



sunday pioneer

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'Revised to FAME II Subsidies to be game changer' P 6

'Cong will have relook at Art 370 revocation' P 5

Does a plant-based diet really help beat Covid? P 10

In brief

Indian-origin journalist wins Pulitzer prize

Megha Rajagopalan, an Indian-origin journalist, along with two contributors has won the Pulitzer Prize for innovative investigative reports that exposed a vast infrastructure of prisons and mass internment camps secretly built by China for detaining hundreds of thousands of Muslims in its restive Xinjiang region. Ms Rajagopalan from BuzzFeed News is among two Indian-origin journalists who won the US's top journalism award on Friday. Neil Bedi along with Kathleen McGrory has been awarded the prize for the series exposing a Sheriff's Office initiative that used computer modelling to identify people believed to be future crime suspects.

Some actions by Indian Govt inconsistent with democratic values: Top US official

India remains the world's largest democracy with a strong rule of law but some of the Indian government's actions, including restrictions on freedom of expression, have raised concerns that are inconsistent with the country's democratic values, a top US official has told lawmakers. Acting Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Dean Thompson's remarks came during a Congressional hearing on Democracy in the Indo-Pacific on Wednesday. "India remains the world's largest democracy with a strong rule of law and independent judiciary and enjoys a strong and growing strategic partnership with the United States," Mr Thompson said.

Telangana seeks hike in FRBM rate to 5%

Offset by untaxed revenue shortfall and mounting Covid-related expenditure, Finance Minister T. Harish Rao on Saturday requested Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman to increase the FRBM rate from four per cent to five per cent of GDP to enable Telangana State to go for more market borrowings. Due to the lockdown imposed again to contain Covid-19, the State had suffered a revenue loss of Rs.4,100 crore in May. The suggested hike in FRBM rate would enable the State to give a boost to economic activities and employment generation once again, he said. Participating in the virtual 44th GST Council meeting held mainly to discuss the report submitted by the GoM on giving GST concessions.

TODAY

ALMANAC

Month & Paksham: Jyestha & Shukla Paksha Panchangam

Tithi: Tritiya: 09:39 pm

Nakshatram: Punarvasu: 07:00 pm

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

Rahukalam: 05:09 pm - 06:47 pm

Yamagandam: 12:16 pm - 01:53 pm

Varjyam: 05:59 am - 07:43 am, 12:00 am - 05:15 am

Gulika: 03:31 pm - 05:09 pm

Good Time: (to start any important work)

Amritakalam: 04:24 pm - 06:08 pm

Ahhit Muhurtham: 11:50 am - 12:42 pm

VIJAYAWADA WEATHER

Forecast: Partly cloudy

Temp: 40/27

Humidity: 50%

Sunrise: 05:41 am

Sunset: 06:51 pm

Current Weather Conditions

Updated June 12, 2021 5:00 PM

OBTUSE ANGLE



GST on Covid, Black fungus medicines cut

5pc GST on vax to continue to help pharma companies

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The GST Council on Saturday slashed tax rate on Covid-19 drugs such as Remdesivir and Tocilizumab as well as on medical oxygen and oxygen concentrators but ignored demands for reduction in taxes on vaccines.

The Council, acting on the recommendation of a group of ministers from different states, cut to nil GST on Covid-19 drug Tocilizumab and black fungus medicine Amphotericin B, from existing 5 percent. Besides, hand sanitiser, pulse oximeter, BiPAP machine, testing kit, ambulance and temperature check equipment were among the 18 items on which GST rates were lowered.

A 5 percent GST levy on vaccines will continue which will allow manufacturers to get benefit of settling taxes paid on inputs.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman explained that the 5 percent levy will not put any additional burden on common man as the government was procuring all vaccines and giving them to citizens for free.

The reduced tax rates were based on a recommendation of a group of ministers, headed by Meghalaya Deputy Chief Minister Conrad Sangma, and would remain effective till September 30, 2021.

Centre trashes report on higher Covid deaths

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India Saturday refuted a report which claimed that its Covid deaths could be "five to seven times" higher than the official number, saying the assessment is based on extrapolation of data without any epidemiological evidence.

In a statement, the Union Health Ministry also slammed the publication, without naming it, for the article which claimed "India has suffered perhaps five to seven times 'excess deaths' than the official number of Covid-19 fatalities".

The ministry termed the article, published by The Economist, speculative, without any basis and misinformation.

"The unsound analysis of the said article is based on the extrapolation of data without any epidemiological evidence," the ministry said, adding the studies used by the magazine to estimate the mortality are not validated tools for determining the death rate of any country or region.

The ministry then went on to list the reasons why the studies used by the publication cannot be relied upon in calculating the Covid mortality figures.

An internet search of research studies in scientific databases such as Pubmed, Research Gate, etc., did not locate this study and its detailed methodology has not been provided by the magazine either, the ministry said.

"Another evidence given is the study done in Telangana based on insurance claims. Again, there is no peer-reviewed scientific data available on such a study," the statement said.



ommendations has brought in a lot of substantial change. Many items, that were at 18 percent and 12 percent, brought down to 5 percent. So there was a lot of substance in the recommendation made by GoM. The Council largely agreed to go with GoM's recommendation....", Sitharaman said while briefing reporters after the 44th GST Council meeting here.

Goods and Services Tax (GST) rate on Covid vaccines was, however, retained at 5 percent as the Council felt that majority of the vaccine procurement was being done by the Centre and given free to people.

No proof to suggest 3rd wave will affect kids more: Report

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

There appears to be no substantial evidence to suggest that children will be more affected or have greater illness severity due to Covid-19 in the anticipated third wave, according to a new report.

The Lancet Covid-19 Commission India Task Force prepared the report after convening an experts group comprising leading paediatricians from the country to examine the issue of paediatric Covid-19 in India.

It said the infection's symptomatology in children in India appears to be globally comparable.

"Most children with Covid-19 are asymptomatic, and amongst those symptomatic mild infections are predominant. Most children have fever with respiratory symptoms, and often present with gastrointestinal symptoms (such as diarrhoea, vomiting, pain in abdomen) and atypical manifestation compared to adults."

2nd wave claimed 35 docs in AP, 36 in TS

NAVEENA GHANATE ■ HYDERABAD

The second wave of Covid-19 has been devastating, with as many as 71 doctors from Telangana and Andhra Pradesh succumbing to the virus.

According to the Indian Medical Association (IMA), 36 doctors from Telangana died due to Covid-19. This is the highest figure in the fraternity among south Indian states. Likewise, 35 doctors in Andhra Pradesh infected by the virus have died. At 111, the highest number of doctors succumbed to the virus in Bihar and 109 in Delhi. In total, 719 doctors across the country have died due to Covid-19.

As many as 748 doctors died in the first wave of the pandemic. Despite health care workers being

inoculated first, the number of doctors who died in the second wave is nearly the same as in the first wave.

IMA president Jayalal, in his letter, also stated that doctors suffered a higher viral load and case fatality ratio as a community. The fatality in Andhra Pradesh is less compared to that in the first wave, wherein as many as 41 doctors succumbed to the virus.

According to the IMA, more than 1,400 doctors have lost their lives since March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in India.

On June 7, the IMA wrote to Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeking his personal intervention to resolve the pleas put forward by the apex medical body concerning the safety of medical professionals.



Andhra Pradesh High Court Chief Justice Justice Arup Kumar Goswamy met Chief Justice of India Justice NV Ramana at Telangana Raj Bhavan on Saturday in Hyderabad

Raju's name goes missing from YSRC website's list of party MPs

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The name of Narasapuram Lok Sabha Member Raghurama Krishnam Raju has disappeared from the official website of the party https://www.ysrccongress.com/english/mp fuelling doubts whether the YSR Congress Party has officially suspended the MP.

The portal features the names of the YSRC's Rajya Sabha and Lok Sabha Members, and their respective constituencies. But Raju's name is conspicuously missing from the list of MPs.

The YSRC Parliamentary Party has formally complained to Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla four times so far, asking him to disqualify Raju. In this backdrop, the MP's name going miss-



to emerge," Raju commented. He further said that disqualifying him was not feasible. "I never resorted to anti-party activities. I have only questioned the anti-people's policies of the government. The party and the government are two separate entities," Raju said.

Out of 28 MPs of the YSRC, only 27 names feature on the party website.

Technically speaking, the YSRC would have no moral right to demand the Speaker of Lok Sabha to disqualify an MP who does not belong to the party.

Those who are close to Raju say that the MP is likely to use the website as a weapon to attack the YSRC leadership.

ing from the portal indicates that that party wants to banish him to be more psychologically, if not physically.

Meanwhile, Raju acknowledged that he was aware of his name missing from the list of YSRC MPs and said that he felt as though the YSRC president had banished him from the party. "But, a clear picture is yet

Crowd-funding helps Hyd child get world's 'costliest' drugs

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

The generosity of nearly 65,000 people has helped get the life-saving gene therapy treatment for a three-year-old boy from the city, who has been diagnosed with a rare and life threatening genetic disease.

Zolgensma, labelled as the "world's most expensive drug," was imported from the US with the donations and administered to Ayaansh Gupta on Wednesday, at a private hospital in the city.

The treatment has given a new lease of life to the child, who was diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy when he was one year old.

"This is an extremely rare condition which causes muscle weakness.. the child will be unable to move his hands or legs, sit, stand or even walk. In fact, eating food is also difficult," said the boy's father Yogesh Gupta, working in a private firm here.

The condition is also life threatening and the doctors said that my child's life expectancy was three to four years, he told PTI.

Mayawati to reorient BSP image as sarv samaj party

PNS ■ LUCKNOW

BSP president Mayawati on Saturday asked her party leaders and workers to connect with every section of the society and expand its base to improve the party's poll prospect in the next year's assembly elections.

Seeking to reorient the party's image, she told party leaders and workers to remember that the Bahujan Samaj Party is a sarv samaj party, committed to achieving the objective of Sarv Jan hitay, Sarv Jan sukhyay (serving interests of all, ensuring the welfare of all).

Mayawati gave the directions in a meeting held here to examine the party's preparedness for the next year's assembly elections.

Cautioning party men against leaders who give more importance to their personal interests than those of the party, she said the party men should have more trust in the cadre than such leaders who

are more interested in serving their own interests while pledging by names of Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram.

Ultimately such people harm themselves more than the party, even if they realise it later. It is important to be careful of such people, the former chief minister cautioned its party leaders and workers.

The BSP president recently expelled two senior leaders, including the BSP's legislature party leader Lajji Verma and its former state unit president Ram

Achal Rajbhar for anti-party activities during the panchayat elections.

She also sought to impress upon the party leaders and workers that "unlike other parties, BSP is a cadre-based party, fighting for the welfare of the poor and neglected people of the entire society."

Majority in sight, YSRC in a flux over Council abolition

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

With the prospects of a majority in the 58-member Andhra Pradesh Legislative Council looking bright, the YS Jaganmohan Reddy government appears to be in no mood to press the Centre for its abolition, in what seems to be a virtual reversal of its stand.

In his meeting with Union Home Minister Amit Shah in New Delhi on Thursday, Chief Minister YS Jaganmohan Reddy raised several long-pending issues of the state but did not press for the Council's abolition, official sources here said.

The YSRC government had earlier considered spending Rs 60 crore annually on the Council an



"unnecessary burden" on the exchequer.

"The resolution is with them (the Centre). We have to see. If it (abo-

lition) happens, okay we are ready for that," Jagan's key aide and Government Advisor Sajjala Ramakrishna Reddy has said.

He indicated that if the abolition does not happen, the government was prepared for that too and the upper house would continue to function as usual.

The AP Legislative Assembly had on January 27, 2020, passed a statutory resolution, unanimously requesting the Centre that the Council be abolished after the Chief Minister said their decision was "only in view of the people's needs and government's responsibilities".

His government's earlier view was that the members of the Legislative Council were "not rep-

resenting the requirements and ambitions of the state".

In accordance with Article 169 (1) of the Constitution, Parliament has to enact an enabling legislation to abolish the Legislative Council.

"Annually, we are spending Rs 60 crore on running the Council, which is of no use. We are seeking to abolish the Council to protect people's interests.

It is not mandatory to have the Council, which is our own creation, and it is only for our convenience," Jagan had said.

At that time, the ruling YSR Congress had only nine members in the Council and the opposition TDP held the majority.

Mayawati to reorient BSP image as sarv...
Continued from Page 1

Accordingly, the party's culture of holding small cadre meetings should be continued as they help the party connect with masses at the ground level and strengthen it, she said.

She also told her party workers that during her four tenures as the state chief minister, the BSP government had done countless work for the entire society and its weaker sections, but the subsequent governments stopped them due to their casteist and communal mindset.

She also appreciated the work done by BSP workers in extending help to common people during the pandemic.

State reports 6,952 new Covid cases, 58 deaths

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Andhra Pradesh registered a Covid-19 positivity rate of 6.4 per cent, the lowest in close to two months, as the state recorded 6,952 new cases in the 24 hours ending 9 am on Saturday.

The latest bulletin said 11,577 persons recovered from the infection while 58 more succumbed in 24 hours.

The state Covid-19 chart now showed 18,03,074 positives, 16,99,775 recoveries and 11,882 deaths. The number of active cases came down further to 91,417.

Indicating a slowdown of the



infection spread, the last one lakh cases came in 11 days after the previous came in seven. In the 24 hours ending 9 am on Saturday, 1,08,616 samples were tested in the state, which

returned a positivity rate of 6.4 per cent, the bulletin said.

Chittoor (1,199) and East Godavari (1,167) continued to report a high number of fresh cases while the remaining 11 districts added less than 700 each.

Prakasam district recorded the highest number of 11 Covid-19 deaths, Chittoor nine, East Godavari six, Anantapur, Krishna and Visakhapatnam five each, Srikakulam and West Godavari four each, Kurnool three, Guntur and Vizianagaram two each, Kadapa and SPS Nellore one each in a day.

GST on Covid, Black fungus medicines cut

Continued from Page 1

"Central government is purchasing 75 percent and is paying GST also. But the impact of this GST on people will be nil since people would be getting vaccines free of cost at government hospitals. Centre is purchasing and it is given free to people," Sitharaman said.

Revenue Secretary Tarun Bajaj said vaccines would continue to attract 5 percent rate and the GST Council discussed that the Centre is purchasing all the vaccines — at least 75 percent is being purchased by the Centre.

"The GST will also be borne by the Centre. But out of the income from GST, 70 percent will be shared with the states... As far as people are concerned who are coming to get their inoculation done, it is tax free. It is not an issue with the people, they are not paying any tax, cost of the vaccine. So it is free for them," Bajaj said.

He said the notification of lower GST rates would be issued "tomorrow or day after".

While GST on Tocilizumab and Amphotericin B is slashed to nil from 5 percent, the rate on Remdesivir and anticoagulants like Heparin is lowered from 12 percent to 5 percent. GST rate on ambulances has been cut to 12 percent from 28 percent.

Tax on medical grade oxygen, oxygen concentrator (including personal imports), ventilators, BiPAP machines and high flow nasal cannula (HFNC) devices has been cut to 5 percent from 12 percent.

Also, tax on Covid testing kits, pulse oximeters (including personal imports) has been brought down to 5 percent from 12 percent. Hand sanitisers, temperature check equipment, gas/electric furnaces for crematoriums too will attract a lower 5 percent

tax, compared to 18 percent earlier. In the previous meeting of the GST Council on May 28, taxes on Covid-19 vaccines and medical supplies were left unchanged after the BJP and Opposition-ruled states sparred over whether the tax cut benefits will reach the common man. An 8-member GoM, under Sangma, was set up to recommend a GST rate on Covid essentials.

The other members of the GoM are Gujarat Deputy Chief Minister Nitinbhai Patel, Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar, Goa Transport Minister Mauvin Godinho, Finance ministers of Kerala (K N Balagopal), Odisha (Niranjan Pujari), Telangana (T Harish Rao) and UP (Suresh Kr Khanna).

To a query on Congress saying that they were not made part of the GoM, Sitharaman said, "... I don't

want to comment on what was said outside.

In the Council, the three Congress ministers said that in the future at least you should consider having us in GoM. The selection into a GoM is never made on party basis, neither is the exclusion. There are several GoMs and several ministers are made members of the GoM. All states are given representation in one or the other GoM. Neither the inclusion, nor the exclusions happen on political party affiliations.

Industry chamber PHDCI said the calibrated reduction in the rates of GST on Covid relief essentials will go a long way in treating Covid cases and to provide required relief for treatment of infections.

"PHDCCI looks forward to the continued reform measures by the government to mitigate the daunting impact of Covid on people

and to make India free from the pandemic," it said in a statement.

EY Tax Partner Abhishek Jain said majority population will not be affected on account of no GST rate cut on Covid vaccines as most people are opting for free of cost vaccinations from the government.

"For the limited few considering getting vaccinated at the private hospitals, the 5 percent GST will continue to be a cost," Jain added.

Deloitte India Partner Mahesh Jaising said with a growing demand for vaccines, while a deemed export option could have resulted in zero taxes for domestic vaccines, the GoM seems to have taken a balanced approach of retaining it at 5 percent. "This is particularly as the GST credit chain is not broken and in any case, a significant portion of vaccine procurements is by the government itself," he said.

Crowd-funding helps Hyd child get world's 'costliest' drugs...

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It was therefore important to treat the child right on time.

At first, it seemed impossible for the boy's parents to raise Rs 16 crore for one dose. But then the couple decided to do it through appeals on social media.

In February this year, they started a crowdfunding campaign to save their son's life and family friends also extended their support.

In three months, they managed to raise enough money to pay for the treatment.

Many celebrities, including Virat Kohli, Anushka Sharma, Anil Kapoor, Ajay Devgan and several from the TV industry came forward to help the couple.

"Around 65,000 people made donations. It was made possible on May 22," Gupta

said.

A family friend reached out to an MP, who raised the issue of cost of the medicine in Parliament following which the central government gave tax exemption to the tune of Rs six crore.

With the medicine being administered, Gupta expressed hope that his kid's condition

would improve in the coming months.

The child was discharged from hospital and follow-up treatment would continue, he said.

The boy's father thanked all the 65,000 donors who helped them mobilise funds for the expensive treatment. PTI SJR ROH

Majority in sight, YSRCP in a flux over Council abolition

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The government faced humiliation in January last year when it failed to get two crucial Bills the AP Decentralisation and Inclusive Development of All Regions Bill, 2020 and the APCRDA (Repeal) Bill passed by Council as they were referred to a select committee at the insistence of the TDP.

Two other Bills that the YSRCP saw as prestigious also faced hurdles in the upper house of the state legislature. "We need to seriously think whether we need to have such a House which appears to be functioning with only political motives. Only six out of 28 states in the country now have a Legislative Council. It is not mandatory to have the Council, Jagan had

then said in the Assembly.

Subsequently, on a couple of occasions last year, he was said to have raised the Council abolition issue with the Union Home Minister but nothing happened. Now, the scenario has, however, changed.

The YSRCP's strength in the Council increased to 16 now. It is poised to win three more seats under the MLAs quota, elections for which were postponed due to Covid-19 second wave.

As it has made a clean sweep of all urban and rural local bodies in the recent elections, the YSRCP will also comfortably win 11 Council seats from the Local Authorities Constituencies, elections for which have to be held shortly.

Besides, it is about to nominate four more members in

the vacancies caused due to retirement of the incumbents.

Very soon, the ruling party will be 34-member strong in the 58-member House while, at the same time, the opposition TDPs number will dwindle to 15, as seven of its legislators will demit office on June 18.

One of its MLCs had already switched over to the BJP upon his suspension from the TDP.

In the next couple of years, the YSRCP's strength will only swell as no other party is in a position to win any seat in the Council.

"Having the Council in place is politically crucial for us as Jagan promised MLC posts to several leaders. It was a very major political gamble he had taken (last year) but now the tide has turned in his favour," a Minister observed.

No proof to suggest 3rd wave will...

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The proportion of symptomatic children increases as age increases as does the severity in such age groups," the report stated.

In the absence of a national database on clinical presentation and outcomes of infected children during the two surges noted thus far, the data of approximately 2,600 hospitalised children, below the age of 10 years (excluding neonates), from 10 hospitals (both public and private), in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Maharashtra and Delhi-NCR region, was collected and analysed.

According to the data, mortality rates amongst these surveyed hospitalised Covid-19 positive children below the age of 10 years was 2.4 percent and about 40 percent of the children who died had comorbidities.

"Nine percent of all hospitalised Covid-19 positive children presented with severe illness, under 10 years of age. The above observations were similar during the two surges of Covid-19 infections India has experienced," the Lancet document said.

Three doctors from AIIMS, namely Sheffali Gulati, Sushil K

Kabra and Rakesh Lodha, contributed to the study.

Kabra said less than 5 percent children will require hospital admission in Covid-19 and out of them the mortality is of 2 percent.

"Say out of 1 lakh, 500 children get hospitalised and 2 percent of deaths are reported among them. So in one lakh, mortality of just one or two children is seen. In children, as such the disease is less severe. Very low proportion requires hospitalisation and very small proportion of mortality is reported. The mortality is also contributed by underlying diseases in the form of comorbidities like diabetes, cancer, anaemia or severe malnutrition. In normal children, mortality is extremely rare," he told PTI.

The data was also evaluated separately for the time periods corresponding to the two surges, March 2020-December 2020 and January 2021-April 2021.

Comparable observations were recorded in a multicentric study which examined 402 children hospitalised in Indian hospitals, of which 90 percent were asymptomatic to mildly symptomatic, and of 318 cases where in 44 percent had underlying

comorbidities, it said.

"Based on the data available, there appears to be no substantial evidence to suggest that children would be more affected or would have greater illness severity due to Covid-19 infection in the anticipated third wave. Studies also indicate that children have milder disease, better prognosis, and low mortality in comparison to adults," it said.

On multisystem inflammatory syndrome (MIS-C) in children, the report said, risk factors for this condition include obesity, asthma, compromised breathing, developmental disorders, cardiac disease, cancers or immunocompromised children as well as those who have undergone surgeries.

Although figures indicate low mortality rates in acute Covid-19 in older teens, it appears to be higher in those who are obese. Most published data suggest mild to moderate predisposition in most cases and low mortality linked with MIS-C.

"Preliminary review of cases within representative facilities further corroborates the low case severity and low overall mortality rates in children. That said, the health system needs to gear up for

a paediatric case load with adequate infrastructure, earmarked facilities at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of care, oxygen availability, appropriate equipment, trained manpower, drugs and injectables among others, all of which are specific to children," the report said.

The national-level clinical protocols must be adhered to at all levels of facilities and all providers adequately trained, similar to adult protocols.

"The health system must maintain its routine programs like immunisation and nutrition and identify high risk patients in advance for better management. Vaccines will form an important part of the preventive strategy for adults and also eventually for children and this must be evaluated and implemented expeditiously.

Behaviour change communication and media management must be prioritised to help alleviate panic and anxiety. Schools must be reopened cautiously in person, with options for online access as needed, but with a firm resolve to bring normalcy back as quickly as possible in children's lives, the report added

Eatela quits as MLA, Speaker accepts, vacancy notified

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

Former health minister Eatela Rajender formally cut off his long ties with the TRS party by resigning as MLA of the Huzurabad constituency here on Saturday. He immediately announced his decision to fight against the 'feudal and dictatorial' rule of Chief Minister K.Chandrasekhar Rao that he averred had undermined the democratic aspirations of people in the separate State.

Eatela paid tributes at the Martyrs Memorial at Gun Park before handing over his resignation letter, addressed to the Speaker, to the Legislature Secretary V Narasimha Charyulu in the absence of Speaker Pocharam Srinivas Reddy at his office in the State Legislature. He was accompanied by former MLA Enugu Ravinder Reddy, former Karimnagar ZP chairperson Tula Uma and several supporters.

The Speaker subsequently accepted his resignation and the vacancy in the Huzurabad constituency was notified and



allegations of encroachments on assigned and temple lands against Etela, subsequent inquiries ordered by the government into those charges, and ejection of Eatela from the Cabinet on May 2 culminated in Eatela's resignation as MLA.

Fight between KCR family & people of Telangana

Now the stage is set for a bye-election any time within the next six months, pushing the State once again into election mode. This election, unlike the previous elections, will be significant with Eatela declaring the bye-election as "a fight between KCR family and the people of Telangana and their self-respect".

This election will be a test for Eatela's political future and his individual clout in the constituency against the might of the ruling party.

Set to join the BJP in the presence of its national president at New Delhi on June 14, Eatela told media persons at the Gun Park that he might have got a party's B form, but he had won six times only with the support of people.

KCR, prominent persons call on CJI

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

On Saturday, many VVIPs called on Chief Justice of India Justice N V Ramana; who has come to the State for the first time after assuming charge as the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

Governor Tamilisai Soundarajan organised a luncheon in honour of Justice Ramana, who is staying at the Raj Bhavan. Chief Minister K.Chandrasekhar Rao and several prominent persons attended it.

KCR, who received the CJI at Raj Bhavan upon his arrival on Friday, met Justice Ramana again on Saturday.

Minister Errabelli Dayakar Rao called on the CJI and invited him to tour Warangal.

Former Deputy CM Kadiam Srihari met Justice Ramana and conveyed his greetings on his appointment as the CJI. He requested the CJI to help bring in changes in the Election Model Code of Conduct.

VIJAYAWADA BULLION RATES	
GOLD	
₹ 49,900 (10 gm)	
₹ 400	↓
SILVER	
₹ 77,300 (1kg)	
₹ 200	↑
CHICKEN RATES ₹/KG	
Dressed/With Skin	₹165
Without Skin	₹188
Broiler at Farm	₹114
EGG RATES ₹/100	
VIJAYAWADA	517
HYDERABAD	508
VISAKHAPATNAM	557
RETAIL PRICE	₹5.17

Dentists see 'mask mouth' issues during pandemic

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

Masks are a must during these pandemic times. But, wearing a mask for long hours has its own side effects, one being the problem it creates for the gum and teeth. With the masked mouth getting dried up for lack of intake of fresh water odour-causing bacteria grow in the mouth leading to various infections, including sore throat and swelling in the gum.

Doctors said that with the pandemic taking its roots in our lives oral hygiene has gone for a toss as people are postponing dental checkups as those are not the immediate

need and this neglect is leading to various problems concerning teeth and gum. In fact, oral health checkups should be done once in six months.

Currently, 90 per cent of the population suffers from some dental problems. 45 to 48 percent suffer from bad teeth problems. 75 per cent are suffering from gum inflammation.

Using a mask for a long time and subsequent low intake of water lead to dry mouth, which as has been already stated is the main cause for most of the dental problems in this pandemic. Plaque is getting accumulated around the teeth and is becoming home to a

variety of bacteria and viruses. Many people are suffering from gum diseases.

Most of those affected by corona and admitted to hospitals needed steroids. Some people have contracted black fungus due to the use of steroids beyond the requirement as part of treatments.

The risk of black fungus is high in those already suffering from bad teeth problems.

Gum infection and jaw inflammation are also symptoms of black fungus. It has become difficult for doctors to identify at the initial stage whether the person is suffering from teeth problems or has got black fungus disease.

Centre trashes report on higher...

Continued from Page 1

"Two other studies relied upon are those done by Psephology groups namely 'Prashnam' and 'C-Voter' who are well versed in conducting, predicting and analyzing poll results. They were never ever associated with public health research. Even in their own area of work of psephology, their methodologies for predicting poll results have been wide off the mark many times," it said.

By their own submission, the magazine states that "such estimates have been extrapolated from patchy and often unreliable local government data, from company records and from analyses of

such things as obituaries", the statement said.

It said the government has been transparent in its approach to Covid data management.

In order to avoid any inconsistency in the number of deaths being reported, the ministry said, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) issued guidelines as early as in May 2020.

It said that for correct recording of all deaths, the ICD-10 codes recommended by World Health Organisation (WHO) was followed.

States and Union Territories have been urged through formal communications, multiple video confer-

ences and through the deployment of Central teams for correct recording of deaths in accordance with laid down guidelines, it said.

The Health Ministry said that it has also regularly emphasised the need for a robust reporting mechanism for monitoring district-wise cases and deaths on a daily basis.

"States consistently reporting lower number of daily deaths were told to re-check their data. A case in point is the Union Government writing to the State of Bihar to provide detailed date and district wise break-up of the reconciled number of deaths to Union Health Ministry," it said.

The statement said there shall always be difference in mortality recorded during a profound and prolonged public health crisis such as Covid pandemic and well conducted research studies on excess mortalities, usually done after the event when data on mortalities are available from reliable sources.

The methodologies for such studies are well established, the data sources are defined as also the valid assumptions for computing mortality, the statement said.

Separately, the ministry said in its daily update that the country has reported a total of 2,93,59,155 cases and 3,67,081 deaths till Saturday.

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CII-Yi Amaravati Chapter organises Covid vax drive

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

CII-Yi Amaravati, in association with VM Bakery Pvt Ltd, organised a Covid vaccination drive for 200 people at Autonagar, Vijayawada.

Leena Chowdary, chairperson, Yi Amaravati Chapter, said that vaccination is the only way through which battle against Covid-19 can be won over the medium term, while protecting both lives and livelihoods and allowing the country to return to usual economic activity at a fast pace. CII -Yi has taken several steps in order to improve our vaccination coverage across the country.

She appreciated the Government efforts for permitting the private sector to undertake vaccination for fastening the vaccination drive across the country.

Young Indians (Yi) is a movement for Indian Youth to converge, lead, co-create and influence India's future.

Yi, Amaravati Chapter, has taken up many activities under Covid-19 relief initiatives by helping poor with dry ration and facilitating oxygen concentrators who are in need and also arranged Covid emergency beds for the people who are in need of it.

AP Red Cross draws plans to mitigate blood shortage

C PRADEEP KUMAR ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Andhra Pradesh Red Cross Society has come up with an innovative idea to resolve the blood shortage in the state with the help and cooperation of village and ward volunteers.

It is a fact that there was an acute shortage of blood reserves in Andhra Pradesh even before the Covid-19 first wave.

According to the state health officials, there are 167 blood banks across the state, that include both government and private banks, to cater to the various needs of people needing blood in an emergency.

There are 96 blood storage units in Andhra Pradesh besides 13 Blood Collection and Transport Vehicles (BCTVs), one for each district in the state. According to estimates, more than five lakh units of blood is required per year in Andhra Pradesh.

With the state population of above 5 crore and a long stretch of highways, road accidents are also high and the victims require a lot of blood. The demand for blood is also going up because of an increase in the rural and urban



population. Even during normal days, people have to run pillar and post for blood in emergencies.

BVS Kumar, State Coordinator of Red Cross Blood centres in Andhra Pradesh has said the state needs more than five lakh units of blood every year, during normal times. "There is a shortfall in blood donation every year. To bridge the gap in the village and ward volunteer system can be very useful to address the issue," Kumar said.

He said that as the volunteers across the state who are mostly youth and potential blood donors. If the volunteers personally donate, or motivate at least one person among the 50/100 families they visit, to

donate blood, it will solve the shortfall of blood donation. "This gap can be filled, if the state Government involves the well established system of village/ward volunteer system in mitigating the blood shortage," Kumar said.

Dr A Sridhar Reddy, Chairman of the AP State Branch of Indian Red Cross Society said that there are around 2.5 lakh volunteers in the system at grassroots-level. "These volunteers belong to potential blood donors age groups. If the Government instructs these volunteers either to donate or motivate others to donate one unit of blood per year, we can overcome this shortage," Sridhar Reddy said.

Red Cross Blood Centres are prepared to work with the Government and can chalk out a plan to conduct blood collection camps at mandal level. Indian Red Cross Society will always be ready to help the patients in emergencies, he said. Dr Geetha Prasadini, Director, Health, APSACS said that 'World Blood Donors Day' is observed on June 14 and the slogan for year 2021 is 'Give blood and keep the world beating'.

She said that 5.4 lakh bags/units per year was required for the state for various emergency purposes with an estimate of 1,470 bags/units per day on a normal day and during the Covid pandemic it is calculated as 500 bags/Units per day.

Dr Prasadini said that to mark the World Blood Donors Day, they felicitate donors as per the blood donor register with a certificate and a memento to encourage blood donations.

She said that one can find the availability of blood reserves on AP Blood Cell app besides the distance to the blood bank from their location. As of today there are about 2,200 units of blood available across the state, Dr Prasadini added.

Preparations key to negating impact of Covid 3rd wave: Naidu

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Leader of the Opposition N Chandrababu Naidu on Saturday expressed concern over the extent of suffering and devastation that the Covid-19 first and second waves have caused to the lives of the people, across all sections of society.

Naidu stressed the need for the Government, voluntary organisations and individual frontline champions to make preparations to counter any threat of a prospective third wave of the pandemic. "The people are now in a pathetic situation that they would not be able to face any further destruction after having undergone great pain and suffering in the first two waves," the TDP supremo said.

Recalling the impact of the two waves, Naidu said that emphasis was placed on masks, social distancing and sanitisers in the first wave. However, the second wave brought in greater destruction. There were more casualties and side infections like black fungus, white fungus and yellow fungus. Pitiable scenes were witnessed when whole families were washed out. Children were turned into orphans overnight, he said.

The TDP chief said that if at all a third wave would strike, then it would create



Recalling the impact of the two waves, Naidu said that emphasis was placed on masks, social distancing and sanitisers in the 1st wave.

financial, human and administrative resources at its command. The Government can even press for emergency services of institutions, doctors and all such frontline warriors, the former chief minister said.

Naidu said that the Central Government has decided to give vaccines to all those above 18 years of age. Now, trials were going on to make vaccines for those in the 3 to 18 years age groups. The infections were in general coming down in the second wave, but there should be no scope for any complacency. Everybody should brace up for any situation that might come up if there was a third wave, the TDP supremo said.

much more destruction. This would cause more suffering if the Government and the general public were not well prepared. Individuals and organisations would have limited resources to serve the people in such calamitous situations, he said. The Government should play an active role since it has got all sorts of



Chilakaluripet DSP Vijaya Bhaskar Rao inspects sachets of banned gutka worth Rs 11 lakh that were seized from Maddi Mallayya Street in Chilakaluripet town of Guntur district. The police raided and arrested a man named Chikoti Raju, who stocked the banned products.

AP Online teams up with LVPEI to prevent blindness

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

APOnline (a division of APT Online Limited), as part of its CSR initiative, has collaborated with LV Prasad Eye Institute for the Andhra Pradesh Eye Health Programme. The focus is on working towards the prevention of avoidable blindness and providing free treatment, including critical eye surgeries for chronic eye conditions such as corneal transplant, glaucoma, squint and retina surgeries within the state.

The partnership is in its second year now. The aim is to perform 500 surgeries and provide free comprehensive eye care to over 10,000 patients from economically underprivileged backgrounds every year, a statement by APOne said.

Five volunteers suspended for negligent attitude

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Krishna district Joint Collector (Development) L Siva Sankar warned volunteers discharging Covid duties recklessly of stern action if they are found to be negligent while fighting to contain the spread of the deadly virus.

In all five volunteers were suspended by the JC at various places in the district on Sunday for discharging Covid duties carelessly.

As part of the Covid control programme in Vijaya wada rural mandals and as per state government direction in conducting the 12th fever survey, a few volunteers who did not comply with

government instructions were suspended.

The suspended volunteers were discharging duties at Enikepadu Paritala, Kanchika charla mandal in Paritala secretariat, Penamalur mandal Yanamalakuduru, Poranki secretariat, Chandralapadu mandal Muppala secretariat.

Siva Sankar said strict action would be taken against those who act negligently in the implementation of government programmes within the secretariats, as well as those who act against the government directions with the public welfare and public health as part of Covid control measures.

Vizag YSRCP leaders accuse TDP men of grabbing land

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

YSRCP Visakhapatnam city president Ch Vamsi Krishna Srinivas on Saturday accused the TDP of making baseless allegations against the YSRCP as it was unable to stand the development activities carried out in Visakhapatnam.

Addressing a press conference here, Srinivas alleged that TDP leaders had occupied government lands in prime areas in Visakhapatnam when their party was in power.

He said that when the GVMC authorities took back government land occupied by the TDP leaders, they started criticising the government. He challenged the TDP leaders to prove that they had not occupied the government lands in Vizag if they had the courage.

YSRCP Visakhapatnam North constituency in-charge KK Raju heaped praise on Chief Minister YS Jaganmohan Reddy for fulfilling the dream and desires of the poor to have their own house.



He accused the TDP leaders of campaigning against the YSRCP to cover up and divert attention from their land grabbing cases. "TDP leaders grabbed many prime government lands in Vizag during their party's rule. TDP leaders occupied hundreds of acres of land in Bheemili, Gajuwaka, Pendurthi, Anakapalli and other places in Visakhapatnam during their five years in power, Raju alleged.

He alleged that TDP city president Palla Srinu occupied 60 acres of land and dared him to disprove the accusation. Raju alleged that Srinu was cheating the employees of Vizag Steel Plant by taking part in the protest as he had set his eyes on the valuable TDP properties.

Raju accused TDP leaders of spreading false propaganda when the department had taken back the occupied land by them for the development activity.

YSRCP betrayed Dalits in nominated posts: TDP

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

TDP MLAs A Satya Prasad and Dola Bala Veeranjanya Swamy on Saturday strongly criticised Chief Minister YS Jaganmohan Reddy for making huge promises to the Dalits during elections and later 'totally ignoring and sidelining' them after coming to power.

They asked whether it was not a breach of trust on the part of the Chief Minister to betray Dalits with whose votes he could win the 2019 elections. Jagan's two-year rule not only cheated the Dalits but also launched non-stop attacks on the weaker sections, the TDP MLAs said.

In a statement here, they said that the Chief Minister has lost all principles going by how he has been giving all lucrative posts only to his caste. "Was it not a bitter truth that over 800 nominated posts were given to Jaganmohan Reddy's own caste? On the other hand, the CM was brazen and bold

enough to say on the Floor of the Assembly that the Dalits were not fit for high-end posts like advisors," they said.

The TDP leaders expressed concern that the YSRCP regime has started cheating SC, STs even in the appointments and promotions of the regular posts too.

"Dalit employees were not being given promotions that were due to them only with an ulterior motive to help the CM's own caste people. Can the YSRCP leaders disclose how many top nominated posts were given to the SC, ST, BCs in the past two years?" they asked.

Satya Prasad and Swamy condemned the manner in which the panchayat raj department promoted an engineer from the CM's own caste. "This incident was proof enough of how the YSRCP leaders would not hesitate to humiliate the weaker sections and the backward classes without any fear of the laws," the TDP MLAs said.

Ganja smuggled in oxygen carriers

PNS ■ KORAPUT (ODISHA)

At least 1,277 kg of ganja was seized in Odisha's Koraput district on Saturday from a truck transporting oxygen cylinders to Delhi, police said. Two persons hailing from Ludhiana district of Punjab were arrested after the seizure of cannabis worth Rs 1.1 crore from the vehicle, an officer said.

"Oxygen cylinders were loaded at Visakhapatnam Port in Andhra Pradesh. On

its way to Delhi, ganja was loaded onto the vehicle in Koraput district for scheduled delivery in Lucknow," Aditya Mahakur, officer-in-charge of Jeypore Sadar police station, said.

The truck was intercepted on Jeypore Ghat Road and the contraband was seized, he said.

Further investigation is underway to trace the local suppliers and others involved in the racket, Mahakur added.

RGUKT organised 4-day Teckzite '21 concludes

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The four-day National Level techno-management fest 'Teckzite '21' organised by Rajiv Gandhi University of Knowledge and Technologies concluded on a grand note on Sunday.

The fourth and the concluding day of the national level techno-management fest was packed with many departmental events like Template Monster, Digi-Analog, Autocad, Raise your problem,

Chem cross, Meta Technica etc., Management events and open to all events like Word smith, IPL Auction, Ignite.

The day is filled with inspiring aspects like Confront Covid-19 and Guest Lecture by Anubha Maneshwar, Founder of Girl script, Texd speaker, Forbes Asia 30 under 30. There was also a virtual exhibition by ALOE e-cell where they exhibited 100 percent eco-friendly and non-hazardous batteries using Aloe vera.

Confront Covid 19 is an event where the students present his/her ideas regarding how to solve the issues of Covid 19.

The students who took part in this event presented their ideas to the organisers through Google platform.

Guest speaker Anubha Maneshwar addressed all the students through YouTube live streaming and shared a few inspiring stories which helps the students to be strong people.

Naidu targeting Dalit: Christians

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Andhra Pradesh Christian JAC chairman Dr Y Praveen Kumar on Saturday alleged that TDP supremo N Chandrababu Naidu was unable to bear to see Dalit officers working sincerely in the government and was hatching conspiracies to defame them.

In a statement, the JAC chairman alleged that Naidu used an MP to criticise the government till his mouth was shut and now roped in Vinay Joshi, Legal Rights convener from Maharashtra to take the MP's place and malign Dalits.

He expressed anger for the wilful targeting of PV Sunil

Kumar, a Dalit and a sincere officer, in an attempt to tarnish his image and mudslinging through their favoured electronic media channels and creating confusion in SC sub-castes. Praveen Kumar found fault for misinterpreting the content of Constitution of India written by Dr BR Ambedkar.

He condemned the allegations made by Vinay Joshi that Sunil Kumar was promoting himself as a celebrity by setting up an organisation Ambedkar India Mission.

Praveen Kumar clarified that the propaganda of blasphemy against Hindu scriptures and gods was baseless and false.

34,037 children rescued during Operation Muskaan by police

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The AP State police department has rescued 34,037 children across the state during the four phase Operation Muskaan programme.

Among the rescued children, about 83 percent are boys and the remaining 17 percent are girls. The police personnel found the children to be working in shops, tea stalls, mechanic sheds, dhabas and as coolies at various places.

As per the reports of the four phases of Operation Muskaan, 16,000 children were rescued during the third phase in November 2020 while 4,035 children were rescued in the first phase in January 2020, 4,806 in the second phase in July 2020, and



8,739 in the fourth phase held in May 2021.

Among the rescued children 61.57 percent studied Class 10, 26.26 percent had

attended Classes 1 to 5 while the rest 12.33 percent were illiterates. A majority of 51.55 percent children found working as coolies, 33.71 percent in

chilli farmlands, 12.2 percent were street children, 1.95 percent rickpullers and 0.6 percent were found to be begging.

The police personnel found that poverty was the main reason behind the children taking up work as coolies and other physical labour. As many as 68.16 percent children among the rescued were indulged in the works due to poverty to look after their families.

Bad habits, addictions and social backwardness were other causes among the rest of the children. The children in the age group of 11-15 years are 76.035 percent among the rescued and it shows growing children-teenagers are forced to switch as workers due to various reasons.

As many as 21.43 percent of children are between 6-10 years of age and the rest of children are below 5 years.

As many as 44.54 percent

children belong to the BC community while 18.08 percent were Muslims, 15.7 percent were SCs, 12.613 percent were STs and the remaining 9.08 percent children belonged to OCs.

DGP Gautam Sawang said that the police department would develop a web application to monitor rescued children and to restrain rejoining rescued children into work.

He said that further police department is recognising the places where child labour is on the rise and will conduct awareness programmes to eliminate child labour with the cooperation of labour, education, medical, health, revenue, women and child welfare departments, NGOs and Child Welfare Committees.



Buoyed by active monsoon, EG farmers begin Kharif operations

DHV SAMBASIVA RAO
KAKINADA

With the onset of monsoon and a few spells of rain under its influence in East Godavari district, farmers have started agricultural operations for the first crop in earnest.

Officials of agriculture and revenue departments are gearing to release water into canals for irrigation purposes on June 15. However, it will take at least 10 days for the canals to reach their full level. With Eruvka Pournami (Full Moon Day)

falling on June 25 in the 'Jyestha' month, farming activity beginning with ploughing will gain momentum from the auspicious date.

Farmers in East Godavari district are gearing up to cultivate 2.32 lakh hectares of paddy during Kharif season this year. They mostly cultivate MTU 3626 Bondas varieties which do not have good demand in the market. Formerly, it used to be exported to Kerala on a large scale. As the farmers in Kerala have started growing this variety of paddy in that State itself,

the demand for produce grown in AP has come down.

In view of this, officials of the Agriculture department have already started warning the farmers not to cultivate Bondas variety of paddy this season and are advising them to go for MTU1121 instead.

Meanwhile, Rythu Bharosa benefits, which were earlier confined to SC, ST and BC farmers, are now being extended to OC tenant farmers as well. Hence, arrangements were being made to issue Crop Cultivator Right Cards

(CCRCs). Joint Director of Agriculture Vijayakumar and Deputy Director (Farmer Assurance) V T Rama Rao said the process of issuing the cards would continue till June 30.

The farmers should wind up agricultural operations, including threshing, by July 31. Otherwise, they may have to face the risk of storms and floods in October and November, which may lead to crop damage. With this, the government is taking steps to encourage farmers to take up Kharif operations early.

Appi Reddy finally gets the MLC seat

PNS ■ GUNTUR

Lella Appi Reddy has been in politics for many years. He rose to become a mass leader after serving as the leader of the student wing NSUI and the Youth Congress, in the Congress party. During the rule of YS Rajasekhara Reddy, he served as the Chairman of the Guntur Market Yard, the largest in Asia.

Later, he has been working with YS Jagan Mohan Reddy in YSRCP since the formation of the party. In 2014, Appi Reddy lost to YSRCP MLA candidate from Guntur West constituency. Subsequently, he continued to work for the party. He served as the president of the



Guntur Urban Party and later as the president of the Guntur Parliamentary Party.

He is currently working as the secretary of the YSRCP office in Tadepalli. Jagan did

not give a seat to Appi Reddy due to social justice in the last 2019 elections. Appi Reddy was sidelined by allotting a seat in Guntur West constituency to Chandragiri Yesuratnam, a former DIG belonging to BC category.

Yet, he worked for the party without being dissatisfied. The CM seems to have allocated the MLC position in recognition of his services to the party. It is learnt that one of the four posts to fall vacant will be allotted to Appi Reddy under Governor's quota.

In an act of social balancing, the four posts have been allotted to candidates belonging to BC, Arya Vaisya, Kapu and Reddy communities.

Thota Trimurthulu set to enter Council

PNS ■ RAMACHANDRAPURAM

Thota Trimurthulu is all set to get one of the four vacant MLC seats in the State Legislative Council, under the Governor's quota. Chief Minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy is learnt to have given his approval for candidature of Trimurthulu.



Trimurthulu, who belongs to a strong

Kapu community in East Godavari district, earlier swayed with the Opposition Telugu Desam Party (TDP). He was also with the Praja Rajyam Party (PRP) and joined the Congress for a while and returned to the TDP. He rejoined the YSRCP after losing the Ramachandrapuram Assembly

elections in 2019. The YSRCP has now rewarded him with an MLC seat. Meanwhile, MLC posts in eight local bodies will fall vacant on June 18. The term of BC leader from East Godavari district and Vice-Chairman of the Legislative Council, Reddy Subramanyam, will end on June 18. With this, Chief Minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy focused on the four vacant Governor quota seats and allotted one of them to East Godavari district.



Wild tusker electrocuted

PNS ■ TIRUPATI

A wild elephant was electrocuted when it came in contact with a power cable in Kothigutta village of Palamaner mandal in the early hours of Friday. This is the 12th incident of jumbo casualty in Chittoor district in the last two years.

According to local farmers, the wild adult elephant was found close to the field near the barbed wire fencing late on Thursday night. It was presumed that the elephant had tried to cross into the field

around Thursday midnight. As the fence was reportedly connected to a power line, the jumbo's death was instantaneous due to the electric shock. On Friday, the farmers found the carcass of the animal which lay by the side of an uprooted electric rock pillar.

Divisional Forest Officer (Chittoor West) S Ravi Shankar, along with senior forest officials from Palamaner and Chittoor ranges, rushed to the spot. The official said the circumstances which led to the death of the pachyderm would be thoroughly probed.

Collector inspects Smart City works in Tirupati

PNS ■ TIRUPATI

Chittoor District Collector M Hari Naryana and Municipal Corporation Commissioner PS Girisha made a surprise inspection of ongoing Smart City works in the city on Saturday which include development of Vinayasagar beautification works, CC roads in Gollavanigunta and works of solid waste plant in Thukivakkam.

The Collector directed the engineering officials to ensure quality in the works taken up under Smart City Project (SCP) for the development of facilities in the city.

The MCT completed the 4 MW solar panel project at Kailasagiri reservoir and fast-tracked Vinayaka Sagar beautification, but could not make much headway on the 6 MW solid waste plant at Thukivakkam under 'Nadu Nedu' due to labour shortage.



In the absence of construction work, the corporation lost Rs 10-15 crore towards regulatory charges and around Rs 5 crore due to lockdown, which is 10-20% of the annual revenue receivables by March-end.

After inspecting the ongoing works of Tirupati Smart City projects, the Commissioner expressed his ire at the contractor for the delay in completing the works. He asked the officials to use the latest technology in completion of development works. The Smart City Project works under the Central sponsorship and various other works were taken up at a total cost of Rs 2,000 crore in the city for the improvement of infrastructure facilities.

Thota ineligible for MLC post, says Amaravati Dalit Bahujan JAC

PNS ■ AMARAVATI

Amaravati Dalit Bahujan JAC leader Balakotaiah has said that Thota Trimurthulu is ineligible for the MLC under Governor quota. In a statement here on Saturday, he said Trimurthulu, who was accused of beheading Dalits, was not qualified to hold the post of MLC. Balakotaiah said offering MLC post to such people would hurt the sentiments of Dalits and asked Chief Minister YS Jagan Mohan to immediately reconsider the candidature of Trimurthulu.

Balakotaiah reiterated that the Amaravati Dalit Bahujan JAC was taking the issue of picking Trimurthulu of East Godavari district for the post of Member of the Legislative Council post by Chief Minister Jagan Mohan Reddy seriously.



Clear Rs 1,450 cr dues related to paddy procurement: Farmers

PNS ■ ELURU

Farmers in West Godavari district have expressed concern over the government not paying even a penny even after two months of procuring paddy from them. Now, they demand that the arrears be paid so that they can start cultivation works during the Kharif season.

According to leaders of the farmers, a total of Rs 1,450 crore has to be released by the government to clear the dues to farmers.

Addressing a media conference, CPM-affiliated AP Rythu Sangham (APRS) district secretary said that they were staging protests for the

past few days at Rythu Bharosa Kendras and also in front of the Mandal Revenue Offices in all mandals across the district. He alleged that the government had cheated the farmers by procuring paddy and not paying the amount. He said that the farmers in the district cultivated about 12 lakhs metric tons of paddy in the Rabi season and the government promised them that they would pay the amount within 24 hours after procurement but that did not happen.

He said that they would intensify their agitation against the government and disclosed that they would stage a Maha Dharna in front of the Collector's office on June 14.

Spurious liquor destroyed

PNS ■ GUNTUR

About 32 lakh worth of liquor was seized by the Special Enforcement Bureau in the town of Macherla in Guntur district. The liquor bottles were then crushed with a road roller on Saturday.

On October 15, 2020, some villagers brought liquor bottles from Belgaum in Goa and also from Karnataka state to Uppalapadu village in Veldurthy mandal of Guntur district and buried them under the ground.

Enforcement officials found the liquor hidden in the ground and sent it to a testing lab in Guntur, suspecting that it was counterfeit liquor. It was found that drinking the seized variety of liquor was harmful to public health. The liquor, valued at Rs 32 lakh, was destroyed with the help of a road roller in Macherla.



Put an end to illegal sand mining in river Krishna: BJP

PNS ■ GUNTUR

Illegal mining of sand in Krishna river basin should be stopped immediately, said Paturi Nagabhushanam, State Secretary of BJP, who visited the dredging area at Tallayapalem in Guntur district on Saturday.

He said local farmers had complained that the sand quarried from the river was being thrown on the other side of the river bund, resulting in damage to farmlands. He also said the government should

stop dredging works in Krishna river basin and observed that because of such activity the river bund would get damaged and about 29 villages would be inundated in case of floods.

Nagabhushanam suggested stocking of excavated sand in government lands instead of private farmlands. He alleged that the government had not yet released the rent to farmers for the lands handed over to the State capital city and demanded the payment of the same immediately.

30.6 L houses sanctioned in State, says Minister

PNS ■ ELURU

Housing Minister Cheruku vada Sri Ranganatha Raju said a total of 30.60 lakh houses have been sanctioned across the State.

Addressing a review meeting at the Godavari Conference Hall in the West Godavari District Collectorate on the housing schemes on Saturday, Raju said Chief Minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy had initiated a programme to construct 15,60,000 houses across the State in the first phase. "We are creating infra-



structure at a cost of Rs 30,000 crore. By the time the Jagananna colonies were completed, 30.6 lakh beneficiaries would get an economic benefit of Rs 15 lakh

each. Their net worth was estimated at around Rs 4 lakh crore," he said.

Mandal-level officials were appointed to oversee construction

of every 20 houses, he said and added that the Chief Minister had appointed an IAS officer as the 'Joint Collector of Housing' in each district to expedite the construction of houses. He also said that the officials and public representatives should work together to accelerate housing construction. Raju said district, division and mandal level special officers were appointed to oversee the housing programme. Four quarries would be set up in the district to overcome the shortage of sand for housing, the minister said.

Woman alleges harassment

PNS ■ ELURU

Sexual harassment charges against Integrated Tribal Development Authority (ITDA) Project Officer, RV Suryanarayana, have created a sensation in the West Godavari district. A married woman belonging to Kicchappagudem of Koyyalagudem mandal accused the ITDA PO of physically abusing her several times in the name of offering a job.

Guru Mohan sworn in as chief of AUDA

PNS ■ KADAPA

Singasani Guru Mohan was sworn in as the Chairman of the Annamaiah Urban Development Authority (AUDA) here on Saturday. State Deputy Chief Minister Amjad Basha congratulated Kadapa MP Avinash Reddy, City Mayor Suresh Babu, Maidukurru MLA Raghunath Reddy, Kamalapuram MLA Rabinathan Reddy, MLC Govinda Reddy, Former MLA

Amarnath Reddy congratulated the new chairman of ADAC.

Speaking on the occasion, the Deputy Chief Minister said, "These positions were a testament to the fact that Chief Minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy has always stood by leaders who have faced many difficulties and acted in a disciplined manner." He said that the government provide all assistance for the development and funding of the Corporation which covers eight municipalities, two

corporations and 31 mandals. Kadapa MP Avinash Reddy said that Guru Mohan started his career. He said he was happy Guru Mohan that Guru Mohan was sworn in as the Chairman of the Annamaiah Urban Development Corporation.

Sudha, wife of former Badvel MLA late Venkata Subbaiah, former MLA Venkata Siva Reddy, Kadapa Municipal Corporation Commissioner Lavanna and others were present.



District Collector Vivek Yadav inspecting the vaccine centres in Guntur city on Saturday

6 held with 180 kg ganja

PNS ■ ONGOLE

The police arrested a gang of six ganja peddlers at Martur in Prakasam district on Saturday. Ganja was being transported in two cars during a vehicle inspection at Rajupalem Cross Road. The six people in the car were arrested by Martur SI Chowdaiah under the supervision of Inkollu CI Altaf Hussain.

A total of 180 kg ganja worth Rs 6 lakh was seized from them. Also, two cars were seized in this connection. CI Altaf Hussain said the accused had brought ganja



from the Visakhapatnam Agency area and were selling it in Prakasam district. SI Chowdaiah was also present at the press conference.

Centuries-old well found in Kondaveedu Fort

PNS ■ GUNTUR

When one hears the name Kondaveedu, one is reminded of the glory of the Reddy kings. The largest well in the Kondaveedu area was recently discovered which was used during the reign of the Reddy kings. It was estimated to be 100 feet long, 25 feet wide and 35 feet deep.

It might have been used for drinking purposes by the Reddy kings and Nawabs of Golconda in the 14th Century. Kalli Siva Reddy, convener of the Kondaveedu Fort Development Committee, cleared the thorn bushes around the well to make



the ancient well a historical landmark. The Reddy kings ruled Kondaveedu fort as their capital from 1325 BC to 1425 BC.

Built in the 14th century, the fort has a total of 21 structures. The fort was built in a beautiful place amid hills and temples. The fort walls are in ruins. Their restoration work has been currently underway under the auspices of the Archaeology Department. The State government has already completed the construction of the road to go up the hill. Many landmarks that were still hidden in the vicinity of Kondaveedu are coming into light, of late.

Digvijay says Cong will have 'relook' at Art 370 revocation; BJP hits out

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Congress leader Digvijay Singh's purported comments in a clubhouse conversation that the revocation of Article 370 and stripping Jammu and Kashmir of statehood was an "extremely sad" decision and his party will have a "relook" at the issue have triggered a row, with the BJP accusing him of speaking against India and in agreement with Pakistan.



and the Congress party would certainly have a relook on the issue," Singh said, according to bits of conversation available on social media.

He was responding to a question about the "way forward" on the issue once the Modi government is gone.

Attacking him, Patra told reporters, "We have all seen how Digvijay Singh is spitting venom on India and speaking in agreement with Pakistan. This is the same person who had dubbed the Pulwama attack as an accident and described the 26/11 Mumbai attack as RSS conspiracy."

The BJP leader cited old comments of other Congress leaders, including Rahul Gandhi and Mani Shankar Aiyar, to allege that Singh's remarks were part of a larger pattern of the party being "hand in glove" with Pakistan. "This is all part of the toolkit which the BJP has exposed," Patra said in a reference to a controversial document rejected as fake by the Congress.

The Congress would go to the extent of collaborating with China and Pakistan to spread "hate" against Modi and India, he alleged. "The Congress should change its name from INC

(Indian National Congress) to ANC, Anti-national Clubhouse. This is such a clubhouse whose members have begun hating India while hating Modi," he alleged.

Patra asked Sonia Gandhi and Rahul to make their party's stand clear on the issue. He claimed that Rahul Gandhi is the leader of these Congress politicians, adding that Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan had used his criticism of Article 370 as part of his country's dossier against India on the issue in the UN.

Union ministers Giriraj Singh and Kiren Rijiju were among other BJP leaders who targeted the Congress in their tweets over the issue.

Singh alleged, "Congress's first love is Pakistan. Digvijay Singh conveyed Rahul Gandhi's message to Pakistan. Congress will help Pakistan in grabbing Kashmir."

'Secret' friendship between Modi and Punjab CM: AAP

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

AAP leader and Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia on Saturday alleged a "secret" friendship between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Punjab CM Amarinder Singh, after Punjab was ranked number one in the Performance Grading Index (PGI) 2019-20 by the Centre.

"Captain (Amarinder Singh) has got the blessings of Modiji. Delhi's schools have been ranked much below. Nearly 800 government schools in Punjab have been shut down in the last five years and many schools have been handed over



to private entities but Punjab has been ranked on the top," he said.

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is in opposition in the Congress-governed Punjab

where Assembly polls is slated for early next year. Modi's BJP is another opposition party in Punjab.

Sisodia alleged that Punjab's government schools have poor educational facilities for students and parents prefer to send their children to private schools. The index is an effort to hide the incompetence of the Punjab government in the field of school education, he alleged.

"Maybe later, the government might release a report saying Punjab's hospitals are best. There is a secret friendship between Modiji and Captain," he said.

PM urged to treat river bank erosion

PNS ■ KOLKATA

Leader of the Congress in the Lok Sabha Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury on Saturday requested Prime Minister Narendra Modi to treat large-scale river bank erosion in Malda and Murshidabad districts of West Bengal as a national disaster and release adequate funds for mitigation.

In a letter to the prime minister, the senior Congress leader, who is also the party's state unit chief, said that large chunks of fertile lands have been lost to the Ganga, which flows through the two minority-dominated districts, rendering lakhs of people homeless and making them "neo-refugees".

"They become landless and lose their livelihood. Sometimes, poverty leads to an increase in crimes. It creates neo-refugees with many social

problems," the letter read.

Citing an example of the erosion-affected people, Chowdhury said a colony of such people from Malda has come up in Mumbai's Byculla area, where they are branded as Bangladeshi infiltrators as they have also lost their documents to the erosion.

"During the UPA regime, a large fund was sanctioned for mitigation above issue. I request you to kindly release adequate funds to check the land erosion and protect the life and livelihood of the affected people," he said.

Chowdhury represents Berhampore Lok Sabha constituency in Murshidabad district.

Ganga flows through Malda before entering Murshidabad, where it splits into Bhagirathi that flows south through West Bengal and Padma which flows east into Bangladesh

Claims of Co-WIN system hacking, data leak 'baseless': Government

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The government on Saturday dismissed the claims of hacking of the Co-WIN system and data leak as "baseless".

In a statement, the Health Ministry said the matter of the alleged hacking of the Co-WIN system has been investigated by the Computer Emergency Response Team of the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology.

Dr R S Sharma, Chairman of the Empowered Group on Vaccine Administration, has clarified that "the claims of so-called hackers on the dark web, relating to alleged

hacking of the Co-WIN system and data leak, is baseless. We continue to take appropriate steps as are necessary, from time to time, to ensure that the data of the people is safe with Co-WIN."

Co-WIN portal facilitates the national COVID-19 vaccination drive.

hacking of the Co-WIN system and data leak, is baseless. We continue to take appropriate steps as are necessary, from time to time, to ensure that the data of the people is safe with Co-WIN."

Mehul Choksi denied bail by Dominica HC

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Dominica High Court has denied bail to fugitive diamond merchant Mehul Choksi in the case of illegal entry into the island country after his mysterious disappearance from neighbouring Antigua and Barbuda where he is staying as a citizen since 2018, local Caribbean media reported.

The high court on Friday (local time) gave the ruling by concluding that Choksi was a "flight risk", did not have any ties with Dominica and the court could not impose any conditions which will stop him

from leaving the country, news outlet Antigua News room said. Choksi had approached the high court after the magistrate had rejected his bail petition. The 62-year-old diamond merchant, who has an Interpol Red Notice against him, had mysteriously gone missing on May 23 from Antigua and Barbuda where he has been staying since 2018 as a citizen after fleeing to the lockdown last year.

He was detained in the neighbouring island country of Dominica for illegal entry after a possible romantic escapade with his rumoured girlfriend.

Choksi's lawyers had filed a habeas corpus petition calling his arrest illegal and alleging that he was abducted, tortured and handed over to Dominica authority to deny him rights available to him in Antigua and Barbuda as a citizen. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and the External Affairs Ministry have sought to implead in the habeas corpus petition by filing two affidavits in the Dominica High Court, officials said here. The central agency will focus on establishing criminal culpability of Choksi, fugitive status, pending

warrants against him, Red Notice and charge sheets, while the External Affairs Ministry will argue that Choksi continues to be an Indian citizen, they said.

The affidavits, if admitted, will pave way for noted lawyer Harish Salve to plead Indian case in Dominica, they said.

Choksi, promoter of Geetanjali Gems and other famous diamond brands in India, had fled the country weeks before Rs 13,500 crore fraud in Punjab National Bank (PNB) allegedly involving him and his nephew Nirav Modi surfaced.

4 swept away while crossing stream

PNS ■ SINGRAULI (MP)

Two women died, while a minor girl went missing, after four persons were swept away while crossing a stream amid heavy rains at a village in Madhya Pradesh's Singrauli district, police said on Saturday.



years were swept away while crossing Chumia nullah, he said.

While the 10-year-old victim managed to swim to the banks and was found by the rescue team in the early hours of the day, the body of the girl's mother was found about 9 km from the accident spot and the other deceased woman was found at Doodhmania village in the morning, he said.

The search is on for the nine-year-old girl who is still missing, the official added.

8-year-old girl raped in UP village

PNS ■ MUZAFFARNAGAR

An eight-year-old girl was allegedly raped by her neighbour in a village here, police said on Saturday, adding the accused has absconded.

Kapil Kumar took the girl to a field on Friday on the pretext of giving her mangoes and raped her, they said.

The girl ran to her home crying and narrated her ordeal to her family, they added. A case was registered at Bhopa police station on her parents' complaint against Kumar under Sections 376 (rape) and 506 (criminal intimidation) of the Indian Penal Code and the Protection of children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, Station House Officer (SHO) Deepak Chaturvedi said. The victim was sent for medical examination.

Guj govt praises MGNREGA scheme; calls it 'lifesaver'

PNS ■ AHMEDABAD

The BJP government in Gujarat has hailed the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme as a "lifesaver" for the migrant workers, who returned to their native villages in the state due to the lockdown last year.

The state government praised the scheme in its report "Implications of COVID-19 on Gujarat on Energy, Emissions, Climate and Development Perspectives", which was released by Chief Minister Vijay Rupani last Saturday on the occasion of World Environment Day.

MGNREGA is the Centre's work guarantee scheme for rural people with predetermined minimum wage. It was launched by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in 2006.



"The MGNREGA scheme of guaranteed employment has been a lifesaver for labourers, compelled to return to their homes following the COVID-19 pandemic," the report said.

Although in comparison to what these migrants were earning in cities, the wages under MGNREGA are minimum, they still consider it to be sufficient to sustain their families during such crisis situations induced by COVID-19, it said.

"Under the MGNREGA, the minimum wage paid is Rs 224 per day, which has been increased from earlier wage of Rs 198 per day. On a brighter note, living in their own village made them save more money, which otherwise was spent in travelling and rents," said the report, which was prepared by the state's climate change department together with IIM Ahmedabad and IIT Gandhinagar.

Ganga Dussehra celebrations cancelled due to COVID-19

PNS ■ MUZAFFARNAGAR

The district will not hold Ganga Dussehra celebrations this year in view of COVID-19 norms, authorities said on Saturday.

Hundreds of devotees participate every year in the festival that involves taking a holy dip in Ganga river.

The daylong festivities and the fair were scheduled for June 20 at Shukartal, Sub-Divisional Magistrate Jayendra Kumar.

Heavy rains lash Mumbai; train, bus services hit

PNS ■ MUMBAI

Heavy rains, coupled with thunderstorm and strong winds, lashed Mumbai and its suburbs on Saturday, leading to disruption of train and bus services as tracks and roads got waterlogged at several locations, officials said.

A Central Railway spokesperson said the suburban train services between Dadar and Kurla stations on the main line were suspended after the water rose above the track level, while a Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport (BEST) official said that several of its buses had to be diverted due to water-logging at some points.

At 10 am on Saturday, the



India Meteorological Department (IMD) had issued a thunderstorm warning for a few districts in Konkan region, including Mumbai, for the next three hours from that time.

"Thunderstorms accompanied with lightning and mod-

erate to intense spells of rain with gusty winds 30-40 kmph are likely to occur at isolated places," the IMD said in its warning for Mumbai, Thane, Palghar, Raigad and Ratnagiri districts of Konkan.

It had earlier issued an

'orange alert' for Mumbai for Saturday. An orange alert implies that authorities should be prepared to handle any situation arising out of severe weather condition.

The Central Railway official said, "Due to more than 61.21 mm rainfall in the last one hour, coupled with a high tide of 4.34 metres at 1.32 pm and closing of Mithi river floodgates, water level has been rising on track between Kurla and Sion." The suburban services on the Harbour line also slowed down due to water-logging on tracks near Chunabhatti station as a result of "extremely heavy rain", he said. Trains have been running at a restricted speed for

safety reasons, the official said.

The operations of local trains on other sections of the main line and other routes, including the Thane-Vashi line, are normal, he added.

A Western Railway spokesperson said that the suburban services on their corridors are running without any disruption, but they are closely monitoring the situation.

Sale of rly platform tickets resumes at 8 stations under Delhi div

PNS ■ DELHI

The Northern Railways has now permitted the sale of platform tickets at eight major stations under the Delhi division. The sale of platform tickets was suspended to avoid overcrowding at railway stations in view of the COVID-19 crisis. The announcement was made by Northern

Railways General Manager Ashutosh Gangal. However, the price has been enhanced to Rs 30 per platform ticket in order to prevent unnecessary crowding at the stations. Now, passengers can avail the platform ticket facility at New Delhi, Delhi Jn., Hazrat Nizamuddin, Anand Vihar Terminal, Meerut City, Ghaziabad, Delhi Sarai Rohilla and Delhi Cantt railway stations. At other stations, a decision will be taken according to the demand, a Northern Railways spokesperson said. The Railway Board had permitted the sale of platform tickets, authorising its divisions and zones to take individual decisions based on the Covid scenario in their areas.

IMA to hold nationwide protest against assault on docs

PNS ■ DELHI

The Indian Medical Association will hold a protest on June 18 against assault on doctors, with the slogan of 'save the saviours'. In a statement, the apex medical body asked all its state and local branches across the country to observe the protest by wearing black badges, masks, ribbons, shirts and running awareness campaign against violence targeting healthcare professionals. The IMA said press conferences will also be organised and they will also meet local NGOs and voluntary service leaders. It termed "extremely disturbing" a series of violence against doctors in the last two weeks in Assam, Bihar, West Bengal, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka and other places. It demanded the implementation of central hospital and Health Care Professionals Protection Act with IPC and Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPc), standardisation and augmentation of security in each hospital, and declaring hospitals as protected zones among others. "Action Committee of IMA, after considering all the aspects and to express our concern, anger and solidarity, has decided to observe the 18th June 2021 as IMA National Protest Day with demand to stop assault on the profession and the professionals with the slogan 'Save the Saviours,'" the medical body said.



G7: Why economies are delaying a break with fossil fuel industry

PNS ■ CARDIFF

The climate crisis is certain to be a hot topic at the G7 summit in Cornwall. While the leaders of the world's richest countries agree in theory on the need to reach net zero emissions by 2050 at the latest, they remain faithful to the fossil fuel industry reluctant to substantively change its business model.

A recent report by the International Energy Agency, a typically conservative advisory body, argued for an immediate ban on new fossil fuel projects. But investments by oil, gas and coal companies into finding new sources continue, as does industry lobbying to undermine regulation.

The environment ministers of the G7 countries committed to end funding for new overseas coal projects by the end of 2021.

But 51 per cent of their COVID-19 economic recovery funds – a total of USD 189 billion – paid between January 2020 and



March 2021 were earmarked as financial aid for the fossil fuel industry. Worse, USD 8 of every USD 10 dedicated to non-renewable energy was paid with no conditions on these companies to reduce their emissions.

Why does it seem so hard for G7 leaders to match their words with action when it comes to the fossil fuel industry?

Betting on the long-term business case

Despite setbacks in volatile markets and oversupply risks, there is still a lot of money to be made from extracting, producing and selling hydrocarbons. Demand for coal has plateaued, but oil and gas demand is predicted to rise at least for the next 15 to 20 years, particularly in emerg-

ing economies such as China and India. This puts G7 leaders in an awkward position. On the one hand, governments need to reboot economic growth after the pandemic slowdown – a profitable energy sector nourished by rising demand abroad is welcome, even though hydrocarbon extraction can be especially polluting in developing countries.

Governmental support for the industry in the form of subsidies or tax breaks artificially inflates the profitability of fossil fuels, in turn making renewables a less attractive investment. Put simply, it is less risky and more profitable to – at least for now – invest in oil and gas.

Carbon lock-in

The fossil fuel industry continues to shed public support, but it can rely on the fact that it's embedded within a complex system of consumers, suppliers and contractors, politicians and the media. The cause-and-effect relations that define such an intricate system often produce unintended outcomes.

This interdependency is referred to as carbon lock-in. Economies have evolved in such a way that they perpetuate an energy landscape dominated by fossil fuels and plagued by an inability to radically change. Not only does carbon lock-in result in inertia, it causes a tragedy of the commons-type problem.



India Power Corp Ltd clocks Rs 27 cr profit after tax in '21

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India Power Corporation Ltd on Saturday said its profit after tax (PAT) jumped 60 per cent to Rs 26.66 crore in the fiscal year ended March 31, 2021.

In 2019-20, it recorded a profit of Rs 16.69 crore, a company statement said. The Kolkata-headquartered company is an integrated power utility with distribution licence covering 618 square

kilometres in Asansol-Raniganj region of West Bengal. It provides power to industrial, commercial and domestic consumers.

Total income for the year was at Rs 518.37 crore, it said without disclosing the comparative figure.

India Power further said its sales increased by 2 million units in 2020-21 despite the impact of the pandemic and lockdown during the first two

quarters of the financial year.

"We were able to overcome the setback of the coronavirus pandemic by adding a large number of consumers across voltage levels, which resulted in accelerated sales growth from second quarter onwards. Our ability to procure power at competitive prices led to cost savings and further improved our earnings," India Power Whole-time Director Somesh Dasgupta said.

Revision to FAME II subsidies to be game changer: EV makers

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Electric two-wheeler makers on Saturday termed as "a phenomenal move" by the government to increase subsidy for such vehicles by 50 per cent under the FAME II scheme saying it would be a game changer in the adoption of eco-friendly vehicles.

The government had on Friday made a partial modification of the scheme for Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Electric Vehicles in India Phase II (FAME India Phase II), including increasing the demand incentive for electric two-wheelers to Rs 15,000 per KWh from the earlier uniform subsidy of Rs 10,000 per KWh for all EVs, including plug-in hybrids and strong hybrids except buses.

In the latest modification, the department of heavy industries also capped incentives for electric two-wheelers at 40 per cent of the cost of vehicles, up from 20 per cent earlier. "The revision in the FAME (II) policy, increasing



the subsidy by 50 per cent per KWh, is a phenomenal move. Sales of electric two-wheelers have grown despite the pandemic and with this additional subsidy, we expect electric two-wheeler sales to disrupt the market, and clock 6 million-plus units by 2025," Ather Energy CEO and Co-founder Tarun Mehta said in a statement. The government's continued support to drive adoption of EVs, with a keen focus on locally built electric two-wheelers will make India the manufacturing hub of EVs, he added. Expressing similar views, Society of Manufacturers of Electric

Vehicles (SMEV) Director General Sohinder Gill said, "It's an important and an admirable decision taken by the government, a move that will bring down the prices of electric two-wheelers nearer to the IC (internal combustion engine) vehicles and remove one of the biggest blockades of the high sticker price of electric two-wheelers." Elaborating further, he said a 'city speed electric scooter' with a range of 100km/charge will now cost less than Rs 60,000 and a high-speed scooter with a range of 80 km will come nearer to the price tag of Rs 1 lakh.

HCL provides 17 imported ready-to-use oxygen plants to Delhi govt

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

IT firm HCL Technologies on Saturday announced that it has provided 17 ready-to-use imported oxygen plants to the Delhi government.

These plants are aimed at ensuring oxygen support to COVID-19 patients across various hospitals in the national capital as well as enabling the Delhi government to be adequately prepared for a possible third wave of the pandemic, it said. These plants were inaugurated by Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, Health Minister Satyendar Jain and HCL Technologies Chairperson Rohini Nadar Malhotra in a virtual ceremony. The oxygen plants have been imported from France and are now deployed across seven hospitals in the city, the company said in a statement.

MTA concerned over states capping prices

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Medical Technology Association of India (MTA) on Saturday said states must be restrained from intervening in price control of medical devices and other products, and the national drug price regulator should take decisions in this regard.

The organisation, which represents research-based medical technology companies, said price capping orders by various states on COVID essentials like PPE kits and N95 masks could lead to supply constraints.

"We are at a critical juncture in the fight against COVID and the government and industry are trying to rally together to overcome this situation. At such a time, decisions taken without consulting with the industry will lead to confusion," MTA Chairman and Director General Pavan Choudhary said in a statement.

Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra have fixed prices at different points which may create risk of products being sold at multiple price points across the country, he added. "This will lead to companies



incurring additional costs and logistical challenges due to re-labelling and may disrupt the availability of these essential products. Companies may also choose not to market the product in the territory where the costs and complexities outweigh the benefits," Choudhary noted.

The Tamil Nadu government on June 4 announced the fixing of MRP of 15 COVID essential medical products including hand sanitizers, PPE kits, N95 masks and surgical gowns, he said.

This is similar to the orders released by the Kerala government in May and by the Maharashtra government last year, Choudhary added.

The points at which the prices have been capped seem irrationally low, which may make this market unviable for the industry, Choudhary said.

MONEY MATTERS

Infosys automating integration between own platform, CoWIN

Major Infosys on Saturday said it is automating the integration between its own vaccination platform and CoWIN to ease the inoculation process for its staff and their families. CoWIN head R S Sharma had recently said over a dozen entities, including large digital companies like



Paytm, MakeMyTrip and Infosys are looking at approval for offering vaccine bookings. "As Infosys is in the process of rolling out vaccines for employees and their family, across our Development Centres in India, we are automating integration between our own vaccination platform and CoWIN to make the programme seamless," Infosys said in an emailed statement to PTI. India has been ramping up vaccination to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic. India has so far administered over 24.9 crore jobs to eligible beneficiaries. The government had, last month, released new guidelines for the integration of CoWIN with third-party applications, easing the way for such apps to offer vaccine bookings.

MaxVIL posts multi-fold rise in Q4 profit at Rs 34 cr

Max Ventures & Industries Ltd (MaxVIL) has clocked nearly 10-fold jump in its consolidated net profit at Rs 33.59 crore for the quarter ended March 2021 and announced its decision to foray into residential real estate business. Its net profit stood at Rs



3.43 crore in the year-ago period. Total income rose to Rs 333.93 crore in the fourth quarter of last fiscal from Rs 258.88 crore in the corresponding period of the previous year, according to a regulatory filing. For the full 2020-21 fiscal, net profit increased to Rs 57.09 crore from Rs 44.09 crore in the previous year. Total income, however, fell to Rs 1,189.91 crore last fiscal from Rs 1,399.49 crore in the 2019-20 fiscal. MaxVIL, a part of multi-business conglomerate Max Group, is into two core businesses - real estate and specialty packaging films. Sahil Vachani, MD & CEO of MaxVIL, said, "Despite FY21 being a year chequered by pandemic induced uncertainties, both core businesses of real estate and packaging films coped exceptionally well."

Hyundai donates PPE kits, oxygen concentrators

Hyundai Motor India Foundation, the philanthropic division of automobile major Hyundai Motor India, handed over oxygen concentrators, personal protective equipment kits to the Kancheepuram district administration on Saturday. As many as 25 oxygen concentrators, 5,000 units of N95 masks, 3,100 PPEs, 600 litres of sanitiser were presented to the government headquarters hospital in Kancheepuram, a press release said. The car-maker under the Hyundai Cares 3.0 initiative/Project: Back to Life' has expedited the purchase and supply of critical medical equipment ensuring quick dispatch of relief materials to hospitals in the most affected States of Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Haryana, New Delhi and Telangana. Hyundai Motor India Foundation trustee Ganesh Mani S presented the oxygen concentrators, PPE kits to the government headquarters hospital in the presence of Kancheepuram MLA Ezhilarasan, the release added.



DLF sale bookings up 24 pc at Rs 3,084 cr in FY21

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Realty major DLF sold residential properties worth Rs 3,084 crore in the last fiscal year, registering a growth of 24 per cent from 2019-20, as it saw better demand for completed and new inventories despite the pandemic. The company's sale bookings stood at Rs 2,485 crore in 2019-20, according to an investors' presentation.

"New sales at Rs 3,084 crore for the fiscal despite Q1FY21 being muted," DLF said.

Housing sales were badly impacted during June quarter of 2020-21 because of the nationwide lockdown to control the COVID-19 pandemic. "Residential demand had exhibited strong rebound during the later part of FY21. Q1FY22 may be impacted due to the lockdown restrictions," DLF said.

ONGC to support art, handicraft projects

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Oil PSUs led by ONGC will take up 75 projects to support various art and crafts in the country in an attempt to encourage local artisans.

In line with the government's commemoration of 75 years of Indian Independence – Azadi Ka Amrut Mahotsav, Petroleum Secretary Tarun Kapoor inaugurated an initiative by oil PSUs to support various art and crafts in the country and launched the Bamboo Craft project of Madhya Pradesh supported by ONGC, the company said in a statement. "As part of a larger initiative, central public enterprises under the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas will take up 75 projects in different districts across the country. ONGC has launched the initiative to revive the struggling



handicraft projects and empower the local artisans. ONGC will take up 15 of the 75 projects. The bamboo handicraft of Madhya Pradesh has been launched on June 11, 2021," it said.

ONGC, in association with local NGOs and forums, will initially undertake five projects across the country to support the handicraft sector, with an outlay of around Rs 1.3 crore. The five projects supported

by ONGC include supporting the bamboo craft of artisans of Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh, helping artisans of ancient metal casting craft Dhokra in Odisha's Dhenkanal, reviving Lac culture in Khunthi and Ghumla districts of Jharkhand, promote traditional craft of wool dyeing in Uttarakhand, and facilitating handloom weavers of Sivasagar district in Upper Assam.

Company chairman Subhash Kumar said oil PSUs have always stood with the community wherever they have an operational presence.

ONGC Director (HR) Alka Mittal said that the handicrafts industry of India generates over Rs 13,000 crore in export earnings and is a source of livelihood for over 6 million craftsmen. "ONGC will remain actively involved in such initiatives touching lives of people".

'Purple revolution' leading farmers towards Atmanirbhar Bharat

PNS ■ BHADARWAH

Despite Covid-19 induced lockdown, around 1,000 families associated with exotic lavender farming here have not only made themselves self-reliant but also emerged as job provider during the pandemic time.

Lavender farmers have also become a source of inspiration for those still practising traditional farming, according to a grower.

The families from different villages of Jammu and Kashmir's additional district Bhadarwah under Union Government's Aroma Mission switched from maize cultivation to growing of aromatic plants and they are happy over their decision in the backdrop of ever increasing demand of lavender oil in the international



market, which earned them good fortunes. At the time of the pandemic and prolonged lockdowns, the farmers were providing jobs to hundreds of labourers, thus becoming a true symbol of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat', officials said.

"I worked with a multinational company in Delhi for four years before losing my job due to the pandemic last year. I packed my bags and returned to my native village dejected after finding it difficult get another job," 28-year-old

Anish, a resident of Tipri village, told PTI.

However, he said his decision to return and join his family in growing Lavender revolutionized his life as he became a job provider from a job seeker a year ago.

"I am more confident today than ever before as not only my savings have increased but it gave me immense satisfaction that I am giving jobs to others," he said, thanking the scientists of IIM Jammu for mobilising farmers of this far flung area.

Farmers from Tipri, Lehrote, Khellani, Manwa, Chinta, Trabbi, Koundla, Sharora, Chattri, Dandi, Bhalla and some parts of Athkar, who have started harvesting their produce of lavender flowers, are expecting a bumper crop this year and opined that switching to lavender farming

has come as a major relief for them during these testing times of corona pandemic.

"When we switched from growing traditional maize crops to aromatic lavender farming 10 years ago, we were discouraged even by our relatives and friends but today all of them look at us as an inspiration. "During current crisis of pandemic when everybody is worried about losing jobs and businesses, lavender farmers are not only making good fortunes for themselves but also providing jobs to at least 3,000 others during these testing times," Toufeeq Bagban, a young entrepreneur, said.

"Growing of lavender not only helped us survive during the hard times of pandemic but it's strong aroma also kept Corona at a bay and it's proof is that not a single positive case

was reported from any of the villages where there are lavender fields," Sarpanch, Neota-Karyan, Om Raj, believes.

The progressive farmers of Tipri village, where all the residents have switched to lavender farming and have become the leading producer of lavender flowers, demand road connectivity to transport their produce to the distillation units. "No doubt lavender farming has changed our fortunes but we have to carry our produce on our back to the distillation centre at Dradhu which is 7 km away from the village for extraction of oil," Anjali Devi, a local resident, said.

She said it is not only very cumbersome to transport the produce on backs in sweltering heat, but the non-availability of a motorable road is a major disadvantage for the residents.

China's internet watchdog issues notices to 129 apps

China's internet watchdog has issued notices to the operators of 129 smartphone applications, including several news apps, for illegally collecting or using consumers' personal information. Popular news aggregation app Jinni Toutiao developed by TikTok owner ByteDance, alongside Tencent-operated Kuai Bao and Tencent News, Sogou News by New York listed Sogou, and Nasdaq-listed Toutiao, were among a group of news apps that received an order from the Cyberspace Administration of China on Friday to rectify their data practices within 15 days, the Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post reported. Seven other app categories targeted included fitness, video streaming, online shopping, education, women's health, dating, and app stores.



Popular apps included under the order were Tencent-backed fitness app Keep, sports giant Nike's shopping app, video streaming apps such as Tencent's NOW Zhibo and Tencent-backed, gamer-focused Huya, as well as online dating platform Zhen Ai.



SUSTAINABILITY IS NO LONGER ABOUT DOING LESS HARM. IT'S ABOUT DOING MORE GOOD
—JOCHEN ZEITZ

THE VACCINE SOLUTION

As tourism industry faces the brunt of rising Covid-19 cases in the Maldives, now might be the time cut the losses and buy the more expensive, but more effective, vaccines, writes SONU SHIVDASANI

The Maldives, along with Dubai, the Seychelles, the United Kingdom, and Israel, are counted among the most vaccinated countries as of now. But while Israel and the UK are seeing the virus almost disappear, the Maldives, Dubai, and the Seychelles are witnessing the opposite, with cases skyrocketing.

In the Maldives, the number of cases has risen from a low of 19 per day in December to over 2,000 in late May, the number of deaths, 45, represents one third of all deaths that we have suffered since the beginning of the pandemic. This is in spite of the fact that 58% of the population has received one vaccine shot, and 30% has received both.

THE HUMAN AND ECONOMIC TOLL

The recent rise in cases in Male has led to hospitals overflowing with patients, and a tragic rise in deaths. Out of the 125 Covid-19 deaths in the Maldives, 45 occurred during the past month. While the fatality rate remains extremely low (0.2% of people who caught Covid-19 in the Maldives have died), that statistic doesn't provide much solace to those who have lost loved ones.

The high case load in recent weeks has also inflicted economic damage. Out of the top ten markets this year, four are no longer able to travel. Indians (the number two market this year) are no longer permitted to visit the Maldives. Germany, the UK, and France (markets number three, seven, and nine) have put the Maldives on their red lists. In the UK, citizens returning home from the Maldives have to quarantine in a miserable hotel for 14 days.

According to the Maldives Inland Revenue Authority (MIRA), US Dollar revenues collected in January 2021 were USD 46 million — just 1% down on January 2020. But in January, things were looking good. Now as many countries' citizens cannot travel here, and revenues in May and June are likely be similar to October 2020 — 58% down on the year earlier. On an annualised basis, this could cost the Government as much as USD 250 million in lost revenues.

THE UNDERLYING REASON

One reason could be the choice of vaccine. The first vaccine Israel used was the Pfizer-BioNTech. They also have an excess supply of Moderna. Dubai and the Maldives had a similar vaccination program using a combination of the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine and Sinopharm. The Seychelles is the most vaccinated country in the world but has relied almost exclusively on Sinopharm.

At Soneva, we consulted six leading infectious disease experts from around the world to assist us with our Covid strategy. Unfortunately, the feedback on the Chinese vaccine was not great.



According to one of the experts: "The mRNA vaccines (Moderna and Pfizer) are the only ones with published data showing high performance even against the new virus variants. The Chinese vaccines that are being used in many parts of the world appear to be only weakly protective, from the limited amount of information available... The problem is that we do not have reliable data on the Chinese vaccines."

Shared another expert: "Sinopharm, unlike the vaccines noted above, is more of a "classical" vaccine design (i.e. inactivated whole virus) — the kind of vaccines which have been trialed (and failed) for decades for combating seasonal Coronavirus. Although the Sinopharm licensing studies suggest the vaccine has 80% effectiveness, the trials had very few people over 60 years and I have concerns about Sinopharm's effectiveness in older individuals in particular. Whether Sinopharm will provide more or less resilience to emerging Covid variants, such as the new strain found in India remains unclear."

When one considers the relative performance of countries using different vac-

cines, as well as the feedback of these experts, it would seem that Sinopharm may not be as effective as we have been led to believe.

PROTECTING A PATIENT FROM CATCHING THE VIRUS V/S PROTECTING THE PATIENT FROM GETTING SERIOUSLY ILL

All data shows that while some vaccines are more effective in preventing you from catching the virus, all the vaccines are generally effective in preventing serious illness and, most importantly, death. As one of the experts consulted said: "Even the weakly protective vaccines may be quite helpful in preventing serious disease or death."

While the number of cases have spiked, and last month, 5 out of 45 fatalities were from people who had already received a second dose of the vaccine, the performance in the Maldives in terms of fatalities is amongst the best in the world. A few months ago, the survival rate here was 99.7%. It is now 99.8%. This is second to Singapore at 99.95%. It is also a commendable performance when compared to India (98.88%), the U.S. (98.21%), Germany (97.6%), and the U.K. (97.16%). The Seychelles at 99.65% is slightly behind

ACCORDING TO MIRA, US DOLLAR REVENUES COLLECTED IN JANUARY 2021 WERE JUST 1% DOWN ON JANUARY 2020. NOW AS MANY COUNTRIES' CITIZENS CANNOT TRAVEL TO THE MALDIVES, REVENUES IN MAY AND JUNE ARE LIKELY BE SIMILAR TO OCTOBER 2020 — 58% DOWN ON THE YEAR EARLIER

the Maldives. So, whilst the vaccines might be less effective in preventing one from getting the virus, they are generally protective against serious disease and death. There are more deaths in Male at the moment simply because there are many, many more cases.]

A NEED FOR PERSPECTIVE

As we discuss the benefits and drawbacks of different vaccines, it is important to remember that the experience in the Maldives, is that if one gets Covid, one has a 99.8% chance of survival.

Furthermore, it is important to remember to boost one's immunity. Immune-boosting diet, rich in foods including garlic, turmeric, cardamom, cinnamon, ginger, and red onions is considered to be of great help. As is popular Ayurvedic herb, Andrographis paniculata. Fortunately, we have had no fatalities among the people who tested positive at our resort.

Dr. Abdul Slocum, a Turkish Oncologist, who treated his cancer patients that caught Covid recently shared: "We used anti-coagulants, anti-biotics, antivirals as conventional therapeutics togeth-

er with high dose vitamin C, Andrographis, Thyme extract etc. as complementary therapies and all of our patients have gotten better with such treatment." So, irrespective of whether one has had the vaccines or not, maintaining a healthy lifestyle is still very important to ensure that one does not succumb to this disease.

MIXING AND MATCHING VACCINES

Call it the way forward, but if the Maldives wants to get both the health and economic long-term benefits of its vaccine roll-out, it might consider changing the brand of vaccines it uses for second shots. There is little information on the effects of combining Sinopharm with other vaccines. However, a recent article in the Lancet finds that pairing the Pfizer-BioNTech and AstraZeneca vaccines appears to increase the likelihood of mild to moderate side effects, but no serious outcomes were reported. In fact, the article goes on to say that:

"MIT Technology Review reports that such an approach could become more common if mixing and matching Covid-19 vaccines is proven to boost the overall level or duration of immunity — as tantalizing, early evidence suggests might be the case."

"Several trials have been launched to examine the question MIT Technology Review reports, including a study in Spain assessing the viability of mixing a first dose of AstraZeneca's vaccine with a second dose of Pfizer-BioNTech, as well as a study between AstraZeneca and Russia's Gamaleya Institute examining how AstraZeneca's vaccine works in combination with Russia's Sputnik V vaccine."

Early evidence suggests that it is possible to combine vaccines and change course. The Pfizer vaccine is considerably more expensive than other options. Covishield is generally available for somewhere between USD 2-4 per vaccine (if you can get hold of the shots, that is). The cost of the Pfizer vaccine is approximately USD 25. Israel was the first to receive a large amount of Pfizer because they offered the company 23 Euros vis-a-vis the 12 Euros the E.U. countries were offering. It is my understanding that Dr Reddy's Laboratories, the Indian manufacturer of the Sputnik V vaccine, proposed a price of USD 14 for the vaccine.

However, as I mentioned earlier, we are starting to see a big drop in tourism as a result of the spike in cases. The economic consequences could affect MIRA's revenues by as much as USD 10 million to USD 20 million per month — considerably more than the cost of more expensive vaccines. Now might be the time cut our losses and buy the more expensive, but more effective, vaccines.

The writer is the CEO and Joint Creative Director of Soneva

The low hanging fruit of agroforestry

India was the first country to adopt a national agroforestry policy in 2014. However, most farmers are reluctant to embrace this ecologically and socially sound practice due to lack of policy support, write ELISA VALLETTE & SIJO ABRAHAM

Agroforestry designates land-use systems that deliberately integrate woody perennials (trees, shrubs, palms, bamboo, etc.) with crops or animals. The "forest" within the "agroforestry" can be an existing native forest, the edge of a forest or a planted forest by the land's owner. But agroforestry should not be reduced to the addition of trees. Agroforestry is a regenerative agricultural practice which, through topsoil regeneration, enables biosequestration that is the capture and storage of atmospheric carbon dioxide. Moreover, agroforestry seeks to optimise the vibrant interplays within local ecosystems to make farms more productive, self-sustained and resilient without a lot of external human inputs. Indeed, the dynamic ecological equilibrium between trees and crops increases biodiversity while improving natural water cycles and enhancing ecosystem services.

Despite its ancient origins, the practice of agroforestry declined at the expense of intensive agriculture promoted during the green revolution in the 1970s. Today, the agriculture sector suffers from climate change while still largely contributing to it. Indeed, agriculture is responsible for 16% of India's annual greenhouse gases emissions, making it the second most polluting sector. However, the flip side of the coin is that climate change threatens agriculture, on which about 58% of India's

population depend on as their primary source of livelihood. Thus, increased socio-environmental concerns have sparked renewed interests for agroforestry practises. Agroforestry provides the opportunity to mitigate climate change by reducing emissions from agriculture, capturing atmospheric carbon, while simultaneously helping farmers to adapt to harsher climate conditions. Already practised on 13.5 million hectares in India, the potential to expand is enormous, especially for the 80% of small-holders farmers in the country with two hectares of land or less. Numerous low-hanging fruits stem from tapping into this potential.

While at first glance agroforestry did not seem profitable, today's socio-environmental crisis makes this long-neglected practise an undeniable solution. According to the Restoration Opportunities Atlas, India has 87 million hectares of land that could benefit from agroforestry. 952.5 million tons of above-ground carbon could be sequestered by just a 20% increase in tree cover. Beyond climate change mitigation, agroforestry farmers are better equipped against climate variations. Although decades of intensive agriculture have depleted soils and threatened natural ecosystem services, regenerative agriculture could repair these damages and conserve soils.

For instance, while agriculture devours and tends to contaminate



water, agroforestry favours and takes advantage of natural water cycles. Also, scientific evidence shows that trees stimulate evaporation and transpiration thereby increasing local rainfalls. Then, as the roots of trees extend deeper than annual crops, water can more easily infiltrate into the ground, preventing floods and making communities resilient in the face of natural disasters.

Roots also take up nutrients from deeper layers of soil that otherwise cannot be reached by the crops and prevent the groundwa-

ter from being contaminated by excess fertilizers or manures. In addition to efficient water management, a forest's inherent native biodiversity helps prevent pest attacks and soil erosion. Therefore, agroforestry allows restoration of depleted soils, maintenance of biodiversity and climate resilience.

These environmental benefits coincide with socio-cultural positive externalities for farmers and consumers. Indeed, agroforestry diversifies types of crops, makes harvests more resilient, and there-

fore secures farmers' livelihood. It also boosts agricultural productivity since, on smaller plots of land, agroforestry grows more food than mono-crops per hectare, alleviating the current pressure on land. This maximisation of potential yields is all the more pleasing as harvests prove to be more nutritious. Therefore, agroforestry provides hope for long-term food security to a growing nation. However, several barriers prevent agroforestry from becoming a mainstream practice. First, since 2014, the policy

rather than alleviating political obstacles has added confusion. Indeed, the creation of a national agroforestry board, which aimed at aligning existing programmes and providing better coordination between the ministries of agriculture, forest and rural development, never gained enough authority. Therefore, despite successfully simplifying regulations, the enabling legal environment is shadowed by an ambiguous governance system.

Secondly, the policy offers farmers extension services and capacity-building training. However, inadequate awareness failed to popularise these policy initiatives. Non-governmental organisations such as Saytrees, who have helped more than 700 farmers, planting 1500 fruit trees over the past 4 years, act as useful bridges between national programs and on-the-ground realities.

Wider local-knowledge dissemination might still be insufficient to overcome farmers' reluctance since at first sight, agroforestry might not seem profitable. Indeed, yields might decrease in the first few years until the soil quality has fully recovered. To counteract perceived risks during the transition phase, the policy should provide safety nets so the farmers can change without risking their livelihood in addition to information about agroforestry's longer-term benefits.

Another major obstacle the policy failed to address is the lack

of clear land ownership rights which discourages farmers from planting trees, perceived as a long term investment. Social discriminations along with gender, caste or tribal lines further force farmers to focus on short term yields and profits. Therefore, for the agroforestry policy to be successful, it is essential to first clarify land tenure rights while subsidising access to land, water, technology and credit across caste and communal barriers.

Finally, despite the stated objective of the policy to boost market linkages, rural farmers still encounter difficulties to find outlets for these products. However, the growing demand given the popularity to buy local, organic and nutritious-indigenous varieties, should incentivise farmers to overcome these supply-chain gaps.

To conclude, despite the agroforestry policy seeking to extract agroforestry's tremendous benefits, farmers still face many challenges to make the transition. Therefore, complementary services and additional support, especially during the transition phase, should work in synergy with the agroforestry policy. India has already established itself to be a global agricultural powerhouse and by the successful implementation of agroforestry, it could champion sustainable agriculture and inspire other nations to adopt and implement similar policies.

The writers are Fellow, Anant Fellowship for Climate Action

the pioneer agenda

FROM THE INSIDE

I always knew that saying the unsayable was going to be a powerful thing
— Phoebe Waller-Bridge



The vaccine solution

As the Maldives tourism industry faces the brunt of rising Covid-19 cases, it is time cut the losses & buy effective vaccines



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The Shrieks

Rape of minor by minors is a clarion call to look within, to wake up and give voice to the calls for help by the 10-year-old that went unheard, says MUSBA HASHMI

THE WORLD WIDE WEB OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

AI can be great to increase the wealth and happiness of humans but we must be making more intelligent choices about when to let it in, writes AKSHAT TYAGI as he warns against the manipulation/misuse of knowledge engineering

Narendra Modi has shown the people of India that he is the only leader who can lead India to become a developed country. The first thing he did in his reign was to eliminate the corruption that was rampant all over India. The corrupt bureaucrats were fired and the black money that was stashed away was brought back to India. The people were fed up of the scams that were taking place in the country. Modi has made sure that the corrupt people are punished and put behind the bars. Modi has shown that the country is secure in his hands. He has made sure that no terrorist would be able to penetrate into the country and destroy the peace that we have in India. He has also made sure that the Chinese are not able to cross the border and conquer any of the Indian territory.

The passage above is neither my opinion nor my writing. In fact, it was not written by a human being at all. It was generated using one of the most advanced language models ever — OpenAI's GPT3. The instruction I gave the model was: Write an essay about Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his ideology. Using publicly available information it can generate coherent thoughts best resembling a human writer. The model can create new ideas, classify information like moods and intentions, summarise content, chat like an empathetic friend and even write basic computer code. It can often ramble and throw meaningless sentences too, like most humans, I guess.

The model is so good at producing human-like sentences that the company which built it has decided to not give out access to this tool to the general public. They sell the right to use GPT3 to a selected group of people and strongly review what you do with it. They do not permit its use for political campaigns, spam, hateful content, content that incites violence, or other uses that may cause social harm. Whether the paragraph above is for a political campaign or not is for you to judge, or might depend on where it is published. It can easily qualify as public awareness advertising with some skillful explanation.

Absurd, isn't it? A company limits its customer size when so many others are waiting in line to give them their money. It doesn't have to market its product, it has to keep it quiet and control what you do with it. Imagine you go to buy a new car, and you first have to submit an application describing where you're going to drive it and the car manufacturer says they can anytime decide you're a bad driver and take the car back. You would probably think the car ain't worth the fuss.

And you'd mostly be right. You can do pretty horrible things with a car if you want but the damage is still going to be limited. When you start crashing into other cars and killing pedestrians, the car would either break down or you will soon enough hit a police barrier. This level of insanity is pretty rare not because of the policing by Hyundai or Suzuki, but because there are real-life consequences to such behaviour. You'll land up in jail and the rest of your life would get very difficult.

OpenAI has to go out of its way to make

sure you are not a bad person with ill intentions because the kind of damage AI can do to our democracies, relationships, health and communities are far more severe than we currently understand. And this damage is going to be deeper and more nuanced, like murder without a murderer, a fountain of blood but no knife.

It is the closest we have come to the sci-fi dystopia feared for so many decades. AI doesn't need to be a conscious entity with a desire for power, nor does it need an Iron Man suit to do real damage to real people. When we talk about not-yet-possible AI in anthropomorphic form, we forget a form of it is already here. And until we understand how it can hurt us, we will not know how governments and companies can use it to manipulate common people for greater power.

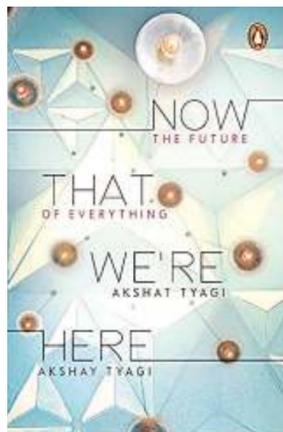
Stuck at homes we are spending more time on social media and the internet than ever. It means more of our beliefs are shaped by a virtual world that we would never verify and experience personally. AI may have had the distant potential to disrupt our lives for years, but now more than ever it has an immediate chance to touch us as we scroll our timelines for sharing SOS messages and distracting ourselves from the horror outside.

WHY DOES AI CONTENT MATTER?

Let's look at the anatomy of a conversation on social media. For example, you hear about a report of political corruption at the highest levels of government. You create a hashtag like #CorruptionHurts. Your friends and their friends share it, popular pages use the same hashtag and some big celebrities also join in. Twitter picks up your chatter and features it in the 'Trending' section.

The leader in question is of course threatened by this public mobilisation. So they get their own troll army to use the same hashtag to either tweet gibberish, highlighting the corruption of the Opposition or calling the dissenters a gang of hoodlums. When the next person tries to click on the hashtag to learn more or search the trend, it will appear to be a partisan issue where one can pick their monster or declare the whole thing a hoax. Unimaginable? We don't know if this was government-sponsored obfuscation but this is what happened during the Russian protests of 2011 when people came out against ballot stuffing and voting irregularities in the elections. After the Russian police detained protesters at Moscow's Triumphal Square, activists created a massive tweetstorm with the hashtag #Triumfalnaya (in Russian). It wasn't much later that the same anti-government hashtag was polluted by pro-Kremlin messages. If you never heard about it, they did a good job.

Scholars call this censorship by noise. AI with its ease of believable content generation at scale will make this problem almost impossible to tackle. Every time that the powerful need to change the narrative and get away with their failings, they wouldn't even have to summon an army of trolls to that. A few skilled employees with access to advanced language models will take care of millions of disgruntled citi-



THE ONLY BULWARK AGAINST AI IS TO BE BETTER-INFORMED CITIZENS. WE SHOULDN'T BE OKAY WITH OUR GOVERNMENT BOASTING ABOUT SELLING OUR DRIVING LICENSE DATA IN THE PARLIAMENT OR USING FACIAL RECOGNITION TECHNOLOGY TO IDENTIFY PROTESTORS. NEITHER SHOULD WE NAIVELY GET EXCITED EVERY TIME A COMPANY TALKS ABOUT A 'PERSONALISED' DIET, MUSIC PLAYLIST, BOOK RECOMMENDATION, CAREER COUNSELLING OR THE NEXT SHINY THING MADE JUST FOR US

zens. Detecting bot accounts and misinformation is already hard for social media companies. What happens when they have to distinguish between the thoughts of flesh beings and silicon avatars?

Even when the political moment is over, imagine how it changes people. If AI can tweet and talk like a person, would you be more alarmed about the account which replied to your post yesterday? Would you be sure they actually agreed with you, are they genuine allies? Suspicion and mistrust can be lethal weapons to make us doubt the reality around us.

MANY LIVES OF AI

Even though an AI program has a predefined objective, we don't quite know how it will go around achieving that objective. There is no simple mathematical function AI follows to get the outputs from the inputs, even though it has been designed purposefully to get those specific outputs. We can observe and study how it behaves by adjusting levers in a controlled environment, but we still don't know what kind of relation it develops between the input and output and whether these relations can be translated into real-world properties at all.

Many traditionally human-intensive jobs are already being augmented by tech, making people's skills less central to the equation. Ever had a bad day and a worse Uber driver who wouldn't pay any heed to the Google Maps' traffic-congestion warnings? He thinks he knows these streets better than any American corporation ever will. He knows which route is shorter and quicker because driving is what he has spent his life doing. There's no point fighting to persuade each other when confirming both his and Google's hypothesis that the traffic will cost you more time than taking a bad option. Even when he surrenders to your arguments about Google Map's algorithm and takes that unintuitive path to drop you at the destination on time, he still cribs about the path not taken. In any case, he is always right.

Of course, the algorithm is not always right. We selectively remember the times it didn't alert us about the diversion, but there is a logic behind its accuracy that we generally trust. It gathers data from millions of other cars, analyses the historical traffic-movement patterns of a neighbourhood and predicts the soon-to-be congestion on your path.

Even though this sophisticated synthesis of data has been around for a while, it has gained increasing traction in the past decade. Never before have we had the capacity to collect these many data points nor the computing power to make any meaning of them. Just fifteen years ago, the best way to predict the shortest and quickest path to a destination was individual human intelligence. And that largely meant you were a frequent commuter of that route to have formed at least a stable opinion of traffic movement. The more outgoing you were, the more personal data you had, the smarter your decisions turned out to be.

In this pre-Google Maps era, individuals with greater social freedom turned out to be better decision-makers. To be clear, this wasn't

a difference of intelligence or any other genetic advantage; it was merely a case of a larger pool of data. The compounded benefit of better decision-making strengthened their position as better deserving of making important decisions. It created a self-serving cycle that kept improving the decisions made by them, earning them even greater power. These pocket machines work the same way but have the data of all the earth's drivers combined and augmented drivers to be much better at their jobs.

That's just one example of how a combination of AI and algorithms changes our lives every day right now. It impacts who has the power to lead and who is left behind.

NOW THAT WE'RE HERE

When a breakthrough in AI happens, it can be deployed before any government can blink an eyelid. There limits to how we can regulate a technology the creation of which doesn't even need an office building let alone a registered GST address. It doesn't come asking for environmental and labour permits. Governments can attempt to control big corporations from following some ethical principles and defining what's okay. Sadly, Indian politicians and bureaucrats are highly unlikely to lose sleep over the design and data of AI anytime soon.

The transport ministry will be better off beginning the work of mitigation now rather than after all the driving jobs in transportation are lost. Transport minister Gadkari may or may not be around to defend his position of not letting autonomous driving happen in the country. India spent a lot of effort wooing Tesla to India when the car maker's ultimate pitch is vehicles that can drive themselves. We want Tesla's factory jobs but fear its main product. India is like a man in his midlife crisis who likes looking at children but not spending time with them.

The only bulwark against AI is to be better-informed citizens. We shouldn't be okay with our government boasting about selling our driving license data in the parliament or using facial recognition technology to identify protesters. Neither should we naively get excited every time a company talks about a 'personalised' diet, music playlist, book recommendation, career counselling or the next shiny thing made just for us.

AI can be great to increase the wealth and happiness of humans but we must be making more intelligent choices about when to let it in. Exciting technology solutions should not steal our attention from things that matter and make life worthwhile. If there are no vaccines in a country, talking about a facial authentication system for efficient distribution is like talking about interior design for cloud castles. Sounds fancy but is pretty useless. Or even deadly.

The writer is the founder of WorkHack and a Rajeev Circle Fellow. AI and Automation is one of the ideas in his book, Now That We're Here: The future of everything (published by Penguin), amongst Design, Data, Behavioural Economics and so much more



The Shrieks

Rape of minor by minors is a clarion call to look within, to wake up and give voice to the calls for help by the 10-year-old that went unheard, says MUSBA HASHMI

On a usual busy morning of May 24, a 10-year-old girl left her house to play with friends, only to return with a trauma that will continue to haunt her for many years to come. The incident is of Rewari, Haryana, where a group of about seven boys, all minors except for one who is 18, raped the girl in a school building. This was not all. The accused went a step ahead and filmed the act. The video went viral in no time.

It was not until a villager informed the girl's parents about the video that the family came to know about the horrific incident. One can only imagine what trauma the little one must have suffered that made her take to silence.

While rape is not something we haven't heard of before, the fact that boys as young as 12 don't shy away from committing such acts is what is both shocking and unfortunate.

What made these young ones take to such heinous crimes? There can be no one answer to this. But it gives us a reality check of the society we live in and the world we will be leaving behind for the generations to come.

"The young ones are the most vulnerable of all. We don't know what exactly might have happened that led to such a crime, but we can anticipate that it was because of the company those boys shared. The 18-year-old was indeed aware of what he was doing, and he might have lured other boys into the crime," Pulkrit Sharma, a clinical psychologist, says.

WATCH YOUR KIDS

The only way out here is to have a close eye on your child's friends. The parents must take charge of the company that their child shares. Keep a look at what your child does when alone. The need is such that even children as young as ten are having access to mobile phones and WiFi; this increases the risk of internet abuse.

"Parents must monitor the watch and search history when their child uses the phone. There are times when a child ends up watching inappropriate videos or ads, not because he searched for it, but because it appeared as a suggestion. It is all toxic and addictive. Hence, try to put your phone in kid-safe mode before giving it to your child; this will eliminate any chances of incorrect use of the Internet," Sharma opines.

He adds that many children grow up with difficult emotions such as loneliness, hatred, aggression and envy because of our current social structures; this makes them hardened and aggressive and predisposes them to such criminal behaviours.

DISCUSS AND EDUCATE KIDS

Pooja Sareen, advocate, women and child rights activist, says that parents' biggest problem is not opening up with their children. "The biggest problem in India is that the parents do not open up with children on a very critical subject such as sex, sexual needs and sexual restrictions, what should be and should not be done. Most of them watch web series with their children that are often full of abusive hurls and sexual and love-making scenes. While some skip them, others don't think that the child is juvenile, or a teenager. It is disheartening to hear some parents say 'dekhne do, ladka hai, seekhne do, isi ne sambhalna hai'." We read too many articles on child rapes, rape on children by children or juveniles and we have read about 'Bois locker room' too; this is one way to expose the young minds towards such a sensitive topic, and due to the lack of proper guidance, they fail to understand what is right and wrong," Sareen says.

The lack of dialogue on sexual crimes at the school and community level is the reason behind



A 10 or 12-year-old, when committing a crime, won't think of the consequences. A child cannot comprehend a crime at such an age and calculate the actions. As most people say, it is nothing but a result of criminal mentality, and it is because they are not educated enough about right and wrong. They see what is happening in their family or area and replicate it

— **Urmi Chudgar, Lawyer, HAQ: Centre for Child Rights**

the increasing cases. The more educated children are about such acts and crimes, the instances of such cases will reduce. "The Government should work towards the prevention of such crimes because the general trend is to respond to a crisis and not prevent it. Also, children don't fall under the vote bank, and the Government thinks that work for children is more charity-driven; this shows in the budget as well, where only 0.6 per cent is spent on child protection. They often see investment and result as two parallels, but the need is to merge the two and work on things. You can't expect results if you don't invest. The investment here is to be done in the prevention of such crimes," Urmi Chudgar, Lawyer, HAQ: Centre for Child Rights, tells you.

Experts emphasise that educating children and creating awareness is the only way to reduce these crimes. "A lot of moral preaching is the need of the hour. We need to educate children about consent and rape punishments. Sadly, the school's curriculum covers sex education as a mere topic. But does it cover STI, STDs, AIDS, rape, pregnancy after rape, the complications that rape victims go through and the psychological treatments they require? The answer is no. All these topics should be covered with the help of examples and suggestive role plays," Sareen opines.

A MIRROR TO SOCIETY

Sareen adds that rape by a 10-year-old or a 6-year-old, is not just an example of a mentally sick and frustrated child, but it also holds a mirror to the parenting, teaching from school, friends and highlights the dearth of efforts made on him. "Such news makes headlines every other day. We read them, think about them and often forget. The question is: are the boys only to be blamed? And not their parents who fail to teach them the difference between right and wrong," Sareen asks.

DO WE NEED STRICTER LAWS?

While many people demand that there should be stern laws for such heinous crimes, Chudgar feels that the current laws are sufficient. "Amending the laws and increasing the punishment is not the way forward. When the Nirbhaya Case happened, there was a change that 16-18 years olds also could be tried as adults in case of heinous crimes; this in itself is a deviation in the principle of the Juvenile Justice (JJ) Act. Also, because India is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) bringing in such changes in the law that are against the benefit of the child are not in line with the principle of JJ Act and UNCRC. Hence, the need is for proper implementation of the existing laws and not thinking of newer

ones. The POCSO and Juvenile Justice Act are strong enough," she emphasises.

She adds that it is not because of the loopholes in the law that juveniles are taking to such crimes thinking they will get away with it; instead, it is because they commit a crime without thinking of the consequences.

"A 10 or 12-year-old, when committing a crime, won't think of the consequences. A child cannot comprehend a crime at such an age and calculate the actions. As most people say, it is nothing but a result of criminal mentality, and it is because they are not educated enough about right and wrong. They see what is happening in their family or area and replicate it. So, parents have to work with their children from the beginning. And especially when a crime has been committed, and they are in the shelter homes, there has to be intensive counselling to make them realise and understand that what they have done will have consequences on them as well. They should not think that they are juveniles and will get away," Chudgar tells you.

VICTIMS HESITATION TO REPORT

While these cases are fortunate enough to make headlines and reach public notice, hundreds of cases go unnoticed and even unreported. The reason being public shame and harassment that follows. Some people even doubt the law and think they will not get justice.

"Some people think that reaching out to the court and attending the hearings will further traumatise the survivor. But in such cases, the law has several provisions for the survivor. There's a separate room for the vulnerable survivors. There's no lawyer or the culprit in the room. The survivor is accompanied by a support system and can put her point forward. There are no direct questions thrown on these young survivors. Not only this, but the law even allows them to avoid multiple visits to the court. If they want, the survivor can give out their statement in one go. Also, when they need to be questioned, police don't go in uniform," Chudgar explains.

It is nothing but a result of a lack of knowledge and awareness related to law. It's high time we should start creating awareness instead of just talking about it. "In the rural areas, the Asha workers can be trained and educated about the law, and they can further pass on the knowledge to the people. The Government can organise short informative sessions on such topics. Further, hoarding and posters can be put in public places. It is said that you tend to remember things that you have read for a long time. Posters will prove to be helpful as they will initiate that dialogue and also educate people about such sensitive topics," Chudgar opines.

TALES OF HORROR



- Six people have been arrested this month for allegedly raping a 16-year-old girl in Mumbai.
- Another minor was allegedly sexually assaulted by four youths near Shivamogga, last year. The girl was taking care of her mother at a COVID care centre when the incident happened.
- In November, 2020, a 68-year-old priest was arrested for raping a 10-year-old at his daughter's home in Bengaluru.
- An eight-year-old girl was allegedly raped by a 70-year-old man in a village in Uttar Pradesh. The girl was playing around when the incident happened.
- A man was held for allegedly raping a 17-year-old girl and filming the act and sharing it on social media. The accused was arrested for repeatedly raping the minor girl for the past one year.

NEED TO STREAMLINE TECH USE

Both Sareen and Chudgar agree with Sharma that the unrestricted use of technology is also leading to such crimes. "Giving them gadgets is a key to easy access to sex. Especially during the lockdown, when both classes and tuitions have gone online, how fair is it to not mentor them on what's essentially a part of them. I beseech to all parents, hold hands of your children, educate them on sex. Educate them on repercussions of rape, talk to them as friends, they need you," Sareen says.

And the even more horrifying trend that is, of course, a result of technology — shooting videos and posting them online, is becoming infamous. Chudgar says that it is part and parcel of technology. "It is a strange world that we live in. Not only children but even adults have the habit of recording whatever is happening near them; this is both good and bad. However, being in possession of child pornographic material is a crime in itself; it is again because of the lack of awareness that people don't shy away from recording and circulating such crimes. The need is to educate people about the wise use of technology because there's not much we can do about this infamous trend," she suggests.



G7 adopts global infra plan in pushback to China's 'belt and road'



The Group of Seven rich nations will announce on Saturday a new global infrastructure plan as a response to China's belt and road initiative, a senior official in U.S. President Joe Biden's administration said.

The official, who spoke to reporters on condition of anonymity, said the United States would also push the other G7 leaders for "concrete action on forced labour" in China, and to include criticism of Beijing in their final communiqué.

"This is not just about confronting or taking on China," the official said. "But until now we haven't offered a positive alternative that reflects our values, our standards and our way of doing business."

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a multi-trillion-dollar infrastructure scheme launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping involving development and investment initiatives that would stretch from Asia to Europe and beyond.

More than 100 countries have signed agreements with China to cooperate in BRI projects like railways, ports, highways and other infrastructure.

According to a Refinitiv database, as of mid-last year, more than 2,600 projects at a cost of \$3.7 trillion were linked to the initiative, although the Chinese foreign ministry said last June that about 20% of projects had been seriously affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.



Villagers pray to 'goddess corona' to rid them of the virus

Indian villagers have erected a shrine to "goddess corona" and are offering her prayers in the hope that divine intervention can banish the deadly virus.

Devotees in Shuklapur village, in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, have been offering prayers, holy water, and flowers at the bright yellow shrine where they have placed their idol of "Corona Mata", since they erected it this week.

"Maybe with her blessings the villagers, our village, and everyone else get some relief," one villager, who gave her name as Sangeeta, said on Friday.

India was hit hard by a surge of coronavirus infections in April and May but there are signs the worst could be over.

Authorities reported 84,332 new cases on Saturday, the lowest daily tally in more than two months, health ministry data showed. read more COVID-19 has killed 367,081 people in India, according to government data. The Shuklapur villagers' prayers have not been fully answered - there are still some cases in the district - but the numbers are also sharply lower than they were at the height of the pandemic.

Does a plant-based diet really help beat Covid?

Since the beginning of the pandemic, it's been suggested that certain foods or diets may offer protection against COVID-19. But are these sorts of claims reliable?

A recent study published in BMJ Nutrition, Prevention and Health sought to test this hypothesis. It found that health professionals who reported following diets that are vegetarian, vegan or pescatarian (those that exclude meat but include fish) had a lower risk of developing moderate-to-severe COVID-19.

Additionally, the study found that those who said they eat a low-carbohydrate or high-protein diet seemed to have an increased risk of contracting moderate-to-severe COVID-19.

This may make it sound like certain food preferences - such as being vegetarian or a fish eater - may benefit you by reducing the risk of COVID-19. But in reality, things aren't so clear.



So what does this tell us?

When it comes to trying to determine the best diet for protecting against COVID-19, the truth is we don't have enough quality data even with the results of this study, which are a small data set and only observational. And a further issue is that the study didn't look at the quality of people's diets by assessing which foods they actually ate. This is another reason why it needs treating with caution. Self-declared diet types or food questionnaires may not capture information on the variety and type of foods eaten for instance missing details about how much fresh or processed food someone eats, how meals are eaten and with whom. And as alluded to above, self-reported data on what people eat is also notoriously inaccurate. The bottom line is: the name of what you call your diet is far less important than what you actually eat. Just because a diet is vegetarian or pescatarian doesn't automatically make it healthy. For now, the robust evidence isn't there to suggest that being vegetarian or pescatarian protects against COVID-19 so there's no need to rush to switch your diet as a result of this study. However, what we do know is that keeping active, eating a sensible healthy diet and keeping our weight in check helps to fortify us against a wide range of health issues, and this could include COVID-19.

Self-reporting and small samples

First, it's important to underline that reported diet type didn't influence the initial risk of contracting COVID-19. The study isn't suggesting that diet changes the risk of getting infected. Nor did it find links between diet type and length of illness. Rather, the study only suggests that there's a link between diet and the specific risk of developing moderate-to-severe COVID-19 symptoms. It's also important to consider the actual number of people involved. Just under 3,000 health professionals took part, spread across six western countries, and only 138 developed moderate-to-severe disease. As each person placed

their diet into one of 11 categories, this left a very small number eating certain types of diet and then even smaller numbers getting seriously ill. This meant, for instance, that fish eaters had to be grouped together with vegetarians and vegans to produce meaningful results. In the end only 41 vegetarians/vegans contracted COVID-19 and only five fish eaters got the disease. Of these, just a handful went on to develop moderate-to-severe COVID-19. Working with such small numbers increases the risk of a falsely identifying a relationship between factors when there isn't one what

statisticians call a type 1 error. Then there is another problem with studies of this type. It's observational only, so can only suggest theories about what is happening, rather than any causality of diet over the effects of COVID-19. To attempt to show something is actually causal, you ideally need to test it as an intervention that is, get someone to switch to doing it for the study, give it time to show an effect, and then compare the results with people who haven't had that intervention. This is how randomised controlled trials work and why they are considered the best source of evidence.



Japan city uses tsunami lessons for Covid vaccinations

Tamio Hayashi, 77, doubted he could ever navigate the internet systems set up to register for COVID-19 vaccines across most of Japan.

He hated the idea of using the "troublesome" systems that have broken down and befuddled other older residents, hobbling Japan's inoculation push.

Luckily, local officials in his small, northeastern town helped him through the red tape and he got his shots - a rarity in Japan, where the authorities are racing to inoculate the vulnerable elderly population before the start of the Summer Olympics in just six weeks.

"This way is great," Hayashi

told Reuters after he and his wife got their second doses at a local gymnasium. "You just get a notice that says come on such-and-such a day."

Soma, a rural city 240 kilometres (150 miles) north of Tokyo that was devastated by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, has surged ahead of most of the country in vaccinations by heeding lessons learned from the catastrophe of a decade ago.

Japan lags far behind other advanced economies in vaccinating its people - 12% have received at least one shot, according to a Reuters tracker, compared to France, the next lowest in the Group of Seven industrial powers at 42%, and

the most advanced, Canada, at 63%.

Soma's nimble, homegrown approach eschews the reservation systems and fragmented efforts common across Japan. The city has inoculated 84% of its elderly - versus about 28% nationwide - is now injecting younger generations and aims to reach people as young as 16 by the end of July, just as the Olympics are getting underway.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga wants to have Japan's elderly population fully vaccinated by July and all adults by November. But that will require boosting shots to a million a day from the peak so far of around 700,000.



Amid renewed calls to probe into the origins of COVID-19, Chinese researchers said they had found a batch of new coronaviruses in bats. The newly found viruses in the bats include one that may be the second-closest yet (genetically) to the COVID-19 virus, CNN reported. The researchers say that their discoveries in southwestern China show just how many coronaviruses are there in bats and how many have the potential to spread to people. In a report published in the journal Cell, the Chinese researchers from Shandong University said, "In total, we assembled 24 novel coronavirus genomes from different bat species, including four SARS-CoV-2 like coronaviruses." The samples were collected from small, forest-dwelling bats between May 2019 and November 2020. The researchers say that they tested urine and feces as well as taking swabs from the bats' mouths.

According to the Chinese researchers, one of the viruses was very similar, genetically to the SARS-CoV-2 virus that's causing the ongoing pandemic. "It would be the closest strain to SARS-CoV-2 except for genetic differences on the spike protein, the knob-like structure that the virus uses when attaching to cells," they said. "Together with the SARS-CoV-2 related virus collected from Thailand in June 2020, these results clearly demonstrate that viruses closely related to SARS-CoV-2 continue to circulate in bat populations, and in some regions might occur at a relatively high frequency," they wrote.

WORK FROM HOME EFFECT

Count of males seeking emotional counselling sees upward trend

PNS ■ PUNE

The national lockdown imposed last year due to coronavirus had reportedly witnessed a rise in the number of complaints from women about domestic violence, abuse by family members, psychological disorders, emotional outbursts and other issues.

But counsellors say that they have been observing a trend over the past few months in which men are increasingly coming forward to complain about a host of issues, including strain in relationship with spouse and work-related stress as a large number of professionals continue to work from home due to the restrictions during the second wave of the pandemic.

Officials and the counsellors from Pune police's Bharosa Cell that was set up to offer help to women, children and senior citizens in distress, said since September last year, men are increasing coming forward with complaints.

Assistant police inspector Sujata Shanme of the cell said that it had received a total of 2,074 complaints in 2020.

"Of these, 1,283 complaints came from women, while in 791 cases the complainants were men. In 2021, till April, we have received 729 complaints from women and 266 from men," she said.

Advocate Prathana Sadavarte, one of the counsellors with the cell, said that during the strict lockdown last year, they started receiving

more complaints from women about domestic violence abuse, emotional outbursts, psychological confinement and husbands and in-laws' tendency of taking them for granted.

"But post-unlock (September onwards), complaints from men also increased and they were about mostly work-related stress and extended working hours due to work from home mode, she said.

She said that if both the spouses are working, they are generally sympathetic towards each other's job responsibilities. However, if one spouse is not working, then he or she may not get full idea of the hardships that the other one is facing on the professional front.

Giving an example, she said, "A male professional had approached us saying that he has been working from home since the last lockdown. He complained that just because he is at home, his wife expects him to help in household chores. The husband had failed to communicate to her his work-related woes, as a result of which both of them started arguing. While counselling them, we realised that both of them had not given space

to each other which was required, she said.

"During the counselling sessions, we asked them to start giving compliments about each other's work and spending more time with each other, she added.

Sadavarte said that there is a perceived notion that such cells and helplines are generally women-centric, but the lockdown has changed that notion and men have also found a platform where they can share their emotions.

