

OPINION 6 FREEDOM OF SPEECH IS A JOKE

WORLD 8 FATALITIES REPORTED AS MYANMAR POLICE INTENSIFY USE OF FORCE

SPORT 12 ROHIT REACHES CAREER-BEST EIGHTH

CHANDIGARH, MONDAY MARCH 1, 2021; PAGES 12 & 2

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I DISLIKE DUBBING: TAAPSEE 10 VIVACITY



Covid jab phase-2 to start today

Shots for 60 + or 45+ with comorbidities even as pandemic's 2nd wave picks up

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India is all set to roll out the second phase of the vaccination drive from Monday to vaccinate people aged above 60 years and 45 years with comorbidities in private and Government hospitals in the backdrop of worrying upward trends shown by Covid-19.

The country reported a single-day rise of 16,752 cases in the last 24 hours, the highest in the last 30 days, taking the overall tally to 1,10,96,731 on Sunday, said the Union Health Ministry, hoping that the accelerated vaccination drive will help make people safe from the infection.

The Covid-19 vaccine will be given free of cost at Government hospitals, while people will need to pay for it at private facilities. The private hospitals can charge up to ₹250 per dose for the jab.

Citizens will be able to register and book an appointment for vaccination, anytime and anywhere, using the COWIN 2.0 portal or through other IT applications such as Aarogya Setu etc, said a statement from the Ministry.

It said there will be only one live appointment for a beneficiary at any point of time for each dose. Appointments for any date for a Covid Vaccination Centre will be closed at 3 pm on that day.



For example, for March 1 the slots will be open from 9 am till 3 pm on the same day, and the appointments can be booked any time before that, subject to availability. However, on March 1 an appointment can also be booked for any future date for which vaccination slots are available.

It also stated, "The number of doses planned to be administered decided by respective State/UT Government for a Vaccination Cycle. Total vaccination slots for a vaccination cycle should not exceed the target number of doses."

A User Guide for the Citizen Registration and Appointment for Vaccination has also been uploaded on the websites of the Ministry and National Health Authority

(NHA). The Ministry has also specified 20 comorbidities among people aged between 45 and 59 years who will get the vaccine — heart failure with hospital admission in past year, moderate or severe valvular heart disease, CT/ MRI-documented stroke, diabetes of over 10 years or with complications,

hypertension, end-stage kidney disease on haemodialysis, diagnosis of any solid cancer on or after 2000 or currently on any cancer therapy. About the surge in cases, the Ministry said six States — Maharashtra, Kerala, Punjab, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat — are behind the current Covid uptick in India and account for almost 86 per cent

BEATING ODDS

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Woman with baby resists snatching bid, stabbed to death

STAFF REPORTER ■ NEW DELHI

A 25-year-old woman, who was carrying her two-year-old daughter, was stabbed to death for resisting a chain-snatching bid in Northwest Delhi's Adarsh Nagar, police said on Sunday, adding that they have arrested the accused involved in the Saturday (9:30 pm) incident.

A CCTV footage of the incident went viral on social media. In the video, two women can be seen walking when a man chases them and tries to snatch the victim's chain from behind. The woman — identified as Simran Kaur — chases him, following which he falls on the road. Thereafter, he stands up and stabs the woman.

The accused stabbed the victim and fled the spot, police said, adding that she was taken to a hospital where she was declared brought dead.

Anil Jindal, Simran's neighbour, said three years ago, an incident of snatching took place at the same spot where Simran was stabbed. The locals are in shock.

The incident took place hardly 20 metres from the victim's house and there is a police post around 100 metres from the spot. Police teams have arrested two accused persons identified as Fardes (19) and Aqbal (22). When she resisted, the accused fell on the road.

N-W Delhi crime video goes viral, locals in shock, 2 accused held



Father of a 25-year-old woman, who was allegedly stabbed to death during a robbery bid, is consoled by relatives as he waits outside Babu Jagjivan Ram Memorial Hospital in New Delhi on Sunday

The weapon of offence and scooty used in crime were recovered. Simran's aunt said she had gone to the market to buy medicines for her daughter.

"She was wearing a chain and holding her daughter. The accused was chasing them and tried to snatch the chain but Simran caught hold of it and did not lose her grip. When she resisted, the accused fell on the road.

CAPSULE

3 CENTRAL POLICE FORCES HEADLESS

New Delhi: At least three Central Police Organisations (CPOs), including CBI and NCB, besides two Central Armed Police Force (CAPF) or paramilitary, CRPF and NSG, are headless in the face of absence of appointments of regular chiefs. These agencies are working with ad hoc chiefs.

SC TO HEAR PLEA AGAINST 69% QUOTA IN TAMIL NADU

New Delhi: The Supreme Court has agreed to hear on March 5 a plea challenging constitutional validity of the 1993 Tamil Nadu law providing 69 per cent quota to scheduled castes (SCs), scheduled tribes (STs) and backward classes in admissions and Government jobs in the State.

REMOVE ME IF YOU CAN: OLI CHALLENGES OPP

Kathmandu: Nepal's embattled Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli on Sunday challenged the ruling Nepal Communist Party's splinter faction led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' to remove him from the top post if he can. Addressing an event in his home district, Jhapa, Prime Minister Oli challenged the Prachanda-led faction to table a vote of no confidence motion and endorse that.

Kejriwal likens BJP to Britishers, says party behind Jan 26 violence

STAFF REPORTER ■ MEERUT

Am Aadmi Party (AAP) national convener and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal lashed out at the BJP-ruled Centre accusing it over its "indifference" towards the farmers who have been protesting for the last three months at Delhi's borders — Singhu, Tikri and Ghaziabad against the three farm laws.

Addressing a "Kisan Mahapanchayat" in Meerut, he alleged that the January 26 violence at Red Fort was orchestrated by the BJP itself.

The Chief Minister also compared the BJP to Britishers, saying not even the colonisers used water canons and lathis on farmers. Criticising the Centre, he said the three agricultural laws are death warrant for the farmers. The Chief Minister said it has been more than three months and 250 farmers have lost their lives while protesting against the three farm laws but the Government has done nothing about it.

Modi doesn't hide his true self, proud of him, says Azad

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

Senior Congress leader SGhulam Nabi Azad on Sunday showered praises on Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Speaking at an event organised by the Gurjar Desh Charitable Trust, former Leader of Opposition in the Rajya Sabha said he has serious political differences with Modi but he appreciates that the Prime Minister does not try to hide his background from the world.

"I like a lot of things about my leaders. I am from the village and feel proud... Even our Prime Minister (Narendra Modi) hails from the village and used to sell tea. We are political rivals but I appreciate that he does not hide his true self. I have travelled the whole world. I have stayed in 5-star and 7-star hotels.

"But the scent of the people who belong to my village is unmatched," the Congress



Senior Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad being felicitated by members of Gurjar Desh Charitable Trust during a function in Jammu on Sunday

leader said after he was felicitated with the 'Sher-e-Gurjar award' by Gurjar Desh Charitable Trust. Interestingly, the platform from where Azad spoke eloquently in favour of the PM was inaugurated by Sonia Gandhi, 11 years ago on May 29, 2010.

Parties vie for farm symbols to cash in on kisan protests

RAJESH KUMAR ■ NEW DELHI

With farmers' agitation holding centre stage, unrecognised political parties are clamouring for farm-related symbols to contest the upcoming Assembly polls.

Sugarcane farmers (ganna kisan), farmers driving tractors (tractor chalata kisan) and jackfruit and coconut farms are among the symbols issued by the poll body to registered unrecognised political parties ahead of the Assembly polls in five States. According to the Election Commission (EC), 60-70 political parties have approached the poll body seeking registration in the past two three months.

These symbols assume significance in the current scenario amid farmers protests in several States over the new



farm laws. Apple, capsicum, cauliflower, ginger, grapes, green chilli, lady finger, peanuts, peas, pineapple, water melon, tiller and walnut are also available for symbols. The Anna Puratchi Thalavaivar Amma Dravidu Munnetra Kazhagam has been allotted jackfruit to contest in Tamil Nadu.

Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura, Puducherry, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka," the EC said. It maintains a pool of hundreds of symbols which represent aspects of everyday life in India.

The Bharatiya Janaseva Congress has been given ganna kisan symbol for Kerala, Assam and Puducherry. The poll body has allotted tractor chalata kisan to the All India Kisan Janatha Party which is gearing up to contest from West Bengal. The Makkal Neethi Katchi-India has been allotted the symbol of "man blowing turha" for Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Puducherry and West Bengal.

The Anna Puratchi Thalavaivar Amma Dravidu Munnetra Kazhagam has been allotted jackfruit to contest in Tamil Nadu.

Sena Minister Rathod resigns in TikTok star suicide case

T N RAGHUNATH ■ MUMBAI

After the ruling Shiv Sena took the wind out of its sails by seeking the resignation of its Tik Tok star Pooja Chavan's alleged suicide-linked Minister Sanjay Rathod, the Opposition BJP on Sunday re-calibrated its strategy to target the rape-accused NCP Minister Dhananjay Munde, ahead of the 10-day Budget session beginning here from Monday.

Detailed report on P5

Advertisement for LIC's JEEVAN UMANG life insurance plan. The ad features a family of four riding bicycles on a beach. Text includes: 'The 100-year plan!', 'LIC's JEEVAN UMANG', 'A New-Linked, Purva-posting, Individual, Life Assurance Saving (Whole Life) Plan', 'Get GUARANTEED Survival Benefit equal to 8% of Basic Sum Assured each year after the final premium, till Age 99 and lump sum maturity benefits on survival to Age 100.', 'FEATURES: Age Eligibility: 18 days to 55 years, Minimum Basic Sum Assured: ₹ 2,00,000, Maximum Basic Sum Assured: No limit, Premium Paying Term: 10, 20, 25 and 30 years, Policy Term: 100 (minimum age at entry) years. SPECIAL FEATURES: Life long risk cover till Age 100, Bonus throughout the term, Final additional bonus (if any), Loan facility.

Punjab Budget Session likely to be stormy affair

AAP and SAD gear up to corner Congress Govt over wide range of issues

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

Punjab Vidhan Sabha's last budget session under the current Congress Government, starting from Monday, is set to be tumultuous.

The 10-day budget session, with eight actual working days, is all set to witness fiery discussion on the wide range of issues with the Centre's farm laws, set to dominate.

Both Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) and Shriromani Akali Dal (SAD) are also geared up

with enough ammunition to target the ruling party with the long list of its unfulfilled promises including drug menace, employment, welfare schemes, among others.

All charged up after party's landslide victory in the recently-concluded civic body polls, Congress, set to bring in legislation to counteract the Centre's three new agriculture acts.

On Monday, the Punjab Governor would address the House, following which obitu-

ary references will be made for those who have passed away in the intervening period between the previous session.

The state budget for 2021-22 is proposed to be presented on March 5.

This being the last budget of the Congress Government before the State goes to polls in January-February next, the Finance Minister Manpreet Singh Bada is expected to make various pro-people and populist announcements.



Besides the state budget estimates for the next fiscal, the session will also see the presentation of the report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India for the year 2018-19 (civil, commercial) and financial accounts of government of Punjab for the year

Minister Capt Amarinder Singh.

"We will ask the Chief Minister to explain why he betrayed the farmers by promising to waive loans taken from nationalized and private banks as well as cooperative societies and arhtiyas when he did not have any intention of fulfilling this promise," he added.

Similarly, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) will be questioning the State Government for not being able to "honour" its poll promises made in 2017.

Opposition Harpal Singh Cheema said: "It has been four years since then and we have reached the final budget session and none of those promises have yet been fulfilled."

The party has a long list of issues to be raised in the House including farm loan waiver, SC post-matric scholarship, MSP issue, electricity issues, farmers' suicide, among others.

AAP's Punjab unit chief Bhagwant Mann accused the Congress-led government of "throwing all its promises into a dustbin".

"No promise has been fulfilled yet, be it jobs to every household, farm debt waiver, Rs 2,500 per month pension etc," said Mann.

Sangrur MP alleged that while "mat mafia" was rampant in the state, the public was "completely neglected" by this government.

Monday in protest against "rising" fuel and cooking gas price on the other hand, the SAD has also planned to "gherao" Punjab Assembly on Monday after the party chief Sukhbir Singh Bada addresses Akali workers at Sector 25.

"We will march towards the Vidhan Sabha in a peaceful manner," said SAD leader Dajjit Singh Cheema while alleging that the Congress party's poll promises had turned out to be "fraud".

BJP leader Tarun Chugh said that they will "expose" the Congress-led dispensation for "not keeping" its promises like farm debt waiver.

"The ruling party always tried to divert attention from its failures in four years," said Chugh.

Punjab Min found Covid +ve by State Health Dept, tests -ve at PGIMER

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

In a major embarrassment for the state Health Minister, the Covid-19 test report of state's Health Minister Sukhinder Singh Randhawa on Sunday tested "negative" for the virus at PGIMER and also at a private lab, a day after he was reported "positive" for the contagion by the state Health Department.

Notably, COVID-19 negative report has been made mandatory for all the legislators and the officials concerned to attend the Punjab Vidhan Sabha budget session, starting from Monday.

For the purpose, the state Health Department is conducting the tests. Randhawa's samples were also collected by the state Health Department from the MLA Hostel on February 25.

Before the test report came, the Minister again got himself tested at a private lab here on February 27.

While the Health Department test came back negative, the private lab found him negative for Coronavirus on Saturday, Randhawa said. Later in the evening, he went to the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGIMER) for a third test, which also came back negative.

"I am surprised by the report of the test conducted by the health authorities as my other two tests came back negative," said the Minister adding that he has shared his reports

with the state Health Minister and other senior officials.

Randhawa said that despite the first test coming back positive, the health authorities have not approached him regarding following COVID-19 related protocols.

Asked if he will attend the assembly session, he said he would if he is allowed to.

In August last year, Randhawa was among the first state ministers to contract the Coronavirus.

Meanwhile, another Cabinet Minister Sukhinder Singh Sarkaria, who tested

positive two days back, continued to do his official work.

On his Facebook page, he shared, "After my corona report came positive, I have quarantined myself and following all health rules and protocols. Despite all this, I am performing my duty and doing government work and clearing necessary files.

"These files go ahead after being fully sanitized. Heartfelt thanks for your wishes and blessings. I hope we all together will win the ongoing war against Corona soon."

PUNJAB REPORTS 582 CASES, 7 DEATHS

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

Continuing the trend, Punjab on Sunday reported 582 fresh cases of the novel Coronavirus, besides seven deaths, pushing the state's Covid-19 tally to 17,712.

Among the fatalities, Amritsar and Jalandhar reported two each; while one casualty each was reported from Ferozepur, Gurdaspur, and Hoshiarpur. The state's case fatality rate continues to hover above three percent. At 3.20 percent, Punjab CFR continues to be highest in the country.

Of the total, the state has 4,632 active cases—accounting for 2.54 percent of the total reported cases. 81 patients are on oxygen support, while nine are critical and on ventilator support. Out of the total, Jalandhar reported the highest 108 fresh cases, followed by 75 from Kapurthala, 61 from Mohali, 64 from Patiala, 63 from Ludhiana, 56 from Nawanshahr, 47 from Amritsar, among others; while three districts—Bathinda, Tarn Taran, and Mansa reported not even a single case.

On Sunday, a total of 376 patients were discharged after recovering from the contagion, taking the total number of recoveries to 1,71,712 at the rate of 94.26 percent.

Haryana all set to launch third phase of Covid-19 vaccine

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

Haryana Health Minister Anil Vij on Sunday said that the State Government will start the third phase of Covid-19 vaccine roll out on March 1.

He said that the state Health Department has successfully completed the first and second phases of Covid-19 vaccine roll out and now, the population above 60 years of age and those with co-morbidities falling within the age group of 45 years to 60 years will be administered the vaccine in the third phase.

Vij said that the vaccine will be administered free of cost at Government Hospitals and will be administered at a cost of Rs 250 at government empanelled private hospitals.

19 vaccine rollout, Additional Chief Secretary, Health, Rajeev Arora said that there are two beneficiaries who will be administered the vaccine in the phase three. First are those who are above 60 years of age and second are between the age group of 45 years to 60 years with co-morbidities. For those with co-morbidities they have to get a certificate regarding the co-morbidity from a government or private registered medical practitioner in order to get the vaccine administered, he added.

Arora said that the beneficiary can go to any government-run COVID vaccine centre and get the vaccine administered free of cost or can register themselves on the CoWIN portal or Arogya Setu App.

Chd to launch third phase of vaccine drive at govt hospitals

that the beneficiary can specify the date, time and vaccination centre where he will like to get the vaccine administered and then visit it on the specified date. The beneficiary should carry any photo-id card, Aadhar card, Voter id card, PAN Card or Driving License, alongwith registration of comorbidity.

National Health Mission, Haryana, Mission Director, Prabhat Singh said that the list of 382 empanelled private hospitals under the Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana, Ayushman Bharat Scheme of State Government insurance scheme hospitals is available on the CoWIN portal and the beneficiary can select the vaccination centre while registration.



and five private hospitals. The Administration would be conducting the COVID-19 vaccination drive in third phase at 13 sites in government health care facilities and five private hospitals. More centres for vaccination will be added in the list in the next couple of days, said Dr Amandeep Kang, Director

Health Services, Chandigarh. The private hospitals to be made operational on day one of the drive on Monday include Santokh Hospital Sector 38, Chaitanya Hospital Sector 44, Healing Hospital and Institute of Paramedical Sciences Sector 34, Landmark Hospital Sector 38 and Bharat Hospital Sector 15, Dr Kang said.

Third round of Covid-19 vaccination from today

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

The third round of Covid-19 vaccination set to commence across Punjab from March 1, is expected to cover around 25 to 30 lakh eligible beneficiaries.

"In this round, vaccine will be administered to senior citizens above 60 years of age and citizens aged 45 to 59 suffering with co-morbidities as specified by the government. They shall be required to provide certification from Registered Medical Practitioner regarding the co-morbidity," said the state Health and Family Welfare Minister Balbir Singh Sidhu on Sunday.

istration for vaccination is not mandatory in this round of vaccination, can pre-register or just walk-in for the same. "However, it is advisable that citizens who are pre-register in order to avoid waiting in the health facility for vaccination," he added.

The vaccine will be administered free of cost in all government hospitals while private sector centres may pre-charge Rs 150 per dose and may charge up to Rs 100 additional as service provision charges, he added.

Sidhu said that in the meanwhile, the vaccination for healthcare workers and front-

line workers would continue along with this round of vaccination even if they have not registered. In this round, onsite registration by walk-in is expected to cover around 24 lakh citizens in Punjab who are above 60, while another four to five lakh people, who are between 45-59 years, with co-morbidities.

As of today, according to the daily media health bulletin, as many as 88,499 healthcare workers and 65,567 frontline workers have been inoculated with the first dose, while a total

Haryana reports 174 fresh Covid cases, one fatality

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

With 174 fresh Covid-19 cases, Haryana's caseload surged to 4702 on Sunday, while one more person succumbed to the virus taking the toll to 3048 in the state.

One death was reported in Yamunagar district due to Covid-19, the state's Health Department bulletin stated. As per the bulletin, a maximum of 56 fresh cases were reported from Gurugram followed by 21 in Ambala. There were 1275 active cases in the state till the evening, 103 people died on Sunday. As per the last 24 hours taking the total recoveries in the state to 26641. Out of 28 critical patients admitted in the hospitals, 24 patients were on oxygen support while four were on ventilator, the health bulletin stated.

According to the bulletin, the fatality rate was recorded at 1.13 percent in Haryana. The case-doubling rate in Haryana stood at 145 days, COVID positive rate was 4.78% and recovery rate was recorded at 98.40%. As many as 56.5 lakh samples have been tested till date in Haryana, it added. Chd reports one death, 51 fresh COVID cases. The UT of Chd reported one COVID-19 death as 51 fresh positive cases were reported on Sunday. As per the Chandigarh Health Dept's evening bulletin, the total case tally reached 21770 and the death toll stood at 352. A 60 years old COVID positive female resident of Sector-38, a case of type 2 Diabetes Mellitus and Coronary Artery Disease expired at PGIMER.

In 3 days, Punjab Police arrests 392 drug smugglers

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

Intensifying its war to eradicate drugs menace from the state, the Punjab Police, under its special drive launched against the drug menace, have arrested 392 drug smugglers in three days. The special drive, named NDPS Act under the state. The week-long drive commenced on February 25.

The State Director General of Police (DGP) Dinkar Gupta, divulging details, said that during this drive, the police have recovered heroin as well as other drugs after carrying out cordon and search operations in drug affected areas besides laying nakas at vulnerable routes across the state. The police have also arrested 15 Proclaimed Offenders (POs) of NDPS cases during these three

days.

"As part of the Punjab Government's zero tolerance policy against the drugs, the Punjab Police is committed to eradicate the drug menace from the state," said Gupta adding that the arrested drug smugglers are being initiated from time-to-time to combat the menace of drugs in Punjab.

"The Punjab Police had set a new record by seizing over 700 kgs heroin worth Rs 3,500 crores in the international market, by confiscating property worth Rs 101 crores after arresting over 10,000 drug smugglers in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic," said the DGP.

He said that massive crackdown on drugs not only led to break the supply chain of drugs but also resulted in decline in

Registers 283 FIRs

Recovery of 700 kg heroin and property worth Rs 101 crores in 2020 highest ever

drug-related deaths as only 19 drug related deaths were reported in year 2020 in comparison to 2019 and 2018, which had witnessed 47 and 111 drug related deaths respectively.

Under the current anti-drug drive, Tarn Taran police carried out a mammoth exercise based on technical collection, data crunching and human intelligence to identify areas notorious for drug smuggling and recovered 1.39 kg heroin and a large number of intoxicant tablets in just three days.

Interestingly, one of the arrested drug suppliers of Tarn Taran used to barter drugs with motorcycle or mobile phones, mostly stolen or snatched.

and 25 cartridges while the Jalandhar Commissionerate Police have recovered 6.23 kg Opium, 4.50 quintal poppy husk, 237grams heroin and 4.7 kg Ganja.

Meanwhile, the data from April 2020 till date reveals that the Punjab Police have recovered 1760 kg heroin, 25 kg smack and 1794 kg opium from the drug smugglers and suppliers besides seizure or attachment of property worth Rs 163 crores.

On 31, 2020, the Special Task Force (STF) of Punjab Police had seized 197kg heroin and other contraband from the illegal drug factory set-up in a rented house at village Sultanwadi of Amritsar.

Similarly, the Amritsar Rural Police have recovered drug money worth Rs 89 lakhs besides impounding one pistol

against conversion by misrepresentation, force, undue influence, coercion, inducement, marriage or any fraudulent means, he said.

On the ongoing farmers' agitation against the Centre's three farm laws, he said that farmers' plan to raise the price of milk from Rs 50 per litre to Rs 100 per litre as part of the protest will fail their agitation.

He also termed the farmers' agitation as a "political issue" with no justified demands.

The Chief Minister also ruled out the State Government's role in the recent IT searches on the premises of Independent MLA Balraj Kundu.

Punjab to provide MRI, CT Scan facility at district hospitals soon on subsidised rates

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH/ GHANAUR (PATIALA)

Soon, Punjab Government is set to provide MRI and CT Scan facility at its district hospitals at subsidized rates.

All the District Hospitals of the state, including some of the Sub-Divisional and Community Health Centers, catering large number of rural population, would have MRI and CT Scan facility at very low cost—about 42 to 48% less—soon, that would further strengthen the infrastructure under Sarbat Sehat Bima Yojna (AS-SBY), said the state Health and Family Welfare Minister Balbir Singh Sidhu on Sunday.

"The State Govt has recruited a large number of doctors, nurses, and paramedics to strengthen the health sector in Punjab," said

Sidhu, while kickstarting the upgrade drive work of Community Health Center at Ghanaur in Patiala district. He said that the existing capacity of 30 beds of the hospital would be enhanced to 50 after completion of renovation work upgradation work worth ₹10 crore. "For providing child and mother healthcare to the remote areas of this belt of Patiala, a 'Mai Dautan Mother and Child Care Hospital' would also come up here," he said.

Appreciating the services rendered by the doctors and healthcare workers during the ongoing Corona pandemic, the Minister said that their work in the service of humanity is exemplary and they have shown utmost dedication to save the human mankind from the clutches of this deadly virus.

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BJP-JJP combine enjoys majority in State Assembly, says HaryanaCM

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar on Sunday claimed that the BJP-JJP combine enjoys a majority in the House.

Responding to Congress' claim of bringing a no-confidence motion against the State Government in the Assembly during the upcoming budget session, the Chief Minister said that it is their right to bring a no-confidence motion against the government.

"We are in majority. The opposition is doing such an exercise as they are afraid of their sustainability," Manohar Lal said while talking to the mediapersons here.

The budget session of the Haryana Assembly will commence from March 5.

Recently, the Leader of the Opposition in the House and senior Congress leader Bhupinder Singh Hooda had said that voices of dissent are being heard among the MLAs supporting the government and they will bring a no-confidence motion against it.

Meanwhile, the Chief Minister also said that a Bill against religious conversion by force, inducement or through marriages solemnised for the sole purpose of adopting a new religion will be introduced in the Budget session. The Bill will be brought in which there will be provisions

against conversion by misrepresentation, force, undue influence, coercion, inducement, marriage or any fraudulent means, he said.

On the ongoing farmers' agitation against the Centre's three farm laws, he said that farmers' plan to raise the price of milk from Rs 50 per litre to Rs 100 per litre as part of the protest will fail their agitation.

He also termed the farmers' agitation as a "political issue" with no justified demands.

The Chief Minister also ruled out the State Government's role in the recent IT searches on the premises of Independent MLA Balraj Kundu.

Jakhar asks leaders, raking up organisational matters to shun politics of opportunism

PNS ■ CHANDIGARH

Hitting out at recent statements of some 'senior' party leaders against the Congress leadership, Punjab Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) president Sunil Jakhar on Sunday castigated them for indulging in politics of opportunism "that too at a time when every Congress worker is fighting the brave battle to save and preserve the idea of India under assault from oppressive central regime".

Those raising their voice against "reforms" in an organisation, which gave them the most potent platform to evolve as leaders, are today doing a great disservice not only to the party but also to the country, Punjab Congress chief said in a hard-hitting statement.

Pointing out that Congress leader Rahul Gandhi had led the struggle against draconian anti-farmer legislations from Punjab, Jakhar reminded them while inviting them to "come and join the politics of struggle for the common man when Punjab Congress leads a protest march to gherao the Governor against the spiraling prices of essential commodities".

"Come and join me in the protest which would be a refresher course for you all in raising the voice of the people we serve far away from the cosy environs of Rajya Sabha galleries," Jakhar quipped.

On being asked about Kapil Sibal, Ghulam Nabi Azad, Raj Babbar, and Anand Sharma's fresh statements, Punjab Congress president said that the country is passing

through a challenging times when the Modi regime is crippling people of all sections of society with its destructive policies to help few corporates.

"To counter this oppression, the country needs Congress to engage in politics of struggle to raise the voice of common man on the street,"

Jakhar said, urging all these senior leaders to take up issues of the public.

Disagreeing with Babbar's 'Hum hi Congress hai' comment, Jakhar underlined that while "Congress party is older than you and me" and its core philosophy has consistently been of public service only.

"No doubt, you are Congress... But such comments do not behave a senior leader like you," Jakhar said to Babbar.

On Ghulam Nabi Azad's statement that he has retired from Rajya Sabha and not from active politics, Jakhar said that retiring from the upper house never means retiring from politics at all and rather politics has begun now.

Responding to Sibal's statement about the need to further strengthen the party, Punjab

Congress chief invited him to come and join him to work for the people in the streets to make the party and country stronger.

Jakhar pointed out that the Punjab Congress would be gheraoing Punjab Governor on March 1 to raise the voice of people against skyrocketing prices of essential commodities.

Inviting all these senior leaders to be a part of this protest march, he said they are cordially welcome to come and raise concerns of the public over the atrocious spike in prices of LPG, petrol and diesel.

CBI, NCB, 3 others without regular chiefs

RAKESH K SINGH ■ NEW DELHI

At least three Central Police Organisations (CPOs), including CBI and NCB, besides two Central Armed Police Force (CAPF) or paramilitary, CRPF and NSG, are headless in the face of absence of appointments of regular chiefs. These agencies are working with ad hoc chiefs.

While the post of Director of Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) is vacant since February 3 when the then incumbent RK Shukla retired from service after completion of the fixed two-year tenure, 1984-batch Gujarat cadre IPS officer Rakesh Ashana is holding additional charge of the chief of the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) after his appointment as Director General of the Border Security Force (BSF) on August 17 last year.

The CBI is currently headed by 1988-batch Gujarat cadre IPS officer Praveen Sinha, presently additional director in the investigating agency, as an interim chief till a regular appointment.

The CBI chief is appointed by a high-level panel headed by the Prime Minister that also includes the Chief Justice of India and the Leader of the largest Opposition party in the Lok Sabha and a meeting of the committee is yet to be called, sources said.

Likewise, the post of the chief of Bureau of Police Research and Development (BPR&D), also a CPO, is vacant after the incumbent Director General and 1986-batch IPS officer of Andhra Pradesh

India must focus on water conservation: PM

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Asking the country to think ahead, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday highlighted the need for water conservation, saying the Government would "in a few days" launch a campaign 'Catch the Rain' "where it falls when it falls."

In his monthly radio-talk 'mann ki baat', Modi called for a 100-day campaign to clean water bodies and harvest rain-water.

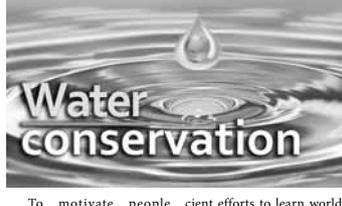
"This is the best time to think about water conservation in the summer months ahead. Water has been crucial for the development of humankind for centuries," he said.

In his 74th edition, second for 2021, radio address Prime Minister touched on various issues concerning the nation, including water conservation, conservation and education.

"Many people from across the country are contributing to Atmanirbhar Bharat... Atmanirbhar Bharat is not merely a Government efforts. It is the national spirit of India," said Modi.

Modi stressed the importance of water conservation during his address and announced that the Jal Shakti Ministry would soon launch a water conservation campaign called 'Catch the Rain'.

"On March 22, World Water Day will be celebrated. We must understand our responsibility towards water conservation. In a few days, the Jal Shakti Ministry will launch a campaign 'Catch the Rain. Its slogan is 'Catch the Rain, where it falls when it falls. This is the best time to think about water conservation in the summer months ahead. Water has been crucial for the development of humankind for centuries," he said.



To motivate people towards nature conservation Modi gave an example of Javed Payeng of Assam. "He has actively contributed towards 300 hectares plantations in Majuli island in Assam. He is now working for forest conservation and has been inspiring people on plantation and conservation of biodiversity," he said.

Wishing students ahead of their examinations, Modi said, "Be a warrior, not a warrior." He also invited parents, teachers for their suggestion for "Pariksha pe Charcha."

In his address, Modi urged sports ministry to promote sports commentary in regional culture.

"We need to think about promoting commentary of Indian sports in regional languages," Prime Minister said.

"We must think about promoting it. I would urge the sports ministry and private institutions to think about it," he said.

Do you ever feel that something is still missing? asked a listener to which he mentioned his "insufficient efforts" to pick-up Tamil language.

"You have been PM and CM for so many years. Do you ever feel that something is still missing? asked a listener. The listener had asked, I could not make suffi-

cient efforts to learn world's most ancient language Tamil. I could not learn Tamil," said Modi in his response.

Extending greetings to the people on 'National Science Day', Prime Minister noted the immense role that, he said, played by Science in making the country self-reliant.

"Today is National Science Day. It is dedicated to the discovery of the 'Raman Effect' by scientist Dr CV Raman. Our youth should read a lot about Indian scientists and understand the history of Indian science," said Modi.

"In self-reliant India, there is immense contribution of science. We will have to take science forward with the mantra of 'lab to land,' he added.

Modi began his address by invoking saint-poet Sant Ravidas, a day after the nation remembered him on his anniversary.

"Sant Ravidas Ji taught us-keep working, do not expect anything...when this is done there will be satisfaction. He taught people to go beyond conventional thinking. Sant Ravidas Ji spoke directly and honestly about various issues. He was fearless. We bow to Sant Ravidas Ji on his Jayanti. His thoughts inspire us," said the Prime Minister.

Mobile app helps data collection of food item prices

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Ministry of Consumer Affairs on Sunday said that data collection of wholesale and retail prices of 22 essential commodities on a daily basis has improved following the launch of a mobile app from January this year. The ministry monitors prices of rice, wheat, wheat flour, gram dal, tur/arhar Dal, moong dal, masoor Dal, sugar, milk, groundnut oil, mustard oil, vanaspathi, soya oil, sunflower oil, palm oil, gur, tea, salt, potato, onion and tomato. The price data is being collected from 127 centres across the country through retail and civil supplies departments of state Governments.

"To improve the quality of prices data for reporting daily prices data for reporting prices by the price reporting centres, the Department of Consumer Affairs launched Mobile App on 1st January, 2021," the ministry said in a statement.

The monitoring and predictive analysis of prices of essential commodities has taken a giant step forward, it said.

The mobile app for price monitoring for 22 essential commodities has started providing effective real time information about retail and wholesale prices from 127 locations across the country, the statement said.

The daily report of retail and wholesale prices are obtained from 127 centres located across the country. The daily report of prices and indicative price trends are analysed for taking appropriate decisions such as monitoring of stocks from the buffer and export-import policy etc.

"Price reporting through Mobile App ensures reporting from the market location as data are geotagged thereby displaying the

location from where price data are reported," it said. The reporting of static data from office desktop is ruled out through the application of Mobile App.

"Therefore, the condition to operationalise Mobile App is that each Price Reporting Centre has to furnish market details such as names and addresses of the shops and markets from where prices are being collected," it said. As per the guidelines for retail price reporting, the prices of the same variety of a commodity are to be collected from three markets — high income market, middle income market and low income market and the average of the three prices is to be reported.

The ministry said that the mobile App has inbuilt feature to calculate and report the average price.

This helps in avoiding human error in calculation. Market information from Agmarknet, Agriwatch, NAFED and trade associations also constitute inputs for price analysis.

The ministry is also utilising the services of Agriculture and Horticulture Market Information System (AHMIS) for intelligence, predictive analysis of prices and to develop price forecasting model.

The ministry said it had proposed to DEA (department of economic affairs) for technical assistance under CARES Programme of Asian Development Bank (ADB) for improving price monitoring and analysis.

The activity components under the technical assistance are upgradation of price monitoring portal, capacity building for price reporting centres and price monitoring cell, identification of long-term improvements for food commodity supply chain & market efficiency.

Foreign Secy dwells on 'lasting peace' ties with China

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Normal bilateral ties between India and China depends on lasting peace and tranquility on the border, Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla said on Sunday. His comments came days after both the countries completed the first phase of disengagement of troops from the stand off sites at the Pangong Tso(lake) in Eastern Ladakh.

India has always stressed in interactions with Chinese that as long as India has a large trade profile with it, Shringla said India has to continue to work on the economic relationship with the neighbouring country, but it has to be calibrated based on the security of the nation.

Underlining that China is the second-largest economy in the world, India has a large trade profile with it, Shringla said India has to continue to work on the economic relationship with the neighbouring country, but it has to be calibrated based on the security of the nation.

Talking about the "recent disturbances" on the India-China border areas in Eastern Ladakh, Shringla, while speaking at a meeting of the Dialogue Group, said, "We in our interactions with our Chinese interlocutors have always made the point that a normal bilateral relationship is contingent upon peace and tranquility in the border areas."

"This is a sine qua non (absolutely necessary) and this is something both sides have accepted as part of their treaty obligations, he said at an online session of the Dialogue Group organised by the Pune International Centre.

"Now as we disengage and there is some forward movement in the resolution of some of the recent border friction points...obviously we have to see what else is required," he said.

"It is a very long border that we have with China and we are only talking about one small point on the border. We are trying to now see whether we can apply similar principles in sorting out some of the other areas which are in the Ladakh sector, some other sectors that we are talking about, and to see how else we can move forward on the issue of managing our long but porous border with China in a manner that allows both countries to sort of maintain a level of semblance of normalcy," the foreign secretary said.

Shringla said the resolution of the outstanding issues has a "work in progress" and has had an impact on the economic ties, he said. On the economic aspect of the ties, he said the important point is that whatever one does, China is the second largest economy in the world and India has a large trade profile with it.

"Clearly, we have to continue to work on the economic relationship but it has to be calibrated based on the security of the nation and progress on important issues that are critical to both countries politically," he said.

Noting that China is India's largest trading partner in terms of goods, the foreign secretary said the balance of trade is very much skewed in favour of China.

"We have carried quite a heavy trade imbalance for over a number of years. Over time this has increasingly seemed as being unsustainable," he said.

'Sindhu Netra' launched to boost country's defence, civilian surveillance



PTI ■ SRIHARIKOTA

New Delhi: In a boost for the country's surveillance capabilities to monitor activities of both military warships and merchant shipping in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), the 'Sindhu Netra' satellite developed by a team of young scientists from Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) was successfully deployed in space on Sunday.

The satellite was launched using the Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO) PSLV-C51 which took off from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota in Andhra Pradesh at 10:30 am today.

The Sindhu Netra satellite has been developed by the young scientists of the DRDO

and is capable of automatically identifying the warships and merchant ships operating in the IOR. The satellite has also started communicating with the ground systems, government sources told.

The satellite, if required, can also help in carrying out surveillance in specific areas such as the South China Sea or the pirate-infested areas near the Gulf of Aden and the African coast, the sources said.

They added that the Sindhu Netra is one of the first in the series of satellites that would help the nation in enhancing its surveillance capabilities on land in areas such as the Ladakh region of China and the border areas with Pakistan.

Seeking to keep a closer eye on the activities of the Chinese military both near the Indian territory as well as in its depth areas all along the 4,000 kilometre Line of Actual Control (LAC), the Indian security agencies feel there is a requirement of four to six dedicated satellites which can help them keep a check on the adversary's moves.

Along with the setting up of the Defence Space Agency, the Government also created a defence space research organisation to look after the ability to protect space assets from being attacked by adversaries there. The space arm of the defence forces would also be bolstered significantly in near future.

"What the government believes is utterly contradictory. They ask why should they initiate anything massive for a group which does not have a massive patient burden unlike cancer, but what I say is that to know the real burden it has to make newborn screening mandatory," he slammed the Government.

Vikas Bhatia from Merd (Metabolic Errors and Rare Diseases) India Foundation echoed similar views saying that in India, the health care priorities are still limited to reducing the Infant Mortality Rate(IMR) and meeting basic infrastructure requirements.

"The Government is yet to have a mandatory screening program for newborn babies."

Amazonia-1 of Brazil, 18 other satellites launched from ISRO

PTI ■ SRIHARIKOTA

India's Polar rocket on Sunday successfully launched Amazonia-1 of Brazil and 18 other satellites from the spaceport here, in the first mission of its space agency ISRO.

The Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle PSLV-C51 lifted off at around 10.24 am from the first launch pad of the Satish Dhawan Space Centre (SHAR) and first injected into orbit primary payload Amazonia-1 about 17 minutes later.

After a gap of over one-and-a-half hours, the co-passenger satellites, including one from Chennai-based Space Kidz India (SKI), which is a private initiative, and carried Bhagavad Gita in a Secured Digital card format. According to SKI, the picture of Modi has been engraved on the top panel of the spacecraft to signify solidarity and gratitude for his Arma Nirbhar initiative and space sector privatisation.

A beaming Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) Chairman K Sivan announced the mission was successful and all 19 satellites were launched in precise orbits. "Today is a very great day for the entire ISRO team and the PSLV-C51 is a special mission for India. Let me congratulate and compliment the team ISRO for achieving the precise injection of AMAZONIA-1 and 18 other satellites," he said.

PSLV-C51 is the first dedicated commercial mission of NewSpace India Limited (NSIL), ISRO's commercial arm, and the launch was watched among others by Brazilian Government officials at the mission control centre here, over 100 kms from Chennai. The co-passenger satellites placed in the orbit are — four from ISRO's Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre (three UNITY Sats from consortium of three Indian academic institutes and the SD-SAT from SKI) and 14 from NSIL.

The 637-kg Amazonia-1 which became the first Brazilian satellite to be launched from India is an optical earth observation satellite of National Institute for Space Research (INPE).

Explosion at quarry site in Karnataka: NGT directs committee to submit report

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) on Sunday formed a six-member committee and directed it to submit a report in connection with a gelatin explosion at a quarry site in Chikkaballapur in Karnataka that left six people dead.

The bench headed by NCTJ Chairperson Justice A K Goel took note of a media report and issued notices to the Central Pollution Control Board, state pollution control board, Director Mines Karnataka and the District Magistrate Chikkaballapur.

"We constitute a six-member joint committee comprising the CPCB, State PCB, District Magistrate, Chikkaballapur, nominee of Director General, Mines, Chief Controller of Explosives, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Nagpur, and the Director, Mines, Karnataka to give a report to this tribunal," the bench said.

The nodal agency for coordination and compliance was to be the CPCB and the State PCB, the NGT said while adding that the committee may visit the site preferably within next one week and give its report about the cause of the incident.

"Except for visit to the site at least once, the Committee will be free to conduct its proceedings online. It will be free to take the assistance from any other expert/organization."

"The Committee may suitably interact with the stakeholders and, apart from considering the present incident, also consider remedial measures for preventing such incidents in the area by other establishments even beyond the said area," the bench said.

The tribunal took cognisance of media report dated February 23, 2021 in which it reported that six people were killed in quarry blast in Hirenagavalli, Chikkaballapur on February 23.

The blast occurred in a stone quarry unit situated in Hirenagavalli village, Chikkaballapur. The preliminary information shared by the police, the quarrying work was stopped at the site on February 7 after local residents complained of rampant use of gelatin sticks.

Early this year, the Delhi High Court had directed the Centre to finalise and operationalise the Policy by March 31, 2021.

Experts call for mandatory newborn screening, fund aid for better mgmt

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

On World Rare Disease Day, observed on every last day of February, experts on Sunday stressed on mandatory newborn screening and adequate financial support for control and management of the disease.

There are more than 7,000 diagnosed rare diseases in the world and over 250 million individuals suffer from them, with nearly one-fifth in India. "But, many patients go without being diagnosed accurately or treated on time," activists in the sector said while calling for a comprehensive policy.

Around 50 percent of the rare diseases are by birth, and the rest are late onset. Only seven of the 450 are treatable

diseases, the rest need to be managed.

"We are literally sitting on a ticking time bomb," Prasanna Shirrol, co-founder of the Organisation of Rare Diseases in India (ORDI) said, lamenting that there is no official list of identified rare diseases issued by the Government.

In fact, the national registry announced by Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) in 2017, which aimed to cover a set of rare and ultra-rare disorders that are prevalent in India has remained a non-starter till date.

Lack of awareness is the biggest challenge in diagnosing rare diseases, said Shirrol, explaining that the average time to identify a rare disease in a patient is seven years.

"What the government believes is utterly contradictory. They ask why should they initiate anything massive for a group which does not have a massive patient burden unlike cancer, but what I say is that to know the real burden it has to make newborn screening mandatory," he slammed the Government.

Vikas Bhatia from Merd (Metabolic Errors and Rare Diseases) India Foundation echoed similar views saying that in India, the health care priorities are still limited to reducing the Infant Mortality Rate(IMR) and meeting basic infrastructure requirements.

"The Government is yet to have a mandatory screening program for newborn babies."

Though, some States like Kerala and Goa and hospitals like SGGGI Lucknow, JK Loan Hospital, Jaipur, have made it mandatory screening for some disorders in the state government health care facilities, it should be uniformly adopted by all the States, said Bhatia.

"Otherwise also, even if it is mandatory or not mandatory, the health of their baby is of utmost important concern of the parents and they do not want to go through any trauma," he said. "Lastly, screening should be simple, specific, sensitive, cost effective and easy for collection and transport," he

suggested.

Unhappy at the delay in diagnosis, Vijay sarpant, chairman of Sappant Foundation for rare disease research and board member of Canadian organization of rare disorders in India, Parvathy Krishnan from Foundation Alliance Manager for Global Genes felt that "this journey is significantly more prolonged due to the unavailability of testing, limited access to specialists, and a lack of

CBI identifies 10 more victims of child sexual abuse by junior engineer

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The CBI has identified 10 more victims of alleged child sexual abuse by now-suspended Uttar Pradesh Irrigation department junior engineer Ram Bhanuwan, the alleged paedophile also accused of selling the illicit acts with kids on the dark web, officials said.

Further expanding its exhaustive probe, the central probe agency recorded the statement of these 10 male victims to buttress its charges against Bhanuwan who was arrested along with his wife and a suspected accomplice, they said.

Furfura Sharief chief exhorts followers to vote for Left Front

Left-Cong-ISF show in Bengal

SAUGAR SENGUPTA ■ KOLKATA

In what could give a created forehead to Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, Indian Secular Front (ISF) chief Pirzada Abbas Siddiqui of Furfura Sharief, the largest Muslim religious congregation in Bengal — on Sunday openly asked the "people of Bengal" to "vote for the Left Front as a mark of gratitude for their humility to leave 30 seats for us in the coming Assembly elections."

"The Left Front leaders have shown humility to accept most of our demands conceding 30 seats to us and so the ISF will support them to throw out the current government of the BJP and its agent Mamata Banerjee... the ISF will support the Left Front," Pirzada who attended the Left Front-

sponsored mammoth rally at the historic Brigade Parade Ground in Kolkata said.

"Mamata Banerjee did more harm to Muslims by creating a Hindu-Muslim divide and allowing the State to enter the State with its agenda... she is a bigger enemy of the Muslims," the Muslim cleric earlier said.

The mega rally was also attended by senior Congress leaders like party Lok Sabha Leader Adhir Chowdhury, Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Rupesh Baghel and Jitendra Prasad. Among other stars were CPIM general secretary Sitaram Yechury, his politburo colleagues, Suryakanto Mishra, Md Salim and Biman Bose and JNU students' wing leader Aishi Ghosh.

The rally's support for the Left became significant against the backdrop of high percentage of Muslim votes in Bengal accounting for about 28-30

percent — dominating the voting pattern of about 125 seats.

The role of Furfura Sharief cleric also becomes important as they have an influence over the majority of Bengali-speaking Muslims of the State.

Reacting to the "alleged grand success" of the rally, Bengal Minister Firhad Hakim said, "The people do not want to know who supports whom... they want to know who will stand by them... and that is Mamata Banerjee... no amount of effort to divide anti-BJP votes will work as the minorities are an intelligent lot and they have seen the fate of Bihar elections a few months ago."

In an electoral atmosphere almost vertically divided between the ruling Trinamool Congress and the opposition BJP, the support of the Left by sitting together a Third Front comprising non-BJP, non-TMC parties including the Congress.



CPIM workers participate in a march towards Brigade Parade Ground during mass Left Front and Congress joint rally ahead of West Bengal Assembly elections, in Kolkata on Sunday

Siddiqui's support to the Left promises to bring back the minority votes to its fold but it also threatens Chief Minister with a realistic loss of Muslim votes — her electoral mainstay for the past two

decades — a factor that can eventually make the BJP's job easier, a senior State BJP leader and a former MLA said adding "this rally was the rally not of the Left but of the Bhajjan Siddiqui" ... let the

thousands of Hindu refugees who were forced to leave Bangladesh take a decision." Siddiqui who supported the Left however issued a veiled warning to the Congress saying "those who will extend a hand

of friendship will get a positive reply otherwise not." Siddiqui has been unhappy with the Congress which is reluctant to part with 10 seats from its share to the ISF.

After initial rounds of talks the Marxists have left 92 seats out of 294 for the Congress and 30 seats for the ISF. The ISF has been asking for additional 10 seats from Congress' share.

In the rally Siddiqui said, "People must be thinking that why I asked you to vote for the Left and why I did not mention the Congress... I have come here to extract our genuine right and not to appeal to someone... those who will extend their hands of friendship we will definitely back them."

In private he said, "I have heard that Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi are trying to bring an alliance to be in place but some people (read Adhir Chowdhury) are acting as irritants," Siddiqui said adding

"we have a few days left before we will start campaigning. Now it is their job to take a decision." He was contacted by Chandigarh said, "Congress is not dependent on any one. It takes its own decision. Our talks with the Left are not over yet. We do not know how much we are getting so how can we part with any seat for the ISF. First let us be clear about our own seat share..."

Meanwhile the leaders lambasted Narendra Modi and Baghel attacked the Narendra Modi Government for its "anti-people approach" and selling out the national assets to a few corporate houses.

"This Government has decided to squeeze the farmers and common people dry as can be seen not only from the triple anti-farmer laws passed by the government but also the rising oil-prices and cooking gas. Chowdhury said More than 8 lakh people attended the rally, Biman Bose later said.

DMK remains intransigent over Congress demands for more seats

KUMAR CHELLAPPAN ■ CHENNAI

The time tested DMK-Congress alliance in Tamil Nadu is on the verge of collapse as Congress senior Rahul Gandhi has not mentioned the names of his alliance partner or its supreme leader during the first two days of his three-day tour in southern districts which began on Saturday.

No DMK leaders were seen sharing the stage with Rahul Gandhi in Thoothukudi or Tirunelveli districts and this is being seen as an allis not well in the ties between the two parties.

In earlier occasions, the DMK chief M K Stalin would be seen sharing the stage and in public appearances of the former president of the Congress party. The talks between the DMK and the Congress over the sharing of seats for the upcoming assembly election in the State has hit a dead end, for the DMK's refusal of the former to part with more than 20 seats.

The Congress is hoping to get at least 40 seats, the same number of assembly seats which it contested in the 2016 assembly election. But Stalin has reportedly told the Congress leaders that his party should have at least 170 seats of its own for the smooth functioning of the government to be formed post-election.

A senior Congress leader who shared with The Pioneer the developments said that the DMK has been threatened by the BJP not to part with more seats. "The DMK track record while in the UPA Government is not clean. The BJP would not hesitate to unleash the investigating agencies against them if the party leadership does not listen to the Central government," the leader said. The union minister who did not want his name to be quoted.

Rahul Gandhi's speech at Thoothukudi on Saturday and at Tirunelveli on Sunday gave a thumbs down to the DMK's pleasure over the intransigence of the DMK. "The Narendra

Modi Government is unleashing central agencies like Enforcement Directorate, CBI and Customs on the opposition party leaders. But I am not one to be frightened by such deeds," said the Congress leader.

Even as the DMK-Congress seat sharing talks remain inconclusive, the AIADMK sealed a pact with the Vanniyar dominated PMK late Saturday. The PMK, one of the tough customers among the AIADMK alliance partners, was allocated 23 seats. Chief Minister Edappadi Palaniswami and his deputy O Panneerselvam were holding discussions with the BJP State leadership on Sunday and a formal announcement was expected either late evening or on Monday.

The Indian Justice Katchi (Katchi is the Tamil for party) launched by T R Panchamathu MP, an alliance partner of the DMK who came out of the front is giving shape to a Third Front. The BJP is eyeing the chief ministerial candidate.

58 new Covid cases, 1 death reported in J&K

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU



Jammu: Jammu & Kashmir reported reported 58 new Covid cases and one pandemic related death in the last 24 hours while 62 patients recovered from the deadly virus on Sunday.

An official bulletin said out of 58 new Covid cases, 11 were from Jammu while 47 were from Kashmir.

So far, 126,441 people have been infected with coronavirus in J&K out of which 123,661 have recovered while the death toll has reached 1,957. The number of active cases is 823, of which 207 are from Jammu division and 616 are from Kashmir division.

Krishna Dhaba owner's son succumbs to injuries

MOHIT KANDHARI ■ JAMMU

Aakash Mehra, son of a famous Krishna dhaba owner, shot at by the motorcycle borne terrorists on February 17 in a high security zone of Sonwar during the visit of a 24 member foreign delegation, lost a crucial battle of life in a Srinagar hospital in the wee hours of Sunday.

According to close family members, "Aakash was on ventilator support for the last two days in SMHS hospital Srinagar. His condition deteriorated in the wee hours of Sunday before succumbing to his fatal injuries."

Asash had received bullet injuries in his abdomen and chest from a very close range. The mortal remains of the young businessman were shifted to Jammu to perform his last rites. Several close relatives and family friends who attended the last rites, criticised the union territory administration headed by Lt-Gov Manoj Sinha for not organising better treatment facilities outside Jammu and Kashmir to save the precious life of a young businessman.

Aakash was not responding to the treatment to their satisfaction they should have referred him to New Delhi or any other place," several well wishers of the family claimed.

The government should have responded swiftly. "It was a targeted killing to scare away members of the minority community," the relatives of the family said.

Ramesh Kumar Mehra, father of Aakash Mehra, has been running the food joint since 1984 in the area. He stayed there during the peak militancy and never faced any security threat.

The eatery served only vegetarian food and was frequented by a large number of tourists and local residents. Several VVIPs including former Chief Minister Omar Abdullah too visited the food joint to relish his favorite food items. Two days after the terror attack on the famous Krishna Dhaba, the Director of Police, Kashmir range Vijay Kumar had claimed all three terrorists involved in the attack were arrested by the police from Pulwama and Danganpora in Baramulla.

The terror attack, according to police, was a plot to scare away non-locals settled in Kashmir. According to police, the terrorists had done reece of the fortified area 10 days in advance on the instructions of their handler identified as 'Ghazi'.

Lt-Gov Manoj Sinha in his condolence message said, "Saddened to hear about the tragic loss of Aakash Mehra, son of the owner of Krishna Dhaba in Srinagar. Condolences to the bereaved family. May God give strength to the family to bear this irreparable loss. Terrorists will never rest until we see the best of designs, and those responsible for such heinous acts shall be brought to justice."

Former Chief Minister Omar Abdullah posted a tweet after learning about the death of Aakash. Omar tweeted, "Very sad news about Aakash, son of the owner of Krishna Dhaba in Srinagar. After a brave fight he lost the battle to recover from injuries suffered in the earlier attack. May his soul rest in peace & may his family find solace at this difficult time." BJP Chief Mehbooba Mufti also tweeted a condolence message saying, "Shocked & saddened to know that Aakash Mehra who ran Krishna Dhaba in Srinagar succumbed to his injuries after being shot at by militants. May his soul rest in peace. My deepest condolences to the bereaved family."

K'taka Cong seeks account of relief aid to Covid-hit people

Mangaluru: Lashing out at the BJP Government in Karnataka for its failure to contain the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Karnataka Congress on Sunday sought details of the relief aid provided to the Covid-affected people, especially the migrants, labourers and displaced people in Mohania.

"Through Prime Minister Narendra Modi claimed to have allocated a Rs 20 lakh crore package to the Covid-hit people across the country, the Karnataka government has not given the details of the relief aid provided to the beneficiaries, including the beedi workers in this coastal region," Shivakumar told the media here.

Asserting that he would raise the mismanagement of the Covid relief measures during the pandemic in the ensuing state Budget session starting March 4, the Congress lawmaker lamented that the Central and state governments were indifferent to the welfare of the people.

"Petrol and diesel prices have shot up 10 times in the recent days, as the Centre refuses to reduce excise duty on

them and the state government's value added tax (VAT), which account for over 50 per cent of fuel retail price per litre," said Shivakumar on the second day of his trip to the coastal region.

Alarmed over the apathy of the ruling BJP to the plight of the people, as price of petrol crossed Rs 100 per litre and diesel Rs 90 per litre in some states due to high taxes, Shivakumar wondered if Prime Minister Modi cared about the poor and the middle class.

"Taxes on petrol during the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance-2 government in 2013-14 was Rs 10.7 on petrol per litre and Rs 4.9 on diesel per litre.

"In the present BJP dispensation, central taxes like excise duty have shot up to Rs 32.9 per litre of petrol and Rs 32.80 per litre of diesel, which are fueling the inflation," Shivakumar said. The Karnataka Pradesh Congress Committee (KPCC) President also accused the BJP government in the southern state of raising the property tax amid the Covid-19 pandemic and at a time when people were in distress. IANS

Cong MLA's nephew shot dead in Bihar

Patna: The nephew of Congress MLA Santosh Mishra has been gunned down by 31 unidentified bike-borne assailants in Bihar's Rohtas district.

The deceased Sanjiv Mishra (35), was the nephew of Santosh Mishra, a Congress MLA from Karghar constituency in Rohtas district. Sanjiv sustained four gunshot injuries on Saturday evening and succumbed to his injuries on the way to the hospital in nearby Mohania.

Eyewitnesses said that six unknown assailants rode three bikes to the house of Sanjiv Mishra located in Parsatua village and opened fire on him indiscriminately. The assailants fled from the spot without any resistance after committing the crime.

Sanjiv Mishra was expected to contest the panchayat elections and was preparing for it. He was one of the most active persons who recently campaigned for his uncle Santosh Mishra and was quite popular at the ground level. The family members of Sanjiv Mishra suspect that it could be a political killing to prevent him from contesting the upcoming panchayat polls. Mandeep Mishra, the brother of Sanjiv Mishra, said, "He did not have personal enmity with anybody. Investigation would reveal the actual reason behind the murder." Vinod Kumar Rawat, Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) in Rohtas, said, "We are investigating the matter from all the angles and recording the statements of the eyewitnesses. We have received some clues about the accused and nab them." IANS

UP: Cop found dead in mysterious circumstances

Sambhal (UP): A 26-year-old police constable was found dead under mysterious circumstances in the barracks of Naraura Bairaj flyover police post under Gannaur police station in Sambhal. He had been married two months ago. The deceased, Shaileendra Yadav, was 26, was deputised at Sambhal Police Lines and was on duty at Naraura police picket under Gannaur police station limits on Saturday when he was found lying unconscious in the barracks.

Senior police officers said the constable died of a cardiac arrest while on duty. Sambhal Superintendent of Police, Chakresh Mishra, said: "After getting information, police teams were rushed to the spot and the constable was taken to the district hospital where doctors proclaimed him dead upon arrival."

"No visible bruises or any evidence of suicide were found. Besides, we have not recovered a suicide note. The constable suffered a cardiac arrest and died on the spot. The body was sent for a post-mortem examination to ascertain the actual reason for death," he said. Sambhal police said that financial assistance will also be provided to the family of the deceased. IANS

UP Dalit man beaten to death by woman's family

Agra (Uttar Pradesh): A 22-year-old Dalit man, who went to meet his girlfriend from a different caste, was beaten to death by her family members in Agra, police said on Sunday.

The man succumbed to injuries at a hospital. Five members of the woman's family were arrested. According to reports, the deceased Pawan Kumar, was in a relationship with the 20-year-old woman, belonging to another caste. The woman, on Friday, had called Pawan Kumar to meet her late in the night. Kumar was mercilessly thrashed at the woman's house by her family members. On hearing his screams, the locals informed the police that rescued him.

Kumar's brother Akash, said, "We came to know about the incident on Saturday. We found him lying inside a police van. He was taken to district hospital where he succumbed. Before dying, he narrated the entire incident to the police. He was called by the woman at her home and then her family brutally beat him up."

Additional Superintendent of Police Mukesh Chandra Mishra said, "A case has been registered under IPC section 302 (murder) against seven persons, including the woman's father and five other family members. Five have been arrested. The matter is being probed further."

Rasoolpur SHO Fateh Bahadur Bhaduria, said, "The man was tied up and beaten with sticks. The body has been sent for post mortem. The woman's father and other relatives have confessed to their crime. The woman, along with four others, will be sent to jail. Two others are absconding."

"The charges are serious. The woman and the woman knew each other and they were in regular touch over the phone for several months. The woman's family was against their friendship and Kumar had been warned to stay away from her. IANS

TIK TOK STAR SUICIDE

SENA'S MIN RESIGNS, MAHA GOVT ORDERS PROBE

TN RAGHUNATHA ■ MUMBAI

After the ruling Shiv Sena took the wind out of its sails by seeking the resignation of its Tik Tok star Pooja Chavan's alleged suicide-linked Minister Sanjay Rathod, the Opposition BJP on Sunday reiterated its strategy to force the rape-accused NCP Minister Dhananjay Munde, ahead of the 10-day Budget session beginning here from Monday.

As the Opposition BJP readied itself to corner the Shiv Sena-led MVA government over the resignation of the Sena's Forest Minister linked to the alleged suicide by 22-year-old Pooja, 49-year-old Rathod — accompanied by his wife Shital — called on Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray at the latter's official residence Varsha and handed over his resignation

to facilitate a comprehensive probe. On their part, Pooja's parents had requested the chief minister not to accept the resignation of Rathod. They, however, said that they wanted the state government to take action against the minister or force his resignation. The property tax amid the Covid-19 pandemic and at a time when people were in distress. IANS

Talking separately to the media, Rathod — a prominent leader of the Banjara community from eastern Maharashtra — said: "I have submitted my resignation to the chief minister. The death of the girl who is also from Banjara community, is very unfortunate. Over the past few weeks, the Opposition has politicised the issue on social media and maligning me and my community. The Opposition has even tried to finish me politically." Unfazed by Rathod's resignation, leader of the Opposition in the State Assembly and senior BJP leader, Devendra Fadnis said: "The minister's resignation is not enough. An FIR should be registered immediately against Rathod. We also demand that the police officers who have not registered an FIR against the minister be suspended to facilitate an impartial probe."

Charging that the chief minister had tried to shield the Sena minister facing charges of abetting the suicide of Pooja, former chief minister and senior BJP leader Narayan Ram demanded that Rathod be immediately arrested to facilitate an impartial probe. In a development that came after Rathod's resignation, the State BJP president Chandrakant Patil shipped the post and asked NCP chief Sharad Pawar to act against his

party's minister Dhananjay Munde, who is facing an accusation of a rape made by a woman. Earlier this month, a woman lodged a complaint with the Mumbai police against Maharashtra's Social Justice Minister Dhananjay Munde for alleged rape. Following her complaint, the BJP had muddled the ante, by demanding the minister's resignation on "moral grounds" and also seeking action against him from the Election Commission for allegedly suppressing information that he had two wives.

Notwithstanding the resignation of Rathod, the BJP will not only go all out to target the MVA government over his alleged link with Pooja's suicide, it will also try to corner the Uddhav Thackeray dispensation over Munde's resignation in the 10-day-long budget session beginning here from Monday. It may be recalled that on February 8, Pooja had allegedly committed suicide by jumping off the Heaven Park building in Pune's Wanwadi locality on the intervening night of February 7 and 8. Following her death, the Opposition BJP on Saturday had upped the ante over the alleged of a 22-year-old Tik Tok star Pooja Chavan, by rooting for the arrest of Rathod, who was reportedly in love with the deceased woman. BJP leaders Radhakrishna Vikhe-Patil, Kirit Somaiya and party's woman leader Chitra Wagh had said that the minister had no moral right to continue in the office. "In fact, he should be booked abetting Pooja's alleged suicide and arrested immediately," Wagh said. Maharashtra's former chief

minister and senior BJP Devenra Fadnis had been investigated in view of the fact that the telephonic conversations between her and the minister had gone viral on social media. The Opposition leaders alleged that Pooja was raped and said that it was and that there were reasons to believe that the minister was responsible for her pregnancy. In the case of Munde, Pawar had at an initial stage (on February 13) termed the charges made by a woman against his party's minister were "serious" and said that he would take a call on the issue, after consulting his senior party's important colleagues. "The charges are serious. The matter is with the police. It is also in court... they will decide, however, we as a party would have to decide on it. I will speak

to my colleagues and decide," Pawar had said. However, two days later, Pawar had softened his stand over the accusation of rape made by a woman against Munde after two more political leaders alleged that the woman was trying to honey trap Munde and said that the police be allowed to investigate the matter. Ruling out indirectly any possible action against Munde at the party level, Pawar said: "Since allegations have been made against the woman who has complained against Munde, we have come to a conclusion that the police be allowed to do a comprehensive probe into the matter. We are confident that the police will do a good job. Hence we will not interfere in the probe. All we have suggested to the government is that an ACP-level woman officer be asked to conduct the probe."

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PAPER WITH PASSION

Bengal conundrum

Meticulous planning and a balanced application of calculus is needed to harvest votes

Winning elections is not an easy business, certainly not in a State like West Bengal. It needs meticulous planning and a balanced application of differential and integral calculus for harvesting votes. Every political party in the fray knows this formula but who is in a position to apply it and to what extent, are the factors that can make the difference. No sooner had the Election Commission (EC) announced an unprecedented eight-phase poll for the State than TMC chief Mamata Banerjee accused it of playing a prejudiced role to the advantage of the BJP. According to some poll experts, often in phase-wise elections, the voting trends in the initial stages have an impact on the polling pattern in the subsequent phases. Generally, people exercising their franchise in the later phases have an inclination towards the party or coalition that leads in the initial stages. It is also seen that oftentimes, voters in the last and the penultimate phases lose enthusiasm and this proves helpful to a party in segments that are traditionally not its strongholds. That said, there are various other intricacies and angles to the micro-management of elections. However, if we go by what Mamata says, the question that crosses one's mind is: Is this the multiplier effect that the BJP is trying to bank upon?



Now, Mamata is a seasoned politician who knows that the BJP is no more riding the "Modi wave" or is in the saddle of "nationalism". Moreover, the reduction in the tax per litre on petrol and diesel by a meagre rupee shows that she is aware that the recent surge in fuel and LPG prices will have a bearing on the BJP's votes and that she herself ought to counter anti-incumbency. Still, Mamata is apprehensive that the surging BJP might unseat the ruling TMC by changing the "numerators and denominators with the EC's help". Meanwhile, the saffron party — which is banking on the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), Hindu mobilisation, the Centre's welfare schemes floated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and corruption charges against the TMC leaders — seems to have played its cards carefully. Mamata has alleged that the EC is working on the orders of the Prime Minister and the Home Minister, and claimed she is in the know of reports that a list of phase-wise elections found in the BJP's office completely matches with the EC's announcement. On the other hand, the EC's argument seems to be more justifiable: It said that it has to consider the movement of forces as well as the current spell of charges and counter-charges. Well, Bengal is a fragile State and elections here are synonymous with violence. Conducting polls in the State is not quite similar to other States. To be fair to it, the EC explanation does have a point. Even the elections to the State Assembly in 2016 were held in seven phases and the Lok Sabha polls in 2019 also saw the same number of voting rounds in the State. Well, if Mamata has any concrete evidence of her claims, it's time for her to move the court rather than levelling allegations based on assumptions. Merely crying foul without any solid evidence to back her claims is futile. Isn't it?

PICTALK



Police stand in formation, blocking a main road in Mandalay, Myanmar

Uneasy truce

To curry favour with the US, China and Pakistan are suddenly talking peace with India

The US is firmly back in the saddle as the global cop, if the happenings in the Asia-Pacific region are anything to go by. What else can explain the fact that, in a little over a month since US President Joe Biden took office, the three neighbours — India, China and Pakistan — are suddenly talking peace as they wait to see how Biden will shift the US policy in the region. Not only did India's and China's top diplomats on Thursday discuss plans to disengage troops from their Himalayan border, which last year saw the deadliest clashes since the 1970s, the External Affairs Ministers of the two hostile neighbours had an hour-long phone call and decided to set up a hotline to ensure "real-time communication" in the wake of the months-long border crisis. On the other hand, India and Pakistan on Friday issued a joint statement that they would strictly observe all ceasefire agreements along the Line of Control (LoC) and in other sectors. This goes to show that the space of the world leader, which former US President Donald Trump had all but ceded to an increasingly aggressive and expansionist Xi Jinping, is now under the US control again.



It was the Chinese dream to be at the centre of the Earth, or 'tianxia', and over the years, Xi embarked on his goal of achieving greatness for China by 2049. However, what until a few years ago was a covert plan became extremely overt during the Trump regime. Consequently, not only was 2020 the year of the pandemic, it was also a year that saw one of the most deadly fightings on India's frontiers with China. In all this, the Dragon was abetted by a more-than-willing Pakistan and there was a point when the danger of a two-pronged war became very real in India. Now, the easing of pressure and hostilities among the three nuclear-armed nations is good news, coming as it does when the COVID-ravaged global economy needs to be the focus of attention. The detente shows that the neighbours are responding to initiatives from the Biden Administration, which is formulating a policy towards the region. While Islamabad wants to show Biden that it's not too close to Beijing, China wants to lower the hostilities it had ramped up as the US woos India to be its partner in trade and policing in the region. One can only hope that this uneasy peace will not be shattered anytime soon.

Freedom of speech is a joke

The jokes made by stand-ups are rarely personal; they are about the hypocrisy in the system, religion and society, and that offends religious gurus and netas



GYANESHWAR DAYAL

Now that the intolerance debate is over and it has been established beyond reasonable doubt that we are a tolerant nation, we can safely discuss the limits of freedom of speech. Back in the bad old days when there was presumed intolerance, people had to be silenced by mob lynching or guns. Not such uncivilised behaviour anymore. We can take revenge in a non-violent civilised way by filing FIRs and slapping defamation cases. That is a massive upgrade.

Had it not been for those in the bad habit of speaking out about anything, including their elected Government, it wouldn't be required. Earlier it was journalists, authors and thespians. Now, another breed of the so-called champions of free speech, comedians, have joined the gang, especially the stand-up comedians.

The freedom to speak, laugh or breathe has to be balanced with the other person's right to get offended. Sure thing. If you are breathing air reserved for someone else you are hurting him. If your delectable laughter and jokes make me throw up, you had better watch out. Now that is a joke but no laughing matter.

Indeed, offending anyone is not a good idea, especially when you laugh at someone's looks or body size. The person has indeed the right to get offended. Ironically, that is often tolerated by the society. Kapil Sharma's blatant humour at the expense of his co-stars is ignored. No one files an FIR against him. The problem starts when the jokes, laced with truth, blast the hypocrisy of those in power. The jokes cracked by the stand-up are rarely personal. Her/his jokes are about the hypocrisy in the system, religion and society, and that offends people. In fact, the two most offended sets of people are religious gurus and politicians.

To say you belong to a religion is one thing but to presume that the religion belongs to you, quite another. In 2015, the self-appointed defenders of Islam shot Charlie Hebdo employees in Paris. For what? For a few lines they had used to depict the



Prophet! But the Quran does not explicitly forbid images of the Prophet. Back home, Munawar Faruqi spent a few nights in the Indore Jail for allegedly cracking anti-Hindu jokes. Now, who gave these people — Hindus and Muslims — the proprietary of the religion they were accidentally born into? When did the gods ask you to defend them?

Be offended if a priest of your shrine rapes. Be outraged when your co-religionist kills in the name of your religion. But that doesn't happen. You prove your bravado by heckling and harassing a comic whose words were too offending for you. Religion is not someone's personal turf that he ought to defend. A person has the right to get offended if he is body shamed. A guy may take offence to being called fat but it would be rather absurd that he becomes the spokesperson for all fat people on the planet. A self-appointed policeman to protect all people overweight!

The other group of most offended types is the politicians. These are the people who make a joke of the system but, when ridiculed, act sacrosanct. They must not be laughed at. That is the exaggerated sense of entitlement. Napoleon



COMIC RELIEF IS WHAT THE PEOPLE IN POWER NEED. IT IS A FEEDBACK MECHANISM YOU CANNOT GET FROM INVESTIGATIVE AGENCIES. LEADERS MUST LISTEN TO THE LAUGHTER OF PEOPLE WHEN A JOKE IS CRACKED ON THEM. IT GIVES THEM A WAKE-UP CALL AND SHOWS THEM THE MIRROR ON THE WALL

Bonaparte once said: "In politics, absurdity is not a handicap." Exactly, they are kind of necessary evil but don't risk telling them that. You could end up in jail.

Indian politicians are known for many things but humour isn't one of them, though we have had a few exceptions. Mahatma Gandhi was never offended when Sarojini Naidu called him "Mickey Mouse". Piloou Mody often took jibes at Indira Gandhi. Laloo's humour is infectious. The incumbent Prime Minister, too, has a good sense of humour. He pokes fun at his opponents with élan, though how much he enjoys jokes on himself is not clear. We have had the tradition of court jesters, or vidushaks. Haasya kavis kept the joke alive and roasted the politicians to their face. Today, the mantle has passed on to stand-up comics.

Political humour and satire are well established in the US. At the President's dinner, people roast the very President who hosts them. The fearless stand-up, George Carlin, never compromised his right to free speech. Today's comedians in the US owe much to Carlin. In India, stand-up comedy started rather late, but the comedians have caught up with the

rest. Their fearless rendering has made many people uncomfortable but, at the same time, won them the respect and following they well deserve.

In the US, comics can get away with a lot. It's different here. Cases of sedition have been filed against cartoonists, satirists and artists. That is the price for calling the Government's bluff. We live in a country where the political system itself is a big joke. In the House, you have a Speaker who won't let you speak. We have lawbreakers making laws for us. The judiciary judges everything except itself. It is a system in which the Treasury benches become rich and the Opposition gives walkovers to the opponent by walking out. Is this not a joke worth laughing at?

Comic relief is what the people in power need. It is a safety valve. So here is my unsolicited advice to those politicians who don't laugh at jokes. Join a laughter yoga club in your vicinity. It is good for your health. It lowers blood pressure and increases your longevity. It might also increase the longevity of your political career.

(The writer is a columnist and documentary film-maker. The views expressed are personal.)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

INTERESTING BATTLE AHEAD IN BENGAL

Sir — It was natural for Mamata Banerjee to cry foul after election dates were announced for four States and a Union Territory as the Election Commission (EC), in an unprecedented manner, announced an eight-phase election in West Bengal.

If Mamata sees a conspiracy in this, the EC has given her an opportunity and a reason to do so. Bengal will begin voting on March 27 but, unlike Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Assam and Puducherry, it will have eight phases spread over a record 33 days before the May 2 results. Interestingly, the West Bengal Assembly polls have become a prestige issue for both the ruling Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress Government and the BJP as neither is leaving any stone unturned to retain or capture power, respectively, in the State.

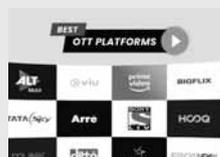
Mamata's objection is not without a reason, given that in Tamil Nadu and Kerala — with 234 and 140 Assembly seats respectively — the election gets over in a single phase while West Bengal having 294 seats has to go through a protracted poll schedule spanning eight phases even as Assam depends on three phases for 126 seats. But it is a matter of shame that she has accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union Home Minister Amit Shah of colluding with the EC for getting favourable dates. With this, the political battle in West Bengal is going to be even more interesting and we have to just wait and watch to see what the voters have on their minds.

Azhar A Khan | Rampur

THE METRO MAN HAS DISAPPOINTED US

Sir — Metro Man E Sreedharan is 88 years old and he wants to be projected as the chief ministerial face of the BJP in Kerala. In his initial comments, he dutifully chanted the party's mantra on "love jihad" and a few other issues. It sounded strange coming from a man widely admired for his integrity and apolitical approach throughout his legendary career. Indians of all ages

Good to regulate OTT platforms



I refers to the editorial 'Censorship?' (February 27). It is essential to regulate the OTT platforms as nobody has the right to hurt the sentiments of a particular community or a section of society by touching upon a controversial topic just for the sake of publicity.

It's true that when people were locked inside their homes during lockdown, the platforms provided them an opportunity to break the boredom of their lives. In this way, Over-The-Top (OTT) plat-

forms have played a crucial role and fast gained popularity among viewers. However, it doesn't mean that the producers and directors of OTT series exercise no caution and continue serving the material that depicts violence, abuse, sexual misconduct and so on.

Such scenes in a movie or series erode our moral values and have the ability to dominate young minds. We certainly don't want our children to be like Munna Bhaiya of *Mirzapur* series who is a gangster and a trigger-happy person. Also, there was no morality to be seen in the series as it promoted infidelity and immorality. Rather, we want a peaceful society which is not bereft of its values. It is obvious that when something that goes against our ethics or values is shown, there will be an outcry. It is essential as it keeps reminding us that we as a society cannot allow anyone to take undue advantage by distorting facts just for financial gains and popularity.

Yugal Kishore Sharma | Faridabad

and backgrounds used to look up to him. He had shown the world and our own countrymen that big projects could be delivered on time and without the concomitant hanky-panky.

He set a world record for bridge-building in his earliest years (in the 1960s) for the Indian Railways and then went on to notch successes with the Konkarn Railway project and subsequently with various Metro projects across the country. Most of them were post his "official" superannuation date. The scale of activity at his age has few parallels anywhere. Age is not a number as far as Metro Man Sreedharan is concerned. But even though the BJP is concerned about the polls, the act of Metro man making a move into politics is rather disappointing.

CK Subramaniam | Mumbai

SECURITY BREAKDOWN IN NIGERIA

Sir — The latest incident of kidnapping of schoolchildren in Nigeria has sent shockwaves across the region and the

world. Haunted by a series of such kidnappings enacted by certain flourishing armed groups there, Nigeria has once again been left to fend for itself in the matters of security, thereby exposing a severe security breakdown.

Speaking of incidents like kidnapping and hijacking, our society has travelled a long way in the fight against such evils. Therefore, it is time for all of us to grow stronger and to build our society back from the scratch. Agricultural and industrial activities across the board, education, technology, food security, employment, natural resources and, above all, good governance can be part of the plan to build back the society. India must help Nigeria in all possible ways. The Governments need to cooperate with each other to stop such crimes which are haunting the world.

P Senthil | Mumbai

SOUNDBITE

Yediyurappa ji has devoted his life towards the welfare of farmers and to empower the poor. Praying for his long and healthy life.

Prime Minister — Narendra Modi

Despite all the statements about the solidarity and combined efforts against Coronavirus, in practice, we see that the picture is completely contrary.

Azharhajan President — Ilham Aliyev

Some of the songs which really put me to test were performances like *Choli ke piche kya hai*, *Chane ke khet mein*, *Ke sera sera*, *Ek do teen* and *Tamma tamma*.

Actor — Madhuri Dixit

The entire team is very excited and eager to get on with the first match. It's been more than a year since we played a competitive match, and we are prepared for the challenge.

Indian men's hockey team captain — PR Sreejesh

By not arresting Sidhania and by not transferring Mukhtar Ansaari to UP, it is evident that the DM is selective in his action against gangsters.

Senior Punjab BJP leader — Vineet Joshi

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com



FIRST COLUMN

TIME TO MAKE A FRESH START

One needs to look at new approaches to create a world order for the future of the planet and its inhabitants



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

There is often talk of history of the planet and history as a discipline. The bald truth is that most histories are actually recalls of experiences of a limited part of the planet over some limited geography with a given vantage point of perception. There is nothing wrong with that. The problem is when it gets mistaken as something which applies globally or has significance beyond its boundaries of focus. This is a common error. It is akin to a half-educated person who begins believing that his/her experience and perception has universal validity. It can never be the case. This is matched by another cardinal error namely, that of expecting others to respond to our expectations. An index of fair relationships requires recognising varying expectations. But varying expectations cause conflict, confusion and heartbreak. The attempts at resolution of varying perceptions and outcomes are often half-baked, if not irrelevant. The fundamental laws of life require an understanding of the aggregate power of human civilisation and the Earth's ecosystem. As distances shrink and time expands because of technology, the fundamental constructs of "how to think" need serious thought. This is apparently yet to be tabled as a major global agenda for reflection and action. The proposition would be clearer if what is said in the above paragraphs is focused on "energy studies."



That life itself needs energy is fairly well-recognised. Where that energy comes from has many schools of thought. Those who find the cartoon character of Mandrake interesting, obviously, will believe in the power of the brain. There are claims in ancient texts of interplanetary travel of mental visualisation through brain power. Hence the ability to recognise inner power and experience wholeness of external energy should be a legitimate goal of a person claiming to be educated. At a personal level entropy is a formidable reality. Expression of entropy is in the form of aging. Organisation of self is a major challenge and a realistic hierarchy of personal values is essential to make relationships work. This is again one of those areas where a lot more attention needs to be paid than has been possible so far. At the global and the external level, like in the case of the inner world, it is important to realise more evolved postulates. That energy flows from the Earth back into the universe surrounding it as heat energy in the form of infrared radiation needs to be seen as one of the basics of all energy studies.

Putting it all together, the COVID-19 experience should be helping the planet to revisit its assumptions of learning, be it internal or external. If that were one of the outcomes of the shake-up the planet is going through it would be a civilisational gain. As of now, individuals have suffered, groups have been shaken and assumptions of productivity and progress look greatly challenged. Whether it has caused any new constructs to emerge remains to be seen. This is totally understandable because the COVID experience is still an unfolding reality. Perhaps one of the biggest results of this extended experience is the general fatigue the whole experience has caused. Being alert in one's own defence requires a general environment of good sense, and as any thinking person knows, good sense is rare. People risk suffering and even death when their balance of energy has been exhausted in taking extended precautions. Time not only heals, it also exhausts.

The important question remains, are there limits to human response to feelings of agony and testing times? As attempts to restore past lives gain strength, the approach seems to be to bring it back to where it was to pre-pandemic experiences. That is understandable, but there should be an attempt to create something different, incorporating the learning of underlying behaviour of the human species. It is time to hold up the process of regression. It's time to make a fresh start. One needs to look at new assumptions and approaches to create a world order for the future of the planet and its inhabitants.

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

Pandemic push to micro-insurance

What was a luxury for the poor has now become a reality due to several innovative models by various institutions. India is now a major centre for rapidly growing microinsurance



MOIN ZAZI

The pandemic has been a game changer for microinsurance and people now understand its importance in their lives. This should spur a greater demand for it. In the developed world, insurance is a part of life but its coverage has been patchy and woefully inadequate in the developing world. However, what was a luxury for the poor has now become a reality on account of several innovative models developed by various institutions. India is now a major centre for rapidly growing microinsurance.

In India, low-income communities live on the edge; just a tiny misfortune away from disaster — an injury, illness, or natural calamity can push them deeper into poverty as their meagre resources get depleted. These events often have very grave financial consequences. Many get drawn into debt traps as they borrow beyond their means, sell productive assets, take children out of school or put them to work, compromise on food, or leave sickness untreated. Although poor households often have informal means to manage risks, such strategies provide inadequate protection, while insurance is a major safeguard for low-income groups. They need it more than well-heeled people because the poor have no financial cushion and are more vulnerable to risks. One of their biggest challenges is health-related expenditure — a burden that often triggers poverty.

Poor families have suffered for long, the triple curse of sudden illness. The trauma associated with sickness, loss of wages and the financial burden of intensive healthcare. It is a fertile hunting ground for loan sharks and illnesses become a financial sinkhole for villagers. The poor usually face two types of risks — idiosyncratic (specific to household) and covariate (in which the entire community suffers loss; the most common, for instance, are drought and epidemics). Insurance contracts are most easily offered if risks within the relevant population are not covariate — so that only some put in a claim at the same time. Furthermore, insurance for rare and infrequent events is also typically more difficult to offer.

Low-income communities aren't considered as "insurable" at reasonable levels of premium. This makes a case for insurance schemes designed specifically for the poor, particularly in sectors of health and life. Microinsurance has emerged in response to the inadequacy of regular insurance to provide protection to the bottom tier of the population. Such insurance can improve healthcare outcomes and raise school attendance rates. Several health insurance programmes cover wage loss on account of illness or other health related issues. Health insurance policies typically don't cover outpatients or domiciliary treatment where a major expense is on account of pharmacy bills, diagnostic tests, and so on.

By managing risks and avoiding debt, those who have microinsurance policies are in a position to protect the assets they accumulate, generate more income, and can even get a fair chance to rescue themselves and their families from poverty. The cost of insuring against an unforeseen development is considerably lower than self-insuring through savings.



ALTHOUGH POOR HOUSEHOLDS OFTEN HAVE INFORMAL MEANS TO MANAGE RISKS, SUCH STRATEGIES PROVIDE INADEQUATE PROTECTION WHILE INSURANCE IS A MAJOR SAFEGUARD FOR LOW-INCOME GROUPS. THEY NEED IT MORE THAN WELL-HEELED PEOPLE BECAUSE THE POOR HAVE NO FINANCIAL CUSHION AND ARE MORE VULNERABLE TO RISKS. ONE OF THE MOST CHALLENGING IS HEALTH-RELATED EXPENDITURE — A BURDEN THAT OFTEN TRIGGERS POVERTY

The writer is a well-known development professional. The views expressed are personal.



The Governments, donors and other players engaged in combating poverty and designing social protection measures should keep insurance as a key component of their toolbox. They can reach the poor and thus reduce the cost of servicing remote clients. For the poor to reap the real benefits of microinsurance, our insurance companies need to function with a sense of responsibility. Because of the lack of proper awareness and failure of institutions to properly guide them, people buy insurance policies without proper planning and give up midway because they don't have the money to pay the premium.

Aggressive selling prevents the agents from properly assessing the consistency in income streams of the buyers for servicing their policies. The customers end up losing heavily as penalties are very harsh.

The outreach of the insurance companies has been very limited. Microinsurance accounted for less than 1.80 per cent for life and 1.16 per cent for general insurance in 2019-20. The key challenge is the high cost of administering it. Microinsurance is a low ticket business, requiring huge volumes to become sustainable. The poor live off the banking grid. Further, the transaction costs of issuing millions of small policies through service agents are high.

Despite the potential of insurance products to provide a "risk

floor" for farmers and to encourage higher-productivity investments and behaviour, uptake of microinsurance at market prices is extremely low and it has not been found to be easily scalable except when heavily subsidised by the Government.

India also lacks the distribution channels appropriate for lower-income groups. Rapid advances in digital payment systems are creating opportunities to connect poor households to affordable and reliable financial tools, through mobile phones and other digital interfaces.

Insurance coverage can be widened by coupling services with existing mobile financial products or creating new solutions that bring insurance services straight to a consumer's phone.

There are also problems with product design. Typically, rural insurance products are clones of products introduced in urban areas and are not suited to the local context. Risk mitigation mechanisms are weak and complexity of people and problems make underwriting, claim processing and resolution a challenge.

An Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority (IRDAI) committee has suggested reduction in entry-level capital requirement for standalone microinsurance companies to ₹20 crore from the current ₹100 crore with a view to accelerate expansion of this segment.

Microinsurance companies as well as cooperatives should be allowed to act as composite insurers to transact both life and non-life business through a single entity.

There are countries which have witnessed a large improvement in product design and availability of a range of insurance products. Microinsurance products tailored for the farmers' community — such as crop insurance, health insurance, rural, personal, accident, irrigation, animal, aqua-culture, agri-allied and cattle insurance — are now available in the market. Even niche products such as insurance covers for snake bites, livestock welfare, failed wells, damage caused by thunderstorms, health issues, funerals and even covering the birth of twins are available.

Microinsurance is now acknowledged as a highly effective tool to end the cycle of poverty by providing a robust safety net that families need. If the poor know that they are covered, they are more likely to plan their future better, invest in expanding businesses, diversify crops or send their children to school without the fear of losing their savings if something were to happen.

The whole capacity to take risks, changes. Thus, apart from just being a safety net, microinsurance promises something that earlier generations could never imagine: Hope for the future.

POINTCOUNTERPOINT

GUJARAT VOTERS' MANDATE IS LOUD AND CLEAR. THE AAP CANDIDATES LOST THEIR DEPOSIT. NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE COMMON MAN'S POWER.
—BJP'S GUJARAT UNIT PRESIDENT
CR PAATIL



PEOPLE WANT TO KNOW WHY YOU TWEETED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT? WISH YOU HAD SHOWN THE SAME EAGERNESS TO SOLVE PEOPLE'S WORRIES.
—DELHI CHIEF MINISTER
ARVIND KEJRIWAL

Tracing the evolution of secularism over the ages

The 'crisis of secularism' bemoaned by some scholars fails to acknowledge that secularism itself has evolved in a highly complex manner

Analysis emerging from various academic platforms in Europe, the US, Turkey and India in the last five years or so, suggests that the world has entered a "post-secular age." But critics of this thesis fear that it is conceiving secularism in its most simplistic form. Secularism has evolved in a highly complex manner, as demonstrated by anthropologist Talal Asad and philosopher Charles Taylor.

Both saw secularism emerging from a process of reform during the Middle Ages, so that a society free of superstition, could be formed. Asad's overall position is that secularism's origins cannot be pinned entirely to a single occurrence, while Taylor says that the demystification of Christianity aided the once superstitious layman to access a disenchanted understanding of the scriptures. Christian



NADEEM PARACHA

Courtesy: Dawn. The views expressed are personal.

sects such as the Protestant and Calvinist saw having an enterprising disposition as a virtue, as long as it benefitted humanity. This not only seeded the idea of "humanism", it also gave birth to ideas that formulated the mechanisms of modernity.

According to Asad, Christianity's spiritual promise that "Christ died to save all humanity" was folded into a political promise "the world must be changed for Christ." Therefore, both Taylor and Asad see the emergence of the idea of secularism springing not from an aversive reaction to religion but from an urge to reform it in a rapidly evolving milieu. To Asad, even though the disenchantment process within Christianity saw it accepting reformist ideas, the traditional notions of Christian morality, for example, did not really wither away. Asad writes that religion was never entire-

ly expelled from the public sphere. Indeed, it was relegated to the private sphere, but religions that were willing to take part in rational debate and accept the new secular paradigm, were welcome to operate in the public sphere.

With the expansion of modernity, the idea of secularism spread from Europe to other regions. But it mutated to accommodate non-Western realities. For example, although it arrived as an inclusive idea that advocated the privatisation of the sacred and the institutionalisation of the profane as a way to construct a rational nationalist whole, in communist set-ups it radically hardened by completely expunging religion. But this hardness was also present in France.

According to Taylor, whereas secularism elsewhere in Europe had largely emerged from reformed Christianity, in



France it had appeared as a revolt against religion (during the 18th century French Revolution), known as *Laïcité* it barely tolerates any display of religion in the public sphere. Unlike inclusive secularism in the US and European countries, where the State remains impersonal towards religion as long as it does not threaten the liberal-democratic order, *Laïcité* sanctions it to aggressively intervene to discourage religion in the public sphere. Interestingly, this is also the form of secularism that Turkey adopted after it became a republic in 1922.

Most anti-colonial movements also adopted secularism by modifying it to suit their nationalisms. For example, 'Arab Nationalism' adopted secularism because it saw its anti-colonial religious contemporaries as competition. It adopted the inclusive secular version, even though Arab nationalist regimes were dictatorial and often jailed leaders of religious groups who challenged the Arab nationalist narrative. According to the French political scientist Christophe Jaffrelot, a unique mutation of secularism emerged in colonial India. Jaffrelot says that followers of the 19th century Indian Muslim scholar Syed Ahmad Khan, politicised his reformist Islamist narrative by forming the Muslim League. Eventually, the party moved towards demanding a separate Muslim-majority State. Syed,

and then the early 20th century philosopher and poet Muhammad Iqbal and, eventually, the barrister Muhammad Ali Jinnah formulated what Talal Asad calls "cultural secularism." Instead of separating religion from politics, they separated the cultural dynamism of Islam from the faith's theological and ritualistic dimensions, to create a political ideology of cultural separatism. According to Jaffrelot, they placed Islam as a cultural identity-marker in the public arena, whereas the faith's theological and ritual aspects were pushed to the private sphere. This is why the founders of Pakistan were never really demonstrative about their religiosity (or lack thereof). They understood Muslim nationalism as a cultural and political idea of a modern Muslim-majority State, but one that would remain impersonal towards

Islam's theological/ ritualistic facets. Jaffrelot writes that, in 1974, the passage of the Second Amendment constitutionally rolled back the project by making Islam in Pakistan exclusivist. Then, various ordinances between 1979 and 1991 almost entirely expunged the inclusive idea of Islam. This aided various far-right religious groups to assert themselves in the public sphere, without being challenged by the State. Secularism is in crisis, but mostly in developing countries. This has been the case for quite some time now. India is the exception, where this crisis is relatively recent. Ironically, the crisis in this context in India is being compounded by the act of treating secularism as it was treated in Pakistan from 1974 onwards. The results were disastrous, as they will be in India too.

Remove me if you can: PM Oli challenges Prachanda

Kathmandu: Nepal's embattled Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli on Sunday challenged the ruling Nepal Communist Party's splinter faction led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' to remove him from the post if he can.

Addressing an event in his home district, Jhapa, Prime Minister Oli challenged the Prachanda-led faction to table a vote of no confidence motion and endorse it, My Republica news agency reported.

"K P Oli is still the parliamentary party leader of the NCP. He is the party chairman as well as the prime minister," 69-year-old Oli said. "If you have restored parliament, remove K P Oli from the prime ministerial post."

Nepal plunged into a political crisis on December 20 after President Bidya Devi Bhandari dissolved the House and announced fresh elections on April 30 and May 10 at the

In a landmark ruling, a five-member constitutional bench led by Chief Justice Chandra Shumsher last week annulled the government's "unconstitutional" decision to dissolve the 275-member lower house of Parliament. The court ordered the government to summon the House session within the next 13 days

recommendation of Prime Minister Oli, amidst a tussle for power with the ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP).

In a landmark ruling, a five-member constitutional bench led by Chief Justice Chandra Shumsher last week annulled the Oli government's "unconstitutional" decision to dissolve the 275-member lower house of Parliament. The court ordered the government to summon the House session within the next 13 days.

The ruling party suffered a vertical split following Oli's

decision to dissolve the lower house. "Remove me if you can. If I am ousted, I'll emerge victorious with a two-thirds majority in the next election," Prime Minister Oli was quoted as saying by the paper.

Prachanda has been making efforts to garner support from the opposition Nepali Congress and Janata Samajbadi parties in an apparent bid to oust Oli from power.

Oli's Press Advisor Surya Thapa last week said the prime minister will not resign immediately and implement the Supreme Court's verdict against him by facing Parliament.

Oli is under pressure to step down following the court verdict.

NCP Vice-president Bamdev Gautam, who maintained a balance between Oli and his rival Prachanda, last week urged the prime minister to step down. **PTI**

MYANMAR CRACKDOWN UN Human Rights Office says 18 dead

AP ■ YANGON

The UN Human Rights Office says it has received "credible information" that a crackdown on Sunday on anti-coup protesters in Myanmar has left at least 18 people dead and over 30 wounded.

"Deaths reportedly occurred as a result of live ammunition fired into crowds in Yangon, Dawei, Mandalay, Mawlaikyo and Paikokk," it said in a statement, referring to several cities in Myanmar.

"Tear gas was also reportedly used in various locations as well as flash-bang and stun grenades." CNN strongly condemns the escalating violence against protesters in Myanmar and call on the military to immediately halt the use of force against peaceful protesters," its spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani was quoted saying.

Fatalities reported as Myanmar police intensify use of force

Yangon: Security forces in Myanmar made mass arrests and used lethal force on Sunday as they intensified their efforts to break up protests a month after the military staged a coup. At least four people were reportedly killed.

There were reports of gunfire as police in Yangon, the country's biggest city, fired tear gas and water cannons while trying to clear the streets of demonstrators demanding that the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi be restored to power. Photos of shell casings from live ammunition used in the protests were posted on social media.

Reports on social media identified by name one young man believed to have been killed in Yangon. His body was shown in photos and videos on YouTube in a number of places. Protesters were able to carry him away.

A violent crackdown also occurred in Dawei, a much smaller city in southeastern Myanmar, where local media reported that at least three people



In this image from a video, anti-coup protesters react as smoke from tear gas rises in Yangon, Myanmar on Sunday. **AP**

were killed during a protest march.

The fatalities could not immediately be independently confirmed, though photos posted on social media showed a wounded man in the care of medical personnel, and later laid out in a bed under a blanket with flowers placed on top.

Confirming reports of protesters' deaths has been difficult amid the chaos and general lack of news from official sources. Prior to Sunday, there had been eight confirmed reports of killings linked to the army's

in the early morning when medical students were marching in Yangon's streets near the Hleda Center intersection, which has become the gathering point for protesters who then fan out to other parts of the city.

Videos and photos showed protesters running away as police charged at them, and, from the street and showed them setting up makeshift roadblocks to slow their advance. Some protesters managed to throw tear gas canisters back at police. Nearby, residents were pleading with police to release those they picked up from the street and showed them police trucks to be taken away. Dozens or more were believed to have been detained.

Protesters regrouped later Sunday and security forces continued to chase them in several neighborhoods. There was no immediate word on Yangon casualties. Sounds of gunfire could be heard in the streets and there were what appeared to be smoke grenades thrown into the crowds. **AP**

Supreme Court could put new limits on voting rights lawsuit

Washington: Eight years after carving the heart out of a landmark voting rights law, the Supreme Court is looking at putting new limits on efforts to combat racial discrimination in voting.

The justices are taking up a case about Arizona restrictions on ballot collection and another policy that penalises voters who cast ballots in the wrong precinct.

The high court's consideration comes as Republican officials in the state and around the country have proposed more than 150 measures, following last year's elections, to restrict voting access that civil rights groups say would disproportionately affect Black and Hispanic voters.

A broad Supreme Court ruling would make it harder to fight those efforts in court. Arguments are set for Tuesday via telephone, because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"It would be taking away one of the big tools in fact, the main tool we have left now, to protect voters against racial discrimination," said Myrna Perez, director of the Brennan Center

for Justice's voting rights and elections program.

Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich, a Republican, said the high court case is about ballot collection discrimination. "This is about protecting the franchise, not disenfranchising anyone," said Brnovich, who will argue the case on Tuesday.

President Joe Biden narrowly won Arizona last year, and since 2018, the state has elected two Democratic senators.

The justices will be reviewing an appeals court ruling against a 2016 Arizona law that limits who can return early ballots for another person and against a separate state policy of discarding ballots if a voter goes to the wrong precinct.

The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the ballot-collection law and the state policy discriminate against minority voters in violation of the federal Voting Rights Act. The law also violates the Constitution.

The Voting Rights Act, first enacted in 1965, was extremely effective

against discrimination at the ballot box because it forced state and local governments, with a history of discrimination, including Arizona, to get court approval for any change of Department or a federal court before making any changes to elections.

In 2013, the Supreme Court ruled 5-4 that the portion of the law known as Section 5 could no longer be enforced because the population formula for determining which states were covered had been updated to take account of racial progress.

Congress "must identify those jurisdictions to be singled out on a basis that makes sense in light of current conditions," Chief Justice John Roberts wrote for a conservative majority.

"It cannot rely simply on the past." Democrats in Congress will try again to revive the advance approval provision of the voting rights law. The John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act passed the House last week. Just as Republicans controlled the Senate and President Donald Trump was in the White House. **AP**

UK Covid vaccine rollout expands to over-60s in latest phase

PTI ■ LONDON

The UK's vaccination programme against Covid-19 enters a new phase on Sunday as the National Health Service (NHS) will begin contacting all over-60s to book their jobs at the nearest vaccination centre or with a general practitioner (GP) or

pharmacy. Almost 2 million people aged 60 to 63 will be invited after over 64s had been covered in the previous phase and letters will start arriving on Monday explaining how they can make an appointment for their jab.

They follow more than three in four people aged 65 to 70 taking up the offer of a vaccination and nearly 17 million people across England, over a third of the adult population, having received the "life-saving jab".

"Our incredible vaccination programme is reaching out to more people in the UK than ever before. Thank you to everyone on the frontline, including NHS vaccinators, GPs, pharmacists and volunteers, whose unrivalled dedication to

protect the most vulnerable should be applauded," he said.

The latest move comes after the NHS wrote to almost 450,000 people aged 64 along with 600,000 who have recently been asked to shield due to underlying health conditions last week.

"The NHS vaccination programme, the biggest in the health service's history and fastest in Europe, goes from strength to strength. I would urge anyone who has been invited to take up the offer - it doesn't matter when you were invited you can still come forward and protect yourself and others," said Professor Stephen Powis, NHS national medical director.

The push to get as many of the most-at-risk people protected means nine in 10 people in the top four priority groups have received a jab. The UK government aims to give a jab to all over-50s and those in specific at-risk groups by April 15 and all over-60s are expected to be offered their first dose by July 31.

"Since around four-fifths of 65-69 year olds have now been vaccinated, we're rapidly working our way down the generations, with people ages 60+ now able to come forward. As expected vaccine supply increases in March, we're planning for further acceleration as we head towards Easter," said Sir Simon Stevens, chief executive of NHS England.

10 killed in shooting attack in Mexico's Jalisco state

Mexico City: Ten men were killed and a woman and two boys were wounded in a shooting attack on a home in western Mexico on Saturday.

Prosecutors in the state of Jalisco said the bullet-ridden bodies of the 10 men were found by police on the sidewalk in front of the home. Another wounded boy was found inside, and a woman and another boy were located at a local hospital.

The prosecutors' office said the attack was carried out by unidentified assailants travelling in an SUV.

The state is home to the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, one of Mexico's most violent and powerful. More bodies have been found in clandestine burial pits in Jalisco there than in any other state in recent years. The cartel has been targeting a breakthrough in and around Guadalajara.

Earlier this month, police found 18 plastic bags full of hacked-up body parts on the outskirts of Guadalajara, the state capital. In November, Jalisco authorities recovered 113 bodies and additional human remains from a mass grave in the town of El Salto, just outside Guadalajara. A total of 189 corpses were discovered in the town throughout 2020. **AP**

Israel, Palestine must avoid unilateral action that could prejudice final status issues: India at UN

United Nations: Reiterating that only a two-state solution will deliver enduring peace that the people of Israel and Palestine deserve, India has said this should be achieved through direct negotiations between both sides on final status issues and any unilateral action which could prejudice these issues must be avoided.

India's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Ambassador K Nagaraj Naidu said on Friday at the UN Security Council meeting on "The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question" that New Delhi reaffirms its support to the Palestinian cause and the establishment of a sovereign, viable and independent State of Palestine living side by side in peace and security with Israel.

"We firmly believe that only a two-state solution will deliver enduring peace that the people of Israel and Palestine desire and deserve. This should be achieved through direct negotiations between both sides on final sta-

tus issues. Both sides must avoid any unilateral action which could prejudice these final status issues," he said.

Naidu termed the recent diplomatic efforts to revive the stalled peace talks as encouraging, and added that the meeting of the Quartet's Special Envoys is timely. India urged the Quartet to initiate engagement with the peace process, Naidu said.

Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Permanent Representative of the Secretary-General Tor Wennesland told the Council meeting that the global community is committed to facilitate the return of the negotiating table.

Earlier this month, the League of Arab States reiterated its support for the establishment

of an independent and sovereign Palestinian State based on the 1967 lines, with East Jerusalem as capital. The envoys of the United States, European Union and United Nations - met virtually on February 15 to discuss the political developments, with all agreeing to meet on a regular basis.

Naidu also added that India is pleased to note that preparations for the Palestinian elections are moving forward. The Cairo agreement between the Palestinian parties on the conduct of parliamentary and presidential elections - to abide by the electoral timetable, accept the results of the election and on other election related arrangements - is a positive step in the right direction, he said.

Noting that the committing undertaken by all parties to release political detainees will also help build trust between them, India acknowledged Egypt's efforts in facilitating this agreement. **PTI**

China rolls out first one-jab Covid-19 vaccine: Report

PTI ■ BEIJING

China has given conditional approval for a single dose Covid-19 vaccine, touted to be a rival to Johnson & Johnson's one-jab shot released by the US drug regulator on Sunday.

China's first Ad5-nCoV COVID-19 vaccine was rolled out on Friday, the state-run Global Times reported on Sunday. Phase-I clinical trials of the vaccine started on March 16, first making it the world's first COVID-19 candidate vaccine that entered clinical trials, it said.

It is the only single-dose COVID-19 vaccine that has been given conditional approval to be rolled out in China, the report quoted last Friday's story by the state broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV).

People can get desirable protective effect after 14 days of inoculation. The protective effect can last

at least six months after a single-dose inoculation and it can increase immune response to 20 times if the second dose is taken half a year after the first one, the report said.

With this, China's medical products regulator has approved five coronavirus vaccines which include Sinovac, Sinopharm, CanSinoBio and another by Wuhan Institute of Biological Products.

One of the developers of the Ad5-nCoV vaccine said that the annual production capacity can reach 500 million doses, which means 500 million people can be vaccinated in a year.

Phase-I clinical trials of the vaccine started on March 16, 2020, making it the world's first COVID-19 candidate vaccine that entered clinical trials, the Global Times report said.

Though China has been supplying its vaccines to different countries, none of them have been approved by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Madagascar President inaugurates advanced digital cobalt therapy machine Bhabhatron-II donated by India

New York: Underlining cooperation in the health sector, India has donated an advanced telecobalt machine for cancer treatment, developed by the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, to the island nation of Madagascar.

The advanced digital cobalt therapy machine Bhabhatron-II was inaugurated at the Joseph Ravoahangy Andrianavalona Hospital (HJRA) in Antananarivo, capital of Madagascar by President Andry Rajoelina this week.

Speaking on the occasion, Rajoelina said cancer is a disease that affects more and more people in our society and is one of the leading causes of mortality, according to a press release.

India's Ambassador to Madagascar Abhay Kumar, addressing the audience at the inauguration, said cancer is a major health problem affecting a large number of people globally.

Rajoelina said that during the visit of President Ram Nath Kovind to Madagascar in March 2018, it was announced that the Bhabhatron machine would be donated to Madagascar, which is one of the few countries to have received the Bhabhatron-II radio

therapy machine from India.

"This reflects growing ties between the two Indian Ocean neighbours under our Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of SAGAR i.e. Security and Growth for All in the Indian Ocean Region," Kumar said.

Rajoelina added that cancer is often poorly treated because of lack of screening and advanced medical treatment facilities. "Majority of people affected by cancer had no other option than medical evacuation. Obviously, under these conditions, health had become a privilege and no longer a right. The setting up of this centre, therefore, is a real solution to facilitate and allow the only treatment for Malagasy people in Madagascar," Rajoelina said.

Rajoelina expressed gratitude to the Government of India for its donation of the radiotherapy device.

"The Malagasy State is pursuing its mission and this radiotherapy centre is a great step towards improving the quality of life of the population and the modernisation of the health system in Madagascar," Rajoelina said. The machine has been functional at HJRA since January and has the capacity to treat 50 patients per day. **PTI**

UN warns of mass famine in Yemen ahead of donor conference

Cairo: A UN humanitarian agency on Sunday warned that more than 16 million people in Yemen would go hungry this year, with already some half a million people in the war-torn country living in famine-like conditions.

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, or OCHA, said the risk of large-scale famine in the Arab world's poorest country "has never been more acute", adding that the years-long conflict, economic decline, and institutional collapse created enormous humanitarian needs in all sectors.

The stark warning comes a day before a pledging conference co-hosted by Sweden and Switzerland.

The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will appeal for USD 3.85 billion in relief aid for Yemen this year.

The response to the UN's appeal is unlikely to meet expectations, given that the coronavirus pandemic and its devastating consequences hit economies around the globe.

Wealthy Gulf donors such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which contributed generously to UN Appeals in 2018 and 2019, cut back drastically on aid to Yemen last year.

Yemen's war started in 2014 when the Houthis rebelled seized the capital, Sanaa, and much of the country's north. The Saudi-led, US-backed coalition intervened months later to dislodge the rebels and restore the internationally recognised government.

The conflict has killed some 130,000 people and spawned the world's worst humanitarian disaster. **AP**

Pope prays for liberation of 317 kidnapped Nigerian students

Vatican City: Pope Francis on Sunday decried the kidnapping of 317 students from their boarding school in northwest Nigeria and prayed for the girls' quick release.

Addressing the public in St. Peter's Square, Francis said he was adding his voice to others including "I pray for these girls, so that they may return home soon," the pope said. "I am close to their families and to them", Francis said, asking people to join him in prayer.

A resident of the area said the gunmen also attacked a nearby military camp and checkpoint, preventing soldiers from interfering with the mass abduction.

On Saturday, authorities in Nigeria announced that nearly 40 students, teachers and relatives abducted on Feb. 17 from a school in northern Nigeria have been freed. **AP**

UN says 5 Europe-bound migrants die at sea off Libya

AP ■ CAIRO

At least 15 Africans drowned when their boat capsized Sunday off Libya, a UN spokeswoman said, the second shipwreck involving migrants seeking a better life in Europe in just over a week.

Safa Meshi, a spokesman for the International Organization for Migration, said the dead were on a rubber boat carrying at least 110 migrants, who embarked from the Libyan coastal town of Zawiyah on Friday.

The boat started to sink early Sunday and the Libyan coast guard managed to rescue at least 95 migrants, including six women and two children, she said.

Meshi said many of the survivors suffered from burns from engine fuel, and hypothermia, with some taken to hospital. "It is an additional tragedy that in most cases, there is very little search to recover the bodies. The sight

of bodies washing ashore later has sadly become too familiar," she added.

Sunday's shipwreck was the latest along the Central Mediterranean migration route. At least 41 migrants were reported dead last week, part of a group of some 120 migrants on a dinghy that left the North African country on Feb. 18.

Libya has become the major transit point for African and Arab migrants hoping to reach Europe, after the North African country plunged into a bloody civil war following a NATO-backed uprising that toppled and killed longtime ruler Muammar Gadhafi in 2011.

Smugglers often pack desperate families into ill-equipped rubber boats that stall and founder along the perilous Central Mediterranean route. Over the last several years, hundreds of thousands of migrants have reached Europe either on their own or after being rescued at sea.

Iran hits 6,000 virus deaths; bans 32 nations

Teheran: Iran has surpassed 6,000 known coronavirus-related deaths, the latest grim milestone for the hardest-hit country in the Middle East.

The Health Ministry reported 93 new deaths from COVID-19 on Sunday and more than 8,000 new infections, pushing the total infection count over 1.63 million.

After more than a year of the pandemic, deaths from COVID-19 recently have declined in Iran as movement restrictions in the capital have set in, including inter-city travel bans, mask mandates and school closures.

The government on Sunday banned incoming trav-

elers from a list of 32 countries, including Britain and other states in Africa and Latin America, due to fears of new virus variants.

Over the year, Iran has struggled with surges that at times overwhelmed its health system as authorities resisted a total lockdown to salvage an economy crippled by US. Sanctions.

Iran's vaccine drive recently has gotten underway, with Russia's Sputnik V vaccine administered to health workers this month. An additional 250,000 doses by the Chinese state-backed pharmaceutical Sinopharm arrived in Iran over the weekend. **AP**

New social media rules may raise compliance cost: Indian execs

SAY MAKE COMPETITION TOUGH FOR SMALLER COS

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The new social media intermediaries rules could raise compliance costs for firms, making it difficult for smaller companies to compete against bigger giants like Facebook, according to industry watchers.

The new rules, announced last week, distinguish between 'social media intermediaries' and 'significant social media intermediaries' with 50 lakh registered users as the threshold for the categorisation.

contact person and resident grievance officer - with all three officials residing in India. Large players like Facebook have said they are studying the rules.

While many in the sector have lauded the new regulations, saying these aim to address concerns like grievance redressal, data privacy and safety of users, a section of the industry has aired concerns around increased compliance cost that could be challenging for smaller players.

Software Freedom Law Centre (SFLC) founder Mishi Choudhary said the rules call for an undue burden and compliance and "ensure only larg-

er players with funds and wherewithal of big legal teams are the only ones who will be left to offer services". "(This could result in) increasing the barrier for entry and raising compliance costs for everyone," she added.

India has 53 crore WhatsApp users, 44.8 crore YouTube users, 41 crore Facebook users, 21 crore use Instagram, while 1.75 crore users are on microblogging platform Twitter, as per government data.

While players like Telegram and Signal do not disclose country-specific user numbers, these platforms have seen a spike in downloads in the last few weeks on the back of concerns around WhatsApp's privacy policy update that seeks to allow sharing limited user data with Facebook and its group



firms.

Telegram did not respond to queries on the impact of the new rules on the platform.

Industry observers noted that players like Telegram and others may not have senior officials based in India and that they will now have to take a series of steps to ensure compliance with the new norms as

their business scales up and user base grows in India.

According to the amended IT rules, social media and streaming companies will be required to take down contentious content quicker, appoint grievance redressal officers and assist in investigations.

The "Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code" designed to curb misuse of social media platforms require players like WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter as well as streaming services such as Netflix, YouTube and Amazon Prime Video to appoint executives to coordinate with law enforcement, disclose the first originator of provocative content and remove, within 24 hours, content depicting nudity or morphed pictures of women.

flagged by the government or legal order has to be taken down within 36 hours.

An industry executive, who did not wish to be named, said some companies may choose to protect the privacy of users and challenge these rules in court.

Also, the industry feels that there needs to be clarity on nuances like how long do users have to be active to be counted as registered users, and what happens if a platform drops below the threshold of 50 lakh registered users.

Ramesh Kailasam, CEO of IndiaTech.Org, had also cautioned that

while these rules are robust and elaborate, it may translate into a certain degree of cost and operational challenges with it. Nasscom had noted that it is imperative that there is a balance between regulation and innovation as the world is in a

phase of accelerated technology shifts.

The industry body had also pointed out that there is a need of "responsible use" and building of technology for all stakeholders - government, industry, startups and citizens.

The option of voluntary self-certification of user accounts, the right to receive an explanatory notification on removal or disablement of access, and to seek remedy against the action being taken by the intermediaries would be helpful for end-users, Nasscom had said.

The association had also said the government has emphasised that the new rules will not curb creativity, and freedom of speech and expression of citizens as it urged the government to ensure that this is the design principle followed during implementation.

Petrol, diesel prices unchanged across metros

IANS ■ NEW DELHI

Fuel prices, which have been soaring to unprecedented levels in the country of late, remained unchanged on Sunday.

In the national capital, petrol was priced at Rs 91.17 per litre, same as on Saturday. Similarly, in Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata, the fuel was sold for Rs 97.57, Rs 93.11 and Rs 91.35 a litre respectively. Oil marketing companies pressed for a pause on price raising the pump price of petrol and diesel by 24 paise and 15 paise per litre on Saturday.

In line with petrol, diesel prices also were unchanged on Sunday at Rs 81.47, Rs



88.60, Rs 86.45 and Rs 84.35 per litre, respectively in Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata.

The increase in the previous weeks has taken petrol to cross historic high levels of Rs 100 a litre in several cities

across the country. Premium petrol crossed Rs 100 per litre mark in several cities of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra a few days back.

Since fuel prices are benchmarked to a 15-day rolling average, any fluctuations in products' prices and dollar exchange rate, pump prices can be expected to remain north-bound over the next few days even if crude price stabilises.

Oil companies executives said that petrol and diesel prices may increase further in coming days as retail prices may have to be balanced in line with global developments to prevent OMCs from making losses on sale of auto fuels.

India's crude steel output grows 7.6% to 10 MT in Jan: Worldsteel

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India registered a growth of 7.6 per cent in crude steel production at 10 million tonne (MT) in January 2021, according to World Steel Association (worldsteel).

The country had produced 9.3 MT crude steel during the same month last year. The US produced 6.9 MT steel in the month under review. Its output was at 6.7 MT in January 2020. Russia's output last month was at 6.7 MT compared to 6 MT in January 2020.



According to worldsteel data, China had produced 84.3 MT steel in the same month last year. Last month, Japan's output slipped 3.9 per cent to 7.9 MT year-on-year. The US produced 6.9 MT steel in the month under review. Its output was at 6.7 MT in January 2020. Russia's output last month was at 6.7 MT compared to 6 MT in January 2020.

South Korea's steel production in the month was at 6 MT, as compared to 5.8 MT in the year-ago period. Turkey produced 3.4 MT of crude steel last month. It had produced 3 MT in January 2020. According to the report, while Germany produced 3.3 MT steel in January 2021, Brazil and Iran produced 3 MT and 2.6 MT, respectively.

Carbon-based tariffs typically non-trade issues; should not be mixed with trade matters: Comm Secy

NEW DELHI

India on Sunday said the proposed carbon-based tariffs on goods is a non-trade issue and it should not be mixed with trade-related matters. Commerce Secretary Anup Wadhawan said non-trade issues like sustainability, environment and labour have to be discussed on the right platform and in the right channels.

"Those (carbon-based tariffs) are typically non-trade issues which are coming into the trade domain.

So, we always opposed trade issues on the right platform with non-trade issues and especially non-trade issues becoming a lever for achieving your trade interest," he said at the Asia Economic Dialogue 2021. The secretary was replying

to a question about India's proposed carbon-based tariffs on goods as it urged the Union as well as the European Union are planning to introduce that. Wadhawan said India is at the forefront on issues like climate change, but one has to engage on those issues on the right platform.

"You cannot mix them with trade issues," he said adding that the western countries have evolved to their present levels over the time and one should not expect that developing world to evolve instantly. Talking about free-trade agreements, he said these pacts put competitive pressure on industry and "cannot undermine" the importance of FTAs for creating competitive pressure for access to global markets. PTI

India's coal import drops 12% to 181 MT in Apr-Jan

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India's coal import registered a drop of 11.59 per cent to 180.84 million tonnes (MT) in the first 10 months of the ongoing fiscal.

The company had imported 204.53 MT of coal in the previous financial year, according to provisional data compiled by international services. Mjunction - a joint venture of Tata Steel and SAIL - is a B2B e-commerce company and also publishes research reports on coal and steel verticals. However, India's coal imports in January increased to 20.05 MT as against 18.7 MT in year-ago period, it said.

Commenting on the coal import trend, ministry MD and CEO Vinay Varma said, "There was a drop in January

volumes as compared to the previous year (December). This was mainly due to the firmness in seaborne prices. While there is steady demand in the market, the import trend will largely depend on the movements in international prices, freight rates and also domestic supply."

Coal import was, however, 7.4 percent higher in January 2021 as compared to 18.67 MT in the year-ago period. Of the total imports in January 2021, non-coking coal was at 12.77 MT, while coking coal import was 5.62 MT. During April-January 2020-21, non-coking coal import was at 119.84 MT as compared to 140.65 MT in the same period a year ago. Coking coal import was recorded at 39.16 MT, lower than 41.15 MT imported during the same period a year ago.

FPIs invest ₹25,787 cr in Indian equities in February

IANS ■ NEW DELHI

As the Indian equities continued to scale new highs post the Union Budget for FY22, the net foreign portfolio investments (FPI) into the Indian equities in February was ₹25,787 crore.

Net FPIs in 2020 stood at ₹45,260 crore, as per NSDI data. Foreign investments have continued to flow in post the Union Budget which announced further liberalisation measures including privatisation of banks and also did not come up with a new tax levy. So far, in the financial year 2021-22, net FPIs into equities stood at ₹2.63 lakh crore, the highest ever FPI inflow into the country. Further, the net foreign institutional investment (FII) during the month was ₹42,044.46 crore.

Govt extends due date for filing FY20 GST annual returns till March 31

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The Government on Sunday extended the deadline for filing GST annual returns for 2019-20 fiscal by a month till March 31.

This is the second extension given by the government. The deadline was earlier extended from December 31, 2020, to February 28, 2021. "In view of the difficulties expressed by the taxpayers in meeting this time limit, Government has decided to further extend the due date for furnishing of GSTR-9 and GSTR-9C for the financial year 2019-20 to March 31, 2021 with the approval of Election Commission of India," the Finance Ministry said in a statement.

GSTR 9 is an annual return filed by taxpayers registered under the Goods and Services Tax (GST). It consists of details regarding

the outward and inward supplies made or received under different tax heads.

GSTR-9C is a statement of reconciliation between GSTR-9 and the audited annual financial statement.

On the extension, AMRG & Associates Senior Partner Rajat Mohan said, "Even though it is a relatively small extension of 31 days but it is sufficient for the tax professionals to complete the requisite filings." EY Tax Partner Abhishek Jain said most industry players were struggling to meet this statutory deadline and had represented to the government for an extension.

Furnishing of the annual return is mandatory only for taxpayers with aggregate annual turnover above Rs 2 crore while reconciliation statement is to be furnished only by the registered persons having aggregate turnover above Rs 5 crore.

CAIT to launch nationwide movement over GST

IANS ■ NEW DELHI

Under a traders' strike called by the Confederation of Traders (CAIT) on Sunday said that it will launch a national movement against the 'arbitrariness' of GST provisions and alleged malpractices of e-commerce giants.

In a statement, the traders' body said that in the next phase of the campaign against GST provisions and e-commerce majors, states would be the key focus of the protesting traders.

The campaign will begin on March 5 and will continue till April 5.

It said that at present, traders across the country are badly plagued by the provisions of GST and the constant arbitrariness of foreign companies in e-commerce and now the traders are either forced to resolve these issues or shut their

business.

According to Secretary General of CAIT, Praveen Khandelwal a video conference was held on Sunday in which more than 275 prominent leaders from all the states and union territories of the country participated and decided unanimously to launch a national wide campaign on these two issues.

"It is not the Centre but the states who are more responsible for diluting the spirit of GST, to their own likings and now they can't escape from their responsibilities," it said.

CAIT alleged that the e-commerce giants have left no stone unturned to distort the GST because of their own interests which has led to the sufferings of traders.

In this context, CAIT has urged the Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman that since is the Chairperson of the GST Council, she should

initiate dialogues with the traders' organisation immediately about the current distorted nature of GST.

CAIT on Sunday said it has also urged the Union Commerce Minister, Piyush Goyal to issue further amend and clarify the FDI policy and also finalise and release e-commerce policy since the FDI policy is being grossly violated by foreign e-commerce companies.

"Since elections will be held in five states in the next few months and as a vote bank in all the states, the trading community holds a huge majority in strength and numbers and can be a deciding factor for the victory and defeat of any political party.

Hence the decision of CAIT to launch a nationwide campaign amid elections and the anger of traders cannot be overlooked as it can be a deciding factor," said the CAIT statement.

GST officers arrest man for ₹50.03 cr ITC fraud, fake firms

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

GST officers have arrested a person for creating fictitious firms and committing input tax credit fraud of ₹50.03 crore, the finance ministry said on Sunday.

The officers of Central Goods and Services Tax (CGST) Commissionerate, Delhi East have unearthed a network of fictitious firms which "was being operated by one Vishal, who is an advocate by profession and was practising law in Karkardooma Court, Delhi", the ministry said in a statement.

Vishal started this GST fraud by creating a fictitious firm in his own name, which he got registered at his residence. Subsequently, he arranged various KYCs of different persons to create multiple fictitious firms having no business activity and was being operated by fake Input Tax Credit.

Since the inception of GST Central Tax, Delhi Zone has made 27 arrests in various cases

used to pass on fake Input Tax Credit to his clients in exchange for a commission of 2 per cent of the invoice amount. The total fake Input Tax Credit passed on quantified so far is Rs 50.03 crore, which is expected to increase as the investigation progresses," it added.

The accused have been remanded to 14-day judicial custody till March 13.

Since the inception of GST Central Tax, Delhi Zone has made 27 arrests in various cases, involving GST evasion amounting to more than Rs 4,019.95 crore, the ministry said.

T'gama's IT exports would've been higher: KTR

IANS ■ HYDERABAD

With the information technology exports from Telangana likely to grow at 11.28 lakh crore during 2020-21, the State's IT minister KT Rama Rao on Sunday said the growth rate would have been much higher if the Centre had not scrapped the ITR project.

Further, the information Technology and Investment Region (ITIR), much higher employment/growth would have been possible.

KTR, as the Minister is popularly known, said despite numerous personal requests to the Prime Minister and Union IT Minister, the ITR has been scrapped for reasons unknown.

He said the Telangana government had submitted Detailed Project Report and IT Cluster details but unfortunately neither ITR has been taken forward nor has there been an alternate progressive policy. KTR was reacting to reports that IT from Telangana is expected to grow over 7 per cent in 2020-21. According to Nasscom, the national growth rate during the same period is estimated to be just 1.9 per cent. KTR recalled that in 2013-14, the IT exports from then undivided Andhra Pradesh were only ₹5,258 crore.

The State had clocked over ₹1.28 lakh crore IT exports during 2019-20, a growth of nearly 18 per cent over the previous year. The state recorded IT exports of ₹1,28,807 crore, an increase of 17.93 per cent over 2018-19. The growth rate was more than double the national average of 8.09 per cent and more than two-and-a-half times the rest of the nation's average of 6.92%.

Pakistan may resume import of cotton from India: Report

PTI ■ ISLAMABAD

Pakistan may allow cotton import from India through land route as prospects of gradual restoration of bilateral trade ties have brightened after the Line of Control, according to a media report on Sunday.

Citing sources in the Ministry of Commerce, The Express Tribune reported that Adviser to the Prime Minister Commerce Abdul Razak Dawood may take a decision on whether to import cotton and yarn from India next week.

They said that the issue of cotton shortfall has already been brought to the notice of the Cabinet, the sources told. He also holds the portfolio of the commerce minister. Once a principled decision is taken, a formal order will be presented before the Economic Coordination Committee of the Cabinet, the sources told the daily.

The sources said that in-house deliberations have already begun but the final

decision would be taken only after seeking the approval of the prime minister.

"I cannot say yes or no at this stage and would be in a better position to respond on Monday," Dawood told the daily, responding to a query on whether Pakistan was considering allowing cotton import from India.

The trade ties between both the countries can help minimise cost of production in Pakistan and ensure sustained food supplies, the daily said.

India and Pakistan issued a joint statement on Thursday to strictly observe all agreements on ceasefire along the LoC and other sectors after the hotline discussions by their Director Generals of Military Operations. The two countries signed a ceasefire agreement in 2003, but it has hardly been followed in letter and spirit over the past several years. Relations between the two neighbours have now been divided after a series of terror attacks in India perpetrated by terror groups based in Pakistan.

'Nirman by ATS' to vie for stalled realty projects

IANS ■ NEW DELHI

ATS Infrastructure Ltd has come up with project management consultancy 'Nirman by ATS' - to assist developers in completing stalled real estate projects and to provide respite to distressed home buyers.

"I cannot say yes or no at this stage and would be in a better position to respond on Monday," Dawood told the daily, responding to a query on whether Pakistan was considering allowing cotton import from India.

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kick-starting the economy." It was of the view that completion of stalled projects and just-in-time deliveries will instil positive sentiment amongst homebuyers and all other stakeholders.

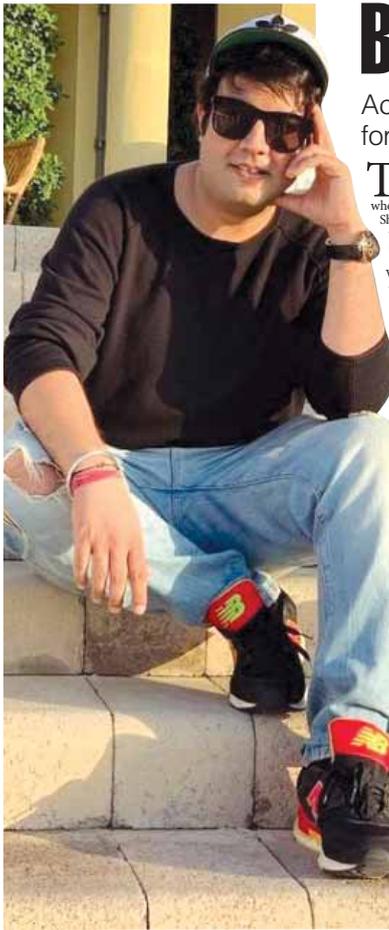
Anand also said that there can be several models of getting involved in stalled projects. There could be projects which are not in the NCLT, where ATS Nirman could come in as third party, oversee and help in rebuilding, selling and manage the project to its logical conclusion, he said.

"Another model is where we could, with the existing financial institution or with a new financial institution bid for the project in the NCLT, where there is a management change," he said.

Anand also said that the company would also seek funds from the SWAMIH (Special Window for Completion of Affordable and Mid-Income Housing Projects) fund instituted by the Ministry of Finance for completion of stalled housing projects.



Bollywood
 It's not my job to keep myself in the news. My job is to keep performing.
 —Kalki Koechlin



BALANCE OF BOTH WORLDS

Actor VARUN SHARMA tells SAKSHI SHARMA that his forthcoming horror-comedy, *Roohi*, is all about entertainment

The trailer of horror-comedy *Roohi* opens with people talking about a witch who preys upon newweds. She sings and puts the grooms to sleep and abducts their brides. As the three minute teaser unfolds, we see actor Varun Sharma in two contrasting looks. One, where he's donning a never-seen-before avatar — with spooky makeup with blood running down his face,



dark circles, a blank stare and red hair. The other Varun is his casual comic self where he cracks jokes with his co-stars Rajkumar Rao and Janhvi Kapoor. As is evident from the trailer, the fun quotient in the film seems to be top class. Says Varun, "There was a lot of fun on the sets while we were doing this film. It is a very crazy concept with three witches being caught in the adventure and falling in love with a witch. We are happy with the way the trailer is being received. The entertainment quotient and quirkiness is evident throughout."

Directed by Hardik Mehta, the film follows the eerie yet hilarious adventures of Bihara (played by Rajkumar), and Kattanni (played by Varun), as they come across a peculiar girl *Roohi* (essayed by Janhvi), in a forest.

It is Varun's second outing

with Rajkumar as they were earlier seen together in *Dolly ki Doli* (2015). The two share a great chemistry in real life, which Varun believes "translated on the screen too." The actor is all praise for his co-star Janhvi too. He says, "She is a phenomenal character. While filming this, she was doing some other project too. So, she had to portray two different personalities on the same day, which she did with a lot of ease and fun. *Maza aa gaya!*"

What made him take up this role? Well, the actor couldn't really decide one thing as the whole concept intrigued him. So, he takes a pause and says, "The script is the strongest pillar. And *yaar kab life mein churail ke saath kaam karne ka mauka milega?* (When will you get a role to work with a witch?) This is really interesting. I am a huge fan of the film *Stree* (2018). I loved that film, so I was really excited to work with the same makers and in the same genre. For all the right reasons, I immediately realised that I want to become a part of this mad world."

But it wasn't easy. Every role comes with its own set of preparation and challenges. Varun had to step out from his usual Hindi-Punjabi accent and learn the MP-UP style. Says he, "The biggest challenge was to portray my character right as it belonged to a fictional town in the film based near the MP-UP border. So, I used to

sit with the writers and learn that accent. I watched a lot of tik tok videos, listened to Bhojpuri songs and kept myself away from Punjabi music so that I could get the nuances of the dialect, make it my own and perform in it."

Horror-comedy is one of the most tricky genres to get right because maintaining the balance between the two — horror and comedy — is very important. How did he make it work? Says Varun, "I think the conviction of the makers, directors, writers and actors did it. I should give it to the team."

There's a very thin line between horror and comedy, one moment it's scary and the very next moment you are laughing. "Yes, it's a tough genre to portray correctly. A lot of time goes into writing the script so that the horror as well as comic timing lands correctly. No matter how much we try, if we don't get the desired reaction, the scene would go flat. I hope people get entertained, they laugh at one point and get scared at the other," adds Varun.

He agrees that earlier this genre wasn't explored much in the Indian cinema. But in the last few years, we have seen more films on these lines, including *Stree*. "When I saw the film, I was scared but in the very next moment I was laughing with ease too. This genre gives a lot of comfort to people who don't watch horror films," says Varun. Hence, we can

attribute this as one of the main reasons for the growing popularity of this genre.

Be it *Chucha in Fukrey* (2013) or *Sexa in Chhiddhore* (2019), the actor, known for his comic timing, has done a range of comedy roles now. So, what more does he aim to explore? "I really like making people laugh. All the comic roles that I have done so far are very different from each other. It's important to understand that there's a very thin line between different styles of comedy and I want to attempt a range of them. Other than this, I am a huge fan of thrillers too and would love to be a part of such films," says Varun.

Even after doing a considerable number of comedy films and being asked about the fear of getting typecast, the actor chooses to stick to this genre. He shares that it is the 'smiling faces' that keep him going. Adds he, "I love to see people smile and laugh. It is then that I think 'why not continue doing this.' I am simultaneously trying other genres too but this is not something that I am going to leave."

The film was expected to release in June 2020 but got delayed due to the pandemic. And now it has become the first film to release in cinema halls after they have been allowed to operate at full capacity. While the actor is clueless if this will give an upperhand to the film, he's just thankful to the makers that they had the confidence of holding it for so long. "It is not easy to do it, they stood by it to release it in cinemas only. I just hope that the audience will go back and enjoy. People need entertainment to go through such times and our constant effort has been to make them laugh. I promise, you'll come out of theatres laughing and taking something home," says Varun.

(The film releases on March 11.)

Bhumi gets nostalgic

Young Bollywood star Bhumi Pednekar was launched her to stardom with her debut film, *Dum Lagao Ke Haisha* (DLKH), in which she plays the role of an overweight girl who stands up for her rights. Bhumi credits her debut, directed by Sharat Katariya, to be a milestone moment that paved her path to glory. She was recently shooting in Rishikesh for her next *Badhaai Do* and was extremely overwhelmed as she was shooting in the same house that was used for her debut film.

The actress says, "DLKH is truly a milestone moment of my life and I can't imagine how my career would have shaped up without it. I was extremely fortunate to get this film and everyone knows how hard I worked to deliver this role. It was such a coincidence that I shot at the same location again for *Badhaai Do*. The house which was my first ever location, for my first film was used for this film. I was so nostalgic. What were the chances that after six years, I would be at the same place!"

She adds, "I was super nostalgic to be actually standing at the same spot where I gave my first shot as an actor. I remember we had done about 11 takes for this and I was so nervous. That is where Bhumi the actor was born."

Bhumi says, "The film gave me an identity as an actress and enabled me to tell the world that I was different, hungry, ambitious, and that I would take incredible risks to carry my legacy in the Hindi film industry. Today, when I look back at my debut, I'm filled with gratitude towards everyone who ensured that I do my best."

She credits the entire team of her first film for inculcating confidence in her as an artist. She says, "Right from Shanoo, Adi sir, Maneesh Sharma, Sharat Katariya and even Ayushmann (Khurrana) — everyone believed in me and that gave me so much confidence to go out there and present myself as an artist. DLKH is and will always be a film from which I harness confidence to take on more risks, to experiment constantly and present myself new on-screen every single time."



TREND TOOL



WEBBED

BIGGIE: I GOT A STORY TO TELL (2021)

Featuring rare footage and in-depth interviews, this documentary celebrates the life of The Notorious B.I.G. on his journey from hustler to rap king. Starring The Notorious B.I.G., Sean "P. Diddy" Combs, the film releases on March 1 on Netflix.

MOXIE

Inspired by her mom's rebellious past and a confident new friend, a shy 16-year-old publishes an anonymous zine calling out sexism at her school. Starring Hadley Robinson, Lauren Tsai and Patrick Schwarzenegger, the film releases on March 3 on Netflix.

SENTINELLE (2021)

Transferred home after a traumatising combat mission, a trained French soldier uses her lethal skills to hunt down the man who hurt her sister. The action-drama releases on March 5 on Netflix.

For many of us, the pandemic has been a time to figure out our mental belongings and get back to basics. This, at times, meant hours scouring for home remedies, aimlessly fishing for YouTube videos on wellness and rediscovering the bounties of homemade face packs. This year also rekindled our love and attention to nature's elements like water, air, heat and light and how these can work wonders for your body and mind. Each of these elements should be at play when you create the wellness zone in your home for complete healing and rejuvenation. The bathroom is considered the ideal place for personal care routine. So, it would be worth transforming it to your very own personal wellness retreat. Here

Relax and rejuvenate

Transform your bathroom into your very own personal wellness retreat

are a few Jaquar wellness range products that can help you do that.

Kubix Prime Whirlpool: Bring wellness into your home with great style and panache. The jets project water in a flowing, circular motion, which offers a wide array of health benefits, including relaxation, improved blood circulation and sore muscle and joint relief. Everything your heart desires, whether hot or cold water massages,

long relaxing soaks or even chromo therapy, this can give it all.

Hydrozone Swim Spa: It is a technological marvel, created to let you relax and restore equilibrium. Here, the 'well-being circuits' comprise of various seats and a common footrest. Each seat is strategically fitted with different types of massage jets in various positions, oriented to massage different parts of the body. By moving

from one seat to the other, one can enjoy a complete and satisfying massage which stimulates and relaxes all parts of the body.

Kubix Sauna: The bathroom or room, made of wood, uses dry heat to induce perspiration, with steam being produced by pouring water on heated stones. Perspiration or sweating is one of the main ways our bodies get rid of the traces of hundreds

of toxins. 15 minutes in a Sauna can help us sweat as much as we might otherwise do over an entire day or more. And the benefits range from relieving common cold symptoms to aiding in medical conditions like chronic fatigue, rheumatoid arthritis, musculoskeletal pain, and even cardiovascular and skin conditions.

Archimede Steam Cabin: An enclosure which may just become your safety zone. Functioning on humidifying water vapour which is produced from a high-quality steam generator provides you with the perfect location to forget all your worries for one day. Meant to nourish and cleanse your skin as well as your mind.

TRENDBLAZER



I DISLIKE DUBBING: TAAPSEE

Actress **TAAPSEE PANNU** confessed that she thoroughly detests dubbing. Taapsee shared a post on Instagram tagging sound designer Dhiman Karmakar and opened up on her experience of dubbing for her forthcoming film *Dobaara*. "Be it the chaotic and noisy lanes in *Manmarziyaan* or the deafening silence of Scotland in *Badla*, by now he (Dhiman) surely knows that if there is one aspect of my job I thoroughly detest is dubbing," she wrote.

fairtalk

JOHN ABRAHAM



"Some actors love dancing. For me, action is my dance. It's like item song to me. Coming up with different kind of action in every film is tough because I feel like my bones are breaking but I try to attempt it. This film, *Mumbai Saga*, has raw action. Here, my character has a conflict. It's a gangster film and we are showing what has happened in reality."

dailytalk

MADHURI DIXIT



"There are a lot of songs which were difficult for me. But the ones which really put me to test were *Choli ke piche kya hai, Chane ke khet mein, Ke sera sera, Ek do teen and Tamra tamra*. While these were some of the most difficult songs, they are also the most memorable ones. However, choreography in films have become more challenging now."

JENNIFER REVEALS HER LOVE FOR COFFEE

Hollywood star **JENNIFER ANISTON** revealed the secret behind her happiness. She says it is coffee. In an Instagram clip, Aniston is seen making herself a cuppa Joe. Me and coffee make for a happy girl, she wrote alongside the image.





Last month, Prime Minister Narendra Modi while speaking at the centenary celebrations of Aligarh Muslim University said that there has been an unprecedented increase in the rate of Muslim girl education in the country. In response to government policies, he said, that the dropout rate of Muslim girls reduced from 70 per cent to 30 per cent in the last decades.

Against all odds

The education of girls tremendously impacts not only their own development but also their families and communities, says RAMA SHARMA

The suggests that the government is investing steps in the right direction. However, there are a few regions where the impact of such schemes has started showing only recently, that too with the combined efforts of the non-government organisations to fight unawareness and orthodox values that act as a major hindrance.

One such region is Nivai Block in the Tonk district of the Western state of Rajasthan. In the block's Khidgi village resides a nomadic community called the Muslim Banjaras who are known for their ignorance towards girls' education. Their insistence to follow patriarchal beliefs restricting girls and women within the household is the main reason that has deprived several adolescent girls of their right to acquire basic education for long.

There are around 250 households in this rural settlement called 'Dhani' which, in local language, refers to a settlement by some families outside the main village. Pinki Khangar, a social activist, informed that a major part of this community earns its livelihood by selling blankets in other cities while few families are engaged in cattle trade. "Due to work, most of the community migrate for more than half of the year. Owing to reasons like poverty and low social status, not much importance is given to the education of girl children. They are often married at a young age," she said.

However, things have started looking positive now. "There are girls from this Banjar community who have started to come forward fighting



all the odds. One such girl is Sohina who is not only pursuing education but is equally determinant to raise awareness against illiteracy and child marriage in her community," shared Pinki.

While appreciating Sohina's efforts, the head of the village, Islam

Khan said, "Sohina was compassionate even as a child and was always eager to help others. She had her own ways to fight for the rights of the girls and at that time, I would think wrong of her. However, her willingness to support this community has changed my opinion."

While appreciating the unflinching courage of Sohina, Mohan Lal, who teaches at the Primary School in Dhani said, "This girl has worked hard not only to connect herself with mainstream education but has inspired around 50 girls of nearby areas of Shyampura Dhani, Ghatta

Patti Dhani and Amarapura Dhani to pursue their dream of being educated".

Mahendra Jain, Principal of Secondary School in Khidgi admitted that the general approach towards this community was negative and teachers weren't too concerned about the education of girls. However, Sohina's confidence and courage transformed their approach.

Besides promoting girls' education, Sohina along with other members of *Kishori Manch* — an adolescent group run by a non-profit organisation in the region, is also creating awareness among other members of her community regarding several social welfare schemes run by the government.

Under her leadership, 150 old age pension forms were filled and submitted to the concerned authorities while 10 widows were connected with the widow pension scheme. To boost the confidence among girls and to make them self-reliant, several girls have been given employment training and been associated with NREGA. In addition, 15 girls are receiving computer training and stitching cutting training under the *Pradhan Mantri Koushal Vikas Yojana* which could not have been possible without Sohina's efforts. She also inspired 10 girls from her community to pursue nursing training programmes just like her.

For the people of the village to benefit from several government schemes, Sohina has been also honoured by the Gram Panchayat," informed Kamlesh, a junior assistant to the Panchayat committee.

"My journey, however, has been full of challenges. "We were also quite orthodox in our approach towards our daughter. We would not have allowed her to step out of the house if social worker Giriraj Sharma would not have counselled us. It helped us understand the importance of supporting our daughter's education. We also supported her decision to train with the *Kishori Manch*," shared Sohina's parents.

Besides, the poor economic condition of the family also created troubles but Sohina acted with courage and continued to raise awareness among other girls. Today, not only her parents but the entire community is proud of her.

Sohina believes that girls have never been a weaker gender and that they should get equal opportunities. Here, not surprising, the female literacy rate is just 10 per cent of the entire village population.

These are the regions which need special attention. Clearly, the existing modus operandi isn't sufficient to address the needs of such low-income communities residing in rural and remote areas. If the government intends to further reduce the drop-out rate of Muslim girls from school, it will need to work with these communities closely. Only then can every girl become inspiring, courageous and self-reliant.

Rama Sharma is a recipient of Sanjog Ghose Media Awards 2020. —Charika Features



Restore morals

Values are more important than knowledge, says RAJYOGI BRAHMAKUMAR NIKUNJJI

Most of the people across the world today feel that education in moral and human values is very essential if we wish to have a better society. Similarly, it is also being amply emphasised that every profession must have a code of conduct which people in that profession must follow. However, there are some differences among the people in regard to impartation of education in values. Like, some people feel that values should not be taught as a separate subject as school going children already have a heavy load of books that they carry and education in values, as a separate subject, would add to this load and make the burden unbearable. So, they suggest that almost every subject, which the students presently study, must have a value-orientation, which means that every subject must talk of some values and not be derived from it or that are basic or related to it besides talking about its main subject-matter. This, they opine, should be done in a subtle and indirect way because this way has been found to be more effective.



Above all these, there is another category of people who would ask for both the methods. They suggest that, if possible, there should be value-orientation in every subject and there should be a separate subject also by that name. One thing that is common to all the kinds of opinion leaders is that they feel that the process of regeneration in values has become very rapid. However, it seems that even though they all feel seriously concerned with the need to stem the rot and to restore the morals to their former heights, they do not think that it is necessary to set a time-schedule for that purpose. This nullifies much of their effort on value-education because it is human nature that if goal and time-limits are not set, then the man becomes sluggish. Moreover, if we allow our efforts for a global moral transformation to go on as a process at any place without giving it a sense of urgency, then before we turn the tables, the tables will turn on us.

To counter this, there is another group who says that 'who said that education in values must be given in the form of a book only? They feel that this way has been found to be more effective. If education in values is taught as a separate subject through stories, poems, dramas, sayings, songs, and more, then this subject would be the most popular of all, particularly if it is given in the form of visuals and is enacted on the stage. Besides these groups, there is another group as well which talks of value-based education, but it seems to be not very clear about what exactly it wants. They ask, 'what does the phrase 'value-based' mean? Does it mean that values should form the very basis of education or that every subject, which we teach, must bring out certain values also. If it has the former meaning, then it implies that education without values has no basis. Since this second meaning seems to be absurd, one can infer that this term 'value-based' is used to put great emphasis on this aspect of education. This term is meant to convey that if education does not impart values, then it is not education; it is, perhaps, mere information. In that sense, it does not talk of the methodology; it does not say whether there should be only value-orientation of every subject or teaching values should form a separate subject.

The speed at which people are destroying the environment and disrupting the ecological system, the rate at which the population is growing, the amounts of money which are being spent to prepare and store weapons of mass-destruction, these and other signs clearly warn humankind that if it does not take any speedy action to restore the values known as the spirit of world-brotherhood, love, co-operation, non-violence, and more, then our very survival would be endangered. Hence, the damage caused by 'moral degeneration in values' must be controlled in time. Else, our present artificial civilisation will, like many of its predecessors, be washed away. Time, in this regard, is a crucial factor. The process of moral regeneration cannot be allowed to be delayed anymore for that would be too late. We must, therefore, set a period of time within which we should be able to reverse the tide or save whatever we can.

HOPE AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

Mental health has been impacted the most during the pandemic, says a students' survey



As the country continues to battle Coronavirus, young adults in college say that their mental well-being has been most impacted by the pandemic's social consequences. But the silver lining is visible to most and the outlook is one of hope for this year, state the results of a survey by BML Munjal University.

One of every two, that is, 49 per cent students say that stress, anxiety and loneliness have been the most challenging to cope with during COVID-19 that has impacted their mental health. Approximately 26 per cent cite not being able to keep up academically to be most challenging. About 15 per cent say that not having a dedicated place for studying at home was a challenge and a meagre 10.47 per cent cite poor internet connectivity to be a pressing concern.

Stress is exaggerated by their concerns of post college careers. 55 per cent of college students are concerned, of which 38 per cent say they are very concerned about their future because of the uncertainty of the situation. In this scenario, their expectations from their college are to offer functional

courses that would be more relevant in the new normal. Fifty-one per cent of students cite this as an expectation while 32 per cent of students expect their college to facilitate industry placements, says the survey.

Social isolation has been

buoyant among students for the new normal. About 78 per cent of students surveyed are feeling hopeful about the future than they did when the pandemic began. Of these nearly 40 per cent say that with the vaccination drive underway, they are hopeful that normal life will resume soon.

India's young adults display positive energy and resilience to respond fast and surprisingly well to unprecedented challenges. Students have taken away important learnings from this black swan event. Thirty-seven per cent of young adults say they realise the importance of mental and physical health, 28 per cent the importance of family and friends and 12 per cent saying that it has reminded and restored their confidence in the resilience of the human spirit. "When the going gets tough, the tough get going" is a lasting lesson that will remain with young adults.

With a lot of free time on their hands, young adults kept themselves entertained on OTT platforms. Around 33.4 per cent of the students turned to watching content on OTT platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hot Star, followed by playing video games (13.2 per cent) and cultivating new hobbies (12.5 per cent) within the confines of their premises.

While students have missed their college campuses and are eager to return, one out of every two students say that the future of learning will be hybrid, says the survey. —BANS

Life is 10 per cent what happens to you and 90 per cent how you react to it. —Charles R Swindoll

PHONES KEEP GLAUCOMA BLINDNESS AT BAY

Smartphones, often blamed for eye strains and other problems, can also come to your aid as researchers have found that these devices could be used to scan people's eyes to early-warning signs of glaucoma, helping to prevent severe ocular diseases and blindness.

Glaucoma is a disease of the optic nerve which is estimated to affect 73.6 million people world-wide and, if left untreated, causes irreversible damage.

In most cases, blindness can be prevented with appropriate control and treatment.

Glaucoma is associated with elevated levels of intraocular pressure (IOP) and an accurate, non-invasive way of monitoring an individual's IOP over an extended period would help to significantly increase their chances of maintaining their vision. Soundwaves used as a mobile measurement method would detect increasing values of IOP, prompting early diagnosis and treatment.

WFH LEADING TO EYE, HEARING ISSUES

Doctors say online classes and work from home due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is causing eye and ear problems among children, adolescents and young adults.

Doctors have warned that this could lead to hearing and eye difficulties among those who failed to curb the use of earphones, mobile phones and laptops. However, the doctors also asserted that in other reason which causes hearing problems is the noise pollution.

Rahul Garg, Head of RG Ear-Nose-Throat (ENT) Hospital, said lifestyle choices lead to more cases of hearing and eye impairment than age-related factors.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, a few patients used to visit hospitals/clinics who were developing hearing problems after Diwali last year due to firecrackers but amid COVID-19, a number of patients from all age groups are visiting doctors' clinics due to hearing problems and eye infection complications.

PLANT-BASED DIET IMPROVES CARDIAC FUNCTION

Want to improve your cardiac function, cognitive health? Plant-based diets may help, say researchers. The study suggests that by eating more plant-based food such as berries and green leafy vegetables while limiting consumption of foods high in saturated fat and animal products, may slow down heart failure and ultimately lower risk of cognitive decline and dementia.

"Our findings highlight the importance of adherence to the MIND diet for a better cardiovascular health and further reduce the burden of cardiovascular disease in the community," said researcher Vanessa Xanthakis, Assistant Professor at the Boston University.

Heart failure is associated with high risk of cognitive decline and dementia. Similarly, changes in cardiac structure and function (cardiac remodelling) that precede the appearance of heart failure are associated with poor cognitive function and cerebral health.

GREEN SPACE REDUCES SELF-HARM IN PRISONS

Adding more trees, lawns and shrubbery in prisons may decrease the levels of violence and self-harm among prisoners, says a new study.

The study indicated that prisoners with a higher presence of green space had lower levels of self-harm, and lower levels of prisoner violence and assaults on prison staff.

"Our evidence shows clear and demonstrable benefits from the presence of green space for prisoners in all categories of prison," said lead researcher Dominique Moran from the University of Birmingham.

"It's clear that inclusion of green space should be a key design element for new prisons, and existing prisons should convert existing outdoor areas to provide more green space wherever possible," Moran added.

COVID MESSING UP SUGAR LEVELS

Garur Jain changed name (name recovered) from a mild COVID-19 attack around Diwali and began a normal life after a short bout of weakness. Nearly three months later, Jain experienced some unusual symptoms like blurry vision, constant thirst and lethargy.

He checked his blood sugar at home and to his horror, the reading came above 400 mg/dL. Before COVID, his blood sugar levels were in the normal range.

Jain rushed to the nearby hospital and was given medications along with a warning to completely transform his lifestyle.

According to leading health experts, Jain is not alone as they are witnessing more COVID-recovered patients being diagnosed with diabetes and related complications.

LYON SLAMS CRITICS OF MOTERA WICKET

PTI ■ MELBOURNE

Nathan Lyon would love India's chief curator to be put in charge of the SCG, declaring the much-maligned pitch in Ahmedabad was brilliant and he is perplexed by those "crying" about spin-friendly surfaces.

India crushed England by 10 wickets in a pink-ball match that spanned just 842 balls, making it the shortest completed Test since 1934.

The result has reignited debate about home-ground advantage.

Former England captains Andrew Strauss, Alastair Cook and Michael Vaughan criticised the pitch prepared by the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI)'s chief groundsman Ashish Bhowmik, while the tourists are considering whether to lodge a formal complaint to the International Cricket Council.

Lyon pointed to the fact that Jack Leach was the visitors' sole frontline spinner when asked about the reaction to the pitch.

"The best thing about this Test match that just passed is that England went in with four seamers," Lyon said.

"That will do me, I don't need to say any more."

Lyon, who worked as a curator before starting his 100-Test career, was captivated by the carnage created by fellow off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin and left-



arm twerker Axar Patel.

"I was up all night watching it," he said.

"It was absolutely brilliant. I'm thinking about bringing that curator out to the SCG."

"We play on seaming wickets around the world and get

bowled out for 47, 60. Nobody ever says a thing (about the pitch)."

"But as soon as it starts spinning, everyone in the world seems to start crying about it."

"I don't get it. I'm all for it, it was entertaining."

The result was a major blow to Australia's hopes of sneaking into the Test championship final.

Tim Paine's team will contest the mid-year final at Lord's if England win their fourth Test against India, which starts at the same venue on Thursday.

Last 2 tracks were hardest to keep: Foakes

PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

The square turner at the Chepauk for the second Test and the Ahmedabad dust bowl provided for the 'pink ball' game are hardest surfaces that Ben Foakes has kept on in his nascent international career.

India have put England on the mat with a couple of tracks which aided the home spinners as Ravichandran Ashwin and Axar Patel ran riot, giving India 2-1 lead in the four-match series.

"Last two games are the hardest pitches I have kept on. In the last game the pink ball was skidding, I haven't seen a wicket like that and keeping on it was a good challenge," Foakes, who has replaced Jos Buttler as per England's rotation policy, said during a virtual media conference.

By his own admission, Foakes hasn't seen a cricket ball turn so much.

"The two pitches that I have played, I have never seen ball turn like that. It's certainly very challenging. It's like having day five pitch from ball one."

But for one of world's best glovesman, the last two games were learning experience and real fun.

"When the ball spins, it's fun



to keep and in Sri Lanka, it was easy because it was consistent and you knew the ball is going to turn. What I found during pink ball Test was it could spin square past batter or it could skid."

He admitted that no seamer can take every catch on these sort of tracks.

"On these sort of pitches, you can't catch every ball."

"The way I have approached is three matches for England and try and play as well as I can. Not look too far ahead and enjoy the moment I guess," he said.

Rohit reaches career-best eighth

PTI ■ DOUBAI

opener Rohit Sharma touched his career-best eighth position in the ICC Test Batmen's Rankings on Sunday with a six-place jump after his impressive show in India's 10-wicket win over England in the low-scoring third Test in Ahmedabad.

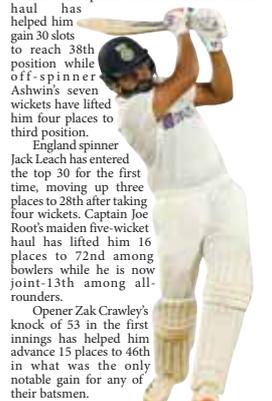
His rating points aggregate is 742, 20 more than his best of 722 in October 2019 when he was ranked 10th.

Player of the match Axar Patel and Ravichandran Ashwin have also made solid gains after playing a crucial role in India's win on a spin-friendly track.

Left-arm spinner Patel's 11-wicket match haul has helped him gain 30 slots to reach 38th position while off-spinner Ashwin's seven wickets have lifted him four places to third position.

England spinner Jack Leach has entered the top 30 for the first time, moving up three places to 28th after taking four wickets. Captain Joe Root's maiden five-wicket haul has lifted him 16 places to 72nd among bowlers while he is now joint-13th among all-rounders.

opener Zak Crawley's knock of 53 in the first innings has helped him advance 15 places to 46th in what was the only notable gain for any of their batsmen.



Padikkal makes hat-trick of hundreds

PTI ■ BENGALURU

Young Karnataka sensation Devdutt Padikkal continued his terrific form ahead of the IPL with a third successive century as the defending champions stormed into the Vijay Hazare Trophy quarter-finals with a lopsided 10-wicket win over Railways in a group C here on Sunday.

The Royal Challengers Bangalore opener, who scored a careerbest 152 against Odisha and followed it up with 126 not out versus Kerala in their last outing, smacked nine sixes and as many boundaries in his 145 not out from 125 balls.

The 20-year-old left-hander had the company of his skipper Ravikumar Samarth who also slammed an unbeaten century (130 not out from 118 balls; 17x4) as the opening duo raced to the 285-run target win with 57 balls to spare at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium here.

The big win ensured that they finished on top of group C to qualify for the last-eight while Uttar Pradesh finished second following their six-wicket win over Odisha at the Just Cricket Academy Samarth who also slammed an unbeaten century (130 not out from 118 balls; 17x4) as the opening duo raced to the 285-run target win with 57 balls to spare at the M Chinnaswamy Stadium here.

The Railways bowlers did very little to trouble the Karnataka opening duo who raced past 200 in 29.5 overs as the seemingly challenging total proved just to be a cakewalk.



GUJARAT BEAT BARODA

Hosts Gujarat defeated Baroda by 40 runs in their last Group A match to remain unbeaten. Opting to bat, Gujarat posted 277 for 7, riding on opener Dhruv Raval's 102 off 129 balls and then restricted the opposition to 237 for 9.

Experienced leg-spinner Piyush Chawla (3/52) shone bright with the ball for Gujarat.

Left-handed batsman

Raval took charge and anchored the innings with responsibility en route to his century knock which was laced with nine boundaries and a six.

Gujarat pegged back Baroda by taking three wickets in quick succession as they slipped to 135 for 4.

Pacer Chintan Gaja struck twice, first removing Solanki, who was caught by Raval, and then sent back inform rival, skipper Krunal Pandya (2).

Ninad Rathwa (3) also fell cheaply.

When Chawla trapped Patel in front of the wicket as Baroda lost half of their side for 154. From there on, it was an uphill task for Baroda, who eventually ended at 237 for 9.

ANDHRA BEAT JHARKHAND

Andhra outplayed Jharkhand by seven wickets to emerge on top of Group B. Andhra, Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh finished on 12 points each from five matches but Andhra emerged on top, thanks to their higher net run rate and secured a place in the knockout phase.

Sent in to bat, Jharkhand struggled with only four batsmen managing double figures. Skipper Ishan Kishan made 38 (68 balls, 3 fours), the highest score while medium-pacer M Harishankar Reddy was impressive with a four-wicket haul for Andhra.

Ashwin Hebbur (44, 18 balls, 4X4s, 4X6s) and Ricky Bhui (57 not out, 27 balls, 5X4s, 4X6s) went on the attack from the start with the Jharkhand bowlers having no respite.

The duo added 82 in 5.5 overs before Hebbur fell to Shahbaz Nadeem (1/26). Bhui continued with his aggressive ways and despite losing captain Hanuma Vihari (4), he saw the team home in the company of Naren Reddy (16 not out, 7 balls, 1X4, 2X6s).

Sune Luus to lead SA Eves

PTI ■ LUCKNOW

Sune Luus will lead South Africa women's team against India in the upcoming limited over series as regular skipper Dane Van Niekerk and Chloe Tryon will again miss the assignment due to injuries, the country's cricket board CSA said on Sunday.

South Africa retained most of the players in the 18-member squad which had won the ODI and T20 series against Pakistan last month. Van Niekerk and Chloe Tryon were not part of that series.

Pacer Masabata Klaas is the only one to miss out after picking up an injury at the last moment.

Sune Luus had captained the side in the last series and will continue to do so with Van Niekerk and Tryon yet to recover from lower-back injuries.

"It is really exciting to finally have this tour confirmed and announce our squad that will do duty here in India, and we are looking forward to getting out there to see our ladies prove themselves under different playing conditions," Hilton Moreeng was quoted as saying in a statement by *Cricbuzz*.

"India is always a wonderful place to tour and we are looking forward to the challenge that lies ahead."

The series comprises five ODIs, followed by three T20 internationals — all to be held at the Ekana Stadium in Lucknow.

SQUAD

Sune Luus (c), Ayabonga Khaka, Shabnim Ismail, Laura Wolvaardt, Trisha Chetty, Sinalo Jafa, Tasmin Britz, Marizanne Kapp, Nondumiso Shangase, Lizelle Lee, Anneke Bosch, Faye Tunnicliffe, Nonkululeko Mlaba, Mignon du Preez, Nadine de Klerk, Lara Goodall and Tumi Sekhukhune.

Inc calculated Eng's ineptitude against spin: Chappell

PTI ■ NEW DELHI



PTI ■ NEW DELHI

India figured out England's general ineptitude against spin during the second Test in Chennai and used it to their advantage in the 'Pink Ball' game by unleashing a spin-heavy attack on a helpful track, says former Australia captain Ian Chappell.

"India's decision to select three spinners for the Test was prompted by England's batting on a tricky Chennai pitch, where their batsmen - Joe Root excepted - displayed a distinct ineptitude against spin," Chappell wrote in a column in *'ESPNcricinfo'*.

"India correctly calculated that would result in mental scarring and used it to their advantage."

Chappell said it was poor defence which led to England's collapse in the third Test.

"When faced with a serious spin challenge, the England batsmen

didn't trust their defence, which eventually resulted in panicked attempts to attack the Indian spinners," he wrote.

"Their choice to reverse-sweep rather than to leave their crease to change the bowler's length is a classic example."

"How can a risky premeditated shot be less dangerous than what was previously a trusted technique to unsettle good spinners?" he questioned.

Chappell said "Shrewd use of footwork not only helps negate the spin but also puts a batsman in a position to direct the ball where he wants."

"To be fair, this is a skill to be learned at a young age. Which prompts the question: why is it not widely taught in England, where sweeping is misguidedly touted as the secret to playing spin bowling successfully?"



Mary will lead 14-member team

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

Six-time world champion MC Mary Kom will spearhead a 14-member Indian boxing in the Boxam International tournament in Castellon, Spain from March 1 to 7.

According to a release issued by the Boxing Federation of India (BFI), the Indian contingent left for Spain in early hours on Sunday.

Besides Mary Kom, the team also has Commonwealth Games Silver medalist Manish Kaushik (63kg).

The duo are key highlights of the Indian team as they are set to make a return to the ring for the first time since the Asian Olympic Qualifiers held in Jordan in March last year.

The highly-competitive tournament will feature 19 nations with their Tokyo-bound boxers.

The Indian team will consist of eight men and six women pugilists, including nine Olympic qualified boxers.

Gunners come back to hunt Foxes

AP ■ LEICESTER

Arsenal turn around its recent poor form to beat Leicester 3-1 on Sunday as the home side was left to deal with an injury to on-form midfielder Harvey Barnes.

Arsenal started the day in 11th and returned to the top half with the win, while Leicester missed a chance to challenge Manchester United for second.

Touri Telemans gave Leicester the lead in the sixth minute when the Belgian midfielder surged down the right



flank as Arsenal failed to close him down, and then shot low past Bernd Leno.

David Luiz leveled for Arsenal with his first league goal since October 2019, heading in Williams' free kick when he was left unmarked.

Pepe had earlier been denied a penalty when a video review showed he was tripped just outside the area by Wilfred Ndidi, but was key to winning a spot-kick just before half time when he struck a shot that hit Ndidi's arm as the Nigerian midfielder tried to block with

his leg. Alexandre Lacazette stepped up to power the penalty in.

Pepe made it 3-1 in the 52nd when he started a move down the right flank and then ran through the Leicester defense to apply a simple finish off Williams' low cross.

Barnes was carried off early in the second half with an apparent knee injury, and defender Jonny Evans was also hurt later in the game. Leicester's effort. The goal was originally ruled out for offside but was awarded on video review.

Injury-hit Juventus was held at Hellas Verona to 1-1 as its hopes of a record-extending 10th successive Serie A title took a blow.

AP ■ MILAN

Romelu Lukaku Rescored after just 32 seconds and helped to set up two goals as league leader Inter Milan beat Genoa 3-0 in Serie A on Sunday.

Inter dominated but took until the 69th minute to double its lead, through Matteo Darmian. Substitute Alexis Sanchez sealed the win to ensure Antonio Conte's side moved seven points above second-place AC Milan, which visits Roma in the late game.

Napoli was also playing later, against Benevento.

It was Genoa's first league defeat since early January and left it 13th, eight points above the drop zone.

Inter was bidding for a fifth straight league win and it got off to the perfect start when Nicolò Barella sent a ball through to Lukaku, who played a quick one-two with Lautaro Martinez before drilling



into the bottom left corner.

The Nerazzurri wasted a number of chances and Barella also hit a long-range stunner off the crossbar in the 17th.

Inter finally doubled its lead when Lukaku drew defenders toward him before setting up an unmarked Darmian.

Sanchez was brought on in the 76th and the Inter forward immedi-

Vinesh returns to mat with Gold



PTI ■ UKRAINE

Star Indian wrestler Vinesh Phogat on Sunday pinned 2017 world champion V Kaladzinsky to grab a Gold medal at the Outstanding Ukrainian Wrestlers and Coaches Memorial tournament here, and returned to the mat in style after a long coronavirus-forced break.

Up against the world number seven Belarusian, it was not an easy bout for the world number three Indian as the two grapplers kept testing each other with consistent attacks in the sea-saw battle in which Vinesh prevailed.

Vinesh opened up a 4-0 lead in the 53kg final with a throw which she initiated with a left-leg attack but Kaladzinsky made it 4-4 with her brilliant move.

Vinesh took the break leading 6-4, adding to her score with a take down, 10 seconds before the break.

The Belarusian put pressure on the Indian with another four-point throw but with 25 seconds to go, Vinesh's move fetched her four more points for a 10-8 lead. She got into a position from where she pinned Kaladzinsky to ensure herself a Gold.