cockfights.

The AP High Court's orders to check cockfights and conduct raids on manufacturers and sellers of special knives also had a dampening effect.

Apart from Warangal Urban and Rural districts, cockfights were arranged even in the districts of Bhupalapalli, Mulug and Bhadrachalam Agency areas, Dummugudem, Parayigudem, Rangareddy and Medchal districts. The organisers provided parking facility and imposed entry fees. On certain routes, there were heavy traffic jams, with many locals and non-locals flocking to these venues.

The police identified the areas where they saw possibility of organisers holding cockfights and installed checkpoints there. However, to frustrate police plans, youth donned the role of porters and collected Rs 200 to Rs 500 for carrying each cock to the

venues surreptitiously via bypass routes.

At many venues, the participation of people from the city was noticed. On Thursday, the police arrested 13 persons from the Bandirevu village in Dummugudem mandal. Under the Miyapur Police Station limits of Cyberabad Commissio-nerate, the police arrested seven persons for indulging in cockfights. Certain areas bordering AP and Chhattisgarh witnessed a full-fledged festive atmosphere with cockfights. In Marayigudem of Chhattisgarh, along Dummugudem in Bhadrachalam, cockfights were arranged without any fear. These cockfights were arranged under the nose of those living in areas adjoining Bhadrachalam etc. In Dummugudem of Telangana, cockfights were arranged secretly. In the vicinity of venues of cockfights, gambling was encouraged on a large scale with many people losing thousands of rupees.

AP people living in Jeelugumilli, Chintalapudi, Kukkururu, Velerupadu bordering with the Telangana's Aswaropeta, Dammapeta and Mulakalapalli crossed over to the Telangana areas to take part in cockfights. A punter belonging to the city, who had taken part in cockfights in Telangana, said that the bets were placed on the game birds not to earn money, but to have fun. As he could not go to AP to take part in the cockfights, he said that he and his friends went to Bhupalapalli, along with family members, to take part in the cockfights. He said that they purchased the game birds in Barkas area of the Old City.

J Vikhyath Reddy played vital role in kidnap: cops

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

In the investigation of Bowenpally kidnap case, the name of Jagath Vikhyath Reddy, brother of Akhila Priya had cropped up in the case.

The police have already grilled Akhila Priya, the main conspirator. She along with her husband Bhargav Ram and her brother Vikhyath Reddy also played an important role in the conspiracy, the cops said.

City Police Commissioner Anjani Kumar said, "Akhila Priya along with her husband Bhargav Ram, conspired with her brother Jagath Vikhyath Reddy and her follower Guntur Srinu."

However, the cops, who were able to nab other accused who were directly involved in the offences are on their toes to nab Bhargav Ram and Guntur Srinu. "They conducted meetings twice at her residence in Lodha Apartments in KPHB and MGM school in Yousufguda on executing the kidnap plan in the first week of January," said Kalmeshwar, DCP (North Zone).

Guntur Srinu had contacted Siddhartha, for man power and made a deal for Rs 5 lakhs and Rs 25,000 for each person.

Bhargav through Mallikarjun and Sampath got 10 stamp papers — 5 each in the name of Bhargav and Vikyath Reddy.

Hubli bizman donates over ₹1 cr to SVBC Trust

PNS ■ TIRUMALA

Hubli-based businessman has donated over Rs1 crore to Sri Venkateshwara Bhakti Channel Trust on Sunday. Dinesh Naik, CEO of DRN Infrastructure Pvt. Ltd. from Hubli of Karnataka has donated Rs 1, 11, 11, 111 to SVBC Trust. He handed over the DD for the same to Additional EO Sri AV Dharma Reddy at the latter's Bungalow at Tirumala.

Dinesh Naik, CEO of DRN Infrastructure Pvt. Ltd. from Hubli of Karnataka has donated Rs 1,11,11, 111 to SVBC Trust



DRN Infrastructure Pvt. Ltd.CEO Dinesh Naik handing over DD to TTD Additional EO Sri AV Dharma Reddy at Tirumala on Sunday.

Despite price cap on RT-PCR test, labs exploit patients

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

Despite the Telangana state government issuing a GO reducing the reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) test charges, several labs in the city have been charging at least Rs 2,000 per test from passengers scheduled to travel abroad. The passengers are aghast at the extortion of money in the name of the tests at the airport.

The state government has revised the charges to be collected by corporate hospitals and private diagnostic labs. The government initially has slashed the rates for RT-PCR testing for Covid-19 in private labs from Rs 2,200 to Rs 850. For samples collected at home,

the charges have been reduced from Rs 2,800 to Rs 1,200. Later, it asked to collect only Rs 500 if the test in the lab and Rs 750 if the sample was collected at the residence of the patient, as against the previous Rs 850 for giving the sample at the lab and Rs 1,200 for collecting it at home.

Several private diagnostic laboratories in Musheerabad and other areas have been collecting old charges to conduct the RT-PCR tests at labs and for collecting the samples at home.

In spite of the violation, there seems to be no official action against these facilities in the recent past.

The diagnostic labs located in the vicinity of Gandhi Hospital, Osmania General



Hospital and Nizam's Institute of Medical Sciences (NIMS) have been collecting huge sum from people to test them for the virus.

As high as Rs 4,200 is being collected per head to conduct

the RT-PCR test at Rajiv Gandhi International Airport (RGIA), to test the passengers returning to city from overseas.

The Centre has made it mandatory in August last year for the people either going to

abroad or returning here from the overseas should undergo the RT-PCR test within 72 hours of embarking on a plane.

On November 4 last year, a diagnostic laboratory has been set up at Rajiv Gandhi

International Airport to test the passengers for the Coronavirus.

Map Mygenome and National Accreditation Board Testing and Calibration Laboratory, Hyderabad entered into an agreement with the airport authorities. The diagnostic tests are being conducted under the aegis of Map Mygenome.

The passengers are expressing anger at charging them Rs 4,290 per test at the airport testing facility. The break-up of the charges are as follows - Rs 750 per head to test whether a person is a carrier or not of the pandemic. The testing facility charges additional Rs 2,900 towards waiting charges and additional charges. This does not include GST levied.

A legend in his lifetime, NTR breathed his last in his sleep, this day a quarter century ago.

With his demise, the country lost a colossus who dominated the world of Telugu films for about four decades and the political arena for over a decade at the regional and national level.

When Deve Gowda became the Prime Minister in 1996, the talk was that it would have been NTR occupying the seat, but for his sudden and untimely death.

NTR, who found his true calling as a film artiste at 26 years of age, excelled in the art like no other. His first film in the leading role was the classic Shavukaru, released in 1950 and the last was Major Chandrakant (1993), a major box office hit. In the intervening years, NTR essayed a variety of roles in over 300 films of different genres and except for his debut film in which he played a minor role, he was the hero in each. He was a rare talent pro-

ducing many meaningful films of which he directed 16 starting with Sita Rama Kalyanam in 1960, a tour de force. NTR daringly played Ravana, the anti-hero, in the movie at a time he had already been deified as Srikrishna and Srirama.

His prowess as an all-rounder can be gauged from the fact that he was the producer, director, screenplay writer and costume designer – a veritable one-man army – of the film Daana Veera Sura Karna in which he also essayed the diverse characters of Krishna, Karna and Suyodhana appearing on screen for four hours of 4 hours and 17 minutes duration of the film, the longest ever Indian movie to date. Often working 72 hours non-stop, wearing period cos-

NTR, who found his true calling as a film artiste at 26 years of age, excelled in the art like no other. His first film in the leading role was the classic Shavukaru, released in 1950 and the last was Major Chandrakant (1993), a major box office hit

tumes and heavy metal crowns, it's incredible that he made the movie in 43 days, a feat no one can dare replicate. The movie released in 1977 was a smashing hit.

NTR chose to stay with the Telugu film industry of which he was the mainstay for four decades rejecting Hindi film offers from V. Shantaram and Nadiadwala. The latter offered him the role of Krishna in a Hindi movie

tempting him with the highest remuneration ever for an Indian actor. Of the movies he acted, nearly half of were blockbusters. At least 50 of his films are watched with tremendous interest even today, and at least 20 would be sure to be viewed by the people as long as Telugu films survive.

When he turned 60, at the height of his career, NTR gave up films and entered the



DR K LAKSHMINARAYANA IAS (RETD)

political arena on March 28, 1982. He launched a political party and took on the till then, undefeated, Congress. He campaigned hard in his Chaitanya Ratham on dusty roads covering 35,000 miles, and rode to power in 1983 with a thumping majority.

As Chief Minister, politics was a distraction for NTR. He

had an abiding faith in dharma and that was the touchstone of his public policy. He was in a hurry to build a society free from social and economic injustice.

He tilted the social and political power in favour of the people belonging to the underprivileged and backward classes, giving voice to the voiceless. He awakened the weak and the poor who felt equal and confident like never before.

NTR unveiled scores of welfare schemes of which subsidised rice scheme, clothing for the poor and shelter for the marginalised sections stood out. He legislated equal right for women in property in 1984, a historic step to empower women. The Central Government followed his example after two

decades. NTR abolished village hereditary posts and created mandals to bring administration closer to the people. Realising that education is the driver of social change and economic progress, NTR laid emphasis on quality education.

Primary education in Telugu was his major concern and as one who knew the potential of cinema, his fertile mind ushered in video lessons for children, a pioneering effort.

He established residential schools (gurukuls), a boon for the children of disadvantaged sections. He carried out diligent nation-wide search for persons of integrity and proven eminence to head the universities.

This is only a small list of his many path-breaking ini-

tiatives.

Ruthlessly honest, NTR expected his legislators to be clean. This created problems and he was overthrown. But he scripted perhaps the finest chapter in democracy by returning to power in 1984 in what has come to be known as the struggle for restoration of democracy.

NTR was not always right. He was obstinate sometimes. He was often too sure of himself. But his intentions were never suspect. His public life was an open book, the under song of which was Telugu pride and self-respect. His was a well lived life worthy of emulation.

'Every man is guilty of all the good that he didn't do,' said Voltaire. NTR was not guilty of this. He accomplished a lot both in films and politics. No wonder then that NTR is fondly remembered even 25 years after his death.

Apt to say a hero like NTR never dies.

(The author formerly served as secretary to NT Rama Rao)

Nitish Kumar seeks help from Bihari diaspora for state's industrial growth

PNS ■ PATNA

Bihari entrepreneurs settled abroad may rest assured of a hassle-free experience if they choose to set up a venture in their home state, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar has said.

Kumar made an advertisement to this effect late on Saturday while taking part in a webinar organized by BJANA (Bihar-Jharkhand Association of North America), as part of which he interacted with US-based delegates with roots in the state.

He underscored the fact that despite impressive progress registered in health, education and infrastructure, Bihar lagged behind when it came to industries.

"You are like members of our family, if you choose to set up an industry here, you will be provided with all necessary



assistance from our government. We will facilitate availability of land. We will also ensure that all issues flagged by you are promptly resolved," he said.

The chief minister sought to

highlight the changes in society which have been caused by initiatives such as free bicycles to school-going girls.

"When we took over in 2005, a girl riding bicycle in Patna was a rare sight. Now hordes of

school-going girls can be seen on the streets of virtually every village. The enrolment of female students has gone up and last year they outnumbered boys in the matric examinations," Kumar said.

He also spoke about his ambitious 'Jal Jeevan Hariyal' drive aimed at combating climate change, recalling that it was appreciated by no less a luminary than Bill Gates when he visited Bihar two years ago.

"He (Gates) came and saw our efforts and, at a media interaction outside the state, expressed his profuse admiration. He was amazed by the zeal shown by a poor state in addressing issues which, normally, only the developed world appears to be concerned with," he said.

The chief minister also told the delegates about efforts made by his government in

giving a facelift to various tourist spots, especially those associated with the Buddha.

"Please do plan a tour. We will be delighted to host you. You will return with memories to cherish," he added.

Kumar also said that he valued the interaction with members of the diaspora, since they brought with them a wealth of experience.

"I am instructing officials attached to the CM Secretariat to hold such sessions regularly. I would like to listen to your suggestions even when it might not be possible (for me) to take active part," he said at the interaction which lasted over an hour.

The CM was accompanied by former cabinet colleague and key aide Sanjay Kumar Jha. Among others who took part in the interaction was Chief Secretary Deepak Kumar.

Noida: 5 involved in robbery held after gunfight

PNS ■ NOIDA

Five people allegedly involved in the loot of Rs 8 lakh from a petrol pump employee in Greater Noida were arrested following an exchange of fire, officials said on Sunday.

Two of them were held after they were injured in the gunfight while the other three were nabbed during a combing operation post the shootout, the officials added.

Central Noida Additional Deputy Commissioner of Police Ankur Aggarwal said the accused had looted Rs 8 lakh in cash from a petrol pump employee in Greater Noida on January 8.

They have also been accused of looting Rs 1.50 lakh from a trader on December 29, Aggarwal said.

"The gunfight broke out late Saturday night in the Surajpur police station area in which two accused suffered injuries in retaliatory firing by police officials," he said.

Following the shootout, police recovered Rs 6.15 lakh of the money looted from the petrol pump employee, Aggarwal said. Those held have been identified as Sunil Sisodia, Vijendra Singh, Vikas Pal, Brajesh Gujjar and Sunny, alias Chandrakant Bharadwaj, police said.

Police said they have also seized four firearms and some ammunition from them and impounded two motorcycles. An FIR has been lodged against the accused and further proceedings are under way, police added.

Maharashtra: Cop held for beating his two children

PNS ■ NASHIK

A 39-year-old man, who is a Government Railway Police personnel, has been arrested for repeatedly beating his two minor children in Nashik district of Maharashtra, leaving them seriously injured, police said on Sunday. The children are undergoing treatment at the Nashik district civil hospital.

The accused, Rahul More, started beating the children-- an 8-year-old boy and a 5-year-old girl who were born to his first wife, who died some years ago--after he married another woman, an official said.

The children, who were living with their maternal grandmother since the death of their mother, recently shifted to Igatpuri in Nashik district to live with their father, he said.

As per the FIR registered by Igatpuri Police on a complaint lodged by a relative of the deceased woman on January 16, More used to ill-treat his own children from the first wife and beat them frequently, sometimes even using a leather belt.

The accused told the police that he used to beat his children as they used to beat his son, who was born to his second wife.

A case has been registered against More under sections 326 (Voluntarily causing grievous hurt by dangerous weapons or means) and 323 (Punishment for voluntarily causing hurt) of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and under section 75 of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015.

CBI arrests railways official in Rs 1-crore bribery case

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The CBI on Sunday arrested a senior Indian Railways Engineering Service (IRES) official for allegedly accepting bribe of Rs 1 crore and carried out searches at 20 locations across the country, officials said.

The agency took Mahender Singh Chauhan, a 1985-batch IRES official, into custody when he was allegedly receiving the bribe to extend favours in granting contracts of projects of the Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR), they said.

Govt may end leases of defunct iron ore mines

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The mines ministry has made a proposal to terminate the iron ore leases of those working mines that have not started production even after lapse of 7-8 months of auction and have not maintained minimum dispatch for three consecutive quarters. The ministry proposed to do so through the amendment of certain mining rules and has invited comments from the stakeholders on the same.

"The Ministry of Mines has prepared the Minerals (Other than Atomic and Hydro Carbons Energy Minerals) Concession (Amendment) Rules, 2021, seeking to amend the Minerals (Other than Atomic and Hydro Carbons Energy Minerals) Concession Rules, 2016," the mines ministry said. It added that as part of the pre-legislative consultation policy, the draft amendment rules are made available.

"Suggestions are invited from the public, state governments and UTs, mining industry, stake holders, industry associations, and other persons on the draft amendment rules, the ministry said.

Modi pays rich tributes to MGR

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday paid tributes to AIADMK founder and former Tamil Nadu chief minister M G Ramachandran on his birth anniversary and lauded his efforts towards poverty alleviation and emphasis on women empowerment.

Born in 1917, MGR, as he

became popularly known, was a Tamil film superstar who joined the C N Annadurai-led DMK and rose to be one of its popular faces. He formed his own party in 1972 following differences with M Karunanidhi, the then DMK chief after Annadurai's death.

"Bharat Ratna MGR lives in the hearts of several people. Be it the world of films or

politics, he was widely respected," Modi tweeted.

"During his CM tenures, he initiated numerous efforts towards poverty alleviation and also emphasised on women empowerment. Tributes to MGR on his Jayanti," the prime minister said.

As chief minister for over 10 years after leading his party to victory for three consecutive terms till his

death in 1987, MGR is credited with popularising several welfare programmes, including mid-day meal scheme, in the state.

The southern state is likely to have assembly polls in May with the two Dravidian parties being seen as the main contenders for power. The BJP had tied up with the ruling AIADMK in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls.

Courts must be open to public scrutiny, criticism: Salve

PNS ■ AHMEDABAD

Senior Supreme Court lawyer Harish Salve has said courts must be open to public scrutiny and criticism as "institutions of governance".

Addressing a lecture organised in Ahmedabad through video-conference on Saturday, Salve said criticism of judges, judicial overreach and the manner of functioning is not scandalising courts, and the language in which such criticism is addressed should be treated with a grin.

"We today have accepted that judges, or rather courts, and especially constitutional courts, have become institutions of governance. As an institution of governance it must be open to public scrutiny and public criticism," he said.

"We have always accepted

that the decisions of courts can be criticised, including in language which may be impolite. So the decisions can be criticised. Can we criticise the decision-making process? Why not?" Salve said.

He was addressing the 16th Justice P D Desai Memorial Lecture on Criticism of Judiciary, contempt jurisdiction and its use in the age of social media.

"Governance has to be under the sharp blaze of sunlight...in fact, I think a time may come when the Supreme Court may seriously consider a very large number of provisions of the Official Secrets Act, how far do they square with democracy," he said.

Most of them have fallen into disuse, said Salve, who was last year appointed the Queens Counsel for the courts of England and Wales.

Furious with division being created on the basis of religion: Naseeruddin Shah

PNS ■ MUMBAI

Veteran actor Naseeruddin Shah has expressed concerns over the divide being created in the country between Hindus and Muslims in the name of love jihad. The 70-year-old actor made the comments in a video interview with Karwan-e-Mohabbat India, shared on its YouTube channel on Sunday.

"I am really furious with the way divisions are being created, like the love jihad tamasha in UP. Firstly, the people who coined this phrase don't know the meaning of the word jihad."

"I don't think that anyone would be so stupid to actually believe that Muslims will overtake the Hindu population, it is unimaginable. For that, Muslims will have to have so many babies. So, this whole notion is unreal, Shah said in the



interview.

Last year in November, Uttar Pradesh became the first state in India to pass an ordinance against forcible or "dishonest" religious conversions.

In the last few months, states like Haryana and Madhya Pradesh have also revealed plans to enact laws to counter alleged attempts to convert Hindu women to Islam in the guise of marriage, which political leaders often refer to as love jihad.

The "Bandish Bandits" actor

believes the term "love jihad" stems from the idea of stigmatising inter-faith marriages and stop social interactions between Hindus and Muslims.

They not only want to discourage inter-faith marriages but also curtail social interactions between Hindus and Muslims, he added.

Shah, who is married to theatre-film actor Ratna Pathak Shah, said he always believed that his marriage to a Hindu woman would set a "healthy precedent".

We have taught our children about every religion. But we have never told them that they belong to any particular religion. I always believed that these differences would slowly fade away. I believed that my marriage to a Hindu woman would set a healthy precedent. I don't think this is wrong, he said.

More than 3,600 birds rescued in 2020: Delhi Fire Service

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Firefighters in the national capital rescued more than 3,600 birds between January-December last year, officials said on Sunday.

The maximum number of such cases were reported around Independence Day in August when people traditionally fly kites and the strings remain suspended on trees and poles creating a death trap for birds.

According to data shared by

the Delhi Fire Service (DFS), the firefighters in the national capital responded to 25,416 distress calls last year, of which 3,691 were for rescue of birds and 2,902 for animals.

The maximum distress calls were received in November (2,652), October (2,521) and August (2,466), the data showed.

These calls were related to fire, building collapse, bird and animal rescue among various other assistance sought by different agencies.



According to data, August saw a rise in bird and animal rescue calls due to kites flown around Independence Day.

"We received the highest number of calls seeking assis-

tance for rescuing birds and animals in August last year. We rescued 882 birds and 345 animals in the month of August alone," Garg said.

"This is usually the trend seen during Independence day when most of the people indulge in flying kites and in many cases, we have observed that these birds get stuck or entangled on electric wire or a tree due to stray strings," he added.

According to the fire department, most of the rescue calls

they received were for birds like crows, pigeons, parrots which either get stuck on electric wires or trees due to kite string. Or, they get calls related to cows, cattle, dogs or cats which get stuck inside narrow lanes, closed spaces, sometimes even inside houses, in a pit, canal or a drain. The months of September and July too saw a high number of rescue operations. The firefighters rescued 458 birds and 248 animals in September and 335 birds and 258 animals in July, the data showed.

FIR against 10 for fraud in processing caste certificates



Police have registered an FIR against 10 people, including four staffers of an e-seva centre here in Maharashtra, for allegedly indulging in a fraud in processing caste certificates, an official said on Sunday. Some people sought caste certificates for their children and submitted applications along with forged documents at an e-seva kendra in the city last year, he said. Despite the e-seva kendra staff being allegedly aware of the fabricated documents attached with the applications, they forwarded them to the sub-divisional office (SDO) here, the official from Thane Nagar police station said. On verification, the SDO found documents attached with the applications as fake and approached police, he said. The police registered an FIR on Friday under relevant Indian Penal Code Sections, he said, adding that no arrest has been made so far.

India's demographic dividend needs to be leveraged: Naidu

PNS ■ CHENNAI

India's biggest strength is its demographic dividend' and people need to fully leverage it to fast-track the country's progress in various sectors, Vice-President M Venkaiah Naidu said here on Sunday.

Naidu also called upon the youth of the country to be at the forefront in accelerating progress and scripting the country's growth story.

"One of our biggest strengths today is our demographic dividend.



progress and scripting India's growth story", Naidu said.

Paying rich encomiums to Kalam, who was known as 'people's president', Naidu urged the youth to take a leaf out of the book and believe in themselves.

They must aspire to become job creators rather than job seekers, he said.

Stating that Kalam would be remembered for his 'indomitable spirit' and "never-say-die attitude", Naidu said the former president pursued and persisted with discipline, hard work and confidence.

"Along with the development of India's indigenous

satellite launch vehicles, he (Kalam) is also credited with the development of India's integrated guided missile development programme (IGMDP)", the vice president said. Kalam can be credited with laying the strong foundation of 'AtmaNirbharta' in space and defence sectors on which scientists and engineers were building today, Naidu said. "The legacy of self-belief that Kalam left motivated us to develop our own vaccine today.

I must compliment the government and scientists for their untiring efforts in bringing out the vaccine for COVID-19. My hearty congratulations

for the historic vaccination drive that kicked off yesterday", he said.

Quoting Mahatma Gandhi's comments 'My life is my message', Naidu said "this (the comment) very well be applied to Dr Kalam too, who practiced what he preached."

Underlining the need to overhaul the country's education system to make learning an enjoyable experience, right from primary education, Naidu said students must be encouraged to pose questions and think critically.

He said the Centre's new education policy is a great leap in this regard, as it does away with artificial segregation between curricular and extra-curricular activities and aims at the holistic development of the child.

Referring to the book that he unveiled today, Naidu said the biography traces Kalam's journey from his student days, including his family roots.

"Many incidents are presented from the family's point of view. I commend the authors for bringing out this book and enriching our understanding of Kalam", Naidu said.

Delhi's Transport dept firming up 'rent a bike'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Tourists in the national capital may soon enjoy rides on rented two-wheelers as the Delhi government's transport department is firming up a scheme to issue licences for 'rent a bike' services in the city, officials said.

A presentation of the draft scheme is likely to be made before the transport minister next week for further discussions, a senior transport department officer said.

The presentation was scheduled earlier this month but it was postponed. Now it will be held next week. The draft proposal for bike rent service will require approval of the State Transport Authority (STA)," he said.

The proposed scheme stipulates issuance of licences to applicants having minimum five bikes with necessary permits and insurance cover, and sound financial condition to ensure maintenance of the vehicles and efficient management of the establishment, the officer said.

Under the scheme, licences will be issued to eligible bike operators by the STA to engage in the bike renting business.

SC-appointed panel on farm laws to hold meet on Jan 19



PNS ■ NEW DELHI

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

The Supreme Court had on January 11 stayed the implementation of the three laws, against which farmers are protesting at Delhi borders for over 50 days now, till further orders and appointed a four-member panel to resolve the impasse.

Bhartiya Kisan Union president Bhupinder Singh Mann, however, recused from the committee last week.

Apart from Ghanwat, agriculturists Ashok Gulati and Pramod Kumar Joshi are the two other panel members. "We are meeting on January

19 at the Pusa campus. Only members will meet to decide the future course of action," Ghanwat, President of Shetkari Sanghatana (Maharashtra), told PTI.

One of the four members has backed out of the committee. If the apex court does not appoint a new member, the existing members will continue, he said.

The committee has received the terms of reference and will begin the work from January 21 onwards, he added.

Asked about the government holding parallel talks with protesting farmer unions after the setting up of the SC panel, he said, "We have no issue if a solution is found and the protests end from either (efforts of) our panel or from the government's separate talks with the protesting farmer unions."

'Doubling farmers income biggest priority of Modi govt'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Sunday said doubling farmers income was the biggest priority of the Narendra Modi government and that the three central farm laws would ensure manifold hike in their earnings. Since coming to power, the Modi government had increased the budget for the farm sector and also the minimum support price (MSP) for various crops, he said.

Speaking after laying the foundation stone and inauguration of farmer-friendly projects of the MRN group, headed by newly inducted Karnataka Minister Murugesh R Nirani, Shah listed out various programmes and initiatives of the central government for the welfare of the farmers.

INDIA CORNER

Delhi schools prepare to open the doors to classes 10, 12 students

Staggered and shorter class hours, frequent sanitisation, and entry and exit through multiple gates are among various new ways adopted by schools in Delhi as they prepare to welcome students of classes 10 and 12 back on Monday, for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic forced closure of educational institutes in March last year. The Delhi government has allowed all schools outside COVID-19 containment zones to reopen for classes 10 and 12 from January 18 in view of board exams. However, it made clear that physical attendance is not compulsory and students will attend schools only with consent of parents. The Directorate of Education (DoE) has instructed schools to follow all COVID-19 guidelines when classroom studies resume.



Fire in luggage van of running train doused in time in Kerala

A fire broke out in a luggage van of a running train in Kerala on Sunday and was doused in time before it could spread to adjacent passenger coach, averting a possible major mishap, railway source said. The Thiruvananthapuram-bound Malabar Express from Mangaluru was stopped at Edava, about 60 km from here, after a gatekeeper there noticed smoke billowing out of the luggage van close to the engine and alerted officials around 7.40 am, they said. Fire force personnel said halting of the train in time averted a major blaze as the fire did not spread to other coaches. According to the railway sources, the gatekeeper informed the station master of Varkala, around 15 km from Edava, who in turn alerted the loco pilot and the guard, following which the train was halted immediately.



IndiGo flight makes safe emergency landing at Bhopal

An IndiGo Airlines flight going to Kolkata from Surat with 172 passengers on board made an emergency landing at Bhopal's Raja Bhoj Airport on Sunday due to a technical glitch, said an official. Raja Bhoj Airport Director Anil Vikram told PTI that the flight made an emergency landing just after 12 noon. "The IndiGo Airlines flight from Surat to Kolkata carrying 172 passengers made an emergency landing at 12.04 pm on Sunday. The landing was safe. The pilot informed the ATC (Air Traffic Controller) about the technical glitch and made an emergency landing safely," he said. Of the 172 passengers, 19 have to go further to Guwahati and Amritsar from Kolkata, and these passengers were sent to Bengaluru by flight to help them get connecting flights to their destinations, he said.



Wild elephant kills farmer, injures another in Erode

A wild elephant trampled to death a farmer and injured another while they were guarding their tapioca crop in Kadambur Athiyur village in the district, forest officials said on Sunday. The incident happened on Friday midnight. Periyasamy (46) and Sadaiyappan (50) were standing guard when the animal entered their land, the officials said. On seeing the elephant, the two burst fire-crackers to scare the animal away, but it attacked the men. Both sustained injuries and Sadaiyappan managed to escape. The elephant trampled Periyasamy to death and left, they said. On Saturday morning, the villagers conveyed the information to the forest officials, who visited the spot. Sadaiyappan is undergoing treatment in the Government Hospital, athyamangalam, they said.



Kumaraswamy accuses Shah of ignoring Kannada

PNS ■ BENGALURU

Accusing Union Home Minister Amit Shah of an anti-Kannada attitude, JD(S) leader H D Kumaraswamy on Sunday asked him to clarify to the people of Karnataka regarding the local language not finding place on the foundation stone plaque of the RAF unit in Bhadravathi, which he inaugurated.

Hitting out at Chief Minister B S Yediyurappa and his Deputy Govind Karjol for ignoring the same, he said in a series of tweets that those who tolerate insult to the dignity and honour of the land as well as its language were not fit to hold the reins of the state's

administration, as he accused them of "betraying" Kannadigas.

Shah on Saturday had laid the foundation stone of a new battalion campus of the Rapid Action Force (RAF) near Bhadravathi in Shivamogga district in the presence of Yediyurappa, Union Minister Pralhad Joshi and Karjol among others.

"...the inscription plaque unveiled on the occasion to mark the foundation stone laying is in only Hindi and English.

It clearly shows that Kannada has been ignored though the foundation stone that has been laid in Karnataka," Kumaraswamy tweeted.

Newsprint cost up 20% in 3 months; publishers seek waiver in import duty

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

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

An industry that was facing headwinds from a slowing economy even before the pandemic, was hit hard when most readers stopped buying newspapers and magazines on fears of them being carriers of viruses.

While there are no medical studies that have established the virus transmission theories, sales did not pick up even after



lockdown restrictions were relaxed, industry leaders said.

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

Indian Newspaper Society (INS) President L Adimoolam said most newspapers have stopped sending the hard

copies to the rural areas with readership of less than 50 copies, to reduce the distribution cost.

In a representation to Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, INS has suggested cutting customs on import of newsprints. They also want a fiscal stimulus package for the industry or raising tariffs of government advertisements by 50 per cent.

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

'Modi should have taken virus vaccine shot'

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

Senior Congress leader and former UP legislator Pradeep Mathur on Sunday said it would have been better had Prime Minister Narendra Modi taken the coronavirus vaccine shot on the first day of the inoculation drive, thereby injecting confidence among people.

"It would have been better had Prime Minister Narendra Modi presented an example like that of Joe Biden, the president-elect of the US, by getting himself vaccinated. By taking the vaccine shot, he would have injected confidence among people of the country. People are feeling hesitant in getting themselves vaccinated," Mathur said.



NGT to take cognizance of ammonia gas leak incident

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The National Green Tribunal is scheduled to take cognizance of the ammonia gas leak incident at IFFCO plant at Phulpur near Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh on Monday.

A bench comprising NGT chairperson Justice A K Goel and Justice Sheo Kumar Singh had taken note of a Hindi newspaper report dated December 24, 2020.

Two officials of the Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative Limited (IFFCO) had died and its 16 other employees were injured in a major ammonia gas leak at the fertiliser major's plant at Phulpur. The gas leakage that took place on December 22 at around 10:30 pm, however, was restricted and stopped in a short time, the fertiliser cooperative major had said in a statement.

Kolam drawings mark kickoff of Biden-Harris inauguration

PNS ■ WASHINGTON

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

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

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

More than 1,800 individuals from across the US and many from India participated in the

online initiative to create thousands of Kolam designs to celebrate the historic event.

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

The initial idea was to have these Kolam patterns from across the country in front of the White House as a symbol of good beginning to the new administration.

The Washington DC police gave permission to the organisers to have it near the Capitol Hill around the inauguration



venue. However, due to the unprecedented security measures that have been enforced in Washington DC, the permission was cancelled.

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

A date for the installation after the inauguration will be

come Biden when he takes office in a few days.

Hundreds of artists, citizens and students from across the country collaborated online to combine thousands of local pieces. This is what we wanted when we planned to have thousands of Kolam tiles in front of the White House, said Somnath. Students from 10 public schools in Washington DC participated in making the art. Lambert said the District of Columbia Public Schools arts curriculum focuses on equity and believes cultural representation is an important part of that effort.

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

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Major Democratic fund raiser Shekar Narasimhan, whose niece and grandniece joined many others to make tiles for the inauguration Kolam, supported the project.

Narasimhan said the project reflects and honours the history of America.

With the rise of diverse America, the energy behind this artwork is a reminder of what binds us together as Americans, he said.

I am so grateful and honoured to be able to share my love for Kolams through the #2021kolam community project. The real celebrities are the children who have invested so much of themselves into beautifying the dots and the shapes around them that will come together for our collaborative welcome offering for Inauguration Kolam #2021, Chandrasekar said.

It's here!

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



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

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

Recasting Delhi

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



On the auspicious day of Makar Sankranti, the day millions of Indians worship the Ganga, construction began on India's new Parliament building, the first of several projects that will define New Delhi in the latter half of the 21st century. Many individuals and organisations have questioned as to why such an expensive infrastructure undertaking is being started now, as India's economy limps back into action following the pandemic. The fact is that large infrastructure projects have always been used by nations, whether it was Germany or Japan following the World War 2 or the United States during the Great Depression, to turbo-charge economic recovery as these projects provide large volumes of employment and leave behind a considerable legacy. Delhiites themselves have never denied heritage its place — Rajput, Islamic, European or Colonial — and made it a part of their living history, one where Lutyens' Delhi is a key chapter. The cluster of offices would undoubtedly change the skyline as we know it and their ramped-up security would rob us of an indulgent spread in the heart of the city. But was this particular infrastructure project needed?

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

BINDU DALMIA

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

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

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

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

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

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

Trends to look out for

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dominant India-centric themes expected to play out

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SOUNDBITE

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



AIIMS Director
Dr Randeep Guleria

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



UN Secretary-General
Antonio Guterres

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



Actor
Rituparna Sengupta

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



Former Indian captain
Sunil Gavaskar

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Low-profile R-Day is good

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

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

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

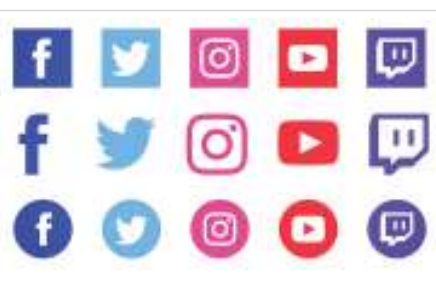
N Subramanian
Delhi

Privacy is the price for social media freedom

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

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

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



teachers. The teachers are asked by the school authorities to share their personal details like email and phone number with parents of all students, thus putting them at grave risk of breach of privacy. The breach is not only through WhatsApp; even video conferencing platforms are not safe. The Government and private sector must do something to safeguard the privacy and freedom of every individual before it gets too late.

N Nagarajan
Secunderabad

Puducherry suffers

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

administration or the people.

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

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

Ganapathi Bhat
Akola

Need to be reasonable

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

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

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

Yash Pal Ralhan
Jalandhar

Send your feedback to:
letterstopioneer@gmail.com

FIRST COLUMN

A new medium of expression

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



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MANISH TEWARI AND THE CONGRESS ARE ONLY PASSIONATE ABOUT SPREADING DISTRUST AND RUMOURS (ABOUT THE COVID VACCINE).
—UNION HEALTH MINISTER
HARSH VARDHAN

POINTCOUNTERPOINT



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

Mobile money is new cash

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



MOIN QAZI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

But such success stories do not

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



NADEEM PARACHA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The party felt that another rout could plunge the outfit into a serious existential crisis. The JI also boycotted the 2008 elections. Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), too, boycotted the same elections because, at the time, it was a tiny outfit with no electoral influence — even though, along with the JI, the PTI claimed that it was boycotting the polls because they were being held by a dictatorship. However, in 2002, both the JI and the PTI had taken part in elections held during the same dictatorship. Second, even parties with strong vote banks can withdraw from elections because they believe that their defeat, engineered by fraudulent polls, can dent their reputation. The PML-N harboured this fear in 2007. Benazir helped Nawaz overcome this fear, despite the fact that the PPP could have easily won Punjab had the PML-N not participated in the 2008 polls. The goal was to continue having at least some influence and presence, even in an engineered Parliament headed by a common foe.

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

A study by Matthew Frankel of elections boycotts in various authoritarian set-ups from 1990 onwards, shows that boycotts were unable to trigger any serious disruption, and many parties that had boycotted elections returned to contest them despite the polls being held by the same regimes they claimed were undemocratic.

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

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

(The views expressed are personal. Courtesy: Dawn)

RECAPITALISATION OF PUBLIC SECTOR BANKS

Finance Min looks at BIC model for affordable capital infusion

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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



ing company would look into the capital needs of banks and arrange funds for them without government support.

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

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

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

The first test case of the new mechanism was a capital infu-

sion of Rs 5,500 crore into Punjab & Sind Bank by issuing zero-coupon bonds of six different maturities last year. These special securities with tenure of 10-15 years are non-interest bearing and valued at par.

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

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

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

net present value, they added.

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

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

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

This mechanism helped the government from making capital infusion from its own resources rather utilised banks' money for the financial assistance.

However, the mechanism had a cost of interest payment towards the recapitalisation bonds for PSBs.

US biz advocacy group urges Minister Sitharaman to lower tariff in Budget

PNS ■ WASHINGTON

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

China and 14 other countries in November last year established the world's largest trading bloc that represents roughly 30 per cent of the world's GDP and population.

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

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

If India can focus on a much more predictable environment from a policy framework it will give more confidence to the investors.

Bringing a sense of transparency in policy making also sends a very positive signal. And if India is going to be competing, especially with the RCEP, then it has to look at lowering its tariff, Mukesh



Aghi, president of US India Strategic and Partnership Forum (USISPF) told PTI.

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

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

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

companies to manage their tax liabilities, and provide a needed boost to the economic activity during the next fiscal year, it added.

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

We have recommended that the midsize public banks should be privatised. If you want large institutional investment to come in, then the clause you have management control and board control lies with the Indian partner has to be removed, Aghi said.

Because American corporate boards will not approve, an investment, if it goes in India and they don't have a management or board control over those investment. Recognising that the pandemic has accelerated digitisation of large swathes of the economy, we recommend the government ensure Digital India can transact securely by expanding the use of digital signatures in negotiable instruments, powers of attorney, deeds, contracts, and other legal documents, USISPF said.

MONEY MATTERS

Shift Freight expects its topline to touch ₹50 crore by FY2022

G7 On-demand shifting services provider Shift Freight expects its topline to touch Rs 50 crore by the end of fiscal 2022 on the back of a pan-India presence and a significant jump in daily movements, its Co-founder, Avinash Raghav has said. The Noida-based start-up entered the fast-growing logistic services space just prior to the imposition of the coronavirus-induced lockdown in March last year. The firm with presence across 10 cities including Delhi-NCR, Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Jaipur, among others, conducts over 1,000 movements per month and is growing at 75-80 per cent month-on-month in terms of both order and revenue, with a fleet of 560 trucks attached to the platform, according to Raghav. "We launched in February and though we executed some orders till lockdown, our actual operations started, in a way, from June 2020 only."

KSUM Palakkad centre to hold session for tech entrepreneurs

Kerala Startup Mission (KSUM) is organising a special session on January 19 for tech entrepreneurs to know more about the service and support system being provided by its incubation centre in Palakkad. The hour-long incubation programme would provide the participants a chance to explore the ecosystem at the KSUMs centre in this city, a press release said. The session would have experts providing advice on technical aspects and trade scene besides tips on support to investment and basic infrastructure. The Palakkad centre has been functioning for a year. As a nodal agency of the Kerala government for entrepreneurship development and incubation activities in the state, KSUM undertakes planning, establishment and management of technology business incubators and accelerators to promote technology-based ventures by creating the infrastructure and environment.

'Include certain elements in vax programme towards CSR spend'

The CII Taskforce on Vaccines has recommended inclusion of certain elements in the vaccination programme as part of the 2 per cent corporate social responsibility (CSR) expenditure required to be undertaken by a class of profitable entities, saying it will encourage the private sector to inoculate its workforce and help enhance the reach of vaccines. The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) Taskforce has made several important submissions to V K Paul, Member, Niti Aayog and Rajesh Bhushan, Health Secretary and the National Expert Group on Vaccine Administration for COVID-19 (NEGVAC), sources said. Among these, the industry body has identified the elements in the vaccination programme, which if supported or undertaken by companies may be considered under the 2 per cent CSR spend. Under the Companies Act, 2013, a certain class of profitable entities are required to spend at least 2 per cent of their three-year annual average net profit towards CSR activities for social good or affirmative action. The taskforce has also recommended that the government utilise private sector capacity from phase one itself of the vaccination drive.

Franklin Templeton MF's six shut schemes generate Rs 13,789 cr

Franks Franklin Templeton Mutual Fund on Sunday said its six shut schemes have received Rs 13,789 crore from maturities, pre-payments and coupon payments since closing down in April. Franklin Templeton MF shut six debt mutual fund schemes on April 23, 2020 citing redemption pressures and lack of liquidity in the bond market. The schemes -- Franklin India Low Duration Fund, Franklin India Dynamic Accrual Fund, Franklin India Credit Risk Fund, Franklin India Short Term Income Plan, Franklin India Ultra Short Bond Fund, and Franklin India Income Opportunities Fund -- together had an estimated Rs 25,000 crore as assets under management (AUM). "The six schemes have received total cash flows of Rs 13,789 crore as of January 15, 2021 from maturities, pre-payments and coupon payments since April 24, 2020," the fund house said in a statement. Over the latest fortnight (January 1-15), these schemes received Rs 669 crore, of which Rs 617 crore was as pre-payments, it added.

Mzaalo partners with Mojo Boxx

PNS ■ MUMBAI

Digital entertainment platform Mzaalo has partnered with Mojo Boxx, to provide content for budget carrier SpiceJet's in-flight entertainment system, SpiceScreen.

Mzaalo through its content platform, offers Bollywood movies, regional cinema, original series, music videos, among others.

Mojo Boxx is an Indian technology start-up providing digital travel experience solutions in an unconnected environment for the Airlines, Railways, Metros, and long-distance road travelers.

The Gurugram-based airline had in last August launched a revamped complimentary in-flight entertainment system, SpiceScreen, with contents such as blockbuster movies, popular TV shows, cartoons and stand-up comedies. The IFE can be accessed by passengers on any of their personal handheld devices like mobiles or laptops. SpiceJet flyers can enjoy unlimited entertainment with Mzaalo's wide-ranging content on SpiceScreen, which is powered by just a pair of Mojo Boxx's special Smartphone IFE Box, Mzaalo said in a release on Sunday.

"Our partnership with Mzaalo will enable us to create deeper engagements with flyers not just in sky but even before departure and after arrival thereby offering a complete home-to-home digital experience for outbound travelers," said Manoj Kumar Gupta, Founder, Mojo Boxx. Vikram Tanna, COO, Mzaalo said "the partnership is a result of our collective effort to enhance customer experience by offering the most sought-after content to SpiceJet travelers".

The growing demand for quality content enabled Mzaalo's partnership with Mojo Boxx to cater to audiences across geographies.

Luxury carmakers seek reduction in taxes on automobiles in Budget

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

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

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

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

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



Seeking a reduction on taxes on the auto sector, Schwenk said, "Already the auto industry is highly taxed...from the import duties to GST and cess which is 22 per cent (on luxury cars). I think the target should actually be to support the growth of the sector and reduce tax. We should try find an avenue."

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

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

Lamborghini India Head Sharad Agarwal said the expectation of the super luxury segment players from the government is to maintain a consistency because the segment has suffered a lot in 2020.

"We want the segment to at least bounce back to 2019 level in 2021. We are still not expecting growth to come back but we want to touch 2019 level in the segment. If there is any change (increase) in the tax structure in the segment it is going to hit the segment very negatively," he added.

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

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

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

Founded by Ashneer Grover and Shashvat Nakrani in 2018, BharatPe offers merchants a single interface for all UPI apps like Paytm, PhonePe, Google Pay, BHIM, Mobikwik, Freercharge and others. It also facilitates loan facility for its merchant partners.

Speaking to PTI, BharatPe co-founder and CEO Ashneer Grover said Rs 90 crore in debt came from Alteria Capital, while the remaining Rs 49

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

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

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

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



breadth of India," Grover said.

Last week, BharatPe raised Rs 60 crore in debt from Innoven Capital. With this, BharatPe has raised a total of Rs 199 crore (USD 28 million) in debt till date. It had said it plans to raise over Rs 5,000 crore in debt funding in the

next two years to build its lending business.

"We have committed ourselves to provide USD 700 million of loans to small merchants and kirana store owners by March 2023 and are hoping to onboard more institutional debt partners in the near future," he said.

Grover added that the company aims to become a digital bank that is the one-stop destination for merchants for all kinds of financial services and this tranche of funds will get things rolling.

Merchants are the top priority for the company and it is committed to solving the credit problem for them, he said.

"The institutional debt raised will help catapult our lending business. We intend to raise

close to USD 700 million of debt capital over the next two years... By March 2023, our aim is to be present in 300 cities and have the lending product available in 200 cities," he added.

Grover said the company has already disbursed loans to more than one lakh merchants and aims to scale this up by 8-10 times and enable credit for a million kirana store owners in 2021.

Currently, serving over 50 lakh merchants across 65 cities, the company has grown business 30 times in 2019 and processed over six crore UPI transactions a month (annualised transaction processed value of over USD 7 billion).

BharatPe has raised close to USD 171 million in equity and debt till date.

'Kerala must use virus as opportunity to reskill non-residents'

PNS ■ THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

Amidst the return of a massive number of non-resident Keralites to the state following the pandemic, a renowned expert on migration has urged the state to use the calamity as an opportunity to re-skill these returnees' prospective migrants so that it continues to lead the human exports market.

Official data from the state shows that as of January 7, as much as 8.7 lakh NRKs (non-resident Keralites) have returned to the state from overseas, mostly from the Gulf since the first week of May last.

What is more, in a job-starved market like Kerala, a vast majority of them (5.7 lakh) have cited job loss as the sole reason for their return, ringing alarm bells in the government corridors and

among the planners.

More than a fourth of the over 1 crore Indians in the Gulf are from Kerala and of them around 7.5 lakh have returned to the state which heavily depends on their remittances, making it the highest in history since the Gulf boom started in the late 1950s.

The pandemic has forced a whopping 8.7 lakh Keralites to return home from abroad, mostly from the Gulf, since last May when travel began after the first lockdown was lifted, and pertinently a vast majority of them, 5.67 lakh to be precise, cited job loss as the sole reason for their return, show the data from the Norka (Non-Resident Keralites Affairs).

The same data also shows 1,11,151 of the 13,27,330 returned from within the country cited job loss as the reason



for their return. Overall, 21.89 lakh Keralites have returned to the state.

According to Norka, 40 lakh Keralites are living/working abroad and 13.73 lakh elsewhere in the country. The state

The pandemic has forced a whopping 8.7 lakh Keralites to return home from abroad, mostly from the Gulf and pertinently a vast majority of them, 5.67 lakh to be precise, cited job loss as the sole reason for their return

has a resident population of 3.48 crore.

However, S Irudaya Rajan, a renowned expert on international migration, doesn't agree with the official numbers especially on job losses, saying tens of thousands have already returned, some of them even with new jobs. Also, he says the data shows only the number of returnees and do not include those who have gone back.

Rajan, the chair professor at

the ministry of overseas Indian affairs' research unit on international migration at the Centre for Development Studies in Thiruvananthapuram, also says the state should use the pandemic as a great opportunity to reskill/upskill its human talent so that it continues to lead the human export market.

"The good news for all us is that migration is picking up and it will pick up more as the pandemic recedes with the vaccina-

tion progressing. Kerala should think of a new migration policy to help them upskill and reskill so that we can resurrect the migration market again," Rajan told PTI.

"We should not be worry too much on how many have come back, as many are going back or have gone back already. We should instead worry about how to help them better, how to make them more skilled, thus helping better migration later," he added.

"We should work towards sending our human talent to other countries also but as better skilled," he said, and called up on the state to urgently unveil a policy to ensure that the state has direct flights to key European and US cities and not just to the Gulf as is the case now.

Sonal Chauhan wants two weddings: one on the beach and one in the mountains

Sonal Chauhan who's a regular on social media, has been burning up the internet with her Instagram pictures and one thing is clear with them — she's definitely got a thing for nature. The Bollywood actress loves taking pictures in a spot by the window at home or at the beach. She admits how she feels and says, "Yes, I love nature, it's so soothing and it has so much value in our lives. For me, nothing makes me happier than nature, whether it's taking a walk outdoors and being close to trees or just hearing the sound of birds chirping early in the morning, in fact that's also why I like to wake up early; it's so silent then and all you hear are the sounds of nature."

Guess what? Sonal also wants her wedding with nature as the backdrop. She says, "When getting married is concerned, I want two weddings — one at the beach and one in the mountains. So maybe, one on the sands and one on a beautiful cliff would be lovely."

Is Mr Right already part of her life who she can dream that with, all set to make that happen, we ask? "No," she laughs, "I am not seeing anyone right now."



Sonu Sood plans pan-India platform for young emerging cricketers

Actor Sonu Sood is putting his weight behind an initiative to set up a pan-India platform to promote young emerging cricketers. The actor revealed that he has always dreamt of becoming a cricketer but did not have a platform in his home town. He also stressed that he feels good when he sees small kids playing cricket. "I always dreamt of becoming a cricketer but I didn't have a platform in our small town, but when I see all these young kids playing cricket it feels really good," Sonu said.

He says pitching in for the cause of promoting budding talent in cricket will also let him take time off his busy schedule and reinvent his passion for the sport. "I like batting as well as bowling but I didn't get much time to play the sport. I feel we all should take some out from our busy work schedules and reinvent our passion. Sometimes when you see these kids playing not just cricket but any kind of sports, you feel motivated to follow them," he said, adding that he has had discussions with Cricfit founder Mikkail Vaswani on "creating a platform on a pan-India level where they (children) can explore their skills and enjoy the sports."

Since last year, Sonu has turned focus on social causes. In 2020, amid Covid

DIVINE, Vince, Pusha T, collab for The White Tiger

Fresh off the success of his sophomore album, *Punya Paap*, multi-platinum rapper DIVINE has teamed up with prominent American rappers Vince Staples and Pusha T for the original track in the highly-anticipated Netflix film *The White Tiger* starring Adarsh Gourav, Rajkumar Rao and Priyanka Chopra Jonas.

Titled *Jungle Mantra*, the invigorating track draws inferences from codes of the jungle and aspires to be the most pertinent portrayal of the trials, tribulations and accomplishments experienced by the lead protagonist in the film, portrayed by Gourav. Pivoted in the pits of a high tempo chorus, one that would inspire a street revolution, the track sees DIVINE, Pusha T and Vince Staples explore the universal themes of class disparity.

Speaking about the track, DIVINE elaborates, "I'm really excited to have partnered on this film. I felt a personal connect with the refreshing narrative which is so relevant today and very comparable to the lives of many today who were once the underdogs till they started to stand up and speak for themselves. This track will reflect the tale of rebellion and opportunity that the film weaves itself around and will narrate the story of the economic and emotional disparity between the rich and the poor."

Adding on further Ramin Bahrani states, "I'm a huge DIVINE fan, so it was incredible to get to work with him. Along with the great Vince Staples and Pusha T they delivered a thrilling track that amplified the themes and the energy of *The White Tiger*."

This *Gully Gang* protégé, Karan Kanchan-produced track is befitting of being called not only a natural successor of DIVINE's 2018 cult hit *Kaam 25* from Netflix's *Sacred Games* but a promising showstopper primed to leave a noteworthy impression on global territories.

The track releases today with Mass Appeal India while the film is all set to release locally in select theaters on 13th January and globally on Netflix on 22nd January.



Fiancé 'proud' as JLo is set to perform at Biden's inauguration

Jennifer Lopez is gearing up to perform at the inauguration of Joe Biden, and her fiancé Alex Rodriguez couldn't be more excited for her. Jennifer Lopez, 51, is set to take the stage at President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration — and her fiancé Alex Rodriguez is so proud! A source close to the 45-year-old former Yankee revealed he still gets "star struck" by the *Hustlers* actress. "Even though Alex is engaged to Jen and spends almost all his free time with her, believe it or not, he still gets star struck by her at times," the source told HollywoodLife exclusively. "Alex has had a huge crush on Jen for years before they even knew each other and sometimes he's just in awe of what an incredible talent she really is." The insider added that Alex couldn't wait to see JLo take the stage during the Celebrating America special.

"It's more than a concert or performance for her music, this is a moment in history that she'll always be part of and he's honored to be standing by her side throughout this journey." A source close to JLo also dished on how she was feeling ahead of the historic performance. "The full year for JLo is and has been humbling. She started with an amazing Super Bowl performance and then 2020 hit us all. She brought us out with fire for New Year's Eve and now her performance for the inauguration puts such a cherry on top on a successful and trying year. She is beyond proud of the moments she has shared and will share for Joe and Kamala [Harris]. It is a very special moment for her."


A third source also told HL that the couple truly believe the incoming President and Vice-President could "unite the country" again. "America has been so divided these past four years and Jennifer knows that bringing the country together again is a big goal. To be there celebrating the first woman Vice President, that means so much to her, not just for herself, but also as a mother, for her and Alex's girls. It's such a historic moment and she feels blessed that she gets to be a part of celebrating it."



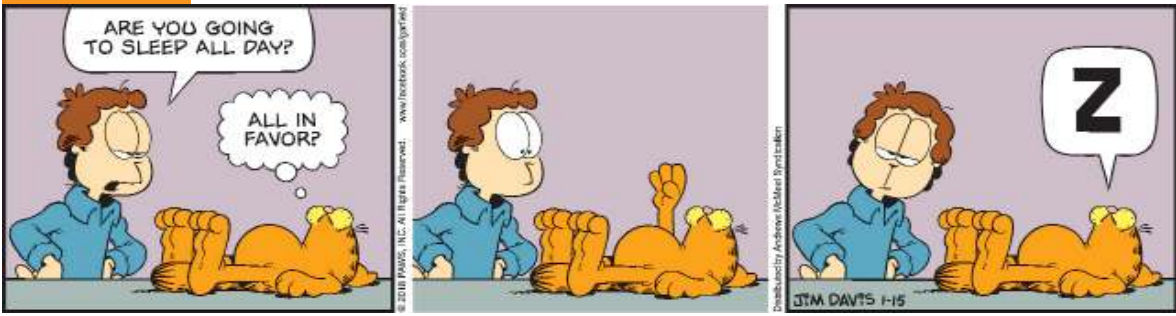
ARCHIE



CALVIN AND HOBBS



GARFIELD



NANCY




GINGER MEGGS



REALITY CHECK



SPEED BUMP



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Rules

- Each row and column can contain each number (1 to 9) exactly once.
- The sum of all numbers in any row or column must equal 45.

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ACROSS

6 Transport for someone who cannot walk

8 With nothing in it

10 The outside ends of something

13 Vanished

14 Opposite of outer

17 The country with Tokyo

19 In all places

9 Annoy or bother someone for fun

11 A play

12 Secret agent

15 Require

16 Sunbeams

17 A boy's name

18 Meat from a pig

DOWN

1 A large boat

2 Extremely

3 A throbbing pain

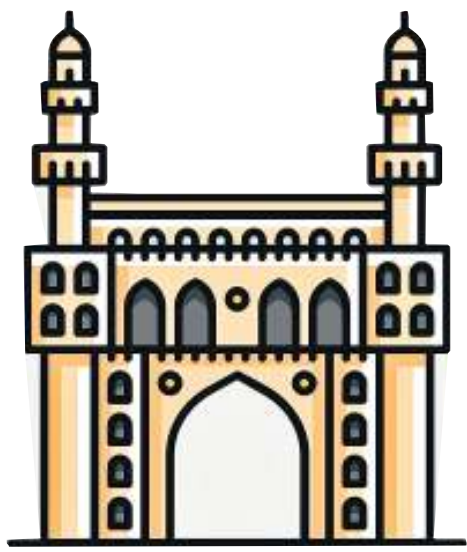
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5 The leader of the USA

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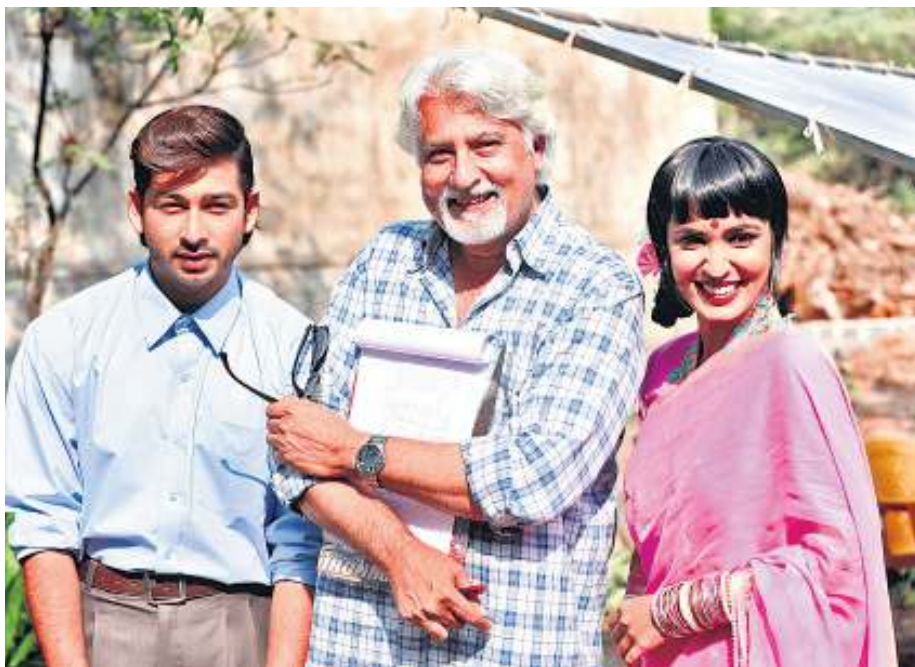
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A true-blue Hyderabadi film

There is truly nothing in life that can warm a heart up like good romantic love story and it gives us hope that some true love does exist. You have probably seen many romantic gestures but love isn't just a fairytale but a heartfelt one. Continuing the trend of romantic stories, the director belonging to the royalties Tarun Dhanrajgir is here with a crunchy masala Hyderabadi love story called *Bolo Hau*. Shining in the role of a classy romantic protagonist is his real life daughter Jahanvi Dhanrajgir who carries a very settled performance. What makes this love story so heartwarming to see is that despite it being a figment of one's imagination, it's still quite fascinating to watch! And, in these unprecedented times where everything is anyway feeling so daunting and chaotic, *Bolo Hau* comes as a good pill of romance for everyone! Drowning in the depth of its romance, the lead actress shares a moment of laughter and says, "You are going to see Hyderabad in a way like you have never seen before! The authenticity of the city of Nizams and its various flavours will be an oozing point for the audiences, especially locals. It's going to revive that old-school romance in every teenager and who knows, it turns you into a hopeless romantic once again. A classic rom-com, this tale of love is anything sweeter that you'll find." The renowned actor



It's been a while since the city of Nizams has had a good Hyderabadi film. *Bolo Hau* looks like a promising return of *dakhni* entertainment. *The Pioneer's* SHIKHA DUGGAL talks to the cast and crew of the film

and producer from the 90s seems to have taken a liking for the cinematic aspects of direction and looks forward to a successful opening in the

theatres. "Coronavirus halted our release but now when it's finally going to be available in the nearest theatres and I can see the audiences going

back to the cinema halls for many Telugu releases, I am hopeful we'll have a good opening too. There are no A-listers in my movie, yet, I believe new talent should always be given a welcoming hand so that they can prosper too. Life in itself is so full of risks, no matter on what budget, the film made is designed for a theatrical release only. Love stories cannot be compared, what's making it different is the Hyderabadi atmosphere in the film. It's about real people falling in love," shares the director. Nowadays, even horror stories have a pinch of romance in it, and a tale like *Bolo Hau* will help quench



your thirst for romance. Showing love as the only powerful emotion by the actress' father, Jahanvi Dhanrajgir seems to be really excited to watch her father in action! Considering film-making to be a giant umbrella, creatives from all the arenas come together to make a

blockbuster movie, nonetheless, she looks forward to working more as an actress in the entertainment industry. "I managed to create a really special bond with the city of Hyderabad, I am head over heels in love with the city of royals," adds Jahanvi. before!

Shubhrajyoti heaps praises on team *Madam Chief Minister*



Actor Shubhrajyoti Barat, better known as Rati Shankar Shukla in *Mirzapur* Season 1 and the one who played a pivotal role in *Article 15*, will now be seen in *Madam Chief Minister* essaying the role of a leader. It stars Richa Chaddha, Saurabh Shukla and Akshay Oberoi too. On talking about his working experience with his co-actors he shares, "Richa Chaddha is a dear friend whom I like and admire a lot. I have known her from the time she was doing theatre. Apart from that I had worked with her before. So I was quite elated when I learnt that she was going to portray the titular role. Saurabh Shukla sir is again a senior from theatre itself! So it was a great experience all in all. The only actor who I didn't know was Akshay Oberoi who turned out to be a delightful young man. I thought I may feel alienated on the set but nothing of that sort happened." Talking

about how he landed the role, the critically acclaimed actor adds, "*Madam Chief Minister* came to me quite suddenly. I had met Subhash Kapoor ji at a common friend's place. I have always been an admirer of his work. I was introduced to him and he said that he really liked my work in *Mirzapur*. It was a brief meeting. So when I received a call after a few months, I was pleasantly surprised. He narrated the whole script and offered me the role. Obviously, I took it. Apart from the fact that it's a Subhash Kapoor movie, the role itself is one of the most important ones in the story. So a great role in a brilliant story to be directed by a brilliant director. The decision to do it was a no brainer."



The celebration of folk music with an urban touch



Rashmeet Kaur, to find a suitable groom and settle down. Rashmeet Kaur states, "*Bajre Da Sitta* is a very popular Punjabi folk wedding song. Our upbeat take on this iconic classic imbibes a blend of folk and old school hip-hop and we also added our own lyrics which talk about desi style of expression of love. It was an incredibly fun experience putting aq danceable number together and reintroducing a classic to the younger generation with a twist!"

The old song now is being rooted with a modern touch; it will no more be a song of history. For over two months now, borders have become home to lakhs of farmers staging protests and *Bajre Da Sitta* can be considered a song of amity too, according to singer Deep Kalsi. Using the composition of the song, the trio of singers wants to echo the strong union between the farmers because the allure of this folk song is like no other. An urgent call for a compelling creation — it's captivating the listeners with its rhythmic beats. The fretless melodies reverberates a rustic cultural hint that echoes the spirit of celebrations and revitalizes the mind of the listener. Some years ago, no one would have imagined seeing hip-hop singers sing folk songs with the blend of a fashionable and a hardcore rap that belts out loud lyrics changing the scenario of music completely. "While the original composition pivots around the harvest season, our rendition without meddling with the original composition embraces a quirky element that also celebrates love and friendship. This song is also our humble effort of saluting the farmer community who are the spirit and the backbone of this country," says Deep Kalsi

Isn't music an important aspect in everybody's life? Almost every area has its own folk music and the peppy bhangra of Punjab hasn't lost its popularity at all. Instead, with the advent of contemporary music, it has enhanced the folk songs' cultural diversity even more. The style in which it is sung and the way it is perceived, the songs and artists are cherished and celebrated by people across. History has it, inspiration from multiple styles have just resulted in a wealth of new collected works that comment on or reflect upon the present times. A happy marriage between a strong sense of tradition and the creation of originality, *Bajre Da Sitta*, a classic Punjabi folk ceremonial song whose popularity dates back to the 1940's will now have a modern rendition that blends fusion folk and boom rap beats, making it the perfect track to make the wedding squad groove this wedding season. Performed by the uber cool 'kalamkaar' discoveries singer-songwriter Rashmeet Kaur and singer, songwriter, producer Deep Kalsi with hip hop heavyweight Ikka cooking up an intoxicating rap storm, the glitzy rendition serves as a picture-perfect dance-floor offering for the wedding party!



The increasingly unsustainable use of marine resources for economic activities, fishing, boating, tourism etc, has hurt the health of our oceans, seas and coasts. However, the wake of Coronavirus and the lockdown has turned out to be a opportunity to revive the marine ecosystem. To throw light on the varied and vast marine ecology, Sony BBC Earth has brought a show called *Blue Planet Revisited*. The two-part series celebrates marine life from all corners of the globe, exploring the challenges facing the ecosystems and wildlife in two key locations — Australia's Great Barrier Reef and the Bahamas. As the breeding season gets underway, the series focusses on the action following whales and their calves, turtles and their hatchlings and the scientists who know our oceans best. It is packed with insight and spectacle. Incredible shark dives in the Bahamas. The underwater dawn chorus of the Great Barrier Reef, home to 600 different kinds of coral and more than 1500 species of fish.

To build relevance around the show through her expertise, the channel reached out and on-boarded Nayantara Jain, Executive Director of Reef Watch Marine Conservation — one of India's oldest and only organisations committed to protecting India's coasts and oceans. Excerpts: Can you tell us about your journey as a marine biologist and what led to resource marine conservation India? I learned how to scuba dive when I was 16. I think a lot of what drove me towards learning diving was the incredible nature documentaries that I've watched before, like the original *Blue Planet* and oceans and all the BBC documentaries, narrated by Sir David Attenborough. Watching them really inspired me to

learn how to dive. And once I started diving, because I was very passionate about it that I became a scuba diving instructor. After working as a scuba instructor for a few years, I realised how our life on lands were impacting the ocean and especially coral reef ecosystems. That's when I became very passionate about conservation, and that's what led me to study marine biology and then work with Reef Watch.

Tell us about the various initiatives undertaken by Reef Watch Marine Conservation India?

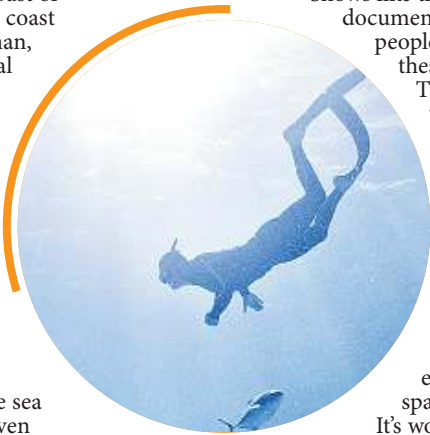
We have two sort of key field placements. One is in the Andaman Islands, and the other on the coast of Karnataka, to the West coast of India. In the Andaman, we work a lot with coral reef restoration and conservation. So, we have various ongoing projects where we are looking at different ways to regrow and repair the damaged reef areas. In another mainland, on the West coast, the work that we're doing is to do with injured and stranded marine megafauna, like sea turtles, dolphins and even whales. We have a lot of them on our ports, even on the mainland, and a lot of them often get stranded on land, either dead or sometimes alive and injured. So, we have a project where we look after the injured or ill megafauna that come up to our coast and study the ones that was wash up dead.

What is your take on the show *Blue Planet Revisited*? Do you think shows like this one help people understand oceans and its life better?

Yes, and this is one of the main reasons I am associated with the channel, to talk about this show, because my

own journey began very much with shows like these. A lot of what I knew before I did my masters on the subject, a lot of what I knew about the ocean and the animals that live in it came from shows like this. Such shows also help dispel a lot of myths and bring things into the right perspective for a lot of people. One of the episodes of the show is about sharks. I believe they are one of the most misunderstood animals on our planet today, so many people are terrified of sharks. I was just telling somebody earlier that when I worked as a full time instructor, the question I was asked most frequently was, 'are there sharks in these waters and are they going to attack me?'

Shows like this and nature documentaries teach people a lot about these animals. They teach them which animals are dangerous and which ones are not. They create a lot of excitement and curiosity, leading to more people exploring these spaces in real life. It's wonderful to have such shows. One of my greatest dreams is to make a documentary about India's coast specifically. Can you tell us about some of the astonishing encounters in your journey underwater? What keeps you going in this field? One of my most memorable diving experience ever, was when I got to do something very similar to what they have shown on this show about the sharks in the Bahamas. A few years ago I got to dive in Galapagos Islands, which is another sort of shark sanctuary we have on our planet today. So, I



Marine biologist Nayantara Jain feels that shows like *Blue Planet Revisited* are needed to dispel myths around animals and help people explore marine life. — PNS

got to dive with hundreds of different species of sharks. And, I could see these really powerful, magnificent beings swimming around me — I can never forget that moment in my life. So, it was really cool to see something similar like that on a particular episode of the show. What is the future of our islands and marine world, especially in India? I've been working as a diver and then as a conservationist for the past 10 years. Over the years, I have seen a lot of damage to our oceans. Areas that boasted of a lot of sharks are completely fished out of it now. I've seen a lot of coral reefs being degraded over the years. There's an increasing amount of litter and plastics on our coastline and waters. It is very concerning, but the silver lining here is that I've seen a surge of young children concerned about the environment. They get in touch with me, wanting to be marine biologists or wanting to come and volunteer with the organisation or know how they can organise a beach clean-up in their city. Indians are coming in to learn how to dive and surf and just interact with the ocean more. This is really encouraging. Right now, the interest of youth in all of this is rising, if more people connect with the ocean and want to preserve it, things can change. We still have coral reefs in the Andaman, have sharks in our ocean, whales in the sea, and sea turtles along the coastline. This is really the time for us to act. If we as a society realise the importance of a healthy ocean and come together we can change.

NO STOPPING INDIAN NEWCOMERS

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

4th Test. Day 4

Live from 5:00am IST

SONY TEN 1, 3 & SIX

PTI ■ BRISBANE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In fact, Shardul opened his



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

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

He became the first visiting cricketer in Australia in 74 years

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

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

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

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

This was largely due to the fight put up by Washington

Winning over Aussie crowd was Shardul's inspiration

PTI ■ BRISBANE

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

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

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

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

"People will love you for your performances and that one thing was also on my mind that people are going love me. Batting at number eight, Thakur impressed with his stroke-play, his drives coming straight out of coaching manuals.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Making a successful comeback after '10-ball' debut is dream come true moment: Shardul

PTI ■ BRISBANE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Eng need 36 runs to win 1st Test

AFP ■ GALLE

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

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

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

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

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

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



four.

Sri Lanka were bundled out for 135 runs in their first innings. Angelo Mathews struck 71 after hitting his 36th half century in Tests to hold fort at one end after opener Lahiru Thirimanne made 111 to steady the innings.

This was Thirimanne's second hundred of his Test career and his first in seven years.

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

England, who made 421 in

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

Mathews stitched a 48-run partnership with Dickwella before the wicketkeeper-batsman nicked one behind off Bess. England took a review against Mathews after the on-field umpire ruled not out to an lbw appeal from Bess. However, replays showed the ball was missing the stumps.

Axelsen, Marin win Thai titles

AFP ■ BANGKOK

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

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

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

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

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



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

Indonesia's Greysia Polii and Apriyani Rahayu were too good for Thailand's Jongkolphan Kittharakul and Rawinda Prajongjai in the women's doubles final, prevailing 21-15, 21-12. In the mixed doubles, top-seeded Thais Dechapol Puavaranukroh and Sapsiree Taerattanachai beat Indonesia's Praveen Jordan and Melati Daeva Oktavianti 21-3, 20-22, 21-18.

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

We faltered in execution: Hazlewood

PTI ■ BRISBANE

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

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

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

Hazlewood conceded that Australia let a few moments slip



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

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

Hazlewood said the match is at present evenly-poised and

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

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

Napoli hit Fiorentina for 6

AFP ■ NAPLES

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

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

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

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

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



break.

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

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

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

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

Milan lose Hernandez, Calhanoglu

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

AC Milan are already missing Croatian striker Ante Rebic

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

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

Spurs pile misery on Blades

AFP ■ SHEFFIELD

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

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

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

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

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

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



struggles in his first season after arriving from Lyon, with Mourinho admitting the player had to change his mindset to get back on track.

Tottenham are on a seven-match unbeaten run in all competitions after winning at Bramall Lane for the first time since 1975.

With a home game against champions Liverpool looming next in the league on January 28, Tottenham still have a chance to mount a serious title challenge.

They sit fourth in the table, just three points behind leaders Manchester United, who were due to play third placed Liverpool later.

Meanwhile, after securing their first league win this season against Newcastle in mid-week, the bottom of the table Blades remain 11 points from safety after their 16th defeat of the campaign.

Mourinho's men made the perfect start as Steven Bergwijn's fierce effort was superbly tipped over by Aaron Ramsdale.

From the resulting corner, Aurier rose highest to meet Son Heung-min's delivery with a powerful header past Ramsdale to give Tottenham a fifth minute lead.

Tottenham have scored five goals in the opening five minutes of Premier League games this season, more than any other team.

Son nearly got on the scoresheet himself moments later when the South Korea forward fired against the post from Kane's pass.

With Tottenham on top, it was half an hour before Hugo Lloris had to make a save as he kept out Oliver Burke's shot.

Lloris had to save again from John Fleck's effort, but Kane doubled Tottenham's lead in the 40th minute.

Taking Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg's pass in stride and shrugging off Chris Basham's

challenge, Kane drilled a superb low strike past Ramsdale from 20 yards.

Kane's sixth goal from outside the area was more than anyone in the Premier League since the start of last season.

He threatened to add another long-range screamer to that list with a thunderous strike tipped over by Ramsdale early in the second half.

McGoldrick gave the Blades an unexpected lifeline when he got above Ben Davies to head home from Fleck's cross in the 59th minute.

Tottenham's habit of sitting back to defend those leads proved costly when they conceded late equalisers against Fulham, Wolves and Crystal Palace in recent weeks.

But Ndombele crushed any hopes of a United comeback in the 62nd minute.

Ram finally discovers his competition

Actor Ram, who's *Red* released last week, says that ever since he made his debut 15 years ago with *Devadas*, he has been asked who he was competing against in the industry. "I've always answered such questions with 'I don't have competition with anyone as I live in my own bubble'. But I've now understood that my fans are my competition. From now on, it will be you versus me. Will it be the love you shower on me or the love that I shower on you with my work?" Ram said to a thunderous response from his fans in Visakhapatnam over the weekend. He was participating in the success meet of the film. Ram added that they've made *Red* as a suspense thriller packed with twists and turns but the biggest twist was awaiting them on the release day. "Reactions to the morning show have been mixed. But once families started watching the film from the evening, the talk improved in the favour of the film. The collections, however, are increasing day by day," he noted with a smile.



Newbie Rashi bags a biggie!

Rashi, who is taking baby steps in the industry, has been signed on by UV Concepts for their next, a murder mystery, top-lined by Naveen Chandra. The *Sashi* fame actress has got a role with substance, finds NAGARAJ GOUD

The *Pioneer* was the first to report (Jan 12) that Naveen Chandra is associating with leading production house UV Creations offshoot UN Concepts for a murder mystery, which has already gone to floors. To this end, the latest we hear is that newbie Rashi Singh has been zeroed in as the leading lady, and she has already started shooting for the project. Short filmmaker Rakesh Varma is making his directorial debut with the untitled film. Rashi, who left her job as an air hostess to pursue a career in acting, is thrilled about collaborating with UV for the project, says a source close to the unit. While she has done films opposite Sai Ram Shankar, Aadi (Shashi) and Arvind Krishna so far, this new project, she believes, will help her career more. "It's a performance-oriented role and Rashi is excited about bringing it to life. The nature of



the role cannot be disclosed at this juncture as there is a lot of mystery surrounding it. It is this role that drives the narrative forward with its numerous twists and turns. Naveen Chandra, however, will be seen as a cop," the source adds.

The project has been shot for over a week until now in the outskirts of Hyderabad and in another 25 days, the entire shoot will be wrapped up. Rakesh has written a whacky edge-of-the-seat thriller which revolves around the roles played by Ravi Varma, Ali Reza and Bhargavi. Darshan, son of revered cinematographer Madhu Ambat, is the film's lensman. Actor Ram Charan, who recovered from COVID-19 last week, on Sunday joined the sets of Koratala Siva's *Acharya*, where he is playing a supporting role. Our Siddha is ready, read Koratala's tweet, welcoming Charan to the film, a socio-political entertainer. The actor's role is shrouded in mystery while some reports indicate that he will be seen as a student leader. He is also jointly producing the film along with Niranjan Reddy.

Pooja wraps up a month-long schedule of *Radhe Shyam*

Actress Pooja Hegde has wrapped up a long schedule for her upcoming multilingual film *Radhe Shyam*, headlined by Prabhas. Pooja posted a picture on her Instagram Stories. In the image, the actress is looking at the camera as she is seen sitting on a backseat of a car. [Schedule wrap on #RadheShyam after a long

30 day schedule... Now home for a fleeting second (airplane emoji)... Hyderabad—Bombay (airplane emoji)," she wrote on the picture. Prabhas will romance actress Pooja Hegde in the film, which, according to a source, will be wrapped up by the end of this month. *Radhe Shyam* is a period romantic-drama helmed by Radha Krishna Kumar. It will see a theatrical release sometime later this year.

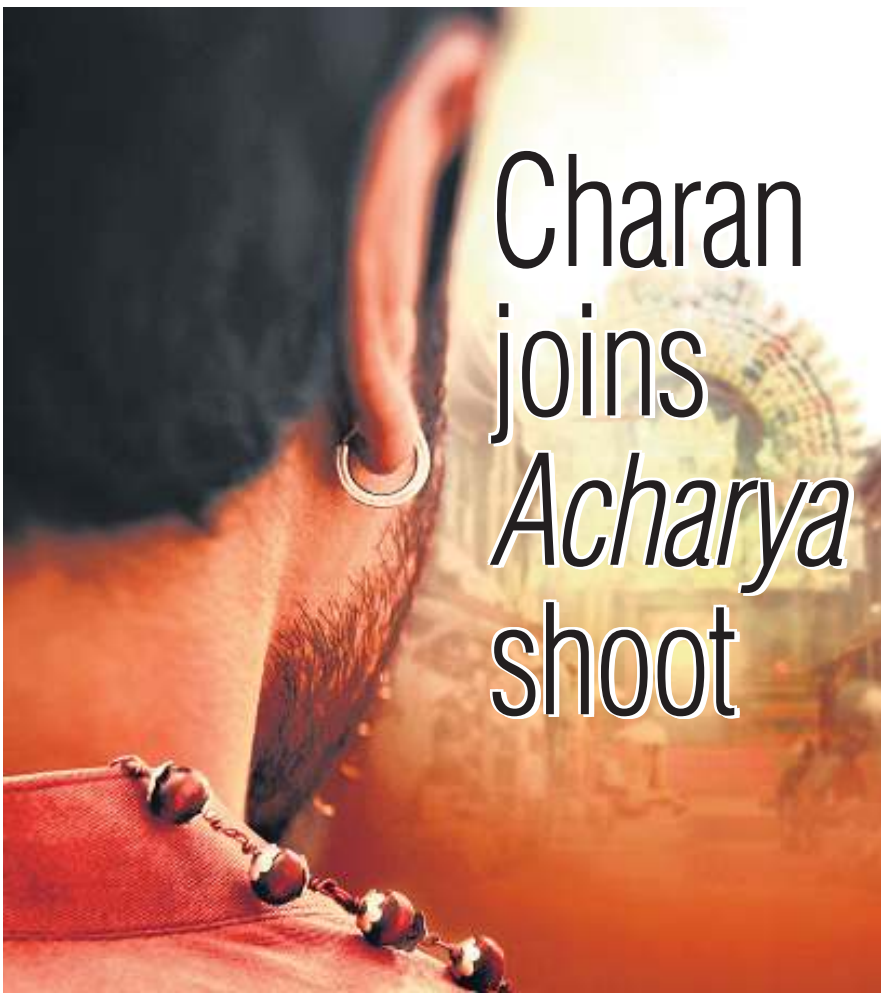
Bellamkonda and Mahesh Koneru rally behind Dil Raju



Days after *Krack* Nizam distributor Warangal Sreenu alleged that Dil Raju and Sirish Reddy snatched away the theatres where *Krack* was running successfully to facilitate releases like *Master*, *Red* and *Alludu Adhurs*, producers Bellamkonda Suresh and Mahesh Koneru have come to the defense of Sri Venkateswara Creations. Speaking at an event of *Alludu Adhurs* in Hyderabad over the weekend, Suresh said that if it wasn't for Dil Raju and Sirish, the industry would've run short on producers. "They were instrumental in bringing people to theatres during Sankranti. If it wasn't for them, the distribution system in Nizam would've collapsed long back. Sreenu is speaking without facts. He still owes Hushaaru producer Bekkum Venugopal some money. He hasn't paid GST dues of the film yet. If he has issues, he should meet Telugu Film Chamber of Commerce president Narayandas or knock the doors of exhibitor and distributor sectors," Suresh said, reminding that he shares a 20-year successful association with Raju. Similarly, Koneru pointed out that as the industry is in business revival mode, controversial state-

ments are not the need of the hour. "Issues, any, should be solved personally. Personal remarks should be avoided. I've been associating with Dil Raju and Sirish garu from 118 and they've treated me like their own," he said. Koneru was speaking at a meet celebrating the success of *Master*, whose Telugu dubbing rights he bagged. SVC helped him aid the release. The producer added when he came to know that there are three Telugu films in the fray for Sankranti, his distributors told him that *Master* will get a good number of screens on day one but the second day will witness a drop. "I've accepted it. In Nizam, *Master* got 150-150 theatres on day one. Day one revenue was extraordinary. Theatres on day two have come down to 75- 80 yet the film's box-office was steady. I've got the least number of screens but I'm happy," he informed.

Charan joins *Acharya* shoot



Gnanavel Raja enters theatre business

Popular Tamil producer K Gnanavel Raja, who distributed many of Suriya and Karthi's films into Telugu and also produced Vijay Deverakonda-starrer *NOTA*, has entered into theatre business, with the launch Green Cinemas in Chennai on Sunday. The objective of Green Cinemas is to give the best and clean safety environment to the audience in the new normal. "The two screens are equipped with 4k projection, 3D projection and Atmos sound, with well-maintained spacious rest rooms, canteen and lobby. The parking space too is spacious," read a tweet from the production house. Actors Karthi and Arya extended their best wishes to Raja on his new endeavour.

