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THE EDITORIAL PAGE

GROWTH: BENEATH THE RECOVERY
BY PRANJUL BHANDARI
PAGE 8

BUSINESS AS USUAL
By UNNY

Incentive for lovers to study well, go abroad and get married.

In UP, college students booked for sedition, principal cites azadi slogans

ASAD REHMAN
LUCKNOW, DECEMBER 27

SIX PERSONS, including students of government-run K S Saket Degree College in Ayodhya district, have been booked for sedition after the college principal lodged a complaint accusing them of raising "anti-national slogans calling (for) azadi".

As per Principal N D Pandey, "indecent and anti-national slogans like *Le ke rahenge azadi*" were raised on the college premises on December 16.

With the Ramjanmabhoomi site nearby, he told *The Indian Express*, he needed to look out for "such anti-national activities" and couldn't allow slogans "that are raised at Jawaharlal Nehru University".

The students say they were only protesting against the non-conduct of union elections at the college, and their slogans were directed at the principal and the chief proctor.

Started in 1991, K S Saket College has around 10,000 students.

An FIR was lodged against the six, Sumit Tewari, Shesh Narayan Pandey, Imran Hashmi,
CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

EXPRESS INVESTIGATION PART 2

Fewer women move abroad, many cite family as factor in career: High up ladder, gender still matters

More girl toppers from metros than small towns where odds for boys better; gap narrowing but still sharp in Science/Tech



“ Though I was stressed by expectations from family, society to get married earlier than I did, my parents were ambitious for me. Since I had their support, I could focus on higher studies ”

JERENE MATHEWS, PAEDIATRIC DERMATOLOGIST AT BELIEVERS CHURCH MEDICAL COLLEGE HOSPITAL, KERALA, CLASS 12 CBSE TOPPER IN 2006



“ At IIT-Bombay, we all got equal treatment regardless of gender. But boys participated in class more... girls sometimes thought their answers might not be correct and refrained from answering ”

SHALAKA KULKARNI, PURSUING MBA FROM YALE SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT, CLASS 10 ICSE TOPPER IN 2012

RITIKA CHOPRA
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

VARTIKA BHANDARI, 40, ISC 1998 Board topper from Allahabad, is a senior staff software engineer with Google in San Francisco. Chaitra Chandrasekhar, 38, ICSE 1998 topper from a Bangalore school, is partner at consulting firm Oliver Wyman in New York. Jerene Mathews, 31, 2006 Class 12 CBSE topper from Kendriya Vidyalaya in Kottayam, is a paediatric dermatologist in Thiruvalla, Kerala.

These women may not have shattered the glass ceiling at their workplace yet but, surely, they are well on their way there, perched high up the ladder. And yet, as a four-month investigation by *The Indian Express* of 86 national school Board toppers — 51 men and 35 women — from 1996 to 2015 shows, their gender does matter.

Maybe not as much as it does among the "average" in their cohort, but its burden is inescapable: from their low representation in science and tech to



TRACKING INDIA'S TOPPERS

TOMORROW RANKS GIVE HEAD START BUT MAY BE DECEPTIVE INDICATORS, SAY TOPPERS

fewer girl toppers going abroad than their male counterparts; from promising careers put on hold to those tailored to suit family obligations.

Fewer women have moved overseas than their men counterparts
More than half the toppers

STUDYING OR WORKING ABROAD



CITY OF SCHOOLING

WOMEN (OUT OF 35)	
TIER 1	63% (22)
TIER 2 & 3	37% (13)
MEN (OUT OF 51)*	
TIER 2 & 3	63% (32)
TIER 1	33% (17)

* 2 of them with CISCE-affiliated schools in Dubai

currently study or live overseas but among them, there is a significant gender gap. Just 40% (14 out of 35) of women toppers are studying/working abroad but for men, that ratio is 63%.

These numbers are small and should not lead to sweeping generalisations, says Poonam Batra, Professor of Education at Delhi

University, but she acknowledges a "gender lens" is important to understand such trends.

"Gender often influences decision-making related to the education of children in a family. With the decline of academic standards in public universities and an increase in disposable income, many more privileged families are sending their children abroad for higher studies. It is usually the boy in the family who has an edge in such decisions. Such trends will, however, need to be researched rigorously, as contexts vary considerably."

Swati Prusty, 27, who topped the Class 12 CBSE exam in 2010, says she was never too keen on settling abroad. Hence studying at a foreign university didn't carry much appeal. "Since I knew I would work in India, it didn't make sense to take a loan to study abroad and then come back to work for financial payoff reasons, among others," she said, adding that she turned down a scholarship with National University of Singapore to pursue engineering in India.
CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



Protesting farmers clang utensils during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's *Mann ki Baat* in Ghazipur, at the Delhi-Uttar Pradesh border, on Sunday. Prem Nath Pandey

GOVT RESPONDS TO PROTESTERS

Tomar welcomes return to talks; no one can take land of farmers: Rajnath

Hope farmers will appreciate situation, reality of law: Govt

HARIKISHAN SHARMA
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

DESCRIBING THE farm unions' decision to return to the negotiation table as "good step", Union Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar on Sunday expressed hope that a solution would be found to the stalemate over the new farm laws through discussions.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh reaffirmed that the Centre has no intention of scrapping the minimum support price (MSP) regime, and that no "ma ka lal (no one)" can take away land from the farmers.

"Main ummeed karta hoon ki kisan parishthi aur kanoon ki sachchai ko samajhenge, vaarta hogi, aur uska samadhaan niklega (I hope that the farmers will appreciate the situation and the reality of the law; talks will take place, and a solution will be found)," Tomar told *The Indian Express*.

Asked about the farm unions' proposal of holding the next round of talks on December 29, Tomar said, "*Vaarta hogi* (Talks will take place)."

"They have written a letter; it is a good step. We were already ready for talks; we will resolve the issue through negotiations," he said.

The Samyukt Kisan Morcha, an umbrella body of 40 farm organisations, on Saturday wrote to the Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, announcing the resumption of talks. It also proposed a four-point agenda for the talks that include modalities to be adopted for the repeal of the three central farm Acts; mechanisms to make the remunerative MSP recommended by the National Farmers' Commission into a legally guaranteed entitlement for all farmers and all agricultural commodities; amendments to be made and notified in the
CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Punjab lawyer kills himself, criticises PM for 'black laws'

RAAKHI JAGGA & AMIL BHATNAGAR
LUDHIANA, NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

AN ADVOCATE from Jalalabad in Punjab's Fazilka district, who had been protesting with farmers affiliated to the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) Ugrahan at Delhi's Tikri border, died by suicide on Sunday morning.

Amarjit Singh Rai consumed the farm pesticide sulphos about 200 metres from the stage at the protest site that farmers have named Gadhri Gulab Kaur Nagar. Before collapsing, he gave two printed letters — one of which was addressed to Prime Minister Narendra Modi — to other protesters.

Earlier this month, a
CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Street vendor scheme a hit, govt plans next phase: digital payments

AVISHEK G DASTIDAR
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

STARTING NEW Year, over a million street vendors across India will accept and make payments digitally, having come on board for the 'Main Bhi Digital (me too digital)' drive designed by the Centre for them.

The drive has been prompted by the success of the Prime Minister Street Vendor's Atma-Nirbhar Nidhi (PMSVANidhi) scheme, launched in the wake of the Covid-19 lockdown, to provide vendors microcredit. As part of the new drive, between
CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

EXPLAINED Applicants cross 50% mark

THE MAIN Bhi Digital drive has been prompted by the success of the loan scheme for vendors, with the number of applicants, 30 lakh, already crossing the half-way mark of the total number of street vendors. More than 16.65 lakh applications have been sanctioned by partner banks.

The go-to actor for new stories, Pankaj Tripathi at eAdda today

EKTAA MALIK
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

WHILE forcing people indoors, the Covid-19 pandemic has whetted India's voracious appetite for stories. Among those at the forefront of this phase in entertainment, playing out largely on online streaming services, is Pankaj Tripathi, credited with delivering some of 2020's most talked about performances. On Monday evening, the 44-year-old will be guest at Express eAdda, which features interactions with people at the centre of change.

Tripathi's releases this year include films like *Ludo*, *Gunjan Saxena: The Kargil Girl*, *Angeeri*



Medium, *Extraction* and *Shakeela* (several of them directly released on OTT platforms). On content made for streaming

platforms, he had prominent roles in *Mirzapur 2* and the recently released *Criminal Justice Season 2*.

A National School of Drama graduate, Tripathi spent many years waiting patiently for his time in the limelight, starting out with blink-and-you-miss roles in films like *Run* (2004) and *Omkaara* (2005), before attracting attention with his performance as Sultan Querishi in *Gangs of Wasseypur Part 1 & 2*. Films like *Fukrey* (2013) and *Masaan* (2013) helped cement his talent, while hit Netflix show *Sacred Games* and acclaimed movies such as *Newton* (2017), *Nil Battey Sannata* (2016) and *Stree* (2018) followed. Now, as stories
CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

After Khadse, Raut's wife gets ED notice; Sena, NCP say Centre targeting Opp

VISHWAS WAGHMODE
MUMBAI, DECEMBER 27

A DAY after a notice to senior NCP leader Eknath Khadse, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Sunday issued summons to the wife of Shiv Sena MP Sanjay Raut, Varsha, asking her to appear before it on December 29.

Varsha was summoned as part of the investigation into the Punjab and Maharashtra Cooperative (PMC) Bank scam case. The ED is investigating alleged financial transactions between Varsha and Pravin Raut, who is under arrest in the case. Dismissing the allegations,
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WILL have special observers for Bengal... for law and order, expenses. If needed, we can act swiftly, ruthlessly'

SUNIL ARORA
CHIEF ELECTION COMMISSIONER OF INDIA
PAGE 12



Eknath Khadse; Sanjay Raut

Raut told *The Indian Express*: "I have been hearing that the ED has sent a notice to us, but I am yet to see a copy of it... They should show us on paper what they have found in their investigation." He said he would clarify his stand on the issue in detail on Monday.
CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

In epic MCG century, Rahane stands up, lifts Adelaide gloom

SANDIP G
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

A DAY after he marshalled his troops admirably on the field, Ajinkya Rahane struck a priceless century in adversity to put India in a commanding position in the second Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

The unbeaten 104 came as a timely balm after the pain inflicted by the humiliation in Adelaide last week. With a lead of 82 runs and five wickets in hand at the end of Day 2, India could now dream of levelling the series.

And the man behind the dream is Rahane. On Saturday, he made all the right calls as captain. His daring and calmness stood out. On Sunday, he played the right shots as a captain. It was his bloody-

mindedness, clarity of stroke-making and the stomach for a fight that stood out.

This could turn out to be not only the defining knock of Rahane's career, but also one of the finest an Indian batsman has composed abroad. Not perhaps in volume yet, but definitely in impact. It could potentially shape the match, the series, and extend the life-span of a generation that would have been dismantled had India reproduced an encore of the Adelaide capitulation.

With the match on the brink, the series on edge, a generation on the fence, his own career plateauing, pitted against a high-class bowling crew, Rahane stood up.

The more variables you weave in, the more lustre his hundred gains. So much so that the effort merits being spoken of in the same breath as Virat Kohli's twin



Ajinkya Rahane celebrates after his century as Ravindra Jadeja looks on during the India-Australia Test match in Melbourne on Sunday. Reuters

hundreds in Adelaide (2014), or Cheteshwar Pujara's 106 in Melbourne (2018), or Sourav Ganguly's 144 in Brisbane (2003). Or if India could orchestrate a turnaround in the series, inspire the same awe as Rahul Dravid's 233 (Adelaide, 2003), considered the finest by an Indian batsman on Australian soil.

It was invaluable on several counts. This was India's first innings during the capitulation in Adelaide. Even though India had scored twice as many runs as they had in the second innings in Adelaide when he walked out to bat at the fall of Shubman Gill, they were 61/2, far from a position of authority. The Australian bowlers were breathing fire, and they could have swallowed the rest of the batting firm in their fury.

India needed someone to fight fire with ice. Rahane was that

man. In his initial days, he had the reputation of being a crisis man, before he slipped into a period of confusion. Since the 2018 tour of South Africa, he has been a largely peripheral figure in Test matches abroad. Barring a century against West Indies, he had been mostly unremarkable. In his last tour of Australia, he managed only 217 runs at a meagre average of 31. There was a time when India feared losing him, when he teetered on the verge of being chopped. The fears now seem unwarranted. Rahane is reborn.

Most unexpectedly, he did not make India crave, or even miss, Kohli. It was a day India didn't need Kohli. For they had Rahane. His batsmanship is different from Kohli's, but the spunk he exuded was similar to Kohli's. He was prepared to fight, and fight he did, from the first to the

200th ball he faced on Sunday. At no point in the game did he surrender the will to fight.

His composure in adversity and the shepherding of the lower-order were akin to VVS Laxman's. Like the Hyderabad virtuoso, there was an air of equanimity about him. Whether he was beaten or had scored a boundary, his expression remained the same. His ability to lift his batting when thrust with the captaincy was reminiscent of Steve Waugh.

Coming into the match, he had been far from fluent, but he fought his way out of trouble. He was not always easy on the eye, and he scraped through the difficult phases of the game. In the end, he lifted the post-Adelaide gloom and passed a few milestones, too. He became only the second batsman to score two hundreds at the MCG.

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10 GLOBAL EVENTS TO WATCH OUT FOR IN 2021

While the world is still getting used to living and coping with coronavirus, indianexpress.com has listed 10 events in 2021 to watch out for, that will be different in form and feel.



TECH

THE SEVEN BEST FLAGSHIPS OF 2020

It was quite an eventful year for the premium smartphone market



EXPLAINED

THE GIANT ANTARCTIC ICEBERG A68A

Where is it heading and why is it a cause for concern?

EXPRESS AUDIO

Decoding Nepal's political crisis

NEW EPISODE EVERYDAY

In today's episode of the 3 Things podcast, we look at the political upheaval in Nepal and its impact.

FROM PAGE ONE

Tomar welcomes return to talks; no one can take land of farmers: Rajnath

Commission for the Air Quality Management in National Capital Region and Adjoining Areas Ordinance, 2020 to exclude farmers from its penal provisions; and changes to be made in the draft Electricity Amendment Bill, 2020 to protect the interests of farmers.

Speaking on the occasion of the Jai Ram Thakur government in Himachal Pradesh completing three years, Rajnath Singh said: "Ek badaa dushprachaar yeh bhi kiya gaya ki kisanon ki zameen contract farming ke madhyam se chheen li jayegi. Main punah kehna chahunga ki koi bhi ma ka la kisanon se unki zameen nahin chheen sakta (There is major propaganda that the land of farmers would be taken away through contract farming. I would like to say again that no one can take away the land of the farmers.)"

In reference to the Opposition's criticism of the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, Singh said: "Whatever agreement will be with the farmers will be about their produce, not their land."

On MSP, he said: "A misconception is being deliberately created in some parts of the country that our government wants to end the MSP. It has never been the intention of this government to abolish the MSP, nor will it ever be."

Singh appealed to farmers to observe the impact of the new laws for "one-two years".

The last round of talks between the government and farm unions was held on December 8, when Home Minister Amit Shah had met with 13 representatives of farm unions. A day after this meeting, the Centre had sent a written proposal of concessions to the protesting unions, which they had rejected in an email sent on December 16.

Punjab lawyer kills himself, criticises PM for 'black laws'

65-year-old Karnal-based religious leader died of a gunshot wound near Singhu, leaving behind a purported suicide note that said he was pained by the farmers' plight. Subsequently, a 70-year-old farmer from Tarn Taran allegedly attempted to kill himself by consuming pesticide tablets.

"At 8.48 am, I got a call from him (Amarjit). He said he had consumed sulphos. I reached him by 8.55 am. He handed us two typed letters before falling unconscious," said Ram Kumar Munshi, who had been camping with Amarjit at Tikri border since December 16.

Munshi said Amarjit was taken to the Bahadurgarh civil hospital and then to PGIMS Rohtak, where he was declared dead. Members of Amarjit's family said he was 63 years old.

"We have received information regarding the death of an advocate at Naya Gaon Chowk near Tikri. A team has been sent to look into the matter," Ashok Kumar, DSP (Badli), said. One of the two letters that Amarjit gave to other protesters

was from the Bar Association, Jalalabad to the SDM, Jalalabad, over extending support to the peaceful protest by farmers.

The other was titled as a letter to the Prime Minister, and was signed "Amrajit Singh Advocate Bar Association Jalalabad (Fazilka)" and dated "18/12/2020", in green ink.

"He got this letter from Jalalabad, he never went anywhere else to type any letter after December 16. He was a notary public and a popular lawyer of Jalalabad," said Amritpal Singh, a Jalalabad resident who is also at the Tikri border.

"He met us smilingly on Sunday morning," Amritpal said. "We had no idea that he would take this extreme step, even though he had been deeply disturbed about the new laws."

The letter, addressed to Modi, was a printed note in English which said that people expected a "better future in you as Prime Minister".

Accusing the PM of "arrogance" and working for special "capitalist (Ambani and Adani) interests", it said: "The common people like farmers and labours are feeling defrauded by your three agriculture black Bills... the public is on tracks and roads not for votes but for the livelihood of their families and generations... Kindly don't snatch bread and butter (Roti) of farmers, labours and common people for a few capitalists and don't compel them to eat Sulphos. Socially you have betrayed the public and politically you have betrayed your associate parties like SAD... I offer my sacrifice in support of this worldwide agitation for shaking your deaf and dumb conscience... Bhartiya Kisan Mazdoor Ekta zindabaad."

Amarjit's daughter Suman Bala, 24, a teacher in a government school in Jalalabad, said, "I can't believe Papa could take such a step. He spoke to all of us on Saturday night, and told us he would come back soon."

Amritpal said Amarjit had been inquiring about buses or trains to go back home. "It is shocking that he was roaming with a typed suicide note in his pocket, and even had sulphos tablets with him. We are even more shocked that his letter has a signature dated December 18, and he committed suicide on December 27," he told The Indian Express.

Shingara Singh Maan, vice-president of BKU Ugrahan, said: "It is a shocking incident, we always tell our workers 'Khudkushi nahin, sangram' (Choose struggle over suicide). No one should adopt this path. The government should wake up even now and see the writing on the wall. If they are a government of the masses, they must take back the laws."

Street vendor scheme a hit, govt plans next phase: digital payments

January 4 and 22, over 10 lakh street vendors across the country who have availed of the Rs 10,000 loan will be trained in using digital payments.

As per official data, 12 lakh street vendors have already availed of the loan while the total number of applicants has crossed 30 lakh -- or half the estimated number of street vendors. Over 16.65 lakh applications have already been sanctioned by partner banks.

Officials underlined that the unique aspect of the new drive was that the vendors would be able to not just receive payments digitally but also pay for material they procure from sellers using unique QR codes. The mobile phones of the vendors will be

Fewer women move overseas, more cite family as factor: high up the ladder, gender still matters

"I wished to stay close to my parents so that I could travel (to Bhubaneswar) to meet them regularly. There is a sense of security about staying in your own country, with your own people that you don't find elsewhere," she said.

Prusty, who holds a Bachelor's degree in Electrical and Electronics Engineering from BITS-Pilani and an MBA from IIM Bangalore, is now Strategy Consultant at L&T Infotech in Mumbai.

Family commitments stronger factor

While there is little difference in the academic goals of these achievers at the post-graduate level -- roughly the same proportion of men (45%) and women (43%) toppers having either finished or still pursuing a Master's degree -- there is a gap at the higher research level. Only a fifth of women toppers have opted for a PhD as compared to a third of men.

Sohini Chaprala, 30, the 2008 Class 12 CBSE topper, is Research Manager at Innovations for Poverty Action, a non-profit founded by American economist Dean Karlan, in Dhaka.

After an MSc (Integrated) Economics from IIT-Kanpur, Chaprala was considering a PhD or another Master's degree in public policy/administration but, she says, life had other plans.

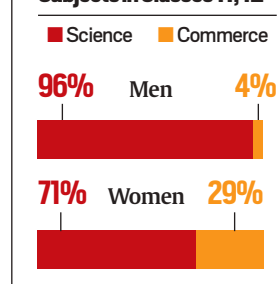
"I got married and all priorities were re-configured -- now, there are constraints on mobility and a longer commitment (such as PhD or an academic career) and that naturally regresses career. I'm not bitter about the social norms or my changed circumstances, but things would definitely have been different, career-wise, if I were not a woman," says Chaprala, who has been managing her baby, career and long-distance marriage -- her husband runs his business out of Hyderabad.

Women under-represented in STEM

The gender gap in undergraduate science education has been progressively closing over the last few years.

According to the 2018 edition of the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), for the first time, there were as many women as men in BSc programmes -- of 48.19 lakh

Subjects in Classes 11, 12*



*No topper from arts/humanities

WHERE THEY WORK

	Women*	Men**
Finance	27% (6)	16% (6)
IT/tech:	18% (4)	39% (15)
Medicine:	14% (3)	8% (3)
Consulting	18% (4)	8% (3)
Business/entrepreneur	9% (2)	11% (4)

*Out of 22 employed

**Out of 38 employed

Others in research, corporate and legal Others in academics, industry and civil service

students enrolled, 50.7 per cent were men and 49.3 per cent women. Also, their presence at the Master's level was the highest ever -- in 2017-18, for every 100 men who enrolled for MSc, there were 171 women. Five years earlier, there were 138 women in BSc programmes for every 100 men.

While, as AISHE suggests, the gender gap in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) has been narrowing of late, the chasm is still way too large and is reflected at the apex, too, despite most of the national toppers being from the Science stream.

Seven of 10 male toppers have studied engineering as their undergraduate degree. Among women toppers, that number was only a third, with another quarter going for BCom or management.

Shalaka Kulkarni, 24, was among a dozen-odd girls in her class of about 130 during her days at IIT-Bombay, where she studied Electrical Engineering in 2012. "In the classroom, we all received equal treatment regardless of gender. However, I did observe that boys participated in class much more than girls, they gave answers more often. Like me, a lot of girls sometimes thought their answers might not be correct and refrained from participating," said Kulkarni, who topped the ICSE Board in 2012 with 98.8% and is now pursuing an MBA from Yale School of Management.

This under-representation in STEM undergraduate programmes mirrors the broader trend of women being starkly missing in STEM jobs, which are among the higher paying jobs in today's economy.

Less than one-fifth of the women toppers currently working are employed in the STEM sector; among employed



SPRIHA BISWAS
Chief Product Officer at Scribotech, heads development of a medical speech recognition software

TOPPED: Class 10, ICSE, 2011



ANIKA AGRAWAL
Pursuing MS in Marine Biology from Texas A&M University

TOPPED: Class 10, ICSE, 2013

men toppers, close to two-fifths are in STEM jobs.

The difference in choice of subjects comes into play at the school level. A greater proportion of the male toppers (96%) chose Science in Classes 11 and 12 as opposed to 71% for women.

While 10 women toppers had studied Commerce, only two male toppers out of 51 had chosen that stream.

Ameeta Wattal, Principal, Springdales School, Pusa Road, says the fact that fewer women toppers chose STEM subjects probably explains the finding

on their comparatively smaller presence abroad. "In India, a foreign degree, particularly in maths and science, is valued over others as universities abroad have a cutting-edge curriculum in these fields, which eventually translate into well-paying jobs overseas. Parents in India will probably be keener to take a sizeable loan to fund a degree in engineering or science as opposed to, say, psychology. Women, traditionally, have been less interested in these sectors, and this possibly explains why you found fewer women toppers studying and working abroad," she said.

Social and cultural challenges

Despite their impressive achievements, many of the women toppers admitted to facing obstacles in the form of socio-cultural barriers and family obligations -- even if this wasn't always in the form of any overt family pressure. Some of them say they reconfigured their careers to fulfill traditional roles.

Of the 45 male toppers who responded to this newspaper's questionnaire, none spoke of being affected by anticipated or actual need to balance academics/career and family.

In contrast, among the 35 women toppers -- many of them spoke of facing hurdles on condition of anonymity -- is one in her twenties, who tailored her work life around her family.

"Once I got married, I didn't want to take up a job where I couldn't control my working hours. (I) restricted travel and regulated my working hours... so automatically, the jobs I could apply for got limited," the topper said. Asked why she felt the need to do so, she said, "My family life needed it... my husband works from 11 am to 6 pm and had limited travel (ob-

structing public servants. Inspector, Ayodhya Police Station, Ashutosh Mishra said they were investigating the matter. "Everything will become clear during the probe. We will be scanning CCTV footage, videos. If an offence is made out, action will be taken accordingly."

The complaint by the principal says, "The admission process and classes have been ongoing at the college since December 7. During this, some outsiders, anti-social elements and so-called leaders started a protest demanding student elections. On December 16, these students entered the college and locked the main gate and misbehaved with teachers, college administration and students. They interrupted classes... They were raising indecent and anti-national slogans like le kar rahenge azadi. Due to the incident, there is anger and fear among the students of the college."

Abhaas Krishna Yadav, who is doing M.Com and was elected

student union president in 2018, said: "The protesting students were only saying that they want azadi from the principal and chief proctor. Now, the principal has used that and is saying they were raising anti-national slogans."

Yadav questioned the administration's logic for the cancellation of the student union polls.

"Last year, the elections could not be held due to the Ram Mandir issue and no one raised their voice as it was a sensitive matter. This year, the students are protesting because the elections have been cancelled while polling is happening across the country. When classes can be held, then why can't elections be held for the student union?"

Speaking to The Indian Express, Principal Pandey said, "Students had raised anti-national slogans that are raised at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi... that they will fight for azadi. What kind of azadi do they want? They wanted elections, we are still in the process of admis-

ligations," she said.

No wonder then that most of the women toppers, over 60%, are from Tier 1 cities while for men, the trend is just the opposite. Over 60% are from Tier 2 & 3 cities.

Shalini Prasad, 41, attended Loreto Convent School in Asansol up to Class 10 and did her high school at De Nobili School, Mugma, Dhanbad.

She is one of the 13 women toppers from Tier 2 and 3 cities. Prasad, who topped the Class 12 ISC exam in 1997, is now Vice President (Finance) at British Petroleum in London.

She credits two men for helping her dreams take wings. "Growing up, I was sure I wanted to study at SRCC in Delhi. My father had just one condition -- that I should score high enough in my Board exam to secure a hostel. Much later, when I was feeling stagnated at my job in Bangalore, it was my father-in-law who pointed out that Ernst & Young was recruiting in London and that I should apply," she said.

Yet, there are many others who struggled with social expectations.

"All through my post-graduation, my family pressured me to get married. This had an impact on me as people would often discuss this and even taunt me. I was quite upset, but I haven't given in to the pressure and will not," said another achiever, who topped nationally with 99%. Her parents, for now, have given in to her decision to study further.

Being a minority in a male-dominated workspace can end up impeding achievement, says Spriha Biswas, 26, the ICSE national topper of 2011 who went on to study Metallurgical Engineering from IIT-Bombay.

Though she says she hasn't faced any gender discrimination yet, there's a footnote to her statement. "...But obviously, being a woman you are always in a minority, whether it is college or at the workplace. Which means that you don't always have a peer group to discuss and share your ideas as freely as your male counterparts do... All of these factors become very important when you want to advance in a profession," said Biswas, who works as Chief Product Officer at Scribotech, a medical transcription company in Mumbai.

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After Khadse, Raut's wife gets ED notice; Sena, NCP say Centre targeting Opp

Speaking to reporters in Sangli, Maharashtra NCP chief Jayant Patil said the ED was being

used to target anyone who goes against the BJP. Khadse was in the BJP for 40 years before moving to the NCP in October.

Last month, the ED had sent a notice to Sena legislator and spokesperson Pratap Samaik and his family members, after searches at their residences and offices in connection with a money laundering case.

"If any political leader speaks against the BJP, the party ensures that the ED starts an investigation against him. Instead of letting it work in the interest of the nation, the ED is being misused by the BJP to target other leaders," Patil said, adding that the summons didn't scare them.

On Saturday, while asking parties to join hands to "take on the BJP and its dictatorial tendencies", Raut had also accused the Centre of targeting the Opposition via central agencies -- a charge he has been very vocal on, including in the probe into Sushant Singh Rajput's death.

"Shiv Sena leaders have also been given ED notices. All those whom the Central government can't fight politically are being pressured through central agencies like the ED," he said on Saturday.

The Sena's chief spokesperson, Raut is believed to be one of the architects of the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi coalition, including the Shiv Sena, NCP and Congress, which wrested power from the BJP in the state after the last Assembly elections.

Khadse is being probed on charges that as revenue minister in the Devendra Fadnis government, he had purchased land belonging to the MIDC (Maharashtra Industrial Development Cooperation) in Pimpri-Chinchwad at gross undervaluation.

A builder had alleged that the land, purchased in the name of Khadse's wife and son-in-law, for Rs 3.75 crore was actually worth around Rs 30 crore. The ED notice was reportedly issued under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act.

Khadse has said he will appear before the ED and cooperate in the probe. He has all along maintained that the land in question belonged to a private party and his family had purchased it following the due process of law.

On Saturday, he said that the allegation had earlier been investigated by the Pune Anti-Corruption Bureau and the Nashik Anti-Corruption Bureau, and neither had found any substance in it. "This will be the fifth probe in the matter."

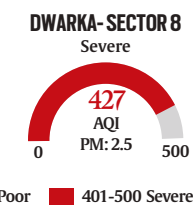
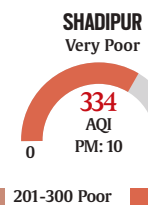
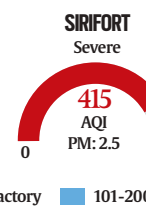
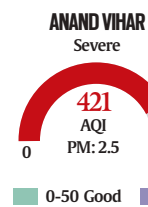
WITHENS, PUNE

The go-to actor for new stories, Pankaj Tripathi at eAdda today

get more intimate, and reach audiences in the solitude of their rooms, Tripathi has emerged as the top pick for filmmakers seeing actors to play salt-of-the-earth characters.

At the Express eAdda, Tripathi will be in conversation with National Features Editor Devyani Onial and The Indian Express film critic Shubhra Gupta.

The Express Adda, that has moved online during the pandemic, has earlier featured actors Amitabh Bachchan, Shah Rukh Khan, Saif Ali Khan, Tabu, Anushka Sharma and Kangana Ranaut, apart from Union ministers Nitin Gadkari, S Jaishankar, Nirmala Sitharaman, Ramesh Pokhriyal, and experts in their fields like AIIMS Director Dr Randeep Guleria, Chief Economic Advisor Krishnamurthy Subramanian, Nobel Laureates Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo, cancer specialist and prize-winning author Dr Siddhartha Mukherjee, and sportspersons like Cheteshwar Pujara.



0-50 Good 51-100 Satisfactory 101-200 Moderate 201-300 Poor 301-400 Very Poor 401-500 Severe

SKY WATCH
FORECAST: Dec 28
Mainly clear sky.
Shallow to moderate
fog in the morning

MAX: 20 | **MIN: 5**
0.5°C below normal | 2°C below normal

GRADUAL REDUCTION FROM 80% TO 60%

ICU beds for Covid patients reduced

Based on panel's report; experts cite 3 reasons to support decision — new UK strain, New Year, severity of cases

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

THE DELHI government has decided to gradually decrease the number of ICU beds reserved for Covid-19 patients from 80% to 60% at 33 private hospitals, following the recommendations of its four-member expert committee. This frees up 20% beds for non-Covid patients — a major demand of doctors in several hospitals. The decision will be reviewed again on January 5.

The order issued Sunday by Amit Singla, secretary, health and family, Delhi government, is based on the opinion shared by AIIMS director Dr Randeep Guleria and NITI Aayog member Dr VK Paul as well as the committee. The country's top experts have taken into account several factors — the new UK strain, increasing severity of Covid-19 cases and the upcoming New Year celebrations — to support the panel's decision recommending graded reduction of ICU beds.

"The new UK strain of Covid-19 is a new development witnessed... very recently. Further, till now, about 19 UK returnees have tested positive and their genome sequencing is underway at the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). In view of the unfolding situation of the new strain, we are of a view that we should take abundant precautions and abrupt de-escalation is not advisable in this juncture," the experts stated in their report.

"The upcoming celebrations shall entail gatherings which may trigger super spreader events. We have also noticed that trends have been observed with regard to the increased severity of Covid-19 cases in recent days," they further explained.

The experts said they can review the situation again on January 15 to understand the impact of the UK strain and overall impact of the New Year celebrations. The report stated that a total of 20,622 people have arrived in Delhi from the UK between

CORONAVIRUS IN THE CAPITAL

TOTAL CASES		HOSPITAL BEDS		VENTILATORS	
6,22,851		18,774		1,525	
		Total		Vacant	
		18,774		16,269	
		1,525		953	
Daily cases	Recoveries	Deaths	Tests		
Dec 26	655	988	23	67,115	
Dec 27	757	939	16	75,210	
Total	6,713*	6,05,685	10,453	83,51,048	

*Total active cases



EXPLAINED

Why the govt is cautious

WHILE PRIVATE hospitals have pointed out several times that earmarking a large chunk of ICU beds for Covid patients is affecting treatment of non-Covid patients, the government is being cautious when it comes to reducing the number of these beds suddenly as cases might spike after Christmas and New Year celebrations. Emergence of the new Covid strain in UK, which is more infectious, has also made the government more wary.

A health worker collects swab samples at Mayapuri industrial area. Renuka Puri

November 25 and December 23.

Dr Paul and Dr Guleria, in their report, also took note of the declining trend of Covid-19 infections in Delhi. "We are also cognizant of the fact that the total Covid ICU bed occupancy has dropped to about 23% as on December 26. We have also noted that the occupancy of the said 33 private hospitals is about 34%, which is higher than the general Covid ICU beds occupancy of other hospitals," it said.

On Sunday, the capital reported 757 new cases and 16 deaths, taking the total number of cases to 6,22,851 and the death toll to 10,453. The daily positivity rate was recorded at 1.01% based on 75,210 tests carried out in the last 24 hours. There are 1,525 ICU beds for Covid patients, out of which 953 (62%) are vacant, as per the Delhi government's Corona app.

882 arrested under NDPS Act in 2020

New Delhi: Delhi Police arrested 882 persons under the NDPS Act this year, and registered 726 FIRs and busted 10 gangs involved in drug trafficking in the city. While most of the drugs were supplied from UP, MP, Haryana, Rajasthan and Manipur, some of the accused had smuggled drugs like cocaine from West Africa and South America via courier services. ENS

OBITUARY

Lieutenant General Ved Prakash Airy, MVC
02 Oct 1933-28 Dec 2007



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Commanding Officer and All Ranks
Third Battalion The GRENADIERS

Inviting Visionary Planners to Shri Ram Nagari

Ayodhya

into a World Class Spiritual Mega Smart City and the Biggest Divine Tourism Hub of Asia



Ref. no. 145/ADA/2020-21 Date: 26.12.2020
REQUEST FOR PROPOSAL (RFP) For appointment of Consultant to prepare a vision document, implementation strategy & integrated infrastructure plan of Ayodhya for transforming it into a World Class Spiritual Mega Smart City and the Biggest Divine Tourism Hub of Asia

Period of Availability of Tender, Date-Schedule are given below:	
Date of issue RFP	26 th December 2020
Last Date for receiving queries	05 th January 2021
Pre-Bid Meeting	08 th January 2021
Publication of final RFP	13 th January 2021
Proposal Due Date	28 th January 2021
Date of Opening of Technical Proposal	29 th January 2021
Date of Presentation by bidders	05 th February 2021

VICE CHAIRMAN
AYODHYA DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY
Civil Lines, Panikrama Road, Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh-224001
Phone : (05278) 223480, 223569 • FAX: 220110
Website : www.ayodhyada.in • E-mail : vcafd@a@gmail.com

55-yr-old dies as tempo rams into concrete mixer truck

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

A 55-YEAR-OLD man died and two others sustained injuries after their tempo rams into a concrete mixer truck at Nehru Place flyover in Kalkaji on Sunday morning.

DCP (Southeast) R P Meena said, "We received a PCR call Sunday morning about the accident. The tempo rams into a truck and the three men inside were injured. Subedar was trapped inside a cabin in the tempo, while his friends Jaichand and Shamsheer were thrown out of the vehicle. They were taken

to AIIMS where Subedar was declared dead on arrival."

Locals claimed the tempo was heading to Okhla when it collided with the truck, which allegedly didn't have any lights on and was parked on the flyover. The truck driver allegedly fled. An officer said Shamsheer, who was driving the tempo, has

been shifted to Max hospital in Saket. His condition is critical.

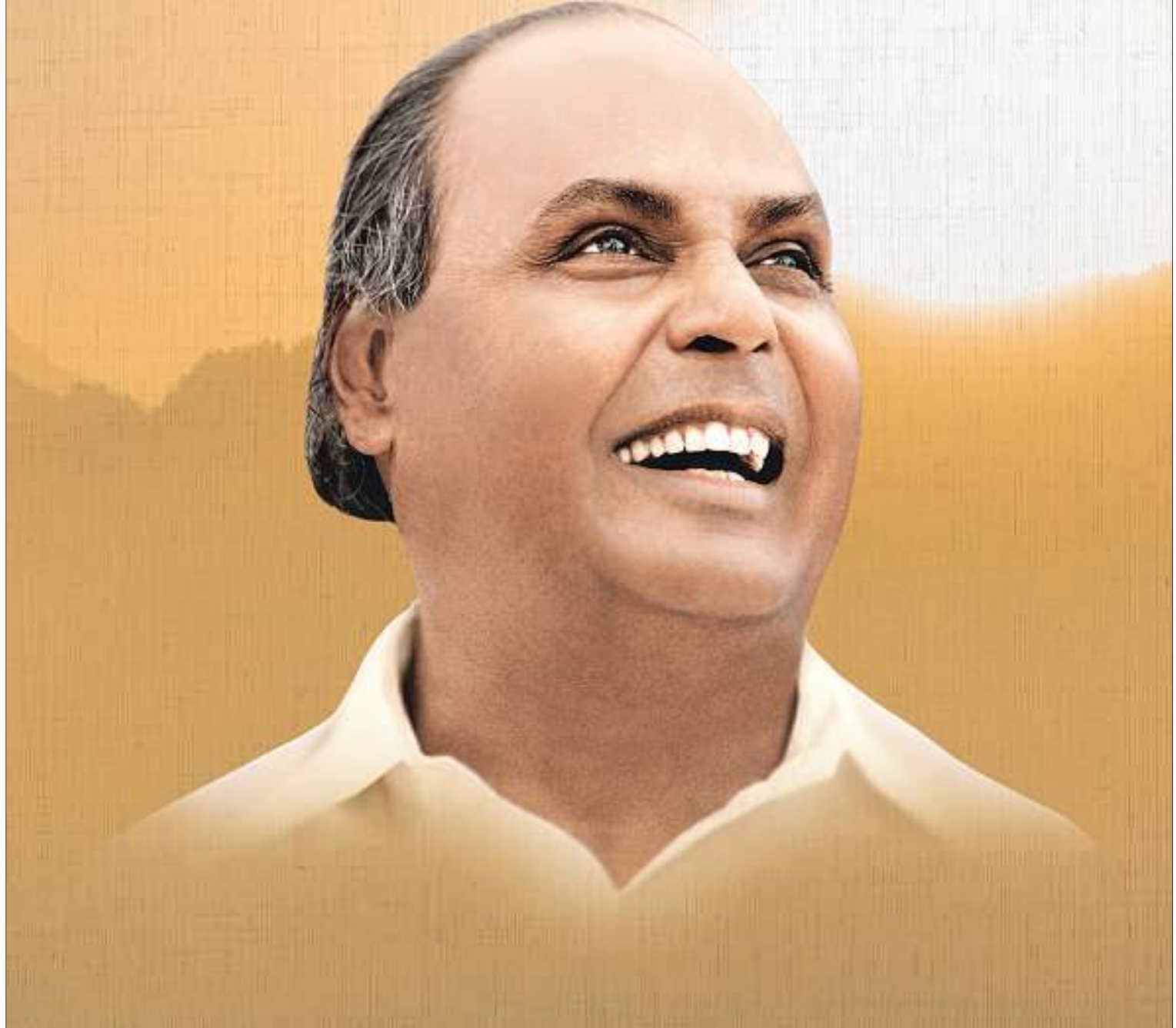
Police said the truck driver had parked his vehicle in a "negligent manner causing danger in the line of navigation" on the road. A case under IPC sections 283 (danger in a public way), 337 (causing hurt by act endangering human life) and 304A (caus-

ing death by negligence) was registered against the driver and police are on the lookout for him.

Subedar lived with his family in Neb Sarai. His son, Nirvesh, told the media, "Police must arrest the (truck) driver. How can he park on the flyover? There were no parking lights either. My father died because of his negligence."



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AT GURU TEG BAHADUR MEMORIAL

CM challenges Centre to debate protesters

SOMYA LAKHANI
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

ON SUNDAY evening, metres from the farmers' protest at Singhu border, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and Deputy CM Manish Sisodia attended the kirtan-darbar commemorating the martyrdom of Guru Gobind Singh's mother Mata Gujri ji and his *chaar sahibzaadas* (four sons) at the Guru Teg Bahadur Memorial. They addressed a gathering of over 200 and spoke about the farmers' protest that has been on for a month.

Kejriwal said: "With folded hands, I appeal to the Centre... These are our people... Listen to them, withdraw the laws, and end their struggle. *Aur kitni sha-haadat lena chahte ho aap?*"

Talking about the people who have died at or on the way to the protest, the CM said: "Right now, we are also feeling cold. I am wearing a jacket, a sweater, an inner, a muffler... Now think about the night time when it gets so cold... our farmer brothers, mothers, children have been forced to sleep on the road for 32 days. Why?"

Referring to the 2011 anti-corruption movement, he said, "During the Anna andolan, we were also defamed. Today, farmers are being called terrorists and anti-nationals... If that's the case, who will feed you? Who will give you roti?"

He said farmers have been "betrayed for 70 years by all parties, politicians, who promise to waive loans, promised employment but that never happened".

Through these laws, he said,



Kejriwal at the event, Sunday. Gajendra Yadav

the government wants to hand over farming to big corporates: "What will farmers do if you take farming away from them? Farmers are here today at the borders for their survival. *Ab aar-paar ki ladai hai.*"

He added, "The Central government fielded their big leaders, ministers... I heard all their speeches and not a single leader has talked about how these farm laws benefit farmers... As far as the benefits counted by these leaders go, the first, they say, is that land will not be taken away from farmers. Is this a benefit? MSP and mandis will not be revoked, is this a benefit? Why have you brought the bills then?"

The only benefit being spoken about, he said, is that farmers will be able to sell their produce anywhere in the country outside of mandis: "If the crop is being sold at Rs 800 per quin-

tal in Bihar where there are no mandis, and the MSP is Rs 1,850 per quintal... where do our farmers from Bihar and UP sell their produce for more than Rs 1,850? They cannot even get 50% of the price outside mandis. This is not a benefit to farmers but to big firms, the rich."

The CM said the whole country is now divided in two — "one half wants to benefit the rich by harming the farmers, the other is standing with farmers without caring for the rich".

On "farmers being misled", Kejriwal said he challenges the Centre to "send their experts to debate with farm leaders".

Before the CM got on stage, Sisodia addressed the gathering and said, "Kejriwal ji is thinking 24 hours about farmers at Singhu border who have left their homes, farms... what are the adequate arrangements that need to be made for them..."



The protest site at Ghazipur border on Sunday. Prem Nath Pandey

Sowing season over, farmers from UP and Uttarakhand make their way to Ghazipur

ASHNA BUTANI
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

HAVING sowed wheat and peas for the season, thousands of farmers from Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand left their hometowns to join the protest at the Ghazipur border. With around 1,000 tractor-trolleys arriving over the last five days and tents being set up till the end of the border, the protest is now 10 times bigger, said farmers. A UP police constable said the number of protesters has gone up

from around 5,000 to 20,000 in the last 10 days.

Farmers, however, said they faced several obstacles on their way.

Simranjeet Singh (30) from Uttarakhand's Rudrapur said he had to change his route after police stopped him. He said, "Twenty five of us left Rudrapur at 6 am on December 25. We were going to come via Rampur but we knew we were stopped there too. So we went through Bilaspur, Patwai and Shahabad and got here around midnight." Singh said he and others from his

district have no intentions of heading back until harvest, adding that 6,000 more farmers are expected to reach Ghazipur by December 30-31. Similarly, farmers from UP who had gone back to cut sugarcane and sow wheat are returning as well.

Pyara Singh (55), from Uttar Pradesh's Bilaspur, said that 60-70 people were stopped near Moradabad and sent back on December 22. He said, "We decided to take another route via Bulandshahr on December 25 and got here the same night. Those who wear turbans were

being stopped..."

Helping hand

As the protest grows in size, help pours in from far and wide. On Sunday, Gursewak Singh (23) from UP's Pilibhit distributed shampoo, soap, winter garments and warm blankets. The medical student turned *sewadar* said, "I was volunteering at Singhu and Tikri but realised that help was needed here too. So I came here." He added that over 700 farmers ask for blankets every day.

Volunteers of Khalsa Aid International distributed essen-

tials and managed traffic. Mahender Singh, vice-President of the NGO, said, "We have seen the numbers grow in the last few days. It will only keep growing in size from now..."

To keep the cold at bay, *desi* geysers were also being distributed by a number of *gurdwara* committees.

A control room has been set up by the farmers to keep track of items like warm clothes and blankets that are donated and to ensure that those in need get them. Volunteers said they prioritise women and the elderly.

AQI to improve slightly today, cold wave to ring in the new year

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

AIR QUALITY of Delhi deteriorated on Sunday and is forecast to slip into the severe category, as per government agencies.

Moisture laden winds from the northeast direction were increasing the concentration of pollutants in the air, experts said, but from Monday the wind direction would change and bring some improvement.

Delhi's 24-hour average air

quality index (AQI) on Sunday was very poor with a reading of 396, five points below the severe range, as per the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB). On Saturday, the AQI was 337.

V K Soni, head of the Met department's Environment Monitoring and Research Centre (EMRC), said, "Air quality will briefly slip into severe category before improving into very poor range on Monday. The wind speed recorded on Sunday was good for dispersion of pollutants — 10 to 15 kmph — but because

of high moisture content, the air quality deteriorated."

Temperatures are also expected to dip Monday onwards, as per the India Meteorological Department (IMD), which has forecast a cold wave in Delhi from December 29 to January 1.

On Sunday, the minimum temperature was 6 degrees Celsius and the maximum was 22.6 degrees Celsius in the city. By December 31, the minimum and maximum temperatures are forecast to fall to 3 degrees and 18 degrees Celsius, as per the IMD.

Among sea of protesters at Singhu, women-only tents offer a safe and private space for many

SOMYA LAKHANI
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

A MONTH ago, 26-year-old Rupinder Singh, a student from Punjab's Moga, joined the farmers' protest at Singhu with one intention — to listen, and to solve problems. If an ingredient in a *langar* was over, he would fetch that; if a protester couldn't read the newspaper, he would read out the news item aloud; if someone needed hot water to bathe, Singh would help them find a geyser.

So, when he realised that women protesters returned to their villages and towns in Punjab quicker than men due to lack of privacy, Singh knew he



There are 70 waterproof tents for women. Somya Lakhani

had to arrange tents just for them. On Friday, Singh and his friends set up 70 waterproof tents in a space cleared up be-

tween tractors from Moga, 500 metres from the main stage.

Singh said, "I did a *recce* of the area to find the best spot to

place the tents, after we raised Rs 1.5 lakh between friends and sought help from an NGO called Jap Ji Foundation. There are tents in three sizes that can accommodate two, three and five people each, and have a layer of *razai*, and a blanket. These are just for women, and for families that have young children."

He said that another 50 tents will be placed at the site by Monday. During the *recce*, Singh said he came across "Bibiyaan da Toilet" set up by Delhi-based BasicShit.org, and decided that proximity to a bathroom was important for the tents.

On Saturday, Manjinder Kaur (47), Tezbir Kaur (42) and their children came to Singhu border after the men of the family re-

turned home after weeks of protesting. "We feel very comfortable and safe here, there is privacy to change clothes too. There's a bathroom for women less than 50 metres away," said Manjinder.

By 7 pm, the tents start filling up, and since Friday, Singh has been inundated with calls from women making bookings.

Amritpreet Kaur (27) from Patiala said that she heard about tents for women from a fellow protester on Saturday but was unable to find the number or its location. "It had been a week so I decided that I'd rather just go back and return in a few days. But today, I found the tents for women and have decided to extend my stay."

BRIEFLY

Bengal tigress released in Delhi Zoo

New Delhi: A Bengal tigress named Barkha was released into its enclosure at the National Zoological Park Sunday by Minister of State for Environment Babul Supriyo. Zoo director Ramesh Pandey said the tigress was brought from Kanpur Zoo in November and had completed a quarantine period. "The National Zoological Park now has a pair of normal coated Bengal Tigers and five white tigers in its captivity," Pandey said. Supriyo also launched a new website for the Delhi Zoo on Sunday, which includes a facility for booking tickets online. The facility will begin when the zoo reopens, Pandey said. He added that the breeding of Sangai deer was successful this year and the zoo has had 20 surviving fawns.

2 held for stealing bag

New Delhi: Two rickshaw pullers were arrested for allegedly stealing a bag from a delivery executive in New Friends Colony. Police said the accused allegedly stole the bag from the victim's bike when he wasn't around. **ENS**

Shopping centres won't be sealed over conversion fee: SDMC

ABHINAV RAJPUT
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

AFTER COMPLAINTS that traders at local shopping centres (LSCs) were being sent sealing notices by civic body officials, the standing committee of the South Delhi Municipal Corporation passed a resolution that LSCs and shops that are under its jurisdiction will not be sealed over non-payment of conversion charges.

Leader of the House Narendra Chawla said there were complaints that people who had purchased shops under a commercial arrangement were being sent notices over non-payment of conversion charges. "The civic body passed the resolution so there is no fear of sealing in their minds," he said.

Property owners have to pay conversion charges to MCDs if the status of the area in which they are located changes from residential to commercial. There are 56 commercial shopping centres in South Delhi with hundreds of shops.

Vishal Ohri, general secretary of LSCs Federation of Delhi, said, "Several local shopping centre owners have got notices that their properties would be sealed if they do not pay conversion and parking charges."

This despite an amendment by the Delhi Development Authority in the 2021 Master

Plan which states that local and commercial shopping centres, as well as shop plots, that are in the commercial use category are not liable to pay conversion and parking charges, he said.

President of the association Rajesh Goyal pointed out that the notices also mention paying for floor area ratio for excess coverage to get their buildings regularised. "While owners are ready to pay, they (MCD) are not ready to accept it unless we pay conversion charges as well," he said.

Said Chawla, "We will discuss this with officials so that unnecessary trouble is not caused to traders." Member of the standing committee Shikha Rai, who had moved the resolution in the committee meeting, said though the issue was taken up in a house meeting in 2019, there were reports of sealing notices being sent out. "So, we decided to reassure traders that their properties would not be sealed," said Rai.

Hundreds of properties across Delhi were sealed for violations following a drive over the past few years in markets such as Defence Colony, GK 1 M Block, Sunder Nagar and Rajouri Garden.

"When governments across the world are trying to increase investments, traders are being harassed through notices. We hope this will stop now," said Goyal.

Preserve footage of search at lawyer's office: Court to police

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

A DELHI court has directed Delhi Police to preserve video footage recorded during the search conducted at advocate Mehmood Pracha's office last week. Pracha is representing several accused in Northeast Delhi riot cases.

Duty Magistrate Udhav Kumar Jain did not pass any order on handing over the copy of the video to Pracha but passed directions to preserve the footage with its seal and place it before the court concerned for necessary orders.

"... the video, which is the bone of contention, was recorded to ensure fairness while the search was being made... At this stage, only directions for preserving the video footage are deemed necessary. The court concerned can take a call on supplying the video footage to the applicant at an appropriate stage," the court said in the order passed Sunday. It listed the matter for January 5 before the court concerned.

The court was hearing an application by Pracha claiming he was threatened by the inves-



Mehmood Pracha

tigating officer while the search was underway at his office.

The Special Cell had searched his office to investigate an FIR, registered in August, which alleged false evidence and forged notary stamps were used to secure bail of an accused arrested in a riots case. Police alleged the complaint letter used to get bail in the case was sent from Pracha's office computer.

In his application, Pracha said that after the search at his office between December 24 and 25, the IO should have intimated forthwith the search and the seized articles to the magistrate concerned but it was not done. He also said he was entitled to a copy of the footage.

Meanwhile, some office bearers and members of the Bar Council of Delhi (BCD) have written to Union Home Minister Amit Shah to take action on the search at Pracha's office.

The letter, written by BCD vice-chairperson Himal Akhtar and members K C Mittal and Rajiv Khosla, says there is an understanding between representatives of the Bar Association/Bar Council and the Delhi Police that in case of any case against an advocate, the body will be taken into confidence.

"This broader understanding is to maintain harmony and cordiality between two wings of the justice delivery system. This seems to have not been followed in the present case. While we do not want to go into various aspects of the matter, apparently the action of the Delhi Police falls short on these aspects, which is a very serious matter as far as the legal community is concerned. We notice anguish and anger amongst the legal community, primarily because it goes to the very root and independent discharge of responsibility by an advocate," the letter read.

In DU exam round 2, fewer answer sheets sent through email

SUKRITABARUAH
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

WITH ALMOST all papers completed in the second cycle of its Open Book Examination, Delhi University officials said it was smoother than the first round, especially with a significant drop in the number of answer script submissions via email instead of the university exam portal.

In the first cycle of OBE, held between August and September, the university had received around 5.5 lakh answer scripts through email. This led to a labour intensive and prolonged evaluation process because of which some students are still awaiting their results. The large number of email submissions had been caused by glitches faced by students while trying to upload on the portal.

This time, the university actively dissuaded students from sending their scripts via email.

"I came up with the idea that students can send their scripts to the nodal officers if all else fails and they cannot submit through the portal within five hours. Despite this, we received around

3,800 emails on the first day. After that I sent a detailed email directly to 1.5 lakh students — instead of a notification on the website — to explain the options available to them within five hours... When college authorities told me that some students cannot understand English, I sent the same email in Hindi as well," said Dean, Examinations, D S Rawat.

He said on the second day, the number of emails reduced to 1,200. Thereafter, there was an average of 10-15 email submissions per college in a day.

Ashtosh Kumar, nodal officer at the College of Vocational Studies, said many students at the college submitted answer scripts through email in the first few days. "In the first three days of the exam, students of different vocational programmes having common papers found that only students of one programme were receiving the question paper on the portal. They shared the question papers with each other but had no option but to submit through email. We received around 500 emails on those three days. After that problem was fixed, the numbers dropped to around 50 per day," he said.



DELHI CONFIDENTIAL



COVID JIBE

EVEN AS election season in Bengal heats up, with the TMC and BJP attacking each other, even political speeches it seems cannot escape Covid. Multiple jibes are being thrown against each other using Covid as an analogy. The latest was Abhishek Banerjee (above), who in a reference to Suwendu Adhikari leaving the party to join the BJP, said that the party had "identified and traced the Covid" virus within the party who were acting like "asymptomatic" carriers and sabotaging the party from within.

RELIEVED PARENT

IT WAS a special weekend for Ayushman Bharat CEO Dr Indu Bhushan. His daughter Ambika Bhushan, who is a doctor in the US, received Covid-19 vaccine on Saturday. Ambika has been on Covid duty since the outbreak of the pandemic. Sharing the personal news, he said he felt "proud and relieved". Bureaucrat-turned-economist Bhushan has two daughters, Devika and Ambika, who are both medical doctors and settled in the USA.

SETTING EXAMPLES

SPEAKING ON sustainable development, including the need to incorporate sustainable living in our own lives, at the recent India International Science Festival, Union Minister for Road and Highways Nitin Gadkari gave his own example. He said he had equipped his home with a composting pit as well as a large kitchen garden. Now meals cooked for his family were cooked from vegetables from this kitchen garden – an accomplishment he relayed to actor Amitabh Bachchan. It appears Bachchan has followed the minister's lead and now he too has a kitchen garden of his own.

LAST 'MANN KI BAAT' PROGRAMME OF THE YEAR

Make list of foreign products, swap them for Indian ones: PM

Modi invokes Sikh gurus, calls for quality boost in Indian manufacturing

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

IN HIS last Mann Ki Baat address of 2020 on Sunday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for a quality boost in Indian manufacturing and a boycott of foreign goods "shackling" the country, even as he brought up sacrifices made by Sikh gurus in the backdrop of the farm law protests.

Prime Minister Modi urged the people to make a list of foreign products that could be substituted with Indian ones and drive out the former from their life. Continuing his Atmanirbhar Bharat pitch, he said it was time Indian companies began making world-class products.

"I have said this earlier too... I once again urge countrymen... do prepare a list. Whatever items we use throughout the day... analyse them... think of things manufactured abroad that have permeated into our lives unknowingly, in a way, shackling us down. Let us find out their substitutes made in India and decide that henceforth we shall use products made with



Prime Minister Narendra Modi

the hard work and sweat of the people of India," he said.

And amid the stalemate between farmers from Punjab and Haryana and the Centre over the farm laws, Modi mentioned the supreme sacrifices made by Guru Gobind Singh and Guru Tegh Bahadur to protect India's "millennia old culture, civilisation and tradition" from "the cruel misdemeanors of tyrants and tormentors".

"On this day, the sons of Guru Gobind Singh, sahibzade Zorawar Singh and Fateh Singh were immured alive. The tyrants wanted the sahibzade to renounce their faith; abandon the teachings of the great Guru tradition. But they showed amazing courage and determination even at that tender age... It was on this day that Guru Gobind Singh ji's mother, Mata Gujari, attained martyrdom. About a week ago, it was the martyrdom day of Shri Guru Tegh Baha-

dur ji too... Once again I bow to the martyrdom of Shri Guru Tegh Bahadur ji, Mata Gujari, Guru Gobind Singh ji and the four sahibzade. Several such sacrifices have preserved the present fabric of India, keeping it intact," Modi said.

The PM last week visited gurdwara Rakab Ganj Sahib to pay homage to Guru Tegh Bahadur. Referring to a letter written by one Venkat Murli Prasad from Visakhapatnam which stressed on improving quality of Indian products, Modi said: "This is the opportune moment to work with the ethos of 'zero effect, zero defect'. I urge manufacturers and industry leaders of the country... people of the country have taken a firm step... moving a bold step forward... vocal for local is reverberating in each and every household... in such a scenario, it is time to ensure that our products meet global standards. Whatever it is global best; we should make it in India and prove it. For that, our entrepreneur friends have to come forward. Startups too have to come forth."

The PM also spoke about saffron farmers of the Valley and said

the export of high quality Kashmiri saffron will further strengthen the idea of Atmanirbhar Bharat. "Saffron has been associated with Kashmir for centuries. Kashmiri saffron is mainly grown in places like Pulwama, Budgam and Kishtwar. In May this year, the Kashmiri Saffron was given the Geographical Indication Tag or GI tag. Through this, we want to make Kashmiri Saffron a globally popular brand. Now its exports will get a boost. Farmers growing saffron will be especially benefited by this," Modi said.

Invoking the Bhagavad Gita, the PM asked countrymen to always remain curious and constantly learn. He said the Gita started with a question. He gave the example of a 92-year-old man from Tamil Nadu who had learnt computers in old age and was now writing a book.

Modi listed the increasing numbers of leopards, lions and tigers as an achievement of the government and the civil society and commended people who take care of animals.

FULL REPORT ON www.indianexpress.com

Sikh gurus' history to be in UP school syllabus: Yogi

MAULSHREE SETH
LUCKNOW, DECEMBER 27

UTTAR PRADESH Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath organised "Gurbani kirtan" and "langar" at his official residence on Sunday on the occasion of "Sahibzada Diwas", which marks the martyrdom of four "sahibzadas" of Sikh guru Guru Gobind Singh and Mata



In Lucknow Sunday, Express

Gujri. He also announced that the history of Sikh gurus will be included in school curriculum in the state and "Sahibzada Diwas" celebrated in schools every year.

Wearing saffron turbans, the chief minister, deputy CMs Keshav Prasad Maurya and Dinesh Sharma, Cabinet ministers and other officials participated in the "kirtan". Along with Sikh representatives, they also had "langar" food.

The CM reminded the gathering how the "sahibzadas" set examples of "protecting the Hindu religion". He added that the last "sahibzada" had "put up a fight against the order of then Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb and refused to convert to Islam". "Sahibzadas of Guru Gobind Singh and Mata Gujri are inspirational examples of sacrifice for rights, truth and protection of religion," he said.

On eve of Cong foundation day, Rahul flies abroad

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 28

Rahul Gandhi

ON THE eve of the foundation day of the Congress, former party president Rahul Gandhi on Sunday left for abroad on a short personal visit. The party said he will be away for a few days, indicating that he will most probably ring in the New Year in a foreign location.

The Congress during the day sent out a message, saying there will be a flag hoisting ceremony at the 24, Akbar Road party headquarters at 9.30 am to mark the 136th foundation day.

The party did not divulge details of his travel itinerary. Congress communication department head Randeep Surjewala told PTI he has left for abroad on a short personal visit and will be away for a few days.

Rahul had travelled abroad in September too, accompanying his mother and Congress president Sonia Gandhi for her annual medical check-up when the Monsoon session of Parliament was on.

While he left for abroad on a short visit, his party stepped up attack on the government over the farm laws issue. It asked Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Cabinet colleagues to sleep on the floor to empathise with the farmers protesting in the cold.

Addressing the media at the AICC headquarters, Congress MPs from Punjab Raveet Singh Bittu and Jasbir Singh Gill who have been staging a sit-in at Jantar Mantar in solidarity with the on-going agitation slammed the Prime Minister for not taking the initiative to resolve the matter.

"It has never happened since 1952 that Parliament's Winter Session has not happened. And this is a crucial time. The farmers had been sitting at the borders of Delhi for 32 days. The Prime Minister in his Mann Ki Baat radio address spoke about everything, but did not mention the farmers, labourers," Bittu said.

He said the government has made it clear that it will not talk about repeal of the laws during its meeting with leaders of the farmer organisations on December 29. "Why this stubbornness?... The government should withdraw the ordinance imposing Rs 1-2 crore fine on stubble burning and the Electricity Amendment Bill before the next round of talks so that the dialogue to end the stalemate over three agri-marketing laws can progress smoothly," he said.

Jaishankar begins 2-day Qatar visit

New Delhi: External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Sunday began a two-day visit to Qatar where he is likely to discuss trade, energy cooperation and welfare of Indians in the country.

Jaishankar will meet Qatar's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign minister Sheikh

Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani and other dignitaries to discuss bilateral, regional and international issues.

The visit is part of India's ongoing outreach to West Asia, which the country sees as part of its extended neighbourhood. **ENS**

Nitish gives JD(U) charge to RCP Singh, says he wants to focus on governance

SANTOSH SINGH
PATNA, DECEMBER 27

BIHAR CHIEF Minister Nitish Kumar on Sunday handed over the reins of JD(U) to his close aide and Rajya Sabha MP Ram Chandra Prasad Singh. Singh had been holding the post of the party's national general secretary (organisation).

Kumar, who had been holding the position of the party's national president, said he wanted to focus on governance. "It is not easy to hold two positions," the Chief Minister said at the national executive meeting of JD(U). He said he had "not wanted to become CM" and had accepted the post only at "the BJP's insistence".

Singh's elevation comes at a time when the JD(U) has been relegated to the position of the junior partner to the BJP following the Assembly polls in Bihar. The development also comes soon after six out of the JD(U)'s seven MLAs in Arunachal Pradesh switched over to the BJP. The JD (U) has termed the development "unfortunate and unfriendly".

Singh, a former IAS officer from Nalanda — also Nitish Kumar's home district — comes from the same OBC Kurmi community as the Chief Minister. In



Bihar CM Nitish Kumar with newly elected JD(U) president RCP Singh at the national executive meet in Patna, Sunday. PTI

selecting Singh as his successor, Nitish has reached out to his core support base of Koeeri-Kurmi, known as Luv-Kush in the political lexicon of Bihar. He has also cleared any ambiguity on the official number two in the party. What goes against Singh is the lack of electoral importance. Singh, along with Lok Sabha MP Rajiv Ranjan Singh alias Lalan Singh, are considered the senior-

most party leaders after Nitish. With Lalan Singh interested more in national politics and not much active in the organisation, RCP Singh emerged as the clear choice. Singh has not won any election yet.

JD(U) national spokesperson K C Tyagi told reporters, "We are hurt at the Arunachal Pradesh episode but it would have no impact on Bihar. But what happened in

EXPLAINED
What this does to RLSP plans

R C P SINGH'S elevation as JD(U) president might delay or even avert RLSP chief Upendra Kushwaha's return to JD (U). Kushwaha, who had been reportedly eyeing the number two position in JD(U) in event of his party merging with JD(U), may well have to rethink his strategy. An alliance with the JD(U) looks a more probable option for Kushwaha as joining JD (U) would mean that Kushwaha would have to report to R C P Singh in organisational matters.

Arunachal Pradesh is against coalition dharma." He added that the JD(U) would work towards strengthening and expanding itself under the new leader.

Newly-elected JD (U) president Singh said, "I profusely thank Nitish Kumar for reposing faith in me. It is a highly emotional moment for me."

Leadership change needed in state unit, UDF: Kerala Cong leaders to AICC team

SHAJU PHILIP
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM,
DECEMBER 27

SEVERAL CONGRESS leaders in Kerala have demanded an overhaul of leadership in the state party unit and the UDF during their interaction with an AICC delegation looking into the poor show by the Congress in the recent local body polls.

The delegation was led by AICC general secretary in-charge of Kerala Tariq Anwar. On Sunday, it heard the views of Congress leaders. Leaders of Congress allies would meet the AICC team Monday.

Congress sources said many leaders pointed out that a change

of guard was required in the party and UDF. "Nobody named state Congress president Mullappally Ramachandran or UDF convener M M Hassan. We have conveyed our concern that the party cannot face the Assembly elections under the present leadership. At the same time, we are aware that time is running out for a major overhaul," said a Congress leader who spoke at the meeting.

Party sources said leaders blamed UDF convener Hassan for entering into an electoral understanding with Jamaat-e-Islami's Welfare Party of India, which, they said, led to the drifting away of secular votes and majority community votes. "During the local body polls, the UDF machinery

failed to give a clear explanation on its tie-up with Welfare Party of India," a source said.

With the CPM claiming that the Congress is being led by Indian Union Muslim League, party leaders said they should send out a strong message that UDF allies cannot hijack the Congress. "The impression that Congress is led by a minority-dominated party would lead to further erosion of votes from majority segment and non-Muslim minorities. The party requires a strong leadership which can assert itself before the allies," another Congress leader said.

Several party leaders demanded that new faces should be fielded in the Assembly elections due to next year. "By pick-

ing a 21-year-old as next Mayor of Thiruvananthapuram, CPM has sent a powerful message that it is giving more space for youth, even though it is mere tokenism. In Congress, leaders aged above 70 and those who have retired from Delhi after several terms of Parliamentary politics are raring to contest the Assembly polls. We have demanded chances for young leaders," said another leader.

Senior party leader and former CM Oommen Chandy told the media that the time is not apt for a change in leadership for Congress and UDF. "It is up to the high command to decide whether sitting MPs should contest the state polls," he said.

The Indian EXPRESS
JOURNALISM OF COURAGE

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BRIEFLY



Rajinikanth

Rajinikanth discharged from hospital

Hyderabad, Chennai: Actor Rajinikanth, who suffered from high blood pressure, was on Sunday discharged from a hospital in Hyderabad after three days of treatment, authorities said. Later, he took a flight to Chennai. The actor was hospitalised on December 25 with severe hypertension and exhaustion. In addition to medication and diet, Rajinikanth has been advised complete bed rest for one week to help avoid stress in view of his post-kidney transplant status, giving hypertension and age. The actor early this month announced he would launch his political party in January ahead of the 2021 Tamil Nadu Assembly elections. PTI

MAHARASHTRA

Fire in temple leaves three people dead

Mumbai: Three persons died after a major fire broke out at a temple in Charkop, Kandivali West, on Sunday. The three men were asleep inside Saibaba temple in Bunder Pakhadi when the fire started at 4.14 am. They have been identified as Subhash Khode (25), Yuvraj Pawar (25) and Manu Gupta (26). All were residents of Bunder Pakhadi slum. According to Fire Brigade officials, while Khode and Pawar died on the spot, Gupta suffered 95 per cent burns and died at a hospital. Preliminary investigation indicates that the fire was triggered by a short circuit. ENS

RAJASTHAN

Body of missing 11-year-old found in Alwar

Jaipur: The body of an 11-year-old boy was found on Sunday, a day after he went missing in Rajasthan's Alwar district, police said. The body of Nirmal Bairwa was found with its nose and ears amputated, they added. A complaint of abduction was filed at Malakheda police station on Saturday and the body of the missing boy was found in a field on Sunday, Alwar SP Tejaswini Gautam said. She said the post-mortem will be conducted on Monday, adding that evidence is being collected. Prima facie, it seems to be a case of murder owing to a property dispute, the police said. PTI

TELANGANA

Ex-minister named women panel chief

Hyderabad: The Telangana government on Sunday appointed former minister V Sunita Lakshma Reddy as chairperson to the state women's commission. Six others have been appointed as members of the Commission, according to a Government Order. The commission has been headless since Tripurana Venkata Ratnam demitted office about two years ago. Reddy, who served as minister during the Congress regime in undivided Andhra Pradesh, joined the ruling TRS last year. PTI

After BJYM rally sparks clash in Ujjain locality, 4 residents face NSA charge

District admin carries out demolition drive in Muslim-majority neighbourhood a day after clash

IRAM SIDDIQUE
BHOPAL, DECEMBER 27

TWO DAYS after a bike rally by the BJP youth wing triggered a clash in a Muslim-majority locality in Madhya Pradesh's Ujjain, the police invoked the National Security Act against four of its residents and charged three more with rioting and attempt to murder.

The clashes took place Friday when around 60 bikers and 300 workers of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM) were passing through the city's Begum Bagh neighbourhood, raising slogans, said Town Inspector Arvind Singh Tomar of Mahakal police station, where three cross-FIRs related to the case have

been registered.

Tomar said this sparked stone-pelting that led to a stampede-like situation. "Around 11 people were injured with one person sustaining grievous injuries," he said, adding that multiple vehicles were damaged.

Begum Bagh residents allege that the rally was taken through the area on multiple occasions during the day, and that rather than simply sloganeering, the BJYM workers were abusing them. Ujjain Seher-e-Kaazi Khaliqu Rehman said: "They were not slogans but abuses shouted while the rally was crossing Begum Bagh. This agitated people as a result of which stones were pelted from both sides. It also led to damage of vehicles of many residents, their

houses, as well as a clinic."

A day after the rally, the district administration carried out a demolition drive to clear "illegal encroachments" in the area. One house was demolished and another was damaged. Another resident, social worker Mohammad Ayub, claimed: "Based on the video of stone pelting, the officials had come to demolish the house where a woman was seen pelting stones. They realised that it belonged to a Hindu family, so they instead demolished the one standing adjacent to it."

The district collector did not respond to multiple calls and messages seeking comment.

Rehman said both the district administration and the police had only acted against residents.

"Not a single person who was part of the rally has been arrested by the police despite us submitting several pieces of video evidence highlighting them pelting stones and damaging vehicles."

Those against whom the NSA has been invoked are Ayaz Mohammad, Wasim Aslam, Shadab Akram and Altu Aslam. Three others were booked on charges of attempt to murder (IPC Section 307), rioting (Section 147), voluntarily causing hurt (Section 323) and giving false statement (Section 423). These three include two women—one of them has been arrested and another is absconding.

According to Ujjain Superintendent of Police Satyendra Kumar Shukla, FIRs

have been registered from both sides and people are being identified based on video evidence. "Begum Bagh area is communally sensitive and those booked under the NSA had criminal records. The police investigation is objective and FIR has been recorded from both sides. In the first FIR, seven people have been booked, the second FIR is against unidentified persons, while in the third FIR, a person from the rally has been identified."

Abhilash Pandey, state president of BJYM, said: "This is the seventh incident where the workers carrying out rally have been attacked. The workers were attacked with stones, pipes, cookers and hot water and any action from their side was purely in self-defence".

MP House session postponed after 60 officials test positive

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
BHOPAL, DECEMBER 27

THE THREE-DAY Assembly session scheduled to start Monday was postponed after 60 officials and staffers, including five MLAs, tested positive for Covid-19, officials said Sunday. The recently-approved Freedom of Religion Bill, 2020, was to be put up for discussion on the first day of the session.

The decision to put off the session was taken after a meeting of political leaders across party lines on Sunday evening. Home Minister Narottam Mishra, who also holds charge of the parliamentary affairs department, told reporters after the meeting: "It was a unanimous decision taken in the presence of the Leader of Opposition. A fu-

ture date for the session will be decided after a meeting."

However, Leader of Opposition Kamal Nath, who was present in the meeting said, "The government should not hold the session if it's not possible but a special committee should be formed to hold discussions. This should be a new practice put in place to ensure our voices are not suppressed."

The Congress had organised a protest on Monday to oppose the three farm laws, with Nath and other party MLAs expected to reach the Vidhan Sabha on tractors. However, the government has barred the movement of heavy vehicles in a five-kilometer radius of the House.

Soon after the announcement, Congress leader Arun Yadav said the state had postponed the session out of a fear of farmers.

Can live life on own terms: HC reunites inter-faith couple

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
LUCKNOW, DECEMBER 27

THE ALLAHABAD High Court has observed that a 21-year-old Hindu woman, who is married to a Muslim man, "has a choice to live her life on her own terms". She has now reunited with her husband.

In an order passed on December 18, a bench of Justices Pankaj Naqvi and Vivek Agarwal observed that since the woman, Shikha, has attained the age of majority and has expressed that she wants to live with her husband, Salman alias Karan, "she is free to move as per her own choice without any restriction or hindrance being created by third party".

The court was hearing a habeas corpus petition filed by Shikha, who was handed over by the Etah CJM to Child Welfare Committee (CWC) on December 7. The committee had then handed over her custody to her

parents the next day. According to the court, this was done "without any application of mind and against her wish".

"The act of CJM, Etah, and that of the CWC, Etah, reflects lack of appreciation of legal provisions," said the court.

It observed that the woman was an adult as her date of birth was October 4, 1999 and the CJM court did not appreciate the fact that when a school certificate had been produced, then any other evidence becomes "secondary in nature and should not be relied on".

The woman's husband had been booked for kidnapping on September 27. The court has also quashed the FIR against him.

It passed the order after interacting with the woman, who submitted that "she is a major, her date of birth is 04.10.1999, she has attained the age of majority and has entered into a wedlock".

The court has directed police to provide security to the couple till they reach their residence.



Home Minister Amit Shah in Imphal on Sunday. Express

Manipur's insurgency days over, now on development path: Shah

JIMMY LEIVON
IMPHAL, DECEMBER 27

UNION HOME Minister Amit Shah on Sunday said that Manipur, a state once riddled with a bad law and order situation due to insurgency, bandhs and blockades, is moving ahead on the path of development after the BJP came into power.

He was addressing a rally at Imphal's Hapta Kangjeibung grounds on the last leg of his three-day visit to the northeast.

"Manipur used to be known for insurgency, law and order situation, bandhs, and blockades. But today, most of the militant organisations have joined the mainstream. Those left, would also do so following efforts of the

BJP government," he said.

The BJP government has changed the face of Manipur in just three years, Shah asserted. Bringing up the implementation of the Inner Line Permit, Shah said it was the biggest gift to the people of Manipur. He said the ILP promise was fulfilled because Prime Minister Narendra Modi wanted to address concerns of those who thought non-implementation of ILP would be unfair.

During his visit, he also laid the foundation stone for seven major projects and launched statewide e-office at Hapta Kangjeibung. He also inaugurated two major projects — Thoubal Multipurpose Project, constructed at estimated cost of Rs 1998.99 crore, and Bishnupur-Tupul-Thoubal-Kasom Khullen

road worth Rs 475.68 crore.

Local media reports indicated that apart from the inauguration and foundation laying, another the purposes of Shah's visit to Manipur was to finalise Indo-Naga peace talks.

After the meeting, he interacted with representatives of different civil bodies including the Nagas, Kukis, and Meitei in a marathon meeting held at Hotel Classic Grande in Imphal.

A United Naga Council representative said that a delegation met Shah and submitted a memorandum with demands including recognition of the Naga "National Flag" and "Constitution" and early "inclusive" and honourable solution based on unique history of the Nagas.

Chhattisgarh villagers oppose 2 BSF camps set up on 'sacred land'

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
RAIPUR, DECEMBER 27

MORE THAN 50 representatives of panchayat bodies in Chhattisgarh's Maoist-hit Kanker district have tendered their resignation protesting the setting up of two Border Security Force camps at sites which are reportedly revered by local residents.

The camps have been set up near Katgaon and Kamteda vil-

lages, 127 km from here, on the strategically important Partapur-Koyalibeda route to provide security to road work underway there, an official said.

Hundreds of people from over 100 villages have been staging a protest in Pakhanjore in Kanker since December 23, demanding that the BSF camps be shifted, sarpanch Lachhuram Gavde of Sikso told PTI. "At least 46 sarpanches, seven Janpad panchayat members, one deputy sarpanch and one zila panchayat

member submitted their resignations on Saturday via two letters to the Pakhanjore sub divisional magistrate," he said.

"We are not against the BSF camps. We are opposed to the acquisition of land where we have been performing rituals for several years now. They even chopped off a tree that we worship, and this is disrespect to our gods and goddesses," he alleged.

The camps have been set up at Karkaghat (near Katgaon) and Tumirghat (near Kamteda) on

the bank of Medhki river, where people from 35 villages perform rituals for our deities every year, he said.

"This area is under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution and permission from the local gram sabha is mandatory for undertaking works. The administration should have consulted us before selecting the location of the camps," said Sohan Hichami, a Janpad panchayat member from the area.

Bastar Range Inspector

General of Police Sundarraj P, however, said the two camps are among the 16 recently set up in Bastar, and these have rattled the Maoists who are forcing people to oppose the presence of security forces. He said all local sentiments are given proper respect when such camps sites are chosen.

Kanker Collector Chandan Kumar said the issue would be resolved soon and claimed that "prima facie, it seems the villagers have been staging protest under pressure from violent forces".

TRACKING INDIA'S COVID CURVE

300 DAYS SINCE PANDEMIC BEGAN

CASES: 10,187,850 ACTIVE CASES: 278,690 DEATHS: 147,622

TESTS: 168,102,657 RECOVERIES: 9,761,538

	CASES	DEATHS	RECOVERIES	TESTS
DEC 26	18,732	279	21,430	943,368



STATES WITH RISING ACTIVE CASES

	ACTIVE CASES	RISE IN LAST WEEK
Kerala	63,820	3,369
Bihar	5,086	119
Sikkim	611	116

STATES WHERE ACTIVE CASES ARE DECLINING

	ACTIVE CASES	DECLINE IN LAST WEEK
West Bengal	14,108	4,352
Delhi	6,911	3,447
Chhattisgarh	14,028	3,012

STATES REPORTING MAXIMUM CASES

	ON DEC 26	TOTAL
Kerala	3,527	735,612
Maharashtra	2,854	1,916,236
West Bengal	1,253	546,008

STATES REPORTING MAXIMUM DEATHS

	ON DEC 26	TOTAL
Maharashtra	60	50,321
West Bengal	33	9,569
Delhi	23	10,437

Data as on December 26, released by Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Indian Council of Medical Research and state governments. Often the numbers released every day contain data from previous days as well. As such, trends based on daily numbers are only indicative and not definitive

BMC norm for UK, other returnees: RT-PCR tests on 7th day of quarantine

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
MUMBAI, DECEMBER 27

THE BRIHANMUMBAI Municipal Corporation Sunday revised Covid-19 quarantine guidelines for all passengers coming from the UK, South Africa, Middle East and European countries.

Now, all passengers will have to undergo RT-PCR tests on the seventh day of their institutional quarantine at their own cost. Earlier, BMC guidelines suggested that the passengers would have to undergo RT-PCR tests between the fifth and seventh day of their quarantine at their own cost.

If the report is negative, they

will be discharged from institutional quarantine and asked to observe home quarantine for seven days, the guidelines issued by Municipal Commissioner Iqbal Singh Chahal said. A home quarantine stamp will be put on the hands of the passengers and undertaking will be taken that they will remain in home quarantine.

If the test result is positive, the passenger will be shifted to a designated Covid-19 hospital like Seven Hills hospital for UK residents and GT hospital for travellers from other countries. "A total of 14 days of quarantine is to be ensured," the guidelines stated.

On December 26, 11 flights from Europe and the Middle East had arrived in Mumbai.

'Truly passionate about dance, things weren't surface level with him'

SUANSHU KHURANA
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

ANYONE WHO'S had anything to do with any form of Indian dance knows Sunil Kothari. From a young student learning the ropes of Bharatanatyam in Tanjore to a dancing diva from Delhi or Chennai or the musicians, writers, make-up artists and lighting technicians, who have come and gone over the years, everyone has been well-acquainted with Kothari and his pocket camera that would pop out every now and then, his gregarious personality and immense passion for the cause of dance.

Dance historian, author, and critic, who would be spotted at

dance conventions and concerts as well as aarangetrams of young dancers and small intimate home concerts with much enthusiasm in an attempt to understand and document Indian dance, passed away on Sunday due to a cardiac arrest. He was 87.

He had tested positive for Covid last month and had recovered from it last week. Kothari was admitted to Fortis Hospital in the Capital last evening.

Born in Mumbai, Kothari qualified as a Chartered Accountant before turning his focus to study Indian dance. He did his Phd from MS University, Vadodara with research in Kuravangi and Kuchipudi and was awarded a DLit by Rabindra Bharati for his research in dance sculptures of medieval temples

SUNIL KOTHARI
1933-2020

of North Gujarat. By all the research, he managed to understand dance but felt that he was

still far away from the soul and nuances of the artforms. So he decided to learn them. He trained in Bharatanatyam under legendary gurus T Kuppaiah Pillai and his son Kalyanasundaram Pillai, followed by training in Kathak under Jaipur gharana legend Pt Badri Prasad.

It was in the early 60s that Kathak exponent Shovana Narayan, who was then learning from Lucknow gharana Kathak exponent Pt Birju Maharaj, met Kothari, who was visiting Maharaj. Kothari wanted to photograph Maharaj and Narayan. "He wanted to photograph a young Birju Maharaj and then me. Both of us had the problem of colic pain. So I would pose and then both of us would go away

for a bit and come back. We couldn't stop laughing about it later," says Narayan, who adds that his writing had enough gravitas and knowledge which was not just theoretical. "He made the effort to learn even the rudimentaries of Kathak, Bharatanatyam, Manipuri, Odissi... so that whatever he wrote or spoke about, he could do that with conviction."

"He was there at each and every performance. He also had his favourites and in the latter part of his life he was frank enough to admit that he had his failings by picking some over the other," adds Narayan, who says the documentation that he did through his writing and over 20 books on dance will be extremely useful for generations.

An interview Kothari did, which is still remembered, is that of Russian ballet star and the then artistic director of the prestigious Paris Opera Ballet in Paris — Rudolf Nureyev. It was published in India Today in 1985. In fact Kothari even danced for Nureyev, showing him the moves from Indian classical dance (in picture).

Chennai-based Bharatanatyam exponent Padma Subrahmanyam recounts her first meeting with Kothari in Mumbai. Kothari was then staying with Zhaveri sisters — the famed Manipuri dancers and was introduced to her by the eldest of the four — Naina Zhaveri. "It was 1963 and there weren't writers like him who knew the artform well. I found him to be truly passionate

about dance. Things weren't surface level with him. He would always take notes," says Subrahmanyam.

While he wrote reports and columns in various newspapers and magazines, Kothari later held the Uday Shankar Chair in Rabindra Bharati University, and taught in the Dance Department of New York University as a Fulbright Professor. He was a member of the International Dance Council of Unesco and a recipient of the Emeritus Fellowship of the Department of Culture, Government of India. He was awarded the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1995 and the Padma Shri in 2001. He was also an elected fellow of Sangeet Natak Akademi for his contribution to Indian dance.

POWER DISRUPTED TO MOBILE TOWERS

Punjab farmer unions say focus on boycott of telecom firm, blame 'miscreants'

RAAKHI JAGGA
LUDHIANA, DECEMBER 27

SOME FARMER groups in Punjab continued to disrupt power supply to Reliance Jio mobile towers Sunday, despite Chief Minister Amarinder Singh's appeals against the same. Sources said power to more than 150 mobile towers had been snatched in the past 24 hours. Till date, power supply to over 1,338 such mobile towers has been cut off.

The latest happened in Talwandi Sabo area of Bathinda. Even in Fazilka, the same thing was done in many border villages. Infrastructure too was damaged in some areas. In Moosa village of Mansa, one pole connected to the tower was thrown away while a cable box was also found burnt. Sources said some villagers manhandled employees of a company when they went to repair the cables.

Shingara Singh Maan, vice-president of BKKU (Ugrahan) told *The Indian Express*: "We never gave such a call, rather we were the first organisation to tell our members that they should not resort to snapping power supply or any other damage to mobile towers. Our focus is only on boycotting a telecom company. If anyone is doing it, they must be people who are doing it on their own as they are very angry against corporates. BKKU Ugrahan has nothing to do with it."

Dr Dharampal, president of Krantikari Kisan Union and coordinator of All India Kisan Sangrath Coordination Committee (AIKSCC), said, "We appealed to everyone in Punjab, Haryana villages... our focus is only on boycotting and nothing else."

FEMA case: ED summons Amarinder's son again, to appear today

ANJU AGNIHOTRI CHABA
JALANDHAR DECEMBER 27

THE ENFORCEMENT Directorate (ED) has again summoned Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh's son Raninder Singh to appear before it on Monday in connection with alleged violation of the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA).

On November 19, the ED had questioned him for six hours. Raninder had told the media on his last appearance that he will cooperate with the agency.

Sources said he had submitted documents pertaining to their queries about his property, bank accounts and income tax details during his last appearance. Now he has been asked to bring some more documents.

The ED had initiated an investigation against Raninder under FEMA following a complaint by the I-T department about the trusts owned by him in British Virgin Islands.

The I-T department officials had placed on record that Amarinder and Raninder had carried out some undisclosed financial transactions through a bank account in HSBC, Geneva, and HSBC Financial Services Limited.

NO TOLL FEE TILL DEMANDS ACCEPTED: HARYANA FARMERS

Chandigarh: Protesting farmers in Haryana on Sunday declared they will ensure that no fee is collected by toll plazas from vehicles across the state till the Centre accepts their demands. For this, dharnas will be held at toll plazas on national highways.

Initially, the farmer unions had given a call for toll-free movement of vehicles on highways from December 25 to December 27. But with a large number of farmers moving daily to the highways to stage protests at toll plazas, they announced toll-free movement of vehicles for an indefinite period. **ENS**

Jagmohan Singh, working committee member, AIKSCC, said, "The Samyukt Kisan Morcha and 32 farmer unions have issued appeals to farmers twice to avoid such actions. Our protests have remained peaceful till now and let them run in a peaceful manner ahead as well...I apprehend some miscreants as well who may be doing this as our unions have categorically told their members to focus on boycotting Jio connections."

Amarinder had issued an appeal on Friday asking farmers not to disrupt state's telecom services as internet network was important for many who are working from home, to hospitals and for online education.

UP govt to withdraw 2011 case against land acquisition protesters: MLA

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
LUCKNOW, DECEMBER 27

THE UTTAR Pradesh government has decided to withdraw a case lodged during an anti-land acquisition protest organised in 2011 by the residents of Bhatta Parsaul village in Gautam Budh Nagar (Noida) district, a state legislator said on Sunday.

The Mayawati government had lodged the case against unidentified people at Dankaur police station in Gautam Budh Nagar for allegedly kidnapping two government officials, and assaulting and abusing a policeman.

The Yogi Adityanath government ordered the withdrawal of the case last week but the prosecuting officer has yet to move an application on the matter. BJP MLA Dharendra Singh, who represents the district's Jewar seat in the Assembly, claimed that the government decided to withdraw the case following his efforts.

"During the protest, I was in the Congress and fighting for farmers. After winning the 2017 Assembly elections on a BJP ticket, I requested the chief minister to help the farmers booked in the case," Singh said.

Important Information regarding Training Schedule for the candidates who qualified for the post of Assistant Loco Pilots through Railway Recruitment Board Allahabad, Chandigarh & Jammu Tawi.

Panel of 2856 Assistant Loco Pilot (ALPs) was received from Railway Recruitment Board/ Allahabad, Chandigarh and Jammu Tawi. Panels were distributed to respective divisions as per indented vacancies.

Assistant Loco Pilots are imparted 109 days initial training before posting on working post. Training is imparted in batches to them. Training of 'A' batch was completed and training of Assistant Loco Pilots of B, C, D, E & F batch was discontinued due to Pandemic situation and all candidates were released on 19.3.2020.

Due to closure of Training Institutes/Centers existing schedule could not be adhered. Training institutes were re-opened on 05.10.2020 with limited capacity and revised schedule of batch B, C, D & E comprising of 1183 candidates w.e.f. 05.10.2020 to 17.03.2021 in different phases was issued. Training of B & C batch has been completed and candidates of D & E batch (337+354=691) are undergoing training.

Schedule for F batch of 182 candidates from 05.03.2021 to 03.07.2021 has also been issued.

Besides above approximately 1264 Assistant Loco Pilots are to be imparted training which will be scheduled from June 2021 onwards in phased manner keeping in view the constraints and limited operational capacity of Training Centers.

The life (currency) of the panel of Assistant Loco Pilots has been extended for one year and all candidates placed on the panel will be absorbed. Schedule of training is advised to the candidates by the divisions.



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TEMPORARY CANCELLATION AND DIVERSION OF TRAINS

In order to upgrade the infrastructure Delhi Division of Northern Railway will undertake the Non-interlocking work in connection with commissioning of Platform No. 8 at Hazrat Nizamuddin Railway station. To execute this work Delhi Division will take suitable traffic blocks of different durations from 28.12.2020 to 31.12.2020. During this period following trains will be cancelled and diverted on the dates shown against each-

CANCELLATION OF TRAINS	
Train No. & Name	Date of cancellation (from the Originating Station)
01841 Khajuraho-Kurukshetra Express	28.12.2020
01842 Kurukshetra-Khajuraho Express	28.12.2020 & 29.12.2020
02059/02060 Kota Jn.- Hazrat Nizamuddin-Kota Jn. Jan Shatabdi	28.12.2020 to 31.12.2020
02127 Jabalpur-Hazrat Nizamuddin M P Sampark Kranti	30.12.2020
02128 Hazrat Nizamuddin-Jabalpur M P Sampark Kranti	31.12.2020
02173 Hazrat Nizamuddin-Jabalpur Shridham Superfast Express	30.12.2020 & 31.12.2020
02174 Jabalpur-Hazrat Nizamuddin Shridham Superfast Express	29.12.2020 & 30.12.2020
02263 Pune Jn.-Hazrat Nizamuddin Duranto Express Special	29.12.2020
02264 Hazrat Nizamuddin-Pune Jn. Duranto Express Special	28.12.2020
02413 Madgaon-Hazrat Nizamuddin Rajdhani Special	28.12.2020
02917 Ahmedabad Jn.-Hazrat Nizamuddin Special	28.12.2020 & 30.12.2020
02918 Hazrat Nizamuddin-Ahmedabad Jn. Special	29.12.2020 & 31.12.2020
02963 Hazrat Nizamuddin-Udaipur Superfast Special	28.12.2020 to 31.12.2020
02964 Udaipur-Hazrat Nizamuddin Superfast Special	28.12.2020 to 30.12.2020

DIVERSION OF TRAIN		
Train No. & Name	Diverted Route	Date (from the Originating Station)
00762 Hazrat Nizamuddin-Renigunta Jn.	Via New Delhi- Delhi Jn.-Ghaziabad-Mitawal-Agra Cantt. instead of Hazrat Nizamuddin-Palwal	31.12.2020

Note: All norms of the State and Central Government regarding COVID-19 including Social distancing, sanitization etc., may be followed in the trains and at the Railway stations. All other precautions associated with COVID-19 should also be ensured.

For any kind of information such as Time-Table/Diversion of trains, the passengers are requested to contact Railway Enquiry No. 139 or visit Indian Railways website <https://enquiry.indianrail.gov.in> or may refer to NTES App please.

Security Helpline No. 182 | Integrated Helpline No. 139

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SALIENT FEATURES

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- Fresh farm produce like pomegranates from Sangola, oranges from Nagpur, musk melon and other produce from Jeur, Belvandi and Kopargaon will be easily transported to regions across eastern & north eastern parts of the country

KISAN RAIL: A GAME CHANGER INITIATIVE FURTHERING FARMERS' PROSPERITY

- Kisan Rail is enabling farmers from various regions to sell agricultural produce to far off markets all across the country
- 50% subsidy makes transportation of fruits and vegetables cheaper
- With access to urban markets, farmers are ensured better profit margins
- Within 3 months, 27 thousand tonnes of agricultural produce has already been transported through Kisan Rail
- Enroute halts of Kisan Rail have loading and unloading facilities that will especially benefit local produce

by

Narendra Modi

Prime Minister

(Through Video Conferencing)

In the August presence of

Narendra Singh Tomar

Minister of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, Rural Development, Panchayati Raj and Food Processing Industries, Government of India

Piyush Goyal

Minister of Railways, Commerce & Industry, Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution, Government of India

28 December, 2020 at 4:30 pm

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Empanelment of Chartered Accountant firms/LLPs for the year 2021-2022

Online Applications are invited from Chartered Accountant firms/LLPs who desire to be empanelled with the office of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India for the year 2021-2022 for the purpose of appointment of auditors of Companies as per Sections 139 (5) and 139(7) of the Companies Act 2013 and of Statutory Corporations /Autonomous Bodies as per the provisions of their respective Acts. The online application along with detailed instructions in this regard will be available on the website www.cag.gov.in from 1 January 2021 to 15 February 2021. The applicant firms/LLPs will have to fill/update the data showing the status of their firm as on 1 January 2021. After filling/updating the data, the firms/LLPs will be required to generate online acknowledgement letter for the year. If the firms/LLPs fail to generate online acknowledgment letter, their application would not be considered for empanelment. The firms/LLPs will be required to submit a print out of the acknowledgement letter generated online and also hard copies of the documents in support of their online application in this office by 26 February 2021.

Sd/-
Sr. Administrative Officer/CA-V
davp 51101/11/0001/2021



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

GROWTH POSITIVE

Higher government spending, vaccine could provide a fillip to the economy. Recovery to pre-COVID levels will take time

THE INDIAN ECONOMY appears to have weathered the COVID storm better than what most had expected. The contraction in economic activities in the second quarter has been shallower than expectations, and as leading economic indicators suggest, the momentum thereafter does appear to have remained healthy, even past the festive season. While the pace of recovery in different parts of the country has not been the same, a study by economists at the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) notes that even the western region, which had lagged behind others in the recovery curve, has exhibited positive momentum September onwards. In fact, mobility levels have returned to almost pre-COVID levels in all cities by early December, signalling a return to normalcy. As the RBI study notes, "Indian economy is pulling out of COVID-19's deep abyss", and is moving "towards a place in the sunlight". While growth is expected to be marginally positive in the third quarter, the study notes that if the current momentum in activities persists, the bounce back in the fourth quarter may actually be stronger than what baseline scenarios indicate.

On the demand side, while there appears to have been some moderation after the saturation of pent up and festive demand, household demand continues to expand. Electricity consumption is up, as is petrol consumption. GST collections remain above the Rs 1 lakh crore mark, and both inter-state and intra-state movement of goods continues to show an uptick as reflected in the e-way bill data. Non-oil imports have returned to pre-COVID levels, and RBI's survey of consumers indicates that sentiment has improved, as employment conditions have begun to look up. On the supply side, manufacturing activity has picked up, as has the services sector, though high contact-intensive services continue to remain below pre-COVID levels. Financing conditions for firms remain conducive as corporate bond spreads have fallen to pre-COVID levels. And as per the RBI's industrial outlook survey, firms were hopeful that the rebound in activities would gain momentum. Though, as a CRISIL report notes, the smaller companies, with low bargaining power and cash reserves, remain in the red.

The RBI expects the "above-the-line" fiscal stimulus to boost growth by close to 2 per cent this year. Though central government spending has till October been almost at the same level as last year, presumably expenditure will pick up as revenue visibility improves. This would impart an expansionary impulse to the economy in the months ahead. Alongside, the roll-out of the vaccine is also likely to strengthen household demand, especially for high-contact services. However, since the structural challenges that pre-date the COVID pandemic continue to persist, a full recovery to pre-COVID levels remains distant.

NEW BRITAIN

Brexit deal will lead to rearrangement of UK's foreign economic policy and international relations, offers India an opportunity

THE CHRISTMAS DAY agreement on new terms of trade between Britain and its largest economic partner, the European Union, is unlikely to please everyone in Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative Party, but a majority is expected to back him. With the Labour Party already supporting the new framework as a welcome alternative to a "no-deal" hard Brexit from the EU, the deal is expected to be ratified by the British parliament this week. The European governments too are set to approve the deal that comes into force on January 1. To be sure, there will be multiple glitches in implementing the complex agreement, which guarantees tariff-free trade on most goods between two of the world's largest economic entities. It also lays the basis for future cooperation on law enforcement, security, data flows among other important areas.

While Europe regrets the separation and looks forward to a new beginning with Britain, Johnson claims a major political victory in regaining British sovereignty to make its own laws and freedom to engage the world on its own terms. Johnson's success should bring to an end the prolonged political divisions in Britain on the nature of its relationship with Europe after the Second World War. The schism in the Conservative party was even deeper. All the seven Conservative prime ministers who preceded Johnson — Theresa May, David Cameron, John Major, Margaret Thatcher, Edward Heath and Harold Macmillan — saw their political careers destroyed by the European question. Britain had voted with a thin margin to leave the EU in a referendum during the summer of 2016; but few had bet on London's ability to negotiate an amicable separation. As he celebrated the deal, Johnson insisted that the agreement brings "a new stability and a new certainty" to a relationship that has long been fractious and difficult. "Although we have left the EU," Johnson said, Britain "will remain culturally, emotionally, historically, strategically and geologically attached to Europe".

The break from Europe will lead to a significant rearrangement of Britain's foreign economic policy and international relations. London is actively negotiating multiple bilateral free trade agreements with major economic partners, trying to reinforce the traditional strategic partnerships with the US and Japan and leverage historic connections with Canada, Australia, New Zealand and other Commonwealth nations. Johnson's visit to India, as the guest at the Republic Day next month, offers an opportunity for Delhi to take a close look at London's post Brexit plans and make a big push for the transformation of a bilateral relationship that has long performed way below its natural potential.

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



PRANJUL BHANDARI

AS THE WORLD grapples with the COVID-19 pandemic, India has stood out in three distinct ways. One, over the past few weeks, India seems to have broken the link between rising levels of mobility and COVID-19 cases. Fears that the celebrations during the Diwali festival would lead to a surge in virus cases haven't played out. In fact, the number of new cases has fallen while the fatality rate continues to drop. Two, India has rolled out one of the smallest fiscal support packages globally, with central government spending flat so far this year. Three, inflation is now a big problem, with consumer prices above the 6 per cent tolerance level for the past eight months.

The fact that Indians can move around more freely without a jump in COVID-19 cases is a major positive that is already paying off. The last quarter saw an improvement in growth as consumers were eager to spend, especially on festival-related items, bolstered by higher-than-usual financial savings.

With the vaccine coming, the economy could get a further shot in the arm. The combination of mass vaccinations, herd immunity (for instance in parts of Mumbai) and rising recovery rates augurs well for growth. We expect the resulting exuberance to be led by the release of pent-up demand for high-touch services, in the same way that pent-up demand for physical goods preceded the recovery in 2020.

At first glance, it may seem that India got off lightly and is back on the path to recovery. But a deeper look suggests that the low level of fiscal spending could leave behind other problems, such as rising inequality.

After all, much of the fiscal support packages around the world have been directed towards safeguarding the vulnerable — poorer households and small businesses. Although it is true that in India there was a focus on these areas, there were some misses, such as the urban poor being

As growth recovers, inflationary concerns could begin to dominate

Indeed, inflation control could be the main task facing policymakers in 2021. The RBI may have to take steps to gradually drain the excess liquidity in the banking sector, provide a floor for short-term rates, which have fallen below the reverse repo rate, and finally narrow the policy rate corridor by raising the reverse repo rate. A quicker exit from loose monetary policy could become another area where India differs from the world.

left out, and the overall outlay was small. For instance, demand for the rural employment guarantee programme continues to outstrip supply.

And then there is the rise in inequality between large and small firms, which is likely to be felt by individual employees. The corporate results in the quarter ending September were telling — large listed firms saw a bigger rise in profits (50 per cent, year-on-year). A combination of cost-cutting, low interest rates, access to buoyant capital markets and increased spending in the formal economy probably helped.

The smaller listed firms did not do as well (7 per cent, year-on-year). And the unlisted informal firms, typically with small cash buffers, are likely to have faced acute economic stress.

In fact, it can be argued that large firms benefited, in part, at the cost of smaller, informal firms. This could have happened in two ways. One, spending moved from small firms to large ones as they were more efficient through the lockdown period. Two, small firms are especially vulnerable to delays or defaults on payments they are owed, many times from the larger firms.

Most worryingly, small firms are more labour intensive than large firms. The informal sector employs around 85 per cent of the labour force. If small firms do poorly, it impacts a large number of people. Data shows that small firms have cut staff costs by much more than large firms (-20 per cent year-on-year versus 0 per cent year-on-year). And limited fiscal support here could stoke inequality.

All this could impact demand over time. We are already seeing some early changes like sales of more expensive passenger vehicles doing better than motorbike sales. Indeed, rising inequality is a scar that the pandemic is likely to leave behind.

But this is not where it ends. Rising in-

equality could have other side effects. It could stoke inflation. India has had trouble in the past with rising prices of services. Once this trend takes hold, as it did in 2011, it remains elevated for a prolonged period. And trying to boost supply takes time. Think health and education services, for example.

For three reasons, it is possible that services inflation rises quickly in 2021. One, as a vaccine comes into play, there could be a release of pent-up demand for high-touch services. Two, as large firms and their employees do relatively well, they are likely to demand more services, stoking prices. Consumption patterns show that the rich in India tend to consume more services than the poor. And rising inequality could, therefore, stoke inflation. Three, many service providers did not do a regular annual price reset in 2020, so they may raise prices to cover the two years once demand picks up. If inflation does become persistent and leads to tighter monetary policy, that could weigh on growth over time.

Putting all of this together, it seems India will come full circle in 2021. For a while it was worried more about weak growth than high inflation. But as growth recovers, inflationary concerns could reappear.

Indeed, inflation control could be the main task facing policymakers in 2021. The RBI may have to take steps to gradually drain the excess liquidity in the banking sector, provide a floor for short-term rates, which have fallen below the reverse repo rate, and finally narrow the policy rate corridor by raising the reverse repo rate. A quicker exit from loose monetary policy could become another area where India differs from the world.

The writer is chief India economist, HSBC Securities and Capital Markets (India) Pvt Ltd

THE LAST STRAW

Systemic neglect ensures that prisons act as warehouses for the marginalised



MAJA DARUWALA AND VIJAY RAGHAVAN

TWO RECENT incidents of Stan Swamy and Gautam Navlakha show up the state of our prisons today. Both are undertrial prisoners in the Bhima-Koregaon case. Both had to move the courts for the simplest of necessities. One, to get a sipper cup and a straw because he is an 80-year-old man with Parkinson's and the other to wrest a pair of glasses to replace a broken pair. It led to the Bombay High Court into making an observation that workshops should be conducted for the prison staff to sensitise them.

Why did these matters have to go to the courts? It is, perhaps, an indication of the fact that there is little space for ground-level staff to make operational decisions. Officials do not want to get into trouble, especially in cases of political prisoners arrested under national security laws.

The law on provision of basic facilities to prisoners is clear — it lies squarely with custodial authorities. The Nelson Mandela Rules 2015 issued by the UN and the Model Prison Manual 2016 by the Bureau of Police Research and Development, Ministry of Home Affairs, have elaborate provisions regarding the care, treatment and rehabilitation of prisoners. A plethora of Supreme Court and high court judgments reiterate that prisoners are human beings with basic rights. In essence, the law emphasises that as far as under trial prisoners are concerned, they enjoy all other rights, save those restricted by virtue of their being incarcerated.

Yet, violations are an everyday routine. They get highlighted when there is a mishap with a high-profile person, like a Rajan Pillai

whose death in Tihar Prison due to lack of medical care led to the high court awarding compensation; or if a public-spirited individual like Sheela Barse files a PIL; or because of a judge who, as in the recent case of "Re Inhuman Conditions in 1382 Prisons", sees the need for systemic change. Notorious criminals, too, like Charles Sobhraj and Sunil Batra, who had the gumption to take matters to the Supreme Court, have played their part in prison reforms over the years.

But standard setting doesn't mean compliance. Our prisons are full of people in compromised states. Around 70 per cent are undertrials and more than 75 per cent come from marginalised sections. They know little about the law. Even if they are aware, they have little recourse to any complaints mechanism and must fall back on an uneven legal aid system. If at all a prisoner can reach the judge, they are either too busy in their routine work or too enmeshed in the local culture to act. Financial, infrastructural, and human resource shortfalls that range from 20 to 40 per cent also play their part in adding to staff stress and inmate misery.

The Supreme Court issued orders to state governments to take steps to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in prisons through a suo moto PIL filed in March 2020, leading to more than 68,000 prisoners being released on bail or parole so far. But a pre-pandemic comparison between 2017 and 2019 shows that overcrowding increased from 116 to 119 per cent. Overcrowding in individual prisons stands much higher; some prisons are more than three times crowded than their official capacity.

Despite efforts at clearing cases, an acute shortage of judges and court infrastructure ensures an accelerating accumulation of cases in courts. Between 2019 and 2020, the numbers crept up from 3.5 crore toward 4 crore, an over 10 per cent rise. According to the India Justice report 2019, it takes an average of three years for the case to traverse the high court and six years in the subordinate courts.

It doesn't have to be this way. There are pathways to accountability and to reform. But since both supervisor and policy maker know the on-ground constraints and the biases within the culture, much is excused or pushed under the carpet. Reform attempts like the constitution of Undertrial Review Committees mandated by the Supreme Court work patchily. In most prisons, the Board of Visitors meant to function as an oversight mechanism are not even constituted.

The policy rhetoric wants prisons to be places of reform and rehabilitation. Their neglect by the executive and oversight bodies ensures they act as warehouses for the poor and the marginalised. But the constitutional ordering of this country requires that pandemic or no pandemic, justice must not wait. Prolongation of these so-called criminal cases is unconscionable, as is forcing vulnerable people into remaining in hotspots of increased infection and fatal risk.

Daruwala is senior adviser, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, and Raghavan is professor, Centre for Criminology and Justice, School of Social Work, TISS

DECEMBER 28, 1980, FORTY YEARS AGO

ASSAM AGITATION

THE POLICE FIRED in Nowgong to disperse a crowd of agitators who had gathered to picket government offices as part of the mass satyagraha on the foreigners' issue. A bus conductor of the Assam State Transport Corporation, who was injured in the firing, was admitted to hospital. Nowgong, with Sadiya and Golaghat were earlier scenes of police lathi charges and teargassing in which many people were injured, according to reports received here. Today was the tenth day of a 13-day state-wide satyagraha the AASU and AAGSP have organised to protest against the central government's alleged indifference to solving the 15-month-old foreigners' problem.

TALKS HOPES DIM

CHANCES FOR EARLY resumption of talks on the complex issue of foreign nationals are considered dim in view of the rigid stand taken by the Assam agitation leaders. The Home Ministry does not seem to be in a mood to take any new initiative to break the deadlock or to send a formal invitation to the AASU and AAGSP to come here for discussions. Official sources pointed out that the Home Minister Zail Singh had clearly conveyed his invitation to the leaders to discuss the problem with him without any precondition being put by either side. This should be taken as a formal invitation and there was no need to send another. Though the AASU

and AAGSP have initially rejected the Centre's offer, Home Ministry sources hope that better sense would prevail.

BJP ON POVERTY

THE BASIC THRUST of the economic policy draft of the BJP is to lift those below the poverty line, the number of which is mounting with completion of every five-year plan. According to the framers of the draft, the main objective was to launch a war against poverty. Briefing newsmen, Kanwarlal Gupta, convener of the committee set up to prepare the draft, said the economic draft envisages a blend of Gandhian socialism, Loknaya's antyodaya and Deen Dayal Upadhyaya's "integral humanism."

An American debt

The narrative of slavery as US's original sin elides its history as a settler colony. The appointment of a Native American as Interior Secretary is an important step in accepting its past



SANJIB BARUAH

TO SAY THAT Native American politician Debra Anne Haaland's appointment as Secretary of the Interior of the US would be historic is an understatement. If confirmed by the Senate, Haaland will take office in early 2021 as the first Native American head of the sprawling government department that manages the US government's relations with indigenous communities and oversees the country's national parks and millions of acres of public lands, most of which were once controlled by Native Americans.

In urging Biden to choose Haaland for the position, prominent environmental and climate activist Bill McKibben said, "It would be a remarkable plot twist in the American story for an indigenous person to run interior — a gesture can't repair much of the damage that's been done, but it can serve as a constant reminder of the debt still to be repaid."

The Department of Interior includes the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Established in 1824, the Bureau was housed originally in the Department of War before it was moved to the newly created Department of the Interior in 1849. It was located in the Department of War since the subjugation of indigenous communities and their forced relocation was official policy.

"As federal policy has changed from notions of subjugating and assimilating American Indians," says the bureau's official website, so has its mission. "Its role now is as a partner with tribes to help them achieve their goals for self-determination".

It may seem remarkable to readers in India that the term "Indian", a legacy of Christopher Columbus's 528-year-old mistake, is still a legal category in the US. Fortunately, terms such as Native or Native American, indigenous communities, Native Nation or First Nations People now enjoy wide acceptance as synonyms.

In the colonial period in North America, the British entered into treaties with Native American nations as they did with foreign countries. The practice continued till after the founding of the United States in 1776. However, their legal and political status suffered a demotion; they became "domestic dependent nations", to use Chief Justice John Marshall's early 19th century re-formulation. In the treaties they signed, Native Americans ceded millions of acres of land to the US, but the treaties did not absorb them into the American body politic. Native Americans were restricted to their reservations. Yet, they could govern themselves. Even groups that did not sign treaties could claim to possess inherent sovereignty.

Native Americans didn't all cheer when the US Congress in 1924 declared that those born in the country will be American citizens. Clinton Rickard, the chief of the Tuscarora people (who now live in the US state of New York and Canada's Ontario province), said: "By its provisions all Indians were automatically made United States citizens whether they wanted to be or not. This



CR Sasikumar

was a violation of our sovereignty. Our citizenship was in our own nations... We wished to remain treaty Indians and reserve our ancient rights. There was no great rush among my people to go out and vote in the white man's elections."

Not all Native Americans took this view. But many still remain ambivalent about citizenship. "Democracy is Indigenous" is the slogan used by an advocacy organization working to register indigenous voters in the last election seeking to appeal to the pride that many feel about historical institutions such as the Iroquois Confederacy and its consensus-based mechanisms of governance.

Born to a Native American mother and a Norwegian-American father, Haaland is an enrolled citizen of the Pueblo of Laguna. Pueblo — the Spanish word for village — is the commonly used term for indigenous communities in New Mexico reflecting the state's Spanish colonial heritage. Haaland often describes herself as a 35th generation New Mexican.

Haaland first came to national attention in 2018 when she was elected to the House of Representatives. She was one of the two Native American women elected to the Congress for the first time in US history. Now she will be the first-ever indigenous person to hold a Cabinet-level position.

At the Democratic National Convention last August, Haaland spoke powerfully against President Trump's anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric. "If anyone can say 'go back', she said, 'it's Native Americans. My Pueblo ancestors, despite being targeted at every juncture — despite facing famine and drought — still inhabit this country today. But indigenous people aren't asking anyone to go back to where they came from."

She has been a champion of Native

During the racial reckoning that has been taking place in the US over the past year, Black Lives Matter activists have drawn attention to the mistreatment of all 'communities of colour'. But the protests have also dramatised the uniqueness of the challenges facing Native Americans. Unlike all other exclusions in American society, at the core of America's problems with indigenous communities lies the question of land — a lot of which falls within the mandate of the Department of Interior

American rights and environmental causes. "The sad fact is that we have a President," she said earlier this year, "who is intent on selling off our public lands to his friends for fracking and drilling." Oil and gas development in federal public lands provides livelihood to many Americans and a major source of revenue for a number of states. Haaland's position on oil and gas drilling on public lands is likely to come under scrutiny during her confirmation hearings and if she is confirmed, during her tenure as Interior Secretary.

During the racial reckoning that has been taking place in the US over the past year, Black Lives Matter activists have drawn attention to the mistreatment of all "communities of colour". But the protests have also dramatised the uniqueness of the challenges facing Native Americans. Unlike all other exclusions in American society, at the core of America's problems with indigenous communities lies the question of land — a lot of which falls within the mandate of the Department of Interior. It has become commonplace to talk of slavery as America's original sin. But this narrative elides the story of the US as a settler colony — native Americans were forcibly removed before white settlers could use slave labour to cultivate those lands.

Biden has promised a Cabinet that "looks like America". Perhaps a Native American Secretary of the Interior will bring America a step closer to recognising its settler colonial past and present. If that happens, Haaland's appointment will prove historic above and beyond its intended short-term political goal.

Baruah is professor of political studies at Bard College, New York

An election, a vindication

Wide participation in J&K DDC polls indicates that people of the UT are turning to democratic decentralisation in the hope of better governance



RAM MADHAV

THE SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION of the District Development Council (DDC) elections in Jammu and Kashmir is indicative of the Narendra Modi government's resolve to return power to the people on the one hand and the resolve of the people of the UT to turn to democratic decentralisation to achieve better governance and development on the other. The elections saw enthusiastic participation of both the people and political parties. Except in the terror hotbeds of Pulwama and Shopian, the voter turnout ranged from 25 per cent to 51 per cent in the other eight districts in the Valley. The panchayat raj laws are made by states based on the 64th Amendment to the Constitution that introduced the Panchayat Raj Act.

Various interpretations can be given to the election outcome. Some will be debatable claims, while some facts will remain conspicuous. There could be some welcome signs and some warning signals. It is necessary to look at all these dispassionately. The very fact that such a big election was completed peacefully with enthusiastic participation from both sides should silence many critics about the lack of political freedom in J&K. The BJP's rise as a pan-J&K party and the single-largest party, securing more votes than the combined votes of the Gupkar group, is a vindication of its growing acceptability across the UT.

The People's Alliance for Gupkar Declaration (PAGD), popularly known as the Gupkar group, has been able to win majority seats in the Valley and some in the Pir Panjal and Chenab Valley regions of Jammu. However, despite the coming together of the mainstream Valley parties like the NC, PDP and PC, the voters didn't give them overwhelming support in the Valley's 140 seats. In 31 places, voters opted for independents while in another 30 places, they voted for the non-PAGD candidates. Hence, it is over-exuberance on the part of the Gupkar leaders to declare that it was a victory for their agenda. Gupkar's biggest failure was in Srinagar, where it managed to win just three seats. Srinagar has traditionally been the bastion of the Abdullahs, but the voters this time rejected them.

The BJP will finally control six DDCs while the Gupkar group will have a chance in a few more. The rest will depend on independents and smaller parties. The Gupkar leaders were hoping for a landslide victory in the Valley. But the people preferred credible candidates to work for local development than high-profile party apparatchiks working only on emotional agendas like the restoration of Article 370. All political parties must accept this message with humility.

These elections were made possible through an amendment to the Panchayat Raj Act 1989 of the erstwhile J&K Constitution, which preceded the national act by six

months. The amendment had facilitated the UT administration to conduct these elections through universal adult franchise.

Haseeb Drabu, former J&K Minister, raised objections to this practice calling it as against the federal spirit of the Indian Constitution (Junior MLA, senior panchn, IE, December 24). Although it is heartening to see the Kashmiri leader's insistence on adherence to the Indian Constitution in letter, his allusion to the DDCs as "District Assemblies" is an exaggeration. India's federal polity is based on a two-tier election system — state assemblies and Parliament — not a three-tier one. Elections to the local bodies are conducted by the state election commissions independently under state laws.

In J&K, the need for greater decentralisation was emphasised by Sheikh Abdullah's National Conference during the agitation years against the Maharaja. It had accepted a political manifesto in 1944 called 'Naya Kashmir'. Article 45 of the manifesto called for "people's panchayats" at the district, block and village level to represent the state power. After the Indira-Sheikh Accord in 1975, the manifesto was redrafted in 1976. It promised to provide regional autonomy and further decentralise political power through "appropriate institutional arrangements at the district, block and village levels".

Balraj Puri, the eminent political commentator from J&K, who was involved in the drafting of the manifesto, reasoned eloquently about the need for greater devolution of powers through decentralisation highlighting the diversity in the state. "A Muslim majority state within a Hindu majority country, a Hindu majority region within a Muslim majority state, Muslim majority districts within Hindu majority region, Hindu majority blocks within Muslim majority districts and Muslim majority villages within Hindu majority blocks" — this was how Puri described the profile of J&K.

Subsequently, the process of devolution of powers happened in the state under the 1989 Act. District Development Boards were constituted to oversee the development plans of the respective districts. However, these bodies were filled with unelected leaders, or ex officio members like the MLAs and MPs. Bureaucrats have dominated the executive authority in these bodies.

J&K's tragedy has been that it became a prisoner of a few political families and a few dozen legislators. Grass roots leadership was never allowed to rise. As a result, people remained largely powerless and at the mercy of a few leaders. Empowering the village panchayats was started by the UT administration a couple of years ago encouraging the rise of a new-generation leadership at the grass roots. The welcome change affected now to empower the DDCs with elected representatives is going to further that process and help address developmental needs in a big way. Realising this opportunity, people too participated in the elections enthusiastically defying terrorist threats and intimidations.

The BJP has clearly emerged as the key player in the UT along with the Gupkar group. However, the party and the government need to take a cautious note of the deepening divisions within the UT along the Pir Panjal and Chenab Valley.

The writer is member, board of governors, India Foundation



SHASHI DESHPANDE

Journal of a plague year

In 2020, we learnt joy of thrift, beauty of austerity, and the need for human touch

THE STORY of the Bombay plague of 1896 is a fascinating one, combining in itself all the horror of an epidemic, personal courage, scientific achievement, resistance to the autocratic measures of a ruling foreign power, nationalism and an assassination. After that terrible outbreak, epidemics, except for the Spanish Flu, became a distant memory in India. As medical science steadily advanced, it mowed down a number of diseases, both big and small, which had troubled the human race. The next great mystery was AIDS, which Siddhartha Mukherjee speaks of in his *The Emperor of All Maladies* as an "epidemiological catastrophe". Another catastrophe was waiting for us in the 21st century.

News came early this year of a strange illness in China which threatened to be worse than AIDS. AIDS needed some kind of contact. This new disease moved from one human to another without any contact; a cough, a sneeze, even just talking could transmit the virus. In those early days, we saw pictures of ghost cities in China, with empty roads and an eerie silence. We became witnesses to the swiftness of its mad rush round the globe, the ruthlessness which made it inescapable; this was truly a formidable enemy. Yet so strangely does the human mind reject the idea of our own vulnerability, we still hoped the coronavirus, as it

had been named, would by some miracle ignore us. It didn't. The virus and COVID-19 came to India.

It was the lockdown that really brought home the horror of the situation. Suddenly all the things that our lives consisted of were swept away, as if a tidal wave had swallowed them. Isolated in our homes, not seeing a human face for days, struggling with chores — this was a nightmare we had never envisaged. Fear lapped at the edges of our lives. Of the loss of everything we had taken for granted. And worst of all, thoughts of death without any dignity.

When the lockdown was lifted, people crawled out with exhausted bodies and ravaged minds. Even the most sanguine knew that the ordeal was not over, that tragedy was still lurking in our midst. For there were no drugs that could tame the virus. Doctors were reduced to working like the vaids of old, trying anything, everything. The only hope was a vaccine. So many vaccines had been developed through the years, surely scientists,

now at the peak of human achievement, would find one?

In its absence, three measures were our only hope: Wear a mask, keep a distance from others, wash your hands. Easy and simple enough it would seem. Nevertheless, post-lockdown, people went about without masks. I wondered: Don't they care about life, about survival? The Buddha told his disciple Ananda: That which you love the most will be taken away from you. What is it that we love most? Children? Parents? Lovers? Yes, we love them, but above all we love life, we want to survive. Survival is a basic animal instinct. Why, then, do people behave as if it didn't matter? Going to weddings, to temples, to the beach, attending parties and political rallies — did these matter more than life?

We have learnt a few things from this terrible time. We have learnt how much we can do without, how little we really need. We have learnt the joy of thrift, the beauty of austerity. We have learnt that we need human

company, that we need human touch. Watching people frantically trying to get home from wherever they were, we relearned the importance of home. We saw for the first time the invisible strata of our cities, when migrant workers made a rush for home, some walking hundreds of miles, some dying before they reached home. We discovered how much the women who helped us at home lightened our tasks, allowed us to do other things.

Above all, we could have, hopefully, learnt the lesson: All things are connected. For the first time, maybe, the whole world has united in suffering, in fear of the virus and grief at the deaths. But the demand for vaccines tells us how little has changed. Rich nations are buying more than they need. Scientists are above pettiness, but politicians are not. The cloak of liberalism and humanism has fallen, there's only selfishness left.

The virus remains a great leveller; it doesn't care about race, colour, nation, gender. All humans are fair game. Will we remember these things in the future? Not very likely, because we have been given the gift of amnesia. Burdened as we are with the knowledge of our own mortality, would we have survived if not for forgetfulness?

The writer is a novelist

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

TAGORE'S INDIA

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'PM Modi at Visva-Bharati: Tagore's vision is essence of Atmanirbhar Bharat mission' (IE, December 25). In his speech, the Prime Minister tried hard to find support from Tagore for the policies of his government. The reality, however, is that the two are diametrically opposed. In the second stanza of 'Jana-Gana-Mana', Tagore finds India as a magnanimous and open-hearted host to Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, Parsis, Muslims and Christians. In 'Bharat Teertha', his India is a confluence of a variety of cultures. Tagore believed in the goodness of universal humanity, not divided by a narrow definition of nationalism. In 'Ghare Baire' — his critique of the "Swadeshi movement" in the guise of a novel — he makes a strong case for affordability over nationalistic pride. In the present context, this could be interpreted as support for globalisation.

Ranjan Das, Mumbai

VACCINE BECKONS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Dear Santa' (IE, December 25). The year 2020 was full of gloom due to COVID. But we must appreciate the Serum Institute of India for manufacturing vaccine for COVID-19 in a record period. The day the first vaccine is administered is certainly going to be part of history books.

Vandana, Chandigarh

IDEAS ONLINE

ONLY IN THE EXPRESS

● RESTORING THE COMPETITION COMMISSION'S MANDATE: SANJAY PANDEY AND VED MISHRA

● BUILDING CONSENSUS: RAM KAUNDINYA

www.indianexpress.com

HOUSE NEEDED

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'The lawmakers must work' (IE, December 25). The periodic assembling of members in a legislative chamber is not mere constitutional convention; these bodies are meant to channel public sentiments, their aspirations, and apprehensions. In a vibrant liberal democracy, every shade of opinion is expected to be given a respectful place in public discourse, and legislative bodies are the perfect platform for this. Discussions stirred by legislators on issues of public importance give a sense of hope to the masses.

Sudip Kumar Dey Kolkata

AIADMK message to ally BJP: Fall in line or rework your 2021 poll options

PRESSTrust OF INDIA
CHENNAI, DECEMBER 27

IN ITS first election rally here, the ruling AIADMK on Sunday bluntly told ally BJP that it cannot make a dent in Tamil Nadu and ruled out accommodating the saffron party in the government if it won the Assembly elections, due next year, and retained power.

The BJP has to endorse Chief Minister K Palaniswami's candidature for the top post for next year's Assembly polls and agree to its other terms — such as non-participation in government — and if not, should rethink of its 2021 electoral options, the AIADMK indicated at the rally. Pointing to the death of AIADMK's top leader J Jayalalitha and DMK's M Karunanidhi who opposed her, senior leader and AIADMK deputy coordinator K P Munusamy said in the absence of such leaders, "many" parties were now trying to make a political entry into Tamil Nadu. Some national parties, "opportunists, betrayers and a crowd", were blaming the Dravidian outfits, alleging that they ruined Tamil Nadu with their 50-plus years of rule in the state, he said.

How can accusations of inefficiency be hurled against the AIADMK government when the Centre had given so many awards to the state for its stellar performance in many sectors, Munusamy said. All such forces eyeing political gains should realise that Tamil Nadu will not endorse them as Dravidian ideology is the bedrock of the state's social and cultural milieu, he said. Tamil Nadu's socio-political landscape was nurtured by the Dravidian movement, which was built on the ethos of Tamil culture, language and valour and hence the state was entirely different from the rest of the country, he said.

The distinctive feature and undercurrent of the Dravidian movement has effectively blocked the entry of national parties into the state for over half a century, he



BJP is yet to endorse Palaniswami as joint CM nominee

said, adding it was only offshoots of the movement — the AIADMK and DMK — that have been ruling Tamil Nadu since 1967.

Munusamy made the remarks in the presence of Palaniswami, Deputy Chief Minister O Panneerselvam and other senior leaders. In his speech, Munusamy, a senior leader considered close to Panneerselvam, who is also the party coordinator, was clear that BJP cannot succeed independently in Tamil Nadu. Though he did not name BJP, it was clear that the message was intended for the national party.

"Be it a national party or state party... the government will be led by AIADMK. There is no necessity for a coalition. If any political party comes forward for an alliance arrangement with an idea of a coalition government, let them please think about it," he said.

The provocation for the Dravidian party seemed to be the continuing hesitancy, seen by political observers as a strategy, of the state BJP leadership in endorsing Palaniswami as the CM candidate of the overall AIADMK-BJP alliance for the 2021 polls. Besides the BJP, there are other constituents, including the PMK. The saffron party's state unit had all along maintained that the chief minister nominee of the NDA in Tamil Nadu would be announced by the BJP's national leadership.

To make matters worse, senior BJP leader and Union minister Prakash Javadekar, who was here on Friday, declined to say if his party continued its ties with AIADMK or if it endorsed the candidature of Palaniswami. The Tamil Nadu BJP is opposed to Dravidian politics, which, it had often said, showed some tendencies of separatism, resulting in the state going off the national mainstream.

Sailor missing in US waters since Dec 3, kin await word

JIGNASA SINHA
MIRZAPUR, DECEMBER 27

"I THINK I got on the wrong ship. I will have to stay here till May... I don't know what to do..."

On December 2, a 27-year-old merchant navy sailor, Arvind Tiwari, spoke to his sister Sulekha, 25, from his ship off the coast of Texas, US. That was the last time his family heard from him.

A day later, according to a letter received by his family, Tiwari was "reported overboard whilst rigging the Pilot ladder". He was last spotted on the ship, MT Sagami, at 7:06 hrs local time, when the vessel was approaching Port Arthur in Texas, said the letter sent by hiring firm Elegant Marine Services Pvt. Ltd. His body has still not been found.

Now, his family is raising suspicions on the manner of his death and questioning the lack of headway in tracing the body. They have had no word on his fate for weeks now.

Tiwari had been working for



27-year-old Arvind Tiwari was last spotted on the MT Sagami when it was approaching Port Arthur in Texas. Express

Hong Kong-based Fleet Management Ltd as an 'able-bodied seaman' after being hired by Elegant Marine Services in August.

A response to queries by *The Indian Express* is awaited from

both Fleet Management and Elegant Marine Services.

"We don't know what happened but we can't accept that he is dead. He sounded nervous on his last call. He wanted to come home... I guess. We spoke to his seniors and found that there were three other seamen when he was rigging the ladder. How can they not find the body? I have sent messages to his seniors to look for my brother on islands near Texas," said Sulekha, who lives in Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh with her husband.

Tiwari is the breadwinner of the family, which is also based in Mirzapur. His father, Rajendra, worked as a driver. He retired after Tiwari joined the merchant navy in 2012. Tiwari has three sisters who are married and live near Mirzapur.

The family said they suspect that something went wrong because his contract was extended till May, which he wasn't aware of when he boarded the ship. He left home in August 2020 and was to return in February 2021.

"We remember him getting

the contract from his new company, Fleet Management. He was supposed to come back in February. Why didn't they have safety measures for someone who's rigging a ladder? It's not safe and anyone can fall overboard," said his mother Savitri.

In the December 3 letter, Elegant Marine Services had also said: "...the United States Coast Guard is carrying out a search to locate the missing AB [able-bodied]".

The family said they have sought help from the Ministry of External Affairs.

On September 13, another merchant navy sailor—who, too, worked for Fleet Management Ltd and was hired by Elegant Marine Services—went missing from a ship off the Mauritius coast.

In 20-year-old Dhananjay Arora's case, the search was called off after four days. An investigation is being conducted by the Hong Kong government in coordination with MRCC Mauritius and DG Shipping. His body has still not been found.

'BJP workers have accepted Marandi 100%'

THE BJP'S Jharkhand unit president **DEEPAK PRAKASH**, who was elected Rajya Sabha MP this year, speaks to **ABHISHEK ANGAD** about one year in the Opposition and the performance of the Hemant Soren government. Excerpts



Since you assumed charge as BJP state president after the party's loss in Jharkhand, what changes have happened on the political front and the organisational level?

From an organisation point of view, we have 27 districts, 513 blocks in Jharkhand and we have selected all presidents, working committees. We have also formed various departments — as it happens in the government — such as on construction, local self-governance, among others, to review the functioning of the government. After I joined, the pandemic came upon us. We ensured that we helped affected poor people... We were in touch with the BJP state presidents of other states and helped migrant labourers...

What would you say of the Hemant Soren-led government's one year?

It has been quite unsuccessful. The Public Distribution System collapsed. Migrant labourers came and left taking away a few more with them, but the state government did not provide them any jobs as they had announced. The government took various decisions such as Jharkhand Land Mutation Bill 2020, which gave immunity to land and revenue department officials. They announced Rs 1 lakh fine if people did not wear masks... and then they announced there won't be any puja because of Covid-19 during Durga Puja and Chhat... I am not saying that one does not need to follow guidelines, but these orders were against one particular religion. In all these decisions, the government had to reverse its order because of our protest. Corruption is rampant and illegal mining of sand is going on... There is financial mismanagement... There is lawlessness, and more than 1,300 women have been victims of sexual violence in Jharkhand in the past one year...

You spoke about financial mismanagement. Please elaborate.

The present government keeps saying they don't have money. Every country takes loans to run its government, India has taken too from the World Bank, IMF, among others. The government says they will work without taking any loans. How is it possible?... Then there is a lack of intent in revenue generation...

You also spoke about corruption, but recently The Indian Express exposed Centre's Pre-Matric Scholarship Scam which happened during the Raghubar Das regime?

Yes, and there should be a thorough investigation and any political leader and officer found guilty should be punished.

Senior leader Babul Marandi joined the BJP after an election loss. There is a perception that his acceptability depended on results of the bypolls on two seats which BJP recently lost

Babul Marandi is a veteran leader and during his leadership, the organisation was strengthened, development works started in many villages... Yes, he left the party due to certain reasons, but BJP workers have accepted him 100%. We lost in bypolls by a narrow margin due to multiple reasons, one being that the current government abused its machinery...

FULL INTERVIEW ON www.indianexpress.com

Jail admin denying Saibaba winter provisions, alleges his lawyer

VIVEK DESHPANDE
NAGPUR, DECEMBER 27



G N Saibaba

THE LAYWER of jailed Delhi University (DU) professor G N Saibaba has accused prison authorities of denying his client basic winter provisions and medical supplies.

Authorities of Nagpur Central Prison — where Saibaba is serving a life sentence — denied the allegations saying everything was provided to the professor according to the jail manual.

In a letter written to jail superintendent Anup Kume, lawyer Akash Sorde also accused the jail authorities of behaving rudely with him when he visits Saibaba to hand over supplies.

Alleging that several essentials he had taken for his client were re-

turned by the jail staff, Sorde wrote, "You have even refused to accept woollen cap/monkey cap, napkin, handkerchief, towel, and white T-shirt, while you accepted underwear and loin cloth only. Given the bone chilling cold that whole of Nagpur is facing, I fail to understand how else do you expect my client to save himself from the cold."

"I myself, on instructions of my client and on humanitarian consideration, came with the articles so as to hand it over to your staff after thorough security checks to Prof Saibaba, who you know is differently-abled and wheelchair-

bound with multiple progressive diseases," the letter further said.

"Despite having provided everything along with the catalogue, on your command, your staff refused to accept materials which are neither a security threat nor pose any danger of contacting or transmitting Covid-19," Sorde said, adding, "...The items rejected form essential medical necessities, stationary and material required for intellectual pursuits."

Kume told *The Indian Express*, "The accusations are not true. We provide him everything as per jail manual. As regards woollen cap, he already has winter wear. The question of physiotherapy material doesn't arise since we are providing him all that doctors have prescribed... Saibaba is not an ordinary inmate. So, we have to follow certain guidelines."

DDU withdraws its vacate-hostel notice over Covid fears after students protest

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
LUCKNOW, DECEMBER 27

STUDENTS OF Deen Dayal Upadhyay Gorkhpur University sat pelless outside the residence of the Vice-Chancellor on Saturday to protest against a notice of vacating hostels in the wake of Covid-19 pandemic. However, following the agitation, the university administration on Sunday said "all bona fide students will be allowed" to stay back in the hostels till a five-member committee was formed to look into the issue.

According to a statement issued by the university, a five-member committee held a meeting on the issue on Sunday. They will talk to students and submit their recommendations to the administration.

An 11-member team has also been formed to visit the hostels to listen to the problems of students, and identify those living illegally in the hostels and recommend actions against them, the statement added.

The students said classes were going on and competitive exams were in the offing. "We should not be vacated from our hostels. Students from several states, including Uttarakhand and Kashmir, stay here. If they go back to their houses, they will have to take several transport options, which will expose them to health hazards," said a student.

The protest, which started on Saturday afternoon and continued till 2 am on Sunday, was withdrawn after the administration's intervention.

"The administration has decided that those who are genuine occupants will not have to vacate the hostels. At present, only postgraduate and research classes are on as per government guidelines. We have to sanitise all the hostels. So, our plan is to shift the students to another wing and sanitise their rooms. Earlier, we had thought that we would vacate the hostels during the winter vacation to sanitise all the rooms. But the students had objected to that," said a university administration official.

The official said hostels were allowed to open after the state government had lifted the lockdown with a condition that every room would have just one occupant.

WANTED IN 1996 EXPLOSIVES CASE

Gujarat ATS arrests Dawood, Abu Salem aide from Jharkhand

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
AHMEDABAD, DECEMBER 17

THE GUJARAT Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) Saturday arrested an associate of gangsters Dawood Ibrahim and Abu Salem, Abdul Majid Kutti alias Mohammad Kamal (58), from Jamshedpur in Jharkhand for allegedly smuggling explosives and automatic weapons from Pakistan to carry out bomb blasts in Gujarat and Maharashtra on Republic Day in 1997. On Sunday, he was brought to Ahmedabad for questioning, police said.

Kutti, ATS officials said, was living at Barinagar in Jamshedpur since May 2019 after he returned to India from Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia allegedly on a fake Indian passport.

On December 23, 1996, police had arrested one Mohammad Fazal Pathan, a native of Ajmer in Rajasthan, at a check post on Mehana highway with a vehicle carrying four kilograms RDX and other weapons. The consignment, police said, had been shipped from Pakistan via Rajasthan's Barmer, a border district, and was being taken to Gujarat and Mumbai for an alleged terrorist attack on January 26, 1997, at the behest of Dawood Ibrahim and Abu



Kutti was arrested in Jamshedpur. Express

Salem. Besides Pathan, two more accused — Anwar Qureshi alias Pappu Akhtar and Shakil Ibrahim Qureshi — were also arrested in the case later. The then chief judicial magistrate of Mehana had also issued warrants against Dawood Ibrahim, Abu Salem, and Kutti. According to police, Kutti and Abu Salem had allegedly sent Pathan, the latter's associate, to receive the explosives' consignment from Barmer.

According to the 1996 warrant, Kutti is wanted under IPC sections 120B (criminal conspiracy), 121 (waging war or attempt to wage war against the government of India), 122 (collecting arms with the intent to wage war against the government of India), and 123 (concealing with intent to facilitate design to wage war against India), besides sections of the Arms Act and Explosives Act.

278 WINNERS TO SWEAR IN TODAY

DDC polls: Meet the new faces who trounced heavyweights

ARUN SHARMA
JAMMU, DECEMBER 27

A HOMEMAKER, an advocate, a former teacher and a sarpanch, who trounced political heavyweights in the just concluded maiden District Development Council elections in Jammu and Kashmir, are some of the new faces among the 278 elected candidates who will take oath at their respective district headquarters on Monday. A look at some of them:

SHAZIA KOUSAR (INDEPENDENT): A postgraduate in Microbiology, she resigned as a government teacher to contest elections in Budhal Old-A constituency. She polled 7,982 votes, defeating her nearest rival Shaheen Akhtar (NC) by 2,446 votes and relegating her aunt Zubeeda Begum and JKAP candidate to third place. Zubeeda is the wife of a former minister and two-time PDP MLA Zulfiqar Choudhary who joined Jammu Kashmir Apni Party.

IQBAL MALIK (BJP): A former bureaucrat, he won the polls from Rajouri district's Darhal constituency, defeating NC's Parvez Rashid by 3,748 votes. Significantly, as a BJP candidate, he polled 11,481 votes in an area which has only one Hindu family.

ASIM HASMI (NC): An advocate by profession, he defeated BJP's former minister Shakti Raj Parihar in Doda district's Gundna constituency by 1,336 votes. As NC candidate, he polled 7,835 votes against Parihar's 6,499 in a Hindu-dominated constituency.

votes in Kathua district's Keerian Gandyal constituency. The latter is the wife of former minister and founder of Dogra Swabhimani Sangathan Party, Choudhary Lal Singh, a three-time MLA and two-time Lok Sabha MP.

KUMARI SHAVETA (BJP): Married nearly six months ago to a school teacher, she polled 7,717 votes, defeating former MLA Kanta Andotra by 1,675

MOHAMMAD ASHAQ (INDEPENDENT): A contractor, he defeated NC's Zeeshan Javed Rana, son of two-time MLA and one-time MLC Javed Rana, in Mendhar-C constituency by 2,105 votes.

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Notice Inviting Open E-Tender
IRCTC - WEST ZONE invites the following Open E-Tender (through two packet system):-

Units	Particulars	Availability of E-Tender Document	Last Date of Submission
Jan Ahaar	Open e-tender cum auction for Operation, Maintenance and Provision of Catering Services through various Refreshment Room / Jan Ahaar (Kitchen Units) at A1 & A category Railway Stations	w.e.f. 29.12.2020	28.01.2021 upto 15:00 hrs.
Refreshment Room		w.e.f. 30.12.2020	29.01.2021 upto 15:00 hrs.
Food Plaza	Open e-tender cum auction for Setting up of Food Plaza / Fast Food Units at various 'B', 'C' & 'D' category Railway Stations	w.e.f. 30.12.2020	28.01.2021 upto 15:00 hrs.
Fast Food Unit		w.e.f. 08.01.2021	08.02.2021 upto 15:00 hrs.

Tender document downloading & participation can be done on website: www.tenderwizard.com/IRCTC In case of any corrigendum/addendum issued on the above advertisement, it will be published only on website www.irctc.com and www.tenderwizard.com/IRCTC

Office Address: IRCTC Ltd., Zonal office (West Zone), 2nd Floor, New Administrative Bldg, D.N. Road, Central Railway, CSMT, Mumbai - 400001. Tel: 022-22618062/63/64

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NMDC Limited
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Donimalai Complex,
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TENDER NOTIFICATION
Sealed tenders are invited from the competent and experienced bidder for the following work:

Sl. No.	Tender No. & Date	Name of Work	Cost of Work & EMD (₹)	Sale/Download period	Last date of Submission upto 15.00 hrs.
1.	DNM/SMT/taata buses/2020-21/02, Date: 28-12-2020	Repair and Maintenance of 08 numbers of TATA Buses for a period of 02 years.	67.97 Lakhs EMD-68,000/-	28-12-2020 to 27-01-2021	27-01-2021
2.	CEW/OT/264/2020, Date: 26-12-2020	Internal Finishing and Disempowering of Vacated Quarters for the year 2021-22.	78.67 Lakhs EMD-78,700/-	28-12-2020 to 27-01-2021	27-01-2021
3.	CEW/OT/250/2020, Date: 26-12-2020	Maintenance of various Parks in Donimalai Township and other Miscellaneous works in the parks for a period of One year (Job Contract Basis).	25.53 Lakhs EMD-25,550/-	29-12-2020 to 28-01-2021	28-01-2021
4.	CEW/OT/249/2020, Date: 26-12-2020	Assistance works in attending day to day complaints like carpentry, plumbing, mason and other various miscellaneous works as per the complaints received at Civil Maintenance Office for a one year (Job Contract Basis).	25.50 Lakhs EMD-25,550/-	30-12-2020 to 29-01-2021	29-01-2021
5.	DNM/PLM/Draw/Dev/OT/2020-21, Date: 28-12-2020	Software Development using latest Design Engineering with Materials Compositions Engineering.	49.67 Lakhs EMD-49,680/-	28-12-2020 to 28-01-2021	28-01-2021

For further clarification: For Sl.No. 2 to 4 may contact by e-mail to dnmew@nmdc.co.in / Fax No. 08395-274644 and For Sl.No. 1 may contact by e-mail to dnmsad@nmdc.co.in / Fax No. 08395-274605 and For Sl.No. 05 may contact dnmplant@nmdc.co.in or 08395-232568. Detailed NIT and tender documents can be viewed and/or downloaded from NMDC's website www.nmdc.co.in/nmdctender/default.aspx or Central Public Procurement Portal www.eprocure.gov.in. Further, for any corrigendum, amendments, clarification etc may please follow the above website. For and on behalf of NMDC Limited (General Manager (Production))

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The Dy. Chief Electrical Engineer/Const, Northern Railway, Moradabad, for and on behalf of the President of India, invites open e-tender (Single Packet) for the under noted work:-

1.	Name of work with its location	Design, Supply, Erection, Testing & Commissioning of 25 kV AC single phase OHE for the electrification along with Civil Engineering work of "Sidings over Moradabad Division.
2.	Completion Period of the work	9 (Nine) Months
3.	Approximate Cost of work	₹ 4,21,56,902.73
4.	Earnest Money amount (to be deposited Online)	₹ 3,60,800/-
5.	Date & Time for submission of E-tender and opening of tender	Tenders may be uploaded upto 11.30 hrs on date 18.01.2021 on IREPS website i.e. www.ireps.gov.in . The bidders can only participate in the e-tender, the tender will be opened at 11.30 hrs on 18.01.2021
6.	Detailed Tender Notice & Tender Document	The detailed e-tender notice is available on Northern Railway web site i.e. www.nr.indianrailways.gov.in and tender document is available on www.ireps.gov.in . Above tender document will be available for submission of offer on IREPS web site i.e. www.ireps.gov.in from 04.01.2021 to 18.01.2021. The bidders who desire to participate against e-tenders, are advised to electronically register themselves on the above website for which, they would require to, obtain class III digital certificate (if already not obtained) issued by CCA under IT Act-2000. All other terms and conditions in respect of above tenders are given in tender document. The detailed tender notice also can be seen on the Notice Board of the above office.

No.: 17-Elect/TRD/MB/130 Date: 24.12.2020 2877/20
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PERSONAL

Rajiv Kumar, S/O Shri Jai Pat Singh, R/o 5130, Sector B, Pocket 7, Vasant Kunj, South West Delhi, New Delhi 110070, have changed my name to Rajiv Jaipal for all purposes.

0400558748-1

PUBLIC NOTICE
My clients Kulbhushan Mehendi Ratta and his wife Sunita Ratta B/S-110-D, 3rd Floor, Shalimar Bagh, Delhi-110088 residing on Rent declares that their Son Gaurav Mehendi Ratta is not well behaving with my client. Therefore my clients disinherited, disowned and severed all relation with him. He will have no right in movable & immovable properties of my client. Who ever deals with him, shall do so at his/her own risk. Narendra Kumar Sharma (Advocate) Enr. No. D/1587/2010 AL-85/8 Shalimar Bagh, Delhi-110088

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It is hereby notified to all public in general that Smt. Manju Devi W/o Shri Jai Shrivastava is sole purchaser/owner of the property bearing No. Plot No. 146, Block A4, measuring 70 Sq. mtrs. situated in Paschim Vihar, New Delhi-110006. The original documents such as (i) Original Allotment Letter, (ii) Original Possession Letter & (iii) Original Possession Slip in the name of original allottee Smt. Krishna Devi W/o Late Sh. J.R. Goel issued by DDA to aforesaid property has been lost and a complaint in this regard has been lodged in the police station P.S. Crime Branch on 23.12.2020. Now, my aforesaid client has applied for household to freshen of the aforesaid property to the Deeds Development Authority, if anybody have any objection, they may directly contact to the Asstt. Director (L&D) Residential, Deeds Development Authority, 3rd Floor, C-Block, Vikas Sadan, INA, New Delhi-110002. Sd/- YUDHISTER LAL (ADVOCATE) D-6269/2017

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My Client Sh. Braham Prakash S/o Late Sh. Chandar R/o D-112, Wazirpur J.J. Colony, North-West, Delhi-110052 has discovered & disowned his son Sunny, Daughters Anita & Shalu from his all movable and immovable properties due to their disrespectful, disobedience behavior and out of control of my client. My client has also severed all his relations with them. If anybody deals with them, he/she shall do so at his/her own risks, cost and consequences. My client shall not be liable or responsible for the same in any manner. Ashok Kumar (Advocate) Enr. No. D-1152/1 Ch. No. B-116, BGS Block, Tie Hazrat Court Delhi-24



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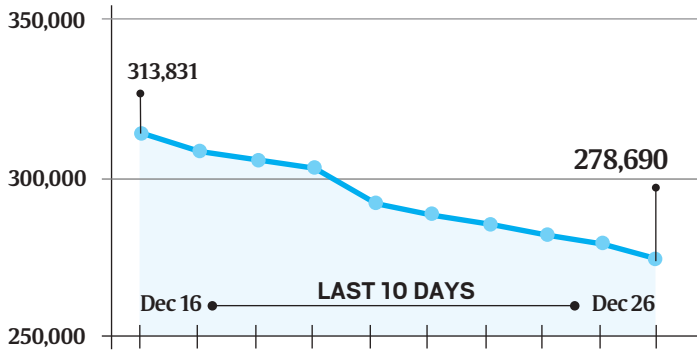
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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to explained@indianexpress.com

CORONAVIRUS DASHBOARD

INDIA ACTIVE CASES

278,690



Note: The Dec 26 figure in this graph is based on the government update on Dec 27

INDIA TOTAL CASES
10,187,850WORLD TOTAL CASES
80,467,041

Source: Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, updated at 11 pm on Dec 27

Source: Johns Hopkins University, updated at 11 pm on Dec 27

How to measure aerosols with a particle counter, after accounting for dust

THE NOVEL coronavirus spreads primarily via aerosols, or tiny droplets generated by a cough or a sneeze that may be carrying the virus. The concentration of aerosols in public spaces, therefore, can give a measure of infection risk, but making that measurement usually requires specialists and specialised equipment.

Now, scientists have demonstrated a simpler alternative: use a commercially available particle counter. The study is published in *Physics of Fluids*, a journal from the American Institute of Physics.

Many particle counters are available in the market. While this study used a device marketed as Fluke 985, the researchers said similar results were obtained with other particle counters.

The reading you get from such handheld particle counters, however, will include background dust besides the aerosols.

How can you distinguish these dust particles from aerosols that arise from people breathing, speaking, sneezing, and coughing? The researchers overcame this with a simple subtraction.

"We can measure the amount of dust particles when there are no aerosols and then take the difference with when people do generate aerosols by speaking or coughing. It's just a simple subtracting of the background," Daniel Bonn, one of the authors of the study, said by email. Dr Bonn is a physicist at the University of Amsterdam.

While the device used comes with six different size channels — 0.3, 0.5, 1.0, 2.0, 5.0, and 10.0 microns (1 mi-

cron is a millionth part of a metre) — a lot of the dust is so fine that aerosols in that range cannot really be measured. More than 98% of the dust, in fact, is contained in the first two channels (smallest particles) of size 0.3 and 0.5 microns. The study did not consider particles in these channels for the aerosol assessment. "But there's a reasonable sized range where you can detect the aerosols," Bonn said.

For validation, the researchers compared their measurements with those from specialised laboratory techniques. Aerosol concentration is often measured using a technique called laser diffraction, in which a laser beam passing through a sample lights up different-sized particles differently. Results from this highly specialised technique and the method used in the study, the researchers found, matched up perfectly.

Bonn noted that the results are not unique to the device they used, and can be extended to other particle counters as well. "I bought a cheap one (50\$) that I keep on my desk; the air quality index turns red if there are too many aerosols or small dust particles. In both cases you want to open a window," Bonn told *The Indian Express*. "Anyone can do it."

The findings suggest that well-ventilated areas can have aerosol concentrations more than 100 times lower than poorly ventilated areas, such as public elevators or restrooms. Ventilation, therefore, plays a large role in indoor spaces.

KABIR FIRAQUE



NEW RESEARCH

Beware the UK mutant

Fast-spreading UK-type variants of SARS-CoV-2 could also develop independently in India. Ignorance cannot be bliss. One basic element of disease surveillance is adequate coverage and density to catch events before they spread widely. Much more genome sequencing is critical.

EXPERT EXPLAINS

DR SHAHID JAMEEL

From *The Indian Express* panel of specialists, exclusive insight

THE YEAR 2020 will be remembered for the emergence of a new virus — the SARS coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and the Covid-19 pandemic it caused. With a few more days to go, 2020 is projected to close out with about 84 million confirmed Covid-19 cases and over 1.8 million deaths.

Despite this gloom, this has also been a year of hope, with the development, testing and approval of vaccines at remarkable speed. For the first time ever, a pandemic of human disease would be controlled by vaccines in real time.

Nobel Laureate Joshua Lederberg, one of modern biology's most influential thinkers, once said, "The single biggest threat to man's continued dominance on the planet is the virus." Two recent developments remind us why viruses can be such formidable adversaries.

With the discovery of 58 people testing positive for the new coronavirus in Antarctica, the pandemic has reached every continent. And a mutant virus has emerged in the United Kingdom, which threatens to shut down the world yet again — a world just beginning to recover from lockdowns and movement restrictions.

The mutation of viruses

The genetic material or genome of SARS-CoV-2 is a ribonucleic acid (RNA) made up of over 30,000 units (called nucleotides). Among the families of RNA viruses, the coronaviruses have the largest genome. Most other RNA viruses have on average about 10,000 nucleotides. When genomes replicate — any genomes, whether DNA or RNA, from the smallest viruses to humans — there are random errors (or mutations). While higher organisms have the machinery to correct these errors, viruses and especially the RNA ones, don't.

Most mutations are deleterious, and those viruses are never seen. Only the mutations that offer some selective advantage result in the evolution of new viral variants.

Evolution also requires selection pressure. For a virus, this could be its ability to infect better and multiply to higher numbers or evade host immunity. The low probability of these events is compensated by the high rates of virus multiplication. For example, each coronavirus-infected cell produces about 1,000 new virus particles in under 12 hours.

The mutant in the UK

A distinct phylogenetic cluster or lineage (named B.1.1.7) of SARS-CoV-2 was recently discovered in the UK. The two earliest viruses of this lineage were collected on September 20 and 21 from Kent and Greater London respectively. By December 15, this lineage contained 1,623 viruses — 555 from Kent, 519 from Greater London, 545 in other regions of the UK including Scotland and Wales, and four from Australia, Denmark, Italy, and Netherlands.

In another ten days — on December 25 — the numbers of these variant viruses has more than doubled to 3,575; mostly from the UK, but now also from France, Ireland, Israel, Hong Kong and Singapore.

What the mutation does

Compared to the original SARS-CoV-2



Passengers from the UK fill in forms at Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport in Mumbai last week. India has stopped all flights from the UK, but the conditions believed to have given rise to the virus variant there are present in India too. AP

strains, viruses of this lineage have accumulated 23 mutations across 5 genes. Of these, there are 17 non-synonymous and six synonymous mutations; the former also change an amino acid at that site in the protein. Importantly, of the 17 non-synonymous mutations, eight are in the spike protein — the protein that allows the virus to attach to and enter cells.

The N501Y mutation in one of the key contact residues in the receptor binding domain (RBD) of the spike protein increases its affinity for the ACE2 receptor. The P681H mutation in the cleavage site between the S1 and S2 domains of the spike protein promotes entry into susceptible cells, and increases transmission in animal models of infection.

The N501Y change is also associated with increased infectivity and virulence in animal models. Both these mutations were earlier observed independently, but have come together in the UK variant viruses. The result is a virus that spreads faster than before.

The cause for worry...

There is widespread concern that these mutations may prevent currently used tests from detecting the virus, make it more lethal, or allow it to evade vaccines under development. There is no evidence so far for any of these. After all, these variants were found in people who were identified to be positive with currently available RT-PCR tests.

However, even though there is no evidence for more severe disease, there is clear evidence that this variant is more contagious. Those infected produce more virus in their nose and throat, and that leads to more virus shedding and more person-to-person transmission.

While these variants appear not to be more lethal, with more infected people there would be higher numbers (not percentages) of severe infections and deaths. This should be cause for worry.

...And reason not to

Even though there are multiple mutations in the spike protein, most experts believe that vaccines currently in development would also work on the variant viruses.

Vineet Menachery, an assistant professor of microbiology and immunology at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, US, has provided the first evidence for this.

His laboratory compared the efficacy of serum samples from recovered Covid-19 patients to neutralise viruses with or without the N501Y mutation. They found no difference. Though only shared on Twitter on December 23 and still not part of a publication, these results are encouraging and reassuring.

Flights off, not mutation

India has stopped all flights from the UK and increased surveillance at airports to stop the import of the highly transmissible variants. While seemingly a reasonable strategy, such variants could easily develop within the country too. After all, India has over 10 million confirmed infections and it is estimated that 150 to 200 million people are already infected.

A fast spreader variant called 501.V2 emerged independently in South Africa and shares the N501Y mutation with the UK variants. Though the spike N501Y variant has not yet been found in India, viruses with the P681H mutation started emerging in July and presently 14% of SARS-CoV-2 circulating in

India carries this mutation.

These viruses are mainly from Maharashtra, with some from West Bengal as well. It would take just one more mutation for us to get where the UK is today. And that should also worry us in India.

Quick reaction is key

To catch the emergence of new viral variants before they spread widely in the population, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends determining the virus genomic sequence from at least one out of every 300 confirmed cases (or 0.33%). The UK has sequenced 135,572 or 6.2% viral variants from its 2.19 million cases, while South Africa and the US have reported genome sequences from 0.3% of confirmed cases.

However, India has so far sequenced only 4,976 or 0.05% viruses from its over 10 million cases. At this rate, we will remain oblivious to the emergence of new variants till it is already too late. One basic element of disease surveillance is adequate coverage and density to catch events before they spread widely.

Conducive Indian conditions

Another reason to worry is that the conditions hypothesised to give rise to the UK variant are present in India as well. Immunodeficient or immunosuppressed patients, who become chronically infected with SARS-CoV-2, remain positive for viral RNA for 2-4 months instead of the usual 2-3 weeks. These patients are often treated with convalescent plasma (sometimes more than once) and usually also with the drug remdesivir.

Virus genome sequencing from such patients has revealed unusually large numbers of nucleotide changes. Intra-patient virus genetic diversity is also known to increase following plasma therapy. Poor nutritional status is a known cause for weak immune systems and physicians in India have reported chronic infection in a subset of patients.

Several unknowns remain

Plasma therapy and remdesivir have also been used widely to treat Covid-19 patients in India. Further, plasma has been administered in India without first testing for the levels of neutralising antibodies. All these create opportunities for UK-type variants to emerge in India as well. But we have not sequenced enough to know if that has happened.

Even at low coverage, the sequences from India are skewed for urban locations, especially the metros where sequencing laboratories are located. This needs broader coverage to include all parts of the country. The Indian Council of Medical Research can facilitate this process by providing access to samples from Covid-19 patients to research laboratories that have the capacity for genomic sequencing and data analysis. Real-time surveillance will provide data that is both dense and granular for setting policy based on evidence.

Going forward with 'SMS'

When vaccines are deployed more widely, there would be further selection pressures on the virus to change. Vaccine-escape mutants are well known for other viruses and will emerge for SARS-CoV-2 as well. Only proper genetic surveillance will catch any vaccine failure well in time.

As we step into 2021, the message to policymakers and the public is clear. Those who oversee public health must continuously seek fresh evidence to make policies at the population level. At the individual level, each one of us must work towards reducing virus transmission — less transmission means less opportunity for the virus to change. And SMS is the only tool available to us at this time — social distancing, masks and sanitisation.

Governor's role in calling an Assembly session: what the law, courts say

APURVA VISHWANATH
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

IN YET another tug-of-war between Kerala Governor Arif Mohammad Khan and Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, the Governor has turned down a request to summon a special sitting of the Assembly to debate the new three central farm laws. The state government's Cabinet had written to the Governor last week and, after the denial, is mulling approaching him again with the same request. The episode raises questions on the role of a Governor and the contours of the powers he or she has under the Constitution.

Who can summon a session of the Assembly?

"The Governor shall from time to time summon the House or each House of the Legislature of the State to meet at such time and place as he thinks fit..." says Article 174 of the Constitution. The provision also puts on the Governor the responsibility of ensuring that the House is summoned at least

once every six months.

Although it is the Governor's prerogative to summon the House, according to Article 163, the Governor is required to act on the "aid and advice" of the Cabinet. So when the Governor summons the House under Article 174, this is not of his or her own will but on the aid and advice of the Cabinet.

Can the Governor refuse the aid and advice of the Cabinet?

There are a few instances where the Governor can summon the House despite the refusal of the Chief Minister who heads the Cabinet. When the Chief Minister appears to have lost the majority and the legislative members of the House propose a no-confidence motion against the Chief Minister, then the Governor can decide on his or her own on summoning the House.

But the actions of the Governor, when using his discretionary powers can be challenged in court.

How have the courts ruled?

A number of rulings by the Supreme



Kerala Governor Arif Mohammed Khan (left) has tuned down a request from Pinarayi Vijayan's government to call a special Assembly session. Express Archive

Court has settled the position that the Governor cannot refuse the request of a Cabinet that enjoys majority in the House unless it is patently unconstitutional. The latest in the line of rulings is the landmark 2016 Constitution Bench ruling in which the Supreme Court looked into the constitutional crisis in Arunachal Pradesh after the Governor had imposed President's Rule in the state.

"In ordinary circumstances during the

period when the Chief Minister and his council of ministers enjoy the confidence of the majority of the House, the power vested with the Governor under Article 174 to summon, prorogue and dissolve the house(s) must be exercised in consonance with the aid and advice of the chief minister and his council of ministers. In the above situation, he is precluded [from taking] an individual call on the issue at his own will,

or in his own discretion," the verdict said.

The court read the power to summon the House as a "function" of the Governor and not a "power" he enjoys.

"If the functions of the Governor were to be read as his power, and an untrammelled one at that (in view of Article 163 of the Constitution, as contended), then the Governor has the power to literally summon the Assembly to meet 'at such time and place as he thinks fit' that is in any city and at any place other than the Legislative Assembly building and at any odd time. This is nothing but arbitrary and surely, an arbitrary exercise of power is not what our Constitution makers either contemplated in the hands of the Governor or imagined its wielding by any constitutional authority," the court said.

Even the Sarkaria Commission of 1983, which reviewed the arrangements between the Centre and the states, had said that "so long as the Council of Ministers enjoys the confidence of the Assembly, its advice in these matters, unless patently unconstitutional must be deemed as binding on the

Governor. It is only where such advice, if acted upon, would lead to an infringement of a constitutional provision, or where the Council of Ministers has ceased to enjoy the confidence of the Assembly, that the question arises whether the Governor may act in the exercise of his discretion".

What happens if the Kerala government insists on holding the special session?

Since the Governor's powers are limited with regard to summoning the House, there can be no legal ground to deny a request for summoning the session. Governor Arif Mohammad has in the past criticised the Kerala Assembly's resolution against the Centre's Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019. In the political slugfest, the Governor's refusal can also be challenged in court.

The political nature of the office of the Governor, especially in Opposition-ruled states, has been underlined in several instances by courts. The constitutional checks and balances and landmark court rulings account for this and limit the discretionary powers of the Governor.

12 IDEA EXCHANGE

NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

SUNIL ARORA, CHIEF ELECTION COMMISSIONER OF INDIA

Will have special observers for Bengal... for law and order, expenses. If needed, we can act swiftly, ruthlessly

The CEC talks about Bihar elections serving as template for coming polls, wishes law would be brought against defections, calls for "sound legislative framework" for handling social media influence on elections, and reiterates support for simultaneous polls. The session was moderated by Senior Assistant Editor Ritika Chopra

RITIKA CHOPRA: What gave the Election Commission the confidence to hold the Bihar polls in the middle of a pandemic?

Successive commissions have been holding elections under very difficult circumstances, at different points in time. The pandemic was unprecedented. As I said in the press conference while announcing the elections, for us it was a leap of faith and not a leap in the dark. We had done a lot of homework. Our team held a series of virtual meetings with various stakeholders and delegations of political parties... Yes, many people were sceptical, but that happens every time. When the first general election in India took place, (the first Chief Election Commissioner of India) Sukumar Sen wrote in his book, the people were not just sceptical, they were also cynical. Many said publicly that this is the last general election in India... The idea was not to delay the (Bihar) elections. We did our homework and took the plunge...

The first step we took was to reduce the number of voters per polling booth—from 1,500 to 1,000 per booth. That alone meant an enhancement of 33,000 booths, which in turn meant that so many more people had to be deployed for security and other jobs. I must congratulate publicly our officers in Bihar, the Chief Electoral Officer there... In some cases, the officers and district magistrates themselves got Covid-19, and after recovery they were back on election duty... I must also congratulate the voters of Bihar, especially the women, who turned up to vote in a disciplined manner...

For the election, we had to procure 11 lakh, 500 ml bottles of sanitisers... This was done by the government of Bihar and the CEO. About seven crore gloves were procured and arrangements for their safe disposal had to be done. Apart from these, face shields, masks etc were procured.

RITIKA CHOPRA: Are there any lessons from Bihar that you would like to implement in polls in other states?

We will be holding elections in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Assam, Kerala... Every major exercise has some lessons. Given the scale of preparations that the Commission has been doing in the past, we will be able to hold these elections successfully. We are also getting some Bihar officers to hold virtual meetings with their counterparts (in election-bound states), so that there can be an exchange of ideas. We have already informally reached out to the health department of Bihar and the state's CEO to have informal discussions with their counterparts in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu to see how the learning of day-to-day operations in Bihar can be utilised in these states.

In West Bengal, we will have to have 28,000 more polling booths. The major lesson would be to ensure that these polling booths are located as near as possible to the main polling station, so that use of resources is optimised, and the deployment of security and staff can be better.

RITIKA CHOPRA: During the Bihar elections, some political parties also raised questions over the delay in the counting process. Did you anticipate that at all? The EC also held several briefings...

When we go for elections, we are prepared for the worst too... Briefing the press more than once (on counting day for Bihar elections) was not a reaction to any situation. It had been thought out before. Our officers thought that the press would be better informed with regular briefings. They synchronised their efforts with CEO, Bihar. I think the last press conference was around midnight. The reaction from the press was also positive about being kept in the loop through the day. The same will now be done in West Bengal too. The Bihar briefings on counting day have virtually become a template for other states.

RITIKA CHOPRA: The RJD had questioned the results. They said a lot of postal ballots were rejected and that they will challenge the results in a few seats in court. Do you see this as a challenge going forward?

Whether it is the RJD or any other party, they have all the right to criticise the Commission, the modalities, the local officials. But our CEO tried his level best and succeeded in explaining... There is a very well laid out procedure in the Constitution which states that you can challenge any election in high court... and if and when any election is challenged, we try and respond and present our own side to the courts.

All I can say is that, lately, which elec-



WHY
SUNIL ARORA

Since taking charge, Sunil Arora has supervised the 2019 general elections and the Bihar polls, the country's first election in a pandemic. The Rajasthan-cadre officer also served as secretary to GoI in two ministries before joining EC

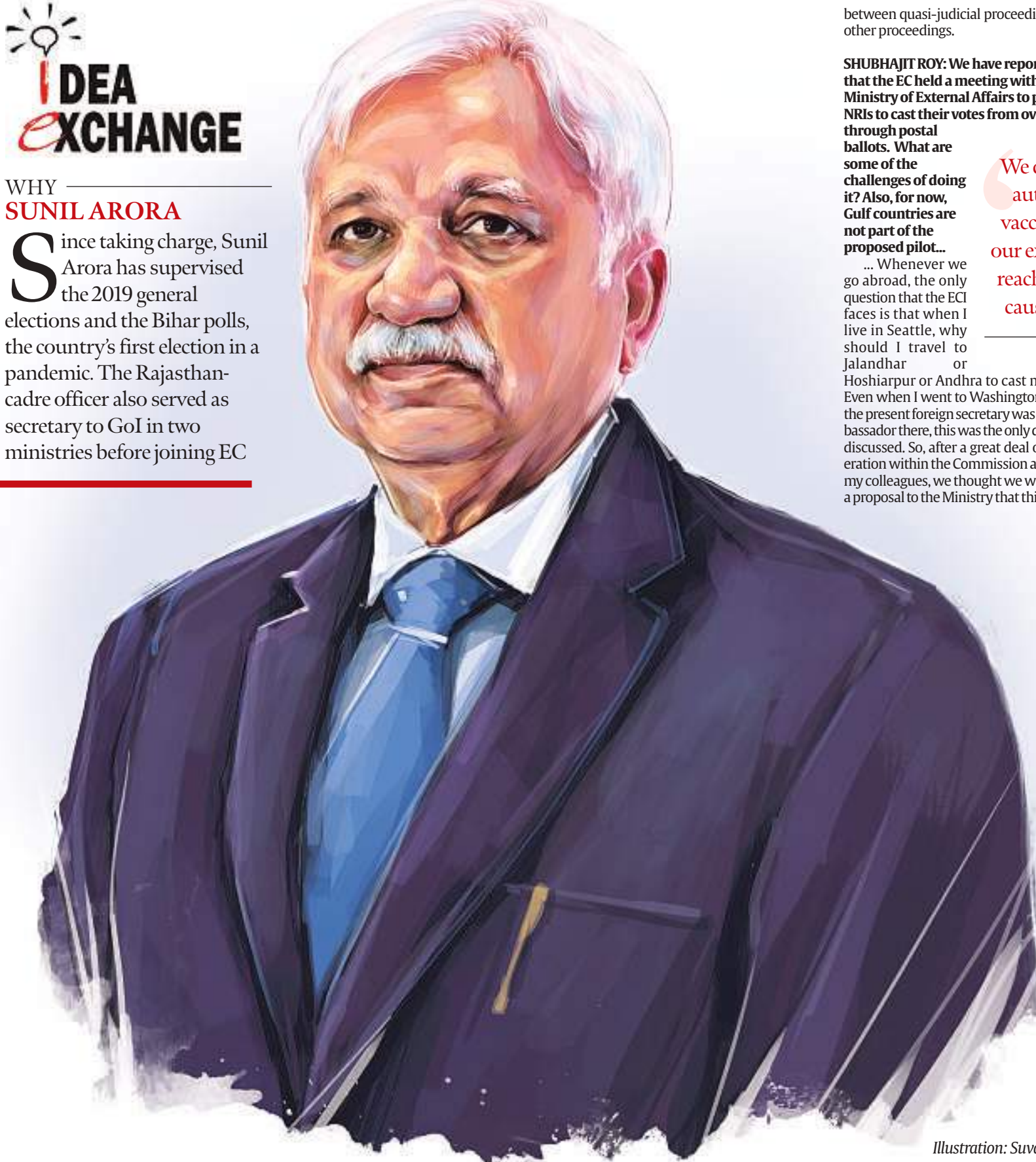


Illustration: Suvajit Dey

tion has not been challenged? In the run-up to the Lok Sabha elections, we met representatives of political parties 123 times. We met the delegations from the BJP 20 times, Congress delegations 28 times... Requests from political parties are most important. There have been challenges, there has been criticism, and there will be criticism in the coming elections also, and we respond to it as best as possible. I can assure that the Commission shall keep trying to ensure free, fair, robust, ethical, and now, safe elections. Still, if someone goes to court, we will respond to it. Our record of convincing the Supreme Court and high courts is good.

SANTANU CHOWDHURY: West Bengal has a history of political violence during polls. What is the EC doing to prevent it in the coming elections?

So far, one major delegation has come to us. They had two-three demands. They wanted (early deployment of) security forces and the (early enforcement of) Model Code of Conduct, (because they believed) the local forces are compromised, and that the local staff is also compromised. Now, these are our instruments, we can't doubt all the instruments. There can be an odd black sheep here or there in many states, in some more than others. We would not like to change any officer for the sake of it. However, during the Lok Sabha elections, we changed one chief secretary, one additional DG, five police commissioners, and DG (Intelligence) of one state. In the case of DG (Intelligence), the matter was challenged in the high court. It was said that since the DG (Intelligence) is not DGP, and doesn't supervise the elections on a day-to-day basis, the Commission has no right to make the change. We were able to convince the court that we have inputs to show that the conduct of the person was

not fair. Eventually, the court did not accept the petition, and the person was changed.

We have also started appointing special observers, over and above the normal observers, especially on the law and order and expenditure side. In Bihar, we put two special observers for expenditure... This time also we will be well-prepared, so that when required we come down on these elements swiftly and ruthlessly.

LEENA MISRA: Before the Rajya Sabha elections in 2017 and 2019, we saw a lot of MLAs quitting their parties, and within six months they got re-elected on another party's ticket. Can the EC put a stop to this?

The Supreme Court has laid down very clear norms on defection. But when it comes to quitting a party and re-joining another party, there is no legal or constitutional mechanism to stop it. It is more for parties to take a call on such matters. Once they have taken a call, the EC will be happy to assist them, if such assistance is sought.

(Barring MLAs from contesting immediately on another party's ticket) is only possible if there are widespread electoral reforms, and if we are able to forge a consensus with political parties. Again, it is not for us to move such a thing. But yes, as a citizen I think this (defection) should be avoided and parties must take the lead.

P VAIDYANATHAN IYER: An issue which came up during your tenure was the objections within the Commission to certain decisions taken by the EC. The Commission decided to not make these public. But, when there is no consensus, in the larger interest of transparency, doesn't it make sense for the EC to put out in public domain what each member says on issues?

This controversy was a non-starter... I would like to give you one example, because I don't want to get into individual issues. The UPSC (Union Public Service Commission) is a multi-member commission. We have three people, they have

about 8-10 people. When this controversy was going on, an ex-UPSC chairman met me in some other context, and said that it is very strange because hundreds of cases come to the UPSC for disciplinary proceedings against government officials, seeking their view. Now, one or two members say no, the punishment imposed by X ministry should be enhanced, some say it should be dropped, and the rest say it should be kept as it is. The normal procedure then, to the best of my knowledge, is that there is a meeting convened by the chairman and a consensus is built, and when the letter goes out, it only mentions the decision. It doesn't mention who said what. (Former election commissioner Ashok Lavasa had objected to the clean chit given to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and former BJP president Amit Shah on charges of violating the Model Code of Conduct during the 2019 Lok Sabha election campaign).

Throughout the controversy, I remained silent... It doesn't mean weakness or a desire to conceal something... In such less time, in a day or two, a view has to be taken, it is an administrative thing, it is not a quasi-judicial matter. I don't think it should have been put on the website and I don't think it needs to be shared.

P VAIDYANATHAN IYER: But recording of dissent, like in this case of Mr Lavasa, does it not strengthen the EC eventually?

My colleague has already joined the ADB (Asian Development Bank). I would not like to comment on individual issues. He wanted to say what he wanted to say, he said it. I gave only one statement on the record. I said that yes, commissioners are not expected to be clones or templates of each other and they are not. But having said that, we have to make a distinction

between quasi-judicial proceedings and other proceedings.

SHUBHAJIT ROY: We have reported that the EC held a meeting with the Ministry of External Affairs to permit NRIs to cast their votes from overseas through postal ballots. What are some of the challenges of doing it? Also, for now, Gulf countries are not part of the proposed pilot...

Whenever we go abroad, the only question that the ECI faces is that when I live in Seattle, why should I travel to Jalandhar or Hoshiarpur or Andhra to cast my vote. Even when I went to Washington, when the present foreign secretary was the ambassador there, this was the only question discussed. So, after a great deal of deliberation within the Commission and with my colleagues, we thought we will move a proposal to the Ministry that this can be

We do not have any legal authority (to assist in vaccine drive). But given our experience, if someone reaches out for a national cause, we will take a call

forms broke some clause... The organisations all got together and voluntarily submitted a code of ethics which they would observe during the elections, and they have been observing it. We are concerned, but we are very clear that we would probably want a system, like in Germany or the UK... They have a very sound legislative framework to deal with the subject. We would also not be averse to having a sound legislative framework in India because the complications in India are far too many.

KRISHN KAUSHIK:

In 2018, except for the BJP, all major parties had asked for a limit on party expenditure during elections. How big of a concern is the influence of big money on elections? Also, what are your views on electoral bonds?

We have already given our views on electoral bonds in the Supreme Court and we stand by that. The Commission as a body has told the Supreme Court that it (electoral bonds)... should be less opaque and more transparent.

On the issue of expenditure, we had some specific requirements for the pandemic. So, we enhanced the limits because of the pandemic. We have appointed a committee under Harish Kumar (former IRS officer and DG-Investigation) to look into various aspects of electoral funding. That committee has already met twice. The Commission also had one interaction with the committee and we had given them a term of reference... I'm sure when their report comes, we will ensure that the recommendations are implemented.

HARIKISHAN SHARMA: Do you think it is possible to hold simultaneous elections in post-Covid times?

The Article 83 (2) of the Constitution provides that the House of the people unless sooner dissolved shall continue for five years from the date appointed for the first meeting. And, no longer an expression of a set period of five years shall operate as a dissolution of the House. Similar provisions are there for state Assemblies. This kind of disjointedness between the life of the people's House and state Assemblies started happening sometime in early 1970s due to various reasons. And now it has become a norm. For example, we have just finished Bihar elections. And Lok Sabha elections in normal course will happen in 2024. So, the system has to align the life of Lok Sabha with the life of state Assemblies. For that, across the board amendments would be required in the provisions of Articles 83, 85, 172 and 56 of the Constitution. Now that is the job of the legislature. What the Prime Minister said (about simultaneous polls) is a very desirable goal... The Law Commission has also supported it. Big amendments can take place only on the floor of Parliament.

RITIKA CHOPRA: Given the EC's experience in conducting large-scale exercises, has the government reached out to the Commission for any kind of assistance in vaccinating the population against Covid-19?

It is a devastating pandemic for the entire world. And India is no exception. So the pandemic requires exceptional and extraordinary measures... Currently, we do not have any legal authority (to assist in the administration of the vaccine). To conduct elections, we are empowered under Article 324. But having said that, given the experience and expertise we have, if someone reaches out to us for a national cause, we will take a call.

RITIKA CHOPRA: You have spent a considerable time in the Commission now. Are there any reforms that you think are required in the EC?

Many times, we have seen that our officers, especially the Chief Electoral Officers, become vulnerable because of their honest and independent conduct during an election. Immediately after elections, such officers are victimised or harassed. There have been instances in which the Commission has authorised me to take up the matter with the chief minister concerned. At the same time, many officers who we had to change (during an election) because of their biased or partial conduct get rewarded when the same party returns to power... We would like to go to the government and say that at least for one year after a state or Central election is over, no (election) officer should be penalised under different alibis, only because he or she was very objective and implemented the law of the land faithfully.

LIZ MATHEW: Are you considering the Bengal Opposition's demand of more deployment of Central Police Forces (CPF) in the state for the elections? The state government seems opposed to the move...

It's a challenging election. It's a hypothetical assumption that the government will oppose it (deployment of forces). There have been a series of meetings with the Maha about how much force is required. This is always the case for every election. We will cross the bridge when we come to it. We have not heard from the state government yet.

KRISHN KAUSHIK: How much of a concern for the EC is the influence of social media on elections?

In the run-up to the Lok Sabha election, the Commission asked officers to deal with social media issues. So, they spoke to all the platforms and their apex organisation associations. There were a series of talks. Then, the Commission also held one or two meetings. We told them very clearly that we would take a very adverse view, especially if any of the plat-

Poll officers are often harassed for their honest conduct during elections... while biased officers come back... Govt must ensure officers are not penalised

TOP OF THE WORLD



Law enforcement agencies at the scene of the shooting. AP

UNITED STATES

Shooting at bowling alley leaves 3 dead

Rockford: A gunman opened fire inside an Illinois bowling alley, killing three people and injuring three others in what authorities believe was a random attack. A 37-year-old male suspect was in custody after the shooting at Don Carter Lanes Saturday night, Rockford police said in a social media post. Two of those who were shot were teenagers, police Chief Dan O'Shea said during a news conference. Mayor Tom McNamara released a statement saying he was "angered and saddened" about the shooting. AP

CHINA

At least 7 killed in knife attack in Kaiyuan city

Beijing: At least seven people were killed and another seven were injured in a knife attack in northeastern China, state media reported on Sunday. The attack in the city of Kaiyuan in Liaoning province was carried out outside a sauna and bathhouse. The suspect, identified by the media by his surname Yang, was arrested while the motive for the attack remains unknown. Chinese law restricts the sale and possession of firearms, and mass attacks are generally carried out with knives or homemade explosives. Perpetrators of similar attacks in the past have been described as mentally ill or bearing grudges against society. AP

CAMEROON

Bus crash leaves 37 dead; 18 more seriously injured

Yaounde: More than 37 people are dead and 18 others seriously injured after a bus crash in Cameroon's western village of Nemale, officials said. A 70-seater bus was on its way to the capital, Yaounde, from the western town of Fouban when it crashed into a truck while trying to avoid a crowd of people on the road around 2 am Sunday, said Absalom Monono Woloo, a senior government official in the area. The death toll will likely rise as rescue workers dig through the wreckage, he said. AP

SHOT IN THE ARM FOR EUROPE

Rare respite, with many struggling with their worst outbreaks since the start of the pandemic



FRANCE: Mauricette, 78, is applauded after receiving the first dose of the vaccine at the Rene-Muret hospital on the outskirts of Paris. Reuters



AUSTRIA: A health care worker reacts after receiving the vaccine at the Hospital Favoriten in Vienna. Reuters



FINLAND: Nurse Andrea Nummi receives the vaccine at the Helsinki University Hospital in Helsinki. Reuters



ITALY: Nurse Elena Betti after receiving the vaccine at the Careggi hospital in Florence. Reuters

450 million people, 27 nations: EU's vaccine campaign takes off

THE NEW YORK TIMES
BERLIN, DECEMBER 27

FROM NURSING homes in France to hospitals in Poland, older Europeans and the workers who care for them rolled up their sleeves on Sunday to receive coronavirus vaccine shots in a campaign to inoculate more than 450 million people across the European Union.

The inoculations offered a rare respite as the continent struggles with one of its most precarious moments since the pandemic began.

Despite national lockdowns, restrictions on movement, shuttering of restaurants and cancellations of Christmas gatherings, the virus has stalked Europe into the dark winter months. The spread of a more contagious variant of the virus in Britain has raised such alarm the much that continental Europe rushed to close its borders to travelers coming from the country.

"Today, we start turning the page on a difficult year," Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission president tweeted. "The #COVID19 vaccine has been delivered to all EU countries."

In Germany, a nursing home jumped the gun on Sunday's planned rollout of the vaccination campaign across the European Union, inoculating a 101-year-old woman and dozens of other residents and staff members on Saturday, hours after the doses arrived. People were also vaccinated on Saturday in Hungary and Slovakia.

Early Sunday, dozens of minivans carrying coolers filled with dry ice to keep the doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine from rising above minus 70 degrees Celsius fanned out to nursing homes across the German capi-

tal as part of the wave of immunizations. The rollout comes as Europe's largest nation is confronting its deadliest period since the start of the pandemic.

More than 350,000 people in the 27 nations that make up the European Union have died from Covid-19 since the bloc's first fatality was recorded in France on February 15. Member states made a show of solidarity by waiting for the bloc's regulatory board to approve the vaccine before beginning coordinated national campaigns. But how those will play out in individual countries is likely to be disparate.

Sindh govt to not release accused in Daniel Pearl murder case

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
ISLAMABAD, DECEMBER 27

PAKISTAN'S SINDH province government has decided not to release British-born al-Qaeda leader Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh and his three aides, accused of kidnapping and murdering US journalist Daniel Pearl, in view of a Supreme Court order, according to a media report.

In a surprise move, a two-judge bench of the Sindh High Court on Thursday directed security agencies not to keep Sheikh and other accused under "any sort of detention" and declared all notifications of the Sindh government related to



Daniel Pearl

their detention "null and void". The court observed that the four men's detention was "illegal".

The court, however, had clarified that the accused should not be released if there is a Supreme Court restraining order regarding their detention.

Citing its sources, the Express Tribune newspaper said the provincial government will not release these men in view of the Supreme Court's September 28 order. A three-judge apex court

bench which is hearing the appeal by the Sindh government and the family of the slain journalist against the acquittal of Sheikh by the Sindh High Court in April, on September 28 noted that till the next date of hearing, the accused shall not be released.

A senior government official said the apex court order has not been specifically recalled. "The SHC in its December 24 order also clarified that accused should not be released if there is a Supreme Court restraining order regarding their detention," he added.

On Friday, the US expressed "deep concern" over the order to release Sheikh and his aides and said it will continue to monitor any developments in the case.

China lowers age of criminal liability to 12

Beijing: China has lowered the age of criminal responsibility for some serious crimes from 14 to 12, as it looks to combat juvenile crime committed by children.

Under an amended law, children aged 12 to 14 will be held criminally liable for "intentional homicide or intentional injury that leads to death or causes others severe disabilities by extremely cruel means". The amendment, passed on Saturday by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, will take effect on March 1.

Currently, the age of criminal liability in China is 16, with those between 14 and 16 held criminally responsible for serious crimes such as rape and robbery. AP

Chinese delegation arrives in Nepal amid political crisis

YUBARAJ GHIMIRE
KATHMANDU, DECEMBER 27

A HIGH-LEVEL Chinese delegation led by a vice minister of the Chinese Communist Party arrived in Kathmandu on Sunday to "take stock" of Nepal's political situation after the dissolution of Parliament and subsequent split in the ruling Nepal Communist Party, according to a media report.

Days after the dissolution of Nepal's Parliament and subsequent split in the ruling Nepal Communist Party (NCP), a high-level Chinese delegation, led by Guo Yezhou, Vice Minister of the International Department of the Communist Party of China, arrived in Kathmandu on Sunday.

The delegation -- all covered in PPE -- arrived by an Air China flight and headed straight to the Chinese Embassy in Bhatbhateni.

Guo was set to meet President Bidhya Devi Bhandari and Prime Minister KP Oli separately. The Prime Minister's Office said a meeting has been scheduled for Monday. The delegation will also meet the leaders of the anti-Oli camp, including former Prime Ministers Madhav Kumar Nepal and Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda'.

Though both China and Nepal are tight-lipped about the visit, Guo -- considered an old



Vice Minister of International Department Guo Yezhou is leading the delegation

hand on Nepal -- is believed to have arrived with the mission to unite the two warring factions of the NCP. Speculations are rife that they would persuade both factions to unite, or make some coalition arrangement.

The delegation is set to stay in Kathmandu for three days -- despite current Chinese policy of avoiding long stays in Nepal due to the Covid-19 situation in the Himalayan country.

A senior NCP leader part of the Prachanda-Nepal camp said China is not too happy with Oli as he refused to heed to their earlier suggestion to quit one post -- either that of Prime Minister or of party chairman -- if that would prevent a split.

A high-placed source in the Oli camp said Chinese delegation appears to be in contact with some "unofficial interlocutors", asking them to stop the bickering of the two factions.

EXPLAINED Beijing's role in Kathmandu's affairs

CHINA'S POLITICAL profile in Nepal has been on the rise in the recent years with billions of dollars of investments under Beijing's multi-billion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including the building of the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network.

Guo Yezhou's visit attaches all the more significance as he is believed to have played a key role to bring the NCP-Unified Marxist Leninist, led by Oli, and the NCP (Maosists) led by Prachanda together to form the unified NCP.

The high-level visit comes in wake of Chinese Ambassador Hou Yanqi's failure to unify the warring factions of the NCP, which had virtually vowed to tread the Xi Jinping path in Nepal.

Meanwhile, police arrested about a dozen protestors who waved placards, objecting to "encroachment of Nepali territory" by China.

Post-Brexit UK can do finance services in a different way, says Sunak

REUTERS
LONDON, DECEMBER 27

BREXIT OFFERS Britain a chance to do things differently (in financial services, finance minister Rishi Sunak said on Sunday, but it will co-operate with the European Union on an approach to the sector despite little detail on the topic in its trade deal.

From January 1, British-based financial services groups lose automatic access to the EU's single market, and both sides have said new market access must be negotiated outside the trade agreement in specific equivalence deals.

"Now that we've left the European Union, we can do things a bit differently (in financial services)," Sunak said.

Britain and the EU clinched a trade deal on Thursday, but Prime Minister Boris Johnson has admitted it is an accord which does not have as much as he would have liked about the financial services sector and regulatory equivalence.

The two sides will aim to agree a memorandum of understanding on regulatory cooperation in financial services by March 2021, and Sunak said that such language should provide reassurance. "This deal also provides reassurance because there's a stable regulatory co-operative framework mentioned in the deal," he said.



Rohingya refugees board a ship as they are ferried to Bhasan Char from Chittagong on December 4. Reuters

Bangla set to move second batch of Rohingya to island

REUTERS
DHAKA, DECEMBER 27

BANGLADESH IS set to move a second batch of Rohingya refugees from neighbouring Myanmar to the remote island of Bhasan Char in the Bay of Bengal this month, officials said on Sunday, despite calls by rights groups not to carry out further relocations.

Around 1,000 Rohingya refugees, members of a Muslim minority who have fled Myanmar, will be moved to the island in the next few days after Bangladesh relocated more than 1,600 early this month, two officials with the direct knowledge of the matter said.

"They will be moved to

Chittagong first and then to Bhasan Char, depending on the high tide," an official said. The officials declined to be named as the issue had not been made public.

Mohammed Shamsud Douza, the deputy Bangladesh government official in charge of refugees, said the relocation was voluntary. "They will not be sent against their will."

Bangladesh says it is transferring only people who are willing to go and the move will ease chronic overcrowding in camps that are home to more than 1 million Rohingya.

But refugees and humanitarian workers say some Rohingya have been coerced into going to the island, which emerged from the sea 20 years ago.

In Afghanistan's village of widows, the opium trade has taken a deadly toll

DAVID ZUCCHINO & NAJIM RAHIM
MIR ALI, AFGHANISTAN,
DECEMBER 27

ON THE barren high plains of western Afghanistan, along a roadway south of Herat city, is a collection of sturdy earthen huts known as Qala-e-Biwaha, or "village of widows."

Most of the village's men have disappeared -- killed while trying to smuggle opium across the desolate frontier into neighboring Iran. The widows have been left to fend for themselves and their children, some of whom have also died while transporting drugs over the border from Herat Province's rugged Adraskan district.

The area is so destitute that men seeking work here have

two choices, said Mohammad Ali Faqiryar, the district governor: "They can smuggle drugs or join the Taliban."

Those who agree to smuggle opium, heroin and methamphetamine into Iran can earn \$300 or more per trip, a fortune for such a poor village. But they risk arrest, prosecution and execution in Iran's Islamic courts -- or being shot and killed by Iranian border guards.

As of 2018, Afghanistan was the world's largest producer of opium, and poppy is the country's most lucrative cash crop. The profits flow the Taliban's financial networks.

Afghan officials seem powerless to stop the lucrative trade; many have grown wealthy through their complicity in facilitating the trafficking. What results is an enduring cycle of

opium cultivation, processing and trafficking that often leaves Afghanistan's most vulnerable to bear the dire consequences of the illicit trade.

Mr. Faqiryar said he has tried and failed to get government money for programs to help people raise livestock and grow wheat, rice and beans in the arid, unforgiving landscape.

"We get no help from the central government -- they don't care about the people, even if they're starving," he said.

The widows survive on food bought with their earnings from the wool-processing trade, and on donations from relatives and international aid groups. Some children attend a madrasa, or Islamic school, run by a mullah at a tiny mosque in a nearby settlement. The nearest population center is Herat city, the provin-



As of 2018, Afghanistan was the world's largest producer of opium and poppy is its most lucrative cash crop. Reuters file

cial capital, 45 miles north.

"For a long time, life was very good and my three sons earned a lot of money carrying opium," said Nek Bibi, a widow who said she was about 50 years old. She

spoke outside her dwelling, fashioned from dried packed earth, as a grandchild clung to her robes. "Then they were all killed."

Her oldest son, Ghulam Rasul, 20, was arrested several years ago

and later hanged in Iran after he was convicted of smuggling opium, she said. Three years ago, she said, two more sons -- Abdul Ghafoor, 15, and Abdel Zarif, 14 -- were shot dead by Iranian border guards as they tried to transport opium from Afghanistan.

Ms. Bibi said Iran never returned her sons' bodies, a complaint shared by other women in the village. "I don't know if they were buried in Iran or their bodies were just thrown in the desert," she said.

These days, the village is whipped by frigid winds that drown out the bleating of sheep in rough pens next to the widows' huts, which seem to rise up from the dun-colored soil to mimic the shape and texture of the surrounding hills. There is no electricity or running water, and no heat except from the dry

brush that families buy or collect to burn. Some widows, like Ms. Bibi, light a single bulb at night with power generated during the day by tiny solar panels.

Conditions were so severe this fall that many women fled the village for the homes of relatives or for displaced-person camps run by aid organizations. Until recently, the village was home to 80 widows and their families, said Mohammad Zaman Shakib, the district council's development director. Today, there are just 30.

The paucity of men in the village has not liberated the women from the harsh confines of Afghanistan's patriarchal culture. The area around Qala-e-Biwaha is home to several white-bearded men, who interrupted some of the widows and talked over others as they spoke about their hardships.

For the widows' village and other settlements in Herat Province, the war is never far away. The Taliban regularly attack government outposts nearby. Every day, police patrols clear the highway to Herat city of roadside bombs planted by militants at night, Mr. Faqiryar said.

Recently, he said, a small border outpost was shut down by the government after it was attacked and damaged -- not by the Taliban, but by drug traffickers aligned with the militants to clear the way for trafficking.

So the widows endure, most of them earning a pittance in the wool-processing trade, which leaves their hands calloused and discolored. As they struggle to raise their children, many fear their sons will follow their dead fathers into the drug trafficking business. NYT

14 ECONOMY

RECAPITALISATION OF PUNJAB & SIND BANK

Zero coupon bonds: Innovative govt tool to fund PSBs, keep deficit in check

SUNNY VERMA & SANDEEP SINGH
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

THE GOVERNMENT has used financial innovation to recapitalise Punjab & Sind Bank by issuing the lender Rs 5,500-crore worth of non-interest bearing bonds valued at par. The funds raised through issuance of these instruments, which are a variation of the recapitalisation bonds issued earlier to public sector banks, are being deployed to capitalise the state-run bank.

Though these will earn no interest for the subscriber, market participants term it both a 'financial illusion' and 'great innovation' by the government where it is using Rs 100 to create an impact of Rs 200 in the economy.

Punjab & Sind Bank MD and CEO S Krishnan said these are special types of zero coupon bonds issued by the government after proper due diligence and these are issued at par.

Since these bonds are not tradable, the lender has kept them in the HTM bucket, not requiring it to book any mark-to-market gains or losses from these bonds.

Financial market participants said the government seems to have found an innovative way to capitalise banks, which does not affect the fiscal deficit while at the same time provides much

'USING ₹100 TO CREATE IMPACT OF ₹200'

■ Though these zero coupon bonds issued by the government will earn no interest for the subscriber, market participants term it both a 'financial illusion' and 'great innovation' by the government where it is using ₹100 to create an impact of ₹200 in the economy

■ Only specified banks can invest in these bonds, which are not tradable, not transferable and limited only to a specific bank, said Punjab & Sind Bank MD & CEO S Krishnan, adding that the bonds — worth ₹5,500 crore — have been issued after proper due diligence and are issued at par

needed equity capital to the banks. But they also caution this may not be a permanent solution for the banking sector's problems.

What kind of bonds are these?

Unlike the previous tranches of recapitalisation bonds which carried interest and were sold to different banks, these "non-interest bearing, non-transferable special GOI securities" have a maturity of 10-15 years and issued specifically to Punjab & Sind Bank.

"These recapitalisation bonds are special types of bonds issued by the Central government specifically to a particular institution. Only those banks, whose name is specified, can invest in them, nobody else. It is not tradable, it is not transfer-

able. It is limited only to a specific bank, and it is for a specified period ... it is held at the held-to-maturity (HTM) category of the bank as per the RBI guidelines," the official said. The Finance Ministry notified these bonds in the government gazette on December 11.

How do they differ from zero coupon bonds issued by private firms?

Zero coupon bonds by private companies are normally issued at discount, but since these special bonds are not tradable these can be issued at par.

"There is a difference between zero coupon bonds issued by other corporates and these. You are absolutely right, normally zero coupon bonds are issued at a discount, which are tradable also. Here, there is no question of trading and these are special types of bonds, which the government issues specifically to a specified person and it's issued at par," Krishnan said.

While praising the govern-

ment's move to inject equity in banks, two top finance industry executives, who wished not to be named, said that this move buys times but doesn't solve the problem permanently.

"It is a great innovation by the government where it is using Rs 100 to create an impact of Rs 200 in the economy. It is issuing a zero coupon bond aggregating to Rs 5,500 crore at par to Punjab & Sind Bank that will mature in tranches between 2030 to 2035. The market value of these bonds would be around Rs 2,750 crore. Punjab & Sind Bank, by investing in these bonds from held-to-maturity category, won't have to book mark-to-market loss and will value the bonds at cost, i.e. Rs 5,500 crore. The government will infuse Rs 5,500 crore into equity capital of Punjab & Sind Bank," one of the financial sector executives said.

By doing so, the capital adequacy of Punjab & Sind Bank goes up by Rs 5,500 crore (instead of Rs 2,750 crore).

"While this is a financial illusion, finally the government has realised that it is better to do what Western countries are doing rather than what their academicians are recommending us. One must remember that financial illusion buys you time to put your house in order. It doesn't solve the problem permanently but gives you more time to solve it," the executive added.

EXPLAINED

BRIEFLY

FY20: Over 4.15 crore ITRs filed till Dec 26

New Delhi: Over 4.15 crore taxpayers have filed income tax returns (ITR) for assessment year 2020-21 (FY20) till December 26, the Income Tax Department said. This includes over 2.34 crore taxpayers filing ITR-1, over 89.89 lakh filing ITR-4, over 49.72 lakh ITR-3 and over 30.36 lakh filing ITR-2.

Extension to validity of vehicle documents

New Delhi: The Union Transport Ministry on Sunday extended the validity of motor vehicle documents like driving licence (DL), registration certificate (RC) and permits till March 31, 2021, in view of the ongoing pandemic.

Budget: CII suggestions on import tariffs

New Delhi: Industry body CII has suggested a graded road map towards competitive import tariffs over three years, with lowest or nil slab between zero to 2.5 per cent for raw materials, highest of 5 to 7.5 per cent for finished goods and 2.5 to 5 per cent for intermediates, as part of its pre-Budget recommendations to the government.

CCI to release telecom sector study shortly

New Delhi: The Competition Commission of India (CCI) will shortly release its study on the telecom sector and one of the key trends that has emerged is the vertical integration between telcos and digital solution providers, including OTTs and e-commerce platforms.

'Crude steel output rises 3.5% in Nov'

New Delhi: India registered a growth of 3.5 per cent in crude steel production at 9.245 million tonne (MT) in November, according to World Steel Association. PTI

442 infra projects show cost overruns of ₹4.34 lakh crore

As many as 442 infrastructure projects have been hit by cost overruns of over ₹4.34 lakh crore, according to the MoSPI report for November

536 Number of projects that reported time escalation, of which

120 delayed by one to 12 months	134 delayed by 13 to 24 months	162 delayed by 25 to 60 months	120 delayed by 61 months and above
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Why is it important: As per the MoSPI report, in addition to the factors that regularly delay work on infra projects, 'state-wise lockdown due to Covid-19' was cited as a reason for delay in their implementation

₹21,21,383.82 CR TOTAL ORIGINAL COST OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 1,671 PROJECTS

1,671 Total projects worth ₹150 crore and above monitored by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI)

942 Projects whose commissioning nor tentative gestation period has been reported

₹4,34,573.70 crore: Overall cost overruns, i.e. 20.49% of original cost

₹11,93,997.81 crore: Expenditure incurred on all projects till November 2020, 46.71% of anticipated cost

Under-reporting: Agencies are not reporting revised cost estimates and commissioning schedules for many projects, which suggests that time and cost overrun figures are under-reported

₹25,55,957.52 CR ANTICIPATED COST OF IMPLEMENTATION OF ALL PROJECTS

Reasons for time overruns, as reported by implementing agencies:

- Delays in land acquisition, forest clearance and supply of equipment
- Fund constraints
- Geological surprises
- Geo-mining conditions
- Slow progress in civil works
- Shortage of labour
- Inadequate mobilisation by contractor
- ROU/ROW (right of use/right of way) problems

44.15 months: Average time overrun of all infrastructure projects examined by the Ministry, on account of delays in execution and other constraints

Source: MoSPI/PTI

Paying 1% GST in cash: 'No impact on small businesses'

ENS ECONOMIC BUREAU
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

THE NEW rule requiring businesses to pay at least 1 per cent of their GST liability in cash will not impact small businesses and dealers as only entities with annual turnover of Rs 6 crore and above are required to follow this rule, sources in the Finance Ministry said.

After unearthing rampant use of fake invoices to evade goods and services tax (GST), the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) had last week amended rules to make it mandatory for businesses with

'ONLY APPLICABLE TO 45K TAXPAYERS'

■ The new rule requiring businesses with monthly turnover of over ₹50 lakh to pay at least 1% of their goods and services tax liability in cash applies only to about 45,000 taxpayers of the GST taxpayer base of 1.2 crore, sources said

monthly turnover of over Rs 50 lakh to pay at least 1 per cent of

their GST liability in cash.

This new rule applies only to about 45,000 taxpayers of the GST taxpayer base of 1.2 crore and genuine dealers and businesses would not be impacted, sources said, adding that it has been brought to check use of fake invoices to claim credit for tax paid on non-existent or highly inflated input cost.

The new rule restricts the use of input tax credit (ITC) for discharging GST liability to 99 per cent, effective January 1, 2021. It would apply only to risky or suspicious dealers who use a lot of fake credit and make no cash tax payment, they said.

Dummy companies which

generate fake ITC or are used to be a layer in multi-layer fake credit flow pay no tax in cash.

"This provision is a very smart rule against fraudsters and would not affect any genuine business entities or 'Ease of Doing Business' in any manner," an official said, adding that all small businesses, including MSMEs (micro, small and medium enterprises) and composition dealers, have been excluded from the rule.

The rule is applicable to registered persons whose value of taxable supply, other than exempt supply and export, in a month exceeds Rs 50 lakh, or Rs 6 crore annually, sources said.

INTERVIEW WITH MD & CEO, AXIS MUTUAL FUND

'We believe equities remain the best asset class for long-term wealth creation'



Chandresh Kumar Nigam

AXISMUTUAL Fund managing director and CEO CHANDRESH KUMAR NIGAM spoke to GEORGE MATHEW on the stock markets, foreign inflows and investor strategy. Edited excerpts:

Why are stock markets hitting new peaks at a time when the GDP is in contraction mode? Is the rally for real?

Stock markets are forward looking. They work on anticipation of the current and future economic outlook. The Covid impact on the economy was predicted in March and hence the markets corrected. As we stand today, the recovery theme has played out well as markets saw renewed interest for domestic equities from all market participants, including FPIs and portfolio investors. Earnings have backed investor expectations and we believe markets are poised to remain positive sans Covid. While we believe vaccines are on anvil and governments are chalking out large scale inoculation drives, the risk of a second wave in India persists.

Why are foreign investors pumping money (over Rs 1,60,000 crore in 2020) into Indian markets?

India has been a standout economy in the global context. Especially in the emerging market world, strong political stability and a robust recovery cycle has been a beacon for international investors. In the post-Covid world, where the world is awash with central bank liquidity, India has been getting a disproportionate share. As an opportunity, India continues to remain an attractive destination for global growth investors since they are increasingly comfortable with the structure of the economy, policy and regulatory framework. The government over the last five years has actively worked to make India more business friendly and this is now paying dividends.

Is the market, which is at a record high, safe for retail investors?

From a grim March to a euphoric November, equity markets have been on a rollercoaster ride — a reminder that equities are a volatile yet rewarding asset class. Retail investors have increasingly participated in equity markets through the mutual fund route and through direct stock investing as various investor awareness programmes by market participants have borne fruit over the years. The value of the Sensex and the Nifty is just a number. We have seen this time and time again. As India grows, financial markets will rise commensurately to reflect this growth.

We have many campaigns

around why investing regularly is important. Timing the market rarely works and hence investing is a continuous process which when followed diligently has rewarded investors over the long term regardless of when they entered the market. SIP flows have been a testament to this understanding. For the better half of three years now, we have seen unwavering SIP flows.

One must remember that markets have been volatile during this phase. Investors who stick with their investment commitments have reaped the rewards of staying patient. We believe equities remain the best asset class for long-term wealth creation and should form some part of every investor's portfolio.

MF equity schemes saw outflows of over Rs 12,000 crore in November. Why?

We must appreciate that domestic retail investors as well as large investors have been diligently investing large sums into equity markets over the last few years. The net negative numbers are not unwarranted given the current market conditions. It is not uncommon for equity investors to book profits especially after the roaring rally we have seen in the last nine months. I would not read too much into this fact. SIP flows continue to remain robust.

Short-term profit booking must not be construed as a negative as this is part and parcel of investor psychology.

What's your assessment on the debt market? Have interest rates bottomed out?

Domestic bond yields have followed the operative rate downwards as the RBI and the government have emphasised of bringing rates lower through policy action and accommodative monetary policy in an attempt to spur growth. While the money market curve and the 3/5-year space have broadly followed suit, longer dated papers especially corporate bonds have remained somewhat anchored. The recent RBI commentary is a clear indication that the RBI intends to keep rates range bound. Unless we see a huge fis-

cal consolidation or downward growth or inflation shock, rate cuts look unlikely.

For 2021, we believe investors will be best suited to go up the duration curve which would serve investor needs of a higher risk reward. We anticipate the RBI will maintain rates at current levels over the course of the next year at minimum, post which we believe a gradual rising rate environment will ensue on the back of a recovery in the economy.

What's your assessment on the Covid-hit economy? How will be the next three or four quarters?

The economy was already seeing signs of stagnation and companies were reeling from flagging demand. The Covid lockdown made things worse as factories and businesses were shut. However, businesses have opened up in a staggered manner and a strong festive demand has been a much-needed relief especially for small and medium businesses. We are very optimistic of the recovery currently playing out and the next 3 or 4 quarters. With high-frequency data improving, we maintain our view that the economy will reach the pre-pandemic level of output by end-2020. We remain constructive on the growth trend and expect the recovery to gain strength from Q2 of FY21 onwards. Accommodative monetary policy stance is likely to support the recovery and structural reforms to lift medium-term growth prospects.

With Covid cases yet to subside, when do you see investment and capex going up?

Covid has been a great opportunity for many companies to re-tool and refocus on their business. Lower funding costs and a recovering economic cycle augurs well for growth prospects of well managed businesses with innovative and well-articulated business models. Currently, low interest rates have also dramatically improved profitability and project IRRs (internal rate of return), thus benefiting long-term investors and promoters.

Which are the sectors yet to come out of problems? When do you expect recovery?

High frequency indicators already point to a recovery across most sectors. As India works towards becoming the next manufacturing and services hub of the world, global opportunities for demand buoyed by government incentives are likely to usher a multi-year growth phase.

The recovery is already underway and we expect a recovery in the next few quarters.

PNB puts three stressed accounts up for sale

ENS ECONOMIC BUREAU
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 27

PUNJAB NATIONAL Bank (PNB) has put up for sale three stressed accounts, with total outstanding dues of nearly Rs 34.50 crore.

The accounts are Mangalam Oil Industries with outstanding dues of Rs 10.77 crore, Alliance Fibres Ltd (Rs 18.31 crore) and Birs Institute of Technology (Trust) (Rs 5.41 crore).

The process is being undertaken by the state-owned bank's Stressed Assets Targeted Resolution Action Division.

The accounts are Mangalam Oil Industries, Alliance Fibres Ltd and Birs Institute of Technology (Trust)

"We intend to place three accounts for sale to ARCs/NBFCs/other banks/FIs etc. on the terms and conditions stipulated in the bank's policy, in line with the regulatory guidelines," a PNB auction notice said.

Chinese regulators urge Ant Group to set 'rectification' plan swiftly

REUTERS
BEIJING, DECEMBER 27

CHINA'S FINANCIAL regulators urged fintech company Ant Group on Sunday to outline a concrete plan as soon as possible to meet regulatory demands and fully understand the seriousness of the "rectification" work it needs to perform.

The central bank, banking, securities and foreign exchange regulators urged Ant to rectify illegal financial activities, including in its credit, insurance and wealth management businesses,

and regulate its credit rating business to protect personal information, People's Bank of China (PBOC) Vice Governor Pan Gongsheng said a day after meeting with representatives of the fintech group.

Ant said in a statement it would establish a "rectification" working party and fully implement regulatory requirements.

The state-backed *Economic Daily* said in a commentary that Ant should serve the people's needs and economic development, taking effective corporate social responsibility. Chinese regulators last



Ant said it would establish a 'rectification' working party and fully implement regulatory requirements. Reuters file

month abruptly suspended Ant's planned \$37 billion initial public offering, which had been on track to be the world's largest, just two days before its shares were due to begin trading in Shanghai and Hong Kong.

On Thursday, authorities said they had launched an antitrust investigation into parent Alibaba Group and would summon Ant, the latest blow for billionaire Jack Ma's e-commerce and fintech empire.

Ma, the founder of both Alibaba and Ant Group, is one of China's richest and most prominent entrepreneurs.

The new demands from the PBOC, China Banking and Insurance

Regulatory Commission, China Securities Regulatory Commission and State Administration of Foreign Exchange also include that Ant be more transparent about its third-party payment transactions and not conduct unfair competition, and that its setup of financial holding companies comply with the law to ensure the capital adequacy, Pan said.

China's annual Central Economic Work Conference, a gathering of top leaders and policymakers to chart the econ-

omy's course in 2021, vowed this month to strengthen antimonopoly efforts and rein in "disorderly capital expansion."

Pan said Ant must step up its risk management and maintain the continuity of its services and normal operations of its business.

During the meeting, regulators pointed out Ant's issues including its poor corporate governance, defiance of regulatory demands, illegal regulatory arbitrage, the use of its market advantage to squeeze out competitors, and harming consumers' legal interests, he said.

MESSI GIVEN EXTENDED BREAK

Lionel Messi missed Barcelona's return to training on Monday after being granted permission by the club to stay in Argentina, and he will also be absent from Tuesday's La Liga match at home to Eibar. Barca said on Twitter that Messi, who is in the last year of his contract and is free to negotiate a move to rival clubs for free in 2021, would return to training after the Eibar game, meaning he will be back for their visit to Huesca on January 3.

REUTERS

BRIEFLY

Williamson's ton boosts NZ on Day 2

Mount Maunganui: Kane Williamson's tireless quest for runs continued Sunday as he batted New Zealand into a commanding position on the second day of the second cricket Test against Pakistan. Williamson made 129, his 23rd test hundred, and shared century partnerships with Ross Taylor and Henry Nicholls as New Zealand made 431 batting first after losing the toss. At stumps Pakistan was 30-1 after 20 overs with Abid Ali 19 not out and nightwatchman Mohammad Abbas 0. Shan Masood was out for 10 just before stumps, caught down the leg side by wicketkeeper B.J. Watling from the bowling of Kyle Jamieson.

BRIEF SCORES: Pakistan 30 for 1 (Abid 19*, Abbas 0*, Jamieson 1-5) trail New Zealand 431 (Williamson 129, Watling 73, Taylor 70, Nicholls 56, Afridi 4-109, Yasir 3-113) by 401 runs

S Africa fight back against Sri Lanka

Pretoria: Opener Dean Elgar fell five runs short of a century as South Africa climbed to 317 for four at the close of play on day two of the first Test against injury-hit Sri Lanka at Centurion Park on Sunday. Elgar looked set for his 13th test ton until he offered Sri Lanka seamer Dunsen Shanaka a sharp caught-and-bowled chance that was superbly taken. Faf du Plessis (55 not out) and Temba Bavuma (41 not out) will resume on the third morning after adding 97 runs, hoping to push South Africa past the visitors' first innings score of 396 after two free-scoring days that have produced 713 runs at a rollicking rate of 4.24 runs per over. That would suggest a batting paradise, but the wicket has given assistance to the bowlers, with both sides perhaps guilty of erring in line and length and not taking advantage of the pace and uneven bounce.

BRIEF SCORES: South Africa 317 for 4 (Elgar 95, Markram 68, du Plessis 55) trail Sri Lanka 396 (Chandimal 85, de Silva 79, Sipamla 4-76) by 79 runs.

City ease to 2-0 win over Newcastle

Manchester: Manchester City secured a routine 2-0 win over Newcastle thanks to goals from Ilkay Gundogan and Ferran Torres to climb to fifth place in the Premier League. Gundogan tucked home a cutback from Raheem Sterling to score in consecutive home games in the league and put City ahead in the 14th minute. Torres, a winger, was playing as the lone striker in the absence of Gabriel Jesus, who has contracted the coronavirus, and scored for the second time in the league this season to make it 2-0. He showed a striker's instinct to hold back as Federico Fernandez blocked a cross from the right and the ball arrived at the feet of Torres, who stroked in a finish from eight meters in the 55th. Bernardo Silva struck the post as City threatened more goals in the pouring rain at Etihad Stadium, despite again struggling to show the free-flowing football of previous years under Pep Guardiola.

AP

Stand-in stands tall

India captain Rahane's memorable hundred, leading from the front, puts visitors in charge as Aussie hopes flounder

SANDIP G
DECEMBER 27

A BRAVE and brilliant hundred from Ajinkya Rahane has fuelled India's comeback ambitions in this series. His 12th Test century, which underlined once again his character and appetite for a scrap, was the soul and spine of India's second-day total of 277/5. The lead already a handful at 82 runs, with Ravindra Jadeja offering manful support, India are firmly in control of proceedings.

The Indian captain's innings was brave not because he was ever in any physical danger or he copped blows, but because of the conception of his knock. It was brilliant not because he executed a flurry of gorgeous strokes, but because he executed his plans perfectly, soaked inexorable pressure and navigated through treacherous cliffs to steer India to a position of strength. Weave in the context of the Adelaide humiliation, Virat Kohli's departure, Mohammed Shami's injury and the crisis India were riding in the first session, and the glitter of his 104 unbeaten runs only attains more gloss. Rahane found India at 64/3, with Pat Cummins and Co. in inspired mood. The seamer had produced a pearler to induce a faint nod of Cheteshwar Pujara's feeble defensive prod, after he had tempted Shubman Gill into an impetuous drive. The background was intimidating. There was an overpowering gloom. The skies were dark and imminent disaster lurked. Rahane walked out with his characteristically nervous body language, like that of a high-school rookie.

The body language is often a facade. Beneath his shaky exterior is a cascade of self-assurance and courage. He is a soldier in the guise of a priest.

For the next 10 overs or so, Rahane was monkish in his abstinence from temptation. The full balls away from the stumps were left alone, those on the body were met with the full, straight blade. The short balls at the body were doused with soft hands. Those that could be avoided were left alone. He stripped the contest into a battle of bat and ball, not a duel between two individuals. The foundation laid, the fundamentals set, he blossomed, exhibiting the full range of his batsmanship and the variegated roles he could perform.

Captivating was how various situations drew varied responses from him. First, he was the stabiliser, intent on just blunting Cummins and Mitchell Starc. Safety was the best tactic. Rahane defanged them with resolute defensive strokes, playing them late and not committing prematurely into strokes, as he is sometimes prone to.

Smooth transition

Into his 30s, he embraced the counter-punching role. He was like a bantamweight boxer pitted against a heavyweight skull-thrasher. He weaved and spun away from the blows, and when the adversary blinked, landed meaty blows on his jaw.

Past his half-century, which he completed by flicking Starc off his legs, the skipper turned into a grisly accumulator, smuggling singles and running the hard runs. But 10 overs either side of the second new ball, he chose to be the aggressor. As the seamers sought a fuller length for reverse swing with the old ball and then the conventional variety with the new, the trickle of runs turned into a stream.

Rahane allowed himself the luxury of leaning into pleasant drives and flicked away to leg on the rare occasions the diligent Australia bowlers strayed from their line down the corridor.

SCORECARD

AUSTRALIA vs INDIA

MELBOURNE CRICKET GROUND

Toss: Australia, chose to bat

AUS FIRST INNINGS		195 (91.3 ov)
INDIA		277/5 (O/N 36/7)
M Agarwal lbw Starc		0 (6b)
S Gill c †Paine b Cummins		45 (65b, 8x4)
C Pujara c †Paine b Cummins		17 (70b, 1x4)
A Rahane not out		104 (200b, 12x4)
H Vihari c Smith b Lyon		21 (66b, 2x4)
R Pant c †Paine b Starc		29 (40b, 3x4)
R Jadeja not out		40 (104b, 1x4)
Extras (b 12, lb 6, nb 2, w 1)		21
FoW: 1-0 (Agarwal, 0.6 ov), 2-61 (Gill, 21.6 ov), 3-64 (Pujara, 23.4 ov), 4-116 (Vihari, 44.4 ov), 5-173 (Pant, 59.1 ov)		
Bowling: M Starc 18.3-3-61-2, P Cummins 22-7-71-2, J Hazlewood 21-6-44-0, N Lyon 18-2-52-1, C Green 12-1-31-0		

DAY 3, LIVE ON SONY SPORTS NETWORK, 5AM

Barring a couple of indiscriminate strokes — a hasty swipe plunked out of Steve Smith's hands at slip when he was on 73 — Rahane's powers of concentration were astonishing. He was totally absorbed in his batting, a self-contained unit who appeared unaware of the world around him. Bowlers tried to break his rhythm, shuffled their lengths, trajectory and angles, but he remained steadfast and unhindered. Rahane, the world knows, is capable of shuffling his roles. But seldom has the process seemed so smooth.

Besides the sparkling clarity of his mind, stood out the dexterity of his hands and fluency of his feet. It's the hands that mirror his mindset. When he is uncertain, his hands tend to be hard and he goes stabbing at the ball. When he's confident, his hands are pliant and he waits for the ball to reach him. It affords him time to play his strokes.

A dab off Starc best illustrated his gifts. The ball was slanted across him at a hard length with a fair bit of bounce. But Rahane got on top of the bounce, and opened the face of the bat without any exaggerated wrist movement and steered it between slip and gully. Even when he drove, he seldom threw his hands at the ball or lunged forward but just extended his forward push a bit further. The follow-through was non-existent. He is anyway not one for the cameras — even his century celebration was muted. Forget being over-jubilant, he didn't even smile. His feet never move excessively, but every stride was firm and decisive.

Under his guidance blossomed Rishabh Pant and Jadeja, with whom he shared stumps of 57 and 104 (unconquered) respectively. Pant was given the liberty to attack, and so he did, quickly whittling down the lead. Though he eventually perished attempting a wild slash, his cameo was significant in the context of the game. Jadeja was more wary and controlled. His assurance meant that Rahane needn't pursue undue risk as he is sometimes needed in the company of lower-order batsmen. And when the new ball winked in, run-scoring opportunities ringed in.

As the day wore on, it was not easy to discern whether it was the pitch or the Australian body language which had become flatter. Arms were folded, hands thrust in pockets and shoulders sagged. Dropped catches and edges that eluded tore their morale apart. But in the dressing room, they could console themselves that they were not undone by their own lack of effort, but outshone by the bravado and brilliance of Rahane.



Australia batsman Steve Smith congratulates Ajinkya Rahane at end of day's play at the MCG on Sunday.

AP

Not putting the best foot forward

SRIRAM VEERA

MUMBAI, DECEMBER 27

BARRING VIRAT Kohli, none of the Indians who made their Test debuts after 2010 have a decent forward stride as part of their defensive oeuvre. At some point, the Indians have mysteriously shed that movement. It's as if they didn't grow up watching Rahul Dravid, who would stretch forward inexorably, or Sachin Tendulkar, who would make a precise forward movement.

Some like Rohit Sharma or Rishabh Pant, and to an extent Ajinkya Rahane, have it in them to move forward to attack, but they don't do it often. On his day, which is yet to come this series, Cheteshwar Pujara does defend or attack off the front foot but he isn't part of this post-2010 generation, anyway. Collectively this lot, have all started to pitch their tent at their original stance, and rarely ever budge too much.

For most of this decade, 'holding shape' has been the buzzword on the white-ball circuit. Players are told to have wide stances since it will help them maintain balance as they try to hit most balls out of the park. When you are lining up for the ball and swinging through the line, 'holding shape' becomes vital.

It's a principle borrowed from golf. Batters teeing off is a sign of cricket's golfification. In this single-minded pursuit of 'holding shape' while having a 'wider stance', the finer nuances of classical batsmanship — 'weight transfer' and 'forward stride' — have been largely forgotten.

Over reliance on 'hands' too has resulted in Indian batsmen getting leaden-footed. Raised in Indian conditions, on mostly slow tracks, they feel they can get out of trouble as they have time to use their



Stuck at crease, Mayank Agarwal's bat has barely managed to peep ahead of the front pad.

AP

hands and adjust.

They can let their hands wander beyond their tiny footsteps to tackle the little deviations of the ball.

Even Rahane, in this character-defining knock, didn't exactly start taking big steps, until very late in his knock. But what he did differently from Adelaide was with his hands; he let them move ahead of his pads and started to meet the ball in front of his body. He would also occasionally stand outside his crease, especially to Josh

Hazlewood. In Adelaide, he rarely met the ball ahead of the front pad. Here, the front foot did move out a little bit more than it did in the first Test. The movement was first spotted in the 19th ball he faced, off Hazlewood, when the front leg came out marginally. Twice in a row, and an alert Hazlewood banged the next two balls short to try pushing him back.

Rahane didn't abandon that short forward press, though, as it allowed him to get his upper body to lean forward, and let his hands come through ahead of the front pad, the crucial reason for his success this time.

Ghosts of the past

Pujara was out to a familiar dismissal, seen not just in Adelaide but in the past as well. When the ball lands short of length around the off-stump and straightens, he tends to open up. He takes a short step forward and tries to hold his balance there. It's a difficult task as in this process, his hips open up. The good thing is that invariably he manages to hold his bat inside the line or sponge it with soft hands so that edges don't carry. But then someone like Pat Cummins comes along who has specialised in not cutting the ball away, but holding its line to induce a nick that carries.

Pujara's short step isn't the problem, it's what he does after that. Unlike Kane Williamson, who looks to get forward with a small press — much like Pujara — but then that step is just the start of Williamson's negotiations. Not the end.

"From that forward press, depending on the length, Kane either pushes back or gets forward further," Williamson's long-time coach David Johnston says. "He doesn't allow the bowler to dictate lengths by being crease-bound." Pujara used to do that, of course, but isn't doing so now.

Away from the bio-bubbles put in place by those with deep pockets, sport had its lockdown tales of angst, uncertainty and apprehension. THE INDIAN EXPRESS talks to those who missed out on their break-out year or had to delay their retirement.

Age doesn't get you down, responsibilities do: Ajay Thakur

Police duty, family commitments and falling fitness add to 34-year-old's woes in kabaddi's wiped out season

SHAHID JUDGE
MUMBAI, DECEMBER 27

AT THIS stage in his career, Ajay Thakur is well used to fans rushing to him with requests for autographs and selfies. The hero of the 2016 kabaddi World Cup final has mentioned many times how he revels in the adulation.

Those fans recognise him even today. Despite the mask (a clear indication of the rough times we live in) and his police uniform, they rush to him. That's when the Deputy Superintendent of Police in Himachal Pradesh finds himself taking a cautionary step back to keep safe distance. A social distance.

The last time he trained for a kabaddi match, or for the sport in general, was back in February, when he competed in the state championship where he pocketed the Best All-Rounder Award. Since then, his uniform has changed from the usual sports kit he dons when raiding on the Pro Kabaddi League (PKL) mat to the Himachal Pradesh Police Service attire.

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the 34-year-old Nalagarh native has been based in Bilaspur, Himachal Pradesh, patrolling the streets and striving to fight the coronavirus. And kabaddi has often been the last thing on his mind.

"This (the season getting wiped out due to the pandemic) was a massive loss for us players, especially for the older players like me who maybe have less than five years left to play," he says. "The biggest thing was that we couldn't play kabaddi at all. But now there is always a fear that 'yaar, mujhe bhi coronavirus toh nahi hua (Am I also infected with the coronavirus)?"

On the kabaddi mat, Thakur's task as a raider is to sneak through defences and get home safely. Since March though, his role in the police has been to stop people from leaving their homes unnecessarily.

"The most difficult bit was to get migrant workers who were heading back to their homes to enter quarantine. I'd be up early in the morning and return home only after 11 at night, sometimes two in the morning. There



DOUBLE ROLE: Kabaddi star Ajay Thakur is a DSP with the Himachal Pradesh Police. The pandemic snatched his focus away from the sport this year.

were people passing by at any time of the day. People would be trying to sneak out in the middle of the night, so it actually became a 24-hour job for us."

In a year that would have seen the 34-year-old former India captain, Arjuna Awardee, Asian Games gold (2014) and bronze (2018) medalist and Padma Shri compete in the



eighth season of the PKL, Thakur has spent most of his time in his police job. And the exhaustion he suffered during the hot summer months on the streets of Bilaspur is something he's yet to get over.

"It was a very difficult period for me in the force, and I'm still physically recovering from it," he says.

Sports have started to resume across the world. There have been a few Grand Slams in tennis, the NBA is on, the Indian Premier League (IPL) was held successfully, and the Indian cricket team is currently on tour in Australia. But as kabaddi is a contact sport, it hasn't been able to restart.

"The risk of (PKL) becoming a super-spreader was much higher than, say cricket," says Sandip Tarkas, CEO of 2019 champions Bengal Warriors. "Even if one player has this virus, chances are all his teammates will pick it up and so will the opposition. Of course, this year we couldn't have the Olympics or the T20 World Cup in cricket. Those events, however, have been postponed. PKL has clearly lost a year." Because of it, there is a chance that some of the more senior players in the league have lost a significant amount of time before they call it quits. Thakur finds himself in that position.

"When I won the Arjuna Award last year, I was confident I'd play at least another three years," he says. "I still want to play at least three years, but it's going to be much more difficult

to stay fit. It's not just because of the age though.

"Jab main 18 ka tha, family ki koi zimmedari mere pe nahi thi. Abhi sab zimmedari mujh pe hai (When I was 18, I didn't have any family responsibilities on me. Now everything is one me). It's difficult to get away from that. Age doesn't get you down, responsibilities do."

Thakur hasn't played or trained in the sport since February. His daily schedule, however, does include a session of physical training to keep the body fit, but not enough to get him to the level he needs to be the dominant player he has been over the years. Right now, his responsibilities in the police take greater precedence over the sport that has seen him achieve everything there is on offer — except winning a PKL title. And 2020 has made it all the more difficult for him.

"Body fit rakhne waala fitness kar raha hoon main. Lekin player banne waala fitness nahi kar paya (I'm keeping the body fit, but not enough to play)," he says. "This year has been a complete waste. Bahut zyada kathiin raha hai (It's been very tough)."