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6.	Rampuriya (Near Choral Dam)	Choral	Indore	64/1	5.000	Resort/Camping Centre/Tenting Unit With Choral Resort Water sports/Resort
7.	Mundlodostdar (Near Indore city)	Bhichouli hapsi	Indore	16/6,16/8, 16/9,16/11 16/10	2.540	Wellness Centre
8.	Mehgavan (Near Jabalpur airport)	Jabalpur	Jabalpur	Plot No. 2	4.510	Hotel Cum Convention Centre or 4-5 Star Hotel
9.	Singhpur Mahal (Chanderi)	Chanderi	Ashoknagar	183	0.805	Heritage Hotel
10.	Benazir Palace, (Bhopal)	Bhopal	Bhopal	76, 77	0.798+ 0.694	Heritage Hotel

The RFP documents can be downloaded from website www.mptenders.gov.in. RFP documents can also be seen at www.tourism.mp.gov.in

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133405002759 Chandan Kumar

133405001746 Jayaprakash Sahany

133405002723 Rukmini Singh

133405002727 Bishnu Kumar

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133405002751 Abdul Hafiz

133405002757 Avinash Kumar Mishra

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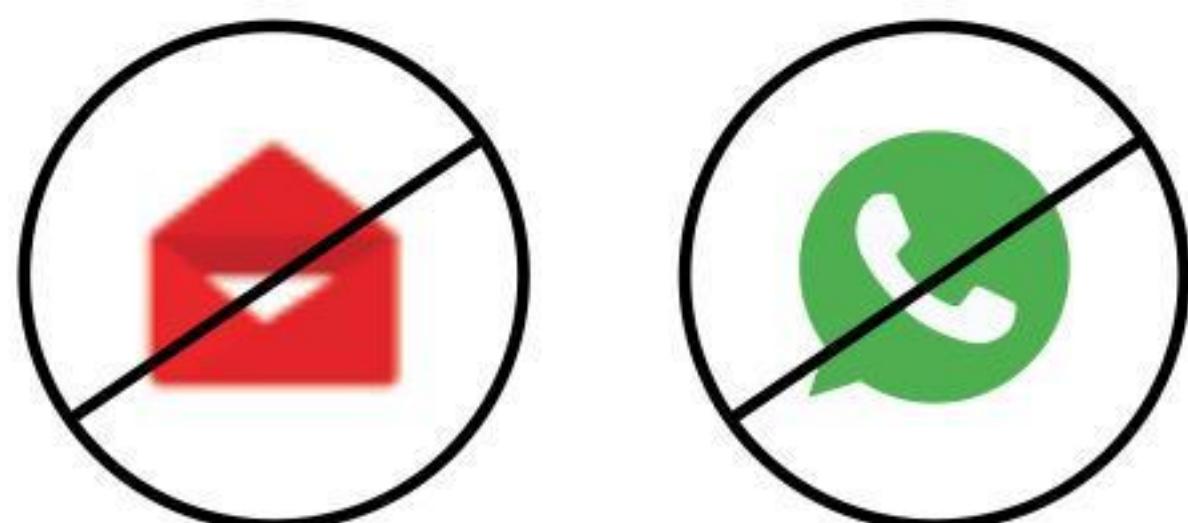
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**'Abusive call':
Kotak plans
legal action
against fintech
firm founder**

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

MUMBAI, JANUARY 9

A LEGAL battle is brewing between Ashneer Grover, co-founder and Managing Director of fintech company BharatPe, and the Kotak Mahindra Group over financing of the initial public offering (IPO) of FSN E-commerce Ventures, the parent company of Nykaa.

Kotak Mahindra Bank on Sunday said it is pursuing "appropriate legal action" against Ashneer Grover and his wife Madhuri in connection with the "inappropriate language" in a call allegedly made by Grover with an employee of the Kotak Group.

The rapid spread of the coronavirus infection continued, meanwhile, with over 1.75 lakh cases being reported by states.

Among key cities, the surge in Mumbai showed some signs of stabilising with a slight dip in cases for the second successive

1.75 LAKH CASES IN 24 HRS

Highest one-day tally in 7 months, PM holds review, meeting with CMs soon

31% in 15-18 age group get first vaccine dose in seven days: Health Secretary

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, JANUARY 9

WITH THE daily count of new Covid cases touching 1.75 lakh on Sunday, the highest single-day tally in 226 days, Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a high-level review meeting with his Cabinet colleagues and top officials, and decided to convene a meeting of chief ministers to discuss "state-specific scenarios, best-practices and the public health response".

At Sunday's meeting, which was also attended by Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya, the Prime Minister listed health infrastructure at the district level, use of masks and effective implementation of home isolation in mild cases as key measures to tackle the surge.

The latest surge in Covid cases has led to a dip in demand for air travel, forcing airlines to rework their domestic schedules — and even cancel flights.

On Sunday, the country's largest airline IndiGo announced the withdrawal of 20 per cent of its scheduled flights due to reduced demand. Full-service carrier Vistara said it is adjusting capacity in sync with changing demand. And, an Air India official said some flights on routes with multiple daily services are being merged based on the load factor.

IndiGo also said that it is offering "free changes for all new

Airlines face demand dip, IndiGo waives ticket change fee

PRANAV MUKUL

NEW DELHI, JANUARY 9

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CONTINUED ON PAGE 4



A deserted Sadar Bazar market Sunday in Delhi, where a weekend curfew is in force following a sharp rise in Covid cases. Praveen Khanna

Kejriwal urges caution: Cases up but no lockdown if you wear masks

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, JANUARY 9

AMID RISING cases in the Capital, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said on Sunday that the government doesn't "want to impose a lockdown", but urged people to follow Covid-appropriate behaviour.

"There will be no lockdown in the city if you wear masks. We don't want to impose a lockdown;



No need to panic, says Kejriwal

that is not our intention... We want to impose as few restrictions as possible so that people's livelihoods are not impacted," he said, addressing a video conference.

The Capital reported 22,751

cases, 17 deaths and a positivity rate of 23.53% on Sunday, up from 20,181 cases, 7 deaths and 19.6% positivity rate on Saturday.

"There is no need to panic. I am saying this after studying data properly. It was on May 7 last year that we had a similar number of cases. Then, 341 people had died in a day and around 20,000 hospital beds were occupied. Yesterday (Saturday), there were seven deaths. In this wave,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

POLLS: NO MODI PIC IN VACCINE CERTIFICATES

PAGE 7

J&K security net wider: not only ops, raids, arrests in new strategy

Over Ground Worker (OGW) networks and their linkages, official records show.

A study of four-year data reveals a renewed push in these areas marked by the sweeping use of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) and the Public Safety Act (PSA), the constitution of the multi-agency Terror Monitoring Group (TMG) and, more recently, the State Investigation Agency (SIA) by the

J&K administration. Since 2019, the J&K Police have cracked down on the Over Ground Worker (OGW) networks leading to the arrest of over 1,900 persons accused by the police of providing logistical support to the militants.

Militancy-related data compiled by the UT government also records busting of almost 195 "terror modules" across J&K over

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

E UAPA, PSA as tools

FOR THE security establishment post-August 5, 2019, when J&K lost its special status, the new strategy is seen as effective in cracking linkages and targeting networks. But the sweeping arrests under UAPA, PSA, the series of raids have also raised questions of due process.

Union Minister and now author, Smriti Irani is guest at e-Adda today

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, JANUARY 9

CHANGING ROLES have marked Union Minister for Women and Child Development Smriti Irani. From the lead character in a prime time TV series to a Lok Sabha candidate who wrested the Gandhi family bastion of Amethi in the 2019 elections, to a member of the Cabinet where she, most recently, piloted the Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill, 2021, which

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

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Irani's book, *Lal Salaam*, was released recently

DECISION 2022

UP: IN SUGARCANE BELT, BITTER PAST, FARM ISSUES KEY

RANE VS RANE IN GOA: AN UNLIKELY DUEL

PAGE 7

INSIDE

NEET COUNSELLING FOR PG SEATS TO BEGIN ON JAN 12

PAGE 8

Sanitised tournament hotel only for top shuttlers as Delhi braces for India Open

he is seeded fifth.

The top Indonesian doubles pairing of former Olympic medallists Hendra Setiawan and Mohamad Ahsan, as well as top Malaysians Ong Yew Sin and Teo Ee Yi, have also flown in for the year's first World Tour event in which around 220 players are slated to take part.

But with just two days to go, a sense of trepidation prevails as India's biggest badminton tournament, cancelled over the last two seasons, will not be fully covered by a "bio-secure bubble". While the international stars and top Indians will be housed in a sanitised tournament hotel, a large number of players who are not in the top 25 in world rankings will be outside this loosely

controlled arrangement.

Hosts Badminton Association of India (BAI) have assured that they are "doing everything humanly possible to hold a safe tournament", and the event had received the go-ahead from the Delhi government, which was consulted by the world body BWF when taking a call on whether the tournament should go ahead.

The cost of official hotel accommodation for the top 25, and all other international players, are being borne by the organisers while the rest are expected to spend from their own pockets, which has put the tournament hotel out of reach for most.

"Most players have started arriving in New Delhi for the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4



Singapore's Loh Kean Yew, the reigning men's singles champion, at IG Stadium in Delhi Sunday. Express

ACCUSED CREATED APP: POLICE

Delhi police arrest BCA graduate from Indore for hate app case filed in July

JIGNASA SINHA & IRAM SIDDIQUE
NEW DELHI, BHOPAL,
JANUARY 9



Allegedly developed code for app on GitHub

SIX MONTHS after registering FIRs against unknown persons for an app which posted pictures of Muslim women captioned "deal of the day", the Delhi Police arrested Aumkareshwar Thakur, 25, a BCA (Bachelor of Computer Application) graduate, from Indore on Saturday.

This comes days after four persons, including two engineering students and a Delhi University student, were arrested for a similar app which posted doctored photos of at least 100 Muslim women, along with lewd remarks and comments, on Twitter and the idea to troll Muslim women was shared there.

"We apprehended him from Indore for his role in the case. During interrogation, he admitted that he joined a 'trad' group (Tradmahasabha) on Twitter in January 2020 and the idea was to defame and troll Muslim women. He then developed the code for the app on GitHub. He confessed to his crime. The access to the app was with all the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

RELATED REPORT

PAGE 6

WORLD

U.K. COVID-19 DEATH TOLL EXCEEDS 150,000 AFTER OMICRON SURGE

BELT AND ROAD: LANKA FOR DEBT RESTRUCTURING BY CHINA PAGE 13



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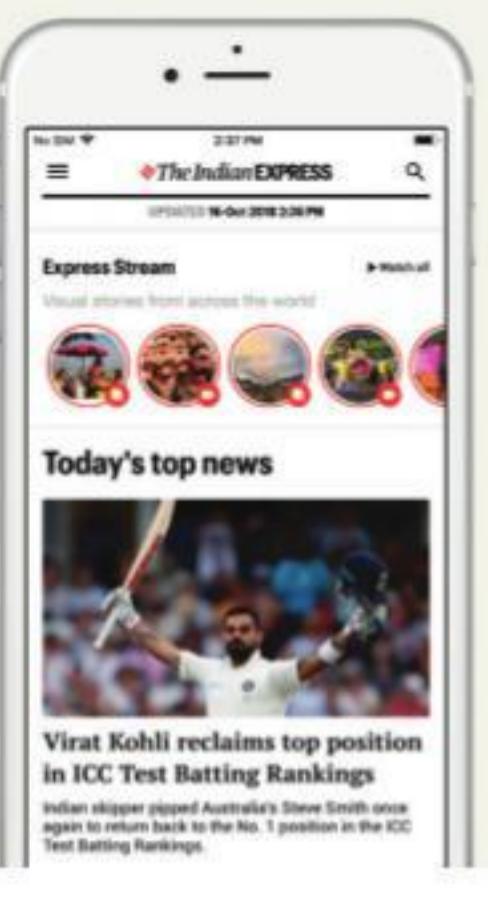
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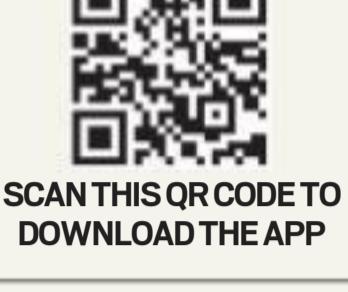
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WEB EXCLUSIVE

EXPLAINED: WHY TAIWAN PURCHASED 20,400 BOTTLES OF LITHUANIAN RUM AMID TRADE WAR WITH CHINA

Last month, Lithuania said that China had blocked all imports from the Baltic nation after it allowed Taiwan to set up a de facto embassy here, which has been seen as a sign of growing ties between both places.

TECH



LENOVO LEGION 5I PRO REVIEW

A mid-range gaming laptop, you won't be disappointed with

ENTERTAINMENT



THE TENDER BAR MOVIE REVIEW

A cliché ridden coming-of-age film, saved by Ben Affleck

EXPRESS AUDIO

What it would take to solve India's grave water crisis

NEW EPISODE EVERYDAY

From the Indus Valley civilisation to British policies that still affect us, Mridula Ramesh talks about all that has led to India's grave water crisis.

FROM PAGE ONE

PM review

day. On Sunday, the city recorded 19,474 new cases, compared to 20,318 the previous day. There has been no significant decline in the number of tests conducted in the last few days. The rise in cases in Mumbai has slowed down considerably after the city went past its previous peak a few days ago.

Along with Delhi, Mumbai was the first city to experience the surge during the third wave. Delhi, which had attained a much higher peak during the second wave, continued to see a rise in infections, with over 22,000 new cases being reported on Sunday.

Among states, West Bengal crossed the peak of the second wave on Sunday, the first to do so. It reported 24,287 new cases, well above the 20,846 that was recorded on May 14 last year.

With just about 60,000 to 70,000 samples being tested every day, far below what even Delhi is doing, nearly one in every three persons being tested in West Bengal is turning positive. The state's daily tally is now second only to Maharashtra, which on Sunday reported over 44,000 cases. Taking to Twitter after the review meeting, Modi posted: "Had extensive discussions on the prevailing Covid-19 situation. Reviewed the preparedness of healthcare infrastructure, the vaccination drive, including for youngsters between 15 and 18, and ensuring continuation on non-Covid healthcare services."

According to an official statement, Union Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan gave a "detailed" presentation at the meeting, highlighting the surge in cases currently being reported globally.

"The presentation brought attention to India's consistent efforts towards the vaccination campaign, with 31% adolescents aged 15-18 years having been administered with the 1st dose so far within 7 days," the statement said.

This was followed by the status of Covid-19 in India highlighting various states and districts of concern, based on the surge in cases and high positivity being reported...Various predictive scenarios of peak cases were also presented," said the statement.

The meeting also focused on support to states "to upgrade health infrastructure, testing capacity, availability of oxygen & ICU beds, and buffer stock of essential drugs" under the Emergency Covid Response Package, the statement said. Modi "stressed on the need to ensure adequate health infrastructure at the district level. He asked officials to maintain coordination regarding this with the states", it said. According to the statement, the Prime Minister directed that intensive containment and active surveillance should continue in clusters reporting higher cases and technical support be provided to states that are reporting a higher number of cases.

"He highlighted the need to ensure effective usage of masks and physical distancing measures as a new normal to control the spread. PM further exhorted the need for effective implementation of Home Isolation for mild/asymptomatic cases

and to disseminate the factual information to the community at large," the statement said.

Stressing on "continuity of non-Covid health services while managing Covid cases presently", the Prime Minister also spoke about the need to leverage telemedicine to ensure availability of health related guidance to people in remote and rural areas".

The meeting was also attended by Union MoS Health Bharati Pravin Pawar, NITI Aayog member Dr VK Paul, Cabinet Secretary Rajiv Gauba, Home Secretary AK Bhalla and other senior officials.

Sunday's meeting came even as India reported over 1.75 lakh new daily cases in the past 24 hours -- the highest single-day count since May 27, 2021, when 1.86 lakh cases were logged -- with the positivity rate remaining well over 10.21 per cent. The active case count, meanwhile, crossed the seven lakh mark. According to a press release Sunday, a total of 3,623 cases of Omicron infection had been confirmed with Maharashtra reporting the highest of 76,099 cases followed by Delhi (513), Karnataka (441), Rajasthan (373) and Kerala (333).

This was the second such review meeting chaired by the Prime Minister in the last two weeks. On December 24, 2021, he reviewed the preparedness of health systems across the country to tackle the surge and called on people to be "satark and saavdhan (alert and cautious)".

The latest meeting came a day before the launch of the "precautionary" third dose for healthcare workers, frontline workers and 60-plus population with comorbidities. Those who are eligible for the third dose -- 39 weeks after getting their second jab -- can either book an online appointment or walk-in to any vaccination centre.

PTI adds: On Monday, Union Minister Mandaviya will interact with health ministers of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Goa, Gujarat and Maharashtra, and the Union Territory of Dadra and Nagar

Haveli and Daman and Diu to review the Covid situation amid a large," the statement said.

Kejriwal

the number of deaths and the rate of hospitalisation are low. I haven't told you this so that you stop wearing masks and become irresponsible. I am telling you this so that you don't panic. Wearing masks is extremely important," he said.

It was in the third week of April, as the second wave was peaking, that the number of daily cases breached the 22,000 mark for the first time. The positivity rate was around 24%, 167 deaths were reported, and over 12,000 hospital beds were occupied. The total number of active cases then was above 60,000; it was 60,733 on Sunday.

Kejriwal, who had tested positive earlier, said Sunday that he had recovered from Covid. He also urged all those who haven't been vaccinated to get their shots as soon as possible. "Those who haven't got vaccinated, please do so. It is not like the vaccine will protect you completely from the disease, but it will save you from severe symptoms. Please get vaccinated," he said.

Delhi imposed restrictions under the yellow alert last month, as cases started to spike. A weekend curfew is in place, where only emergency and essential services are permitted. A Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) meeting is scheduled with health-care experts on Monday.

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Her book *Lal Salaam*, framed by the killing of 76 CRPF personnel in Dantewada in April 2010, is the story of a courageous police officer and his quest for truth amidst a cloud of conflicting versions and challenges. Irani will be the guest at The Indian Express e-Adda on Monday.

As five states go to the polls next month, Irani will be among the star campaigners for her party. Fluent in several languages -- Hindi, English, Gujarati, Bengali and

Marathi -- she has emerged as one of the BJP's most significant voices, both inside and outside Parliament.

As Women and Child Development Minister, Irani, who earlier held the HRD and I&B portfolios, has introduced several landmark Bills in Parliament, the most recent being the Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill, 2021. The ministry also amended the Juvenile Justice Act, while the long-awaited Trafficking in Persons (Prevention, Care and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2021, is to be introduced in Parliament soon.

At the Express e-Adda, Irani will be in conversation with Anant Goenka, Executive Director, The Indian Express Group, and Vandita Mishra, National Opinion Editor, The Indian Express. The Express Adda involves interactions with people at the centre of change, and has earlier featured, among others, CNN host Fareed Zakaria, CMD of Kotak Mahindra Bank Uday Kotak, writer and Morgan Stanley strategist Ruchir Sharma, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and Punjab Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi. During the pandemic, the Adda is being held virtually.

Airlines and existing bookings" made up to January 31 for flights up to March 31.

According to data from the Ministry of Civil Aviation, domestic air passenger numbers have been witnessing a fall since two weeks ago when Covid cases started surging and various states began imposing restrictions.

On January 8, the Ministry logged 2.41 lakh air passengers, down from 3.85 lakh on December 26.

In terms of load factor, which is representative of demand, IndiGo reported 65.8 per cent on January 8 -- on an average, over 34 out of its every 100 seats went unsold. Its low-cost rivals SpiceJet and GoFirst reported load factors of 68.5 per cent and 62.8 per cent, respectively. Air India's load factor on Saturday was 67.4 per cent, while those of Vistara and AirAsia India were 53.6 per cent and 59.6 per cent, respectively.

"Owing to the increasing number of Omicron infections, large numbers of IndiGo customers are changing their travel plans. In response to customer needs, IndiGo is waiving change fees and is offering free changes for all new and existing bookings made up to 31st January, for flights up to 31st March 2022," IndiGo said in a statement.

"With the reduced demand, we will also be selectively withdrawing some of our flights from service...We anticipate that around 20 per cent of our current scheduled operations will be withdrawn from service," it said.

A Vistara spokesperson said: "We are observing a decline in demand for air travel due to the sudden surge in number of Covid-19 cases and travel restrictions/quarantine requirements imposed by various states. At Vistara, we are monitoring the situation closely and adjusting capacity to demand. We are also trying to minimise the inconvenience to our customers by offering them various options, such as rescheduling or refund, etc., as applicable."

According to a senior executive with a low-cost airline, unused capacity means the airlines would be incurring the cost of flying half-empty planes in addition to their fare dynamics being impacted.

Hate app case

members of the group. He shared the app details on his Twitter account. The photos of the Muslim women were uploaded by other group members," he said.

According to police investigations, Thakur joined the group using the Twitter handle @gangescion. "During various group discussions, the members had discussed trolling Muslim

women. After the uproar over the women, Grover had denied having made the call. "Folks. Chill. It's a fake audio by some scamster trying to extort funds (US\$ 240K in bitcoins). I refused to buckle. I've got more character. And Internet has got enough scammers," Grover had tweeted.

Grover had earlier worked as Vice President of Kotak Investment Banking for seven years. He left the group in 2013.

The notice sent by Grover's law firm Regstreet said Thakur had created over seven Twitter accounts in the last two years. "We have seen he was a member of many 'trad' groups on Telegram and Twitter, but the members are deleting these groups now. We have seen 7-8 boys who were part of the Tividhamasabha group. They all left the group and deleted their profiles. This was the main group. There was no hierarchy. All members are equally guilty of making the app. Thakur was the one who wrote the code. There were several discussions about Muslim women and their community," said a source.

"These ('trad' groups) are some 'traditional' and conservative groups... the members seem to have oppressive views -- from the caste system to women empowerment," said a police officer.

The notice sent by Grover's law firm Regstreet said Kotak's refusal to comply with its assurances on financing the IPO was on the "pretext of" "erratic FII movements" and "very high lending rates". Regstreet did not respond to the mail sent by The Indian Express.

FSNE-commerce (Nykaa) was listed on the stock exchanges in November 2021 at a huge premium of around 80 per cent. Nykaa founder and MD Falguni Nayar was also a top employee of the Kotak Group earlier.

India Open

tournament. The foreign players

as well as Indian players, ranked under Top-25 in the world, will be staying at the same hotel. All the participating players will be taking the necessary safety precautions right from their arrival in New Delhi as per protocol, and will be tested every day at the hotel and from there they will be having shuttle buses to come to the stadium, play matches and go back to the hotel again," the BAI said in a statement.

Police said Thakur's name came up during interrogation of Niraj Bishnoi -- alleged to be the creator of the more recent app -- who was arrested earlier. "Bishnoi told us he was interacting with many people in groups. In July 2021, he joined a group where the app was being discussed. This was the first time he had heard about the app on GitHub. Bishnoi followed the accounts and told us that Thakur lives in Indore," said Malhotra.

Thakur did his BCA from IPS Academy in Indore, and was doing freelance work from home. His family said he was being falsely accused in the case.

His father, Akhilesh, said two policemen came to their house, in New York Township, Indore, on Saturday afternoon. "They told my son to accompany them and took his laptop and cellphone," he said. At around 7 pm, he received a call from his son saying that he was being taken to Delhi, said Akhilesh, a manager with a private company.

"I asked him what the issue was, but he said it would only be clear when he reached Delhi... My younger son told me it is something to do with some apps which have Hindu-Muslim issue, but my son had nothing to do with it," he said.

"I was there when the police came home. They asked my brother if he had any links with the app; he denied any involvement. He is being falsely accused by those who have already been arrested," said Mangaleswar (23), Thakur's brother. "My brother had no motive to indulge in such activity," he said. Police Commissioner, Indore, Harinayan Chari Mishra, said the local police station was not informed.

'Abusive call'

alleged failure to provide IPO financing for the IPO and allocate shares worth Rs 500 crore before the closing of the IPO on Monday, November 1, 2021.

On Sunday, the Kotak Group said in a media statement, "We would like to confirm that there is no breach or violation by the Kotak Group in any manner whatsoever. This notice was received by us and was replied to appropriately at the time, including placing on record our objections to inappropriate language used by Grover. Appropriate legal action is being taken."

In an audio call that had surfaced on social media last week, Grover had allegedly used inappropriate language and threatened a Kotak employee. However,

the entire network, he said, "through their linkages, whether logistic, funds or otherwise."

Key to this is the clampdown under UAPA and PSA in J&K. Between 2019 and 2021, the number of cases under UAPA increased from 437 (2019) to 557 in 2020 and it was under 500 in 2021. The number of persons booked under these cases over the last three years is over 2,700.

Of these, more than half, or 1,362 persons remain in custody.

The number of PSA detentions rose significantly to 331 last year from 134 in 2020.

It's this aspect of the crackdown that has drawn criticism from political leaders in the Valley after the splitting of the state and its downgrade in August 2019.

Even two years later, PDP's youth president Waheed Para remains lodged in the Srinagar central jail, arrested within hours of securing bail from an NIA court in Jammu. He also won his seat in the Pulwama District Development Council in December last year. He was, however, not allowed to take oath of office. In November, human rights activist Khurram Parvez was arrested by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) in connection with a case filed under Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), including terror funding.

"Dissent has been criminalised and is accordingly dealt with through harsh laws. At times these laws may have nothing to do with the kind of alleged offence committed by a person. Security agencies and ED are very serious institutions to be used in rare cases, but they have been weaponised and are used regularly... No one with a contrary view point can escape COI's punitive actions, be it a student, an activist or a politician," said the last J&K chief minister and PDP president Mehbooba Mufti.

Security operations have also been on a constant simmer. In 2020 and 2021, more than 400 militants were killed in 197 operations, roughly equal to the number of militants killed in the previous two years (2018 and 2019). But recruitment has kept pace with the killings.

When contacted, Dilbag Singh, Director General of J&K Police, told The Indian Express, "In the last year alone, 89 modules were busted, 670 OGWs arrested. We are focussed on dismantling terror infrastructure in all forms. This will continue." OGWs, he said, "presented themselves in all hues and shades, irrespective of age, gender, profession, or location. They are runners or gunners, at home or abroad. What has changed is our capability to locate and identify them and we will continue to hit them."

To that effect, the TMG or Terror Monitoring Group was established by the Ministry of Home Affairs in March 2019 to effectively coordinate actions of different agencies. The SIA, established in end-2021 by the Home Department of the UT administration, as a "specialised agency" to probe terror related cases in J&K, is also aimed at investigating and prosecuting terror cases at the UT level. As per official records, about 169 militants remain active in J&K, 163 of them in Kashmir Valley.

Of the 134 individuals who joined militant ranks over the last year (2021), 72 were killed in various operations, 22 arrested, and 40 remain active. As many as 20 J&K police personnel and 23 security forces personnel were killed in 2021. Lashkar-e-Taiba saw the highest casualty in 2021 followed by Jaish-e-Mohammad and then the Hizbul Mujahideen. Meanwhile, in terms of cross-border infiltration, 2021 saw a decline in both gross and net infiltrations with 73 persons attempting to cross the LoC and 34 succeeding. In 2020, gross and net infiltrations were 99 and 51 respectively.

Said a senior official: "So far, counter-terrorism operations have targeted and incentivised the elimination of active terrorists... but an effective strategy now should address the entire terrorism structure." This can only be done through "effective prosecution" of

Contact for Advt. Booking: M/s Friends Publicity Service

CONSTABLE ARRESTED

Zomato delivery executive hit by cop's vehicle, succumbs to injuries

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 9

A 38-YEAR-OLD restaurant manager, who also worked as a Zomato delivery executive to make ends meet for his family, died after a Delhi Police constable allegedly rammed his SUV into him. The incident took place in Rohini on Saturday night.

The victim, Salil Tripathi, lived in Budh Vihar with his mother, wife and 10-year-old son and was the sole breadwinner. Salil's father recently died of Covid, and the family had been struggling financially. Salil worked as a manager at Ricos in Hudson Lane and had taken on the Zomato job to earn extra,



Salil Tripathi (38) worked as a manager at Ricos in Hudson Lane and had taken on the Zomato job to earn extra, said his family.

Videos from the incident uploaded on social media show locals taking photos of the damaged car. Constable Singh is seen sitting inside in his police uniform and is surrounded by onlookers, who catch hold of him. Locals alleged he was speeding and driving rashly.

DCP (Rohini) Pranav Tayal said, "We had received a call about the accident at 10 pm. A

said his family. Police said the constable, Zile Singh, allegedly rammed his car into Salil's bike near Baba Saheb Ambedkar hospital before hitting a DTC bus. Police are probing if Singh was under the influence of alcohol.

Salil was flung into the air and crashed near the divider. He was rushed to the hospital, where doctors declared him dead on arrival.

Police said Salil's body was handed over to the family on Sunday after an autopsy.

VACCINATIONS IN LAST 24 HOURS
1,19,334OMICRON CASES
513DELHI: TOTAL CASES
15,49,730Total
HOSPITAL BEDS
ICU BEDS14,332
4,099
12,522
3,695Vacant
Deaths
CASES IN GURGAON*
2,3380
Daily figures: Jan 9

17 DEATHS, OVER 22,000 CASES ON SUNDAY

Curb Covid infections in ICUs and dialysis centres: Govt issues advisory to hospitals

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 9

CASES OF patients already admitted to ICU wards, as well those regularly coming in for dialysis, testing positive for Covid are on the rise again, officials said.

Over the past few days, healthcare workers and Delhi government officials have pointed out that several of the people who are seriously ill with Covid are those who may have been admitted to hospitals already or had come in for a procedure and had tested positive for Covid later.

The government suspects that this might be because of infected healthcare workers and undiagnosed infected patients being admitted in the ICU and dialysis units of hospitals.

An advisory issued to heads of hospitals by the Directorate of Health Services on Sunday states, "... it has been observed that there is an upsurge of Covid-19 cases within ICUs/ dialysis units and wards of hospitals.

Whereas, infected healthcare workers /undiagnosed infected patients admitted in ICUs/ dialysis units/wards of the hospitals is one of the likely causes of spread of Covid-19 in these areas."

Senior health officials told *The Indian Express* that most of the people who had either died over the past few days or were on ventilator support were the ones who had serious co-morbid conditions such as cancer, pulmonary disease or heart disease.

The Directorate of Health Services in its advisory has now asked hospitals to ensure that healthcare workers deployed to treat non-Covid patients follow Covid appropriate behaviour strictly. "All healthcare workers should be routinely checked for SARS-CoV2. Further, healthcare workers with symptoms suggestive of Covid infection should not be allowed to work till RT-PCR report is negative... authorities of all private hospitals / nursing homes are to ensure that there should be an isolation area within ICUs and wards to manage new patients till their RT-PCR report is available," it says.

On Sunday, the capital reported 22,751 fresh cases and a positivity rate of 23.53%.

It also saw a sharp increase in the number of Covid deaths on Sunday, with 17 people dying as opposed to 7 on Saturday. The death count for one day is higher than that in the whole of November and December.

"Most people who are combating serious symptoms and are being put on ventilators are those with existing co-morbid conditions. So while the situation may not be very serious for those who are healthy, it is those with compromised immune systems who are suffering the most. This is why wearing masks and avoiding gatherings is important right now. Those who are healthy may not suffer, but those who are unwell will have to bear the brunt of the disease," said a senior Delhi government official.



An empty Sadar Bazar during weekend curfew on Sunday. Praveen Khanna

Restaurants hit by new curbs: 'Unable to get e-passes, food delivery affected'

ABHINAV RAJPUT
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 9

THE RESTAURANT industry is once again facing hardships with restrictions being imposed in the national capital due to a sharp spike in Covid cases fuelled by the omicron variant. Several owners pointed to e-passes acting as a hurdle in food delivery.

On Friday, the National Restaurant Association of India (NRAI) tagged the CM's Office in a tweet and sought help in resolving the e-pass problem for the food and beverage industry. "We aren't getting them, leading to severe harassment. We will be compelled to shut down delivery as well if this isn't resolved right away," CM Arvind Kejriwal responded, saying to send him their

contact details (to get the issue resolved.)

While the Delhi Disaster Management Authority issued the yellow alert under the Covid Graded Response Plan on December 29, under which restaurants could operate at 50% capacity between 8 am and 10 pm, a weekend curfew was declared last week as cases continued to surge. Under this, dine-in is not permitted, but restaurants can make food deliveries and employees have to avail e-passes.

Anurag Katriar, trustee and founder of Indigo Hospitality, said the restaurant industry is over regulated, causing further loss to business. "If curfew is imposed, people would need food delivered at home. For that to happen, staff should be able to step out. Restaurants are already in crisis

and there is no need to add extra burden on them to deal with bureaucratic hassles," he said.

Secretary general of the association, Prakul Kumar, pointed out that the industry has been among the biggest hit due to Covid, with more than 25% of eateries shutting shop since the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020. "The industry used to employ more than seven million people; now 25 lakh jobs have been lost," he said.

Kumar also said questioned why restaurants have restrictions, when buses and Metro are running at 100% capacity: "The food industry is already identified as an essential service, permitted during curfews. But restaurant employees have been facing problem in getting e-passes... Majority of applications have been rejected. We want that the documents

needed to get an e-pass made, like declaration from the restaurants regarding the employee ID card, be allowed instead."

Facing crippling losses after the first and the second wave in 2020 and 2021, especially during the lockdown, 50% of more than 2,700 licensed eateries in Delhi did not renew their health trade licence for months. Senior MCD officials had said many of them had shut shop as they couldn't afford to pay rent and several others switched to home delivery to keep their businesses running.

"Jan aur jahan dono saath me leke kaise chale koi sochta nahi hai. (They don't think about how to take life and business together)," said Katriar.

Government officials did not respond to calls and messages seeking comment.



Beds being set up at a Covid care centre in Commonwealth Games Village. Gajendra Yadav

BRIEFLY

Business Blasters:
1,000 ideas shortlisted for round 2

New Delhi: 1,000 start-up ideas from government schools have been shortlisted from among 51,000 for the round 2 of Delhi's Business Blasters programme. As part of its 'Entrepreneurship Mindset Curriculum', the government had started the programme across all of its senior secondary schools last September, giving Rs 2,000 as seed money to Class XI and XII students to develop entrepreneurship ideas. Through this, 51,000 start-ups had been designed by students across government schools. Ultimately, 1,000 projects were selected for Round 2. Of these, 100 will be shortlisted for the final round. ENS

Over 5k fined for not wearing face masks

New Delhi: Amid an uptick in Covid cases, the Delhi government has taken action against 5,073 people for not wearing masks in public or work places. As per official data, 61 FIRs were registered on Saturday against those not following Covid-appropriate behaviour and a fine of Rs.1.25 crore was collected from violators. PTI

To bolster drinking water supply in capital, RO plants at 6 locations

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 9

After purification, water will be transported to areas facing shortage in supply. Archive

The official said the plants are not likely to take up much space, and will be set up at the DJB's existing premises in these areas.

At the proposed RO plants, ground water will be extracted and purified to make it potable, another senior official said. Tube wells are likely to be used to extract the ground water, going by the tender documents. After purification, the water will be transported to areas facing a shortage in supply either through the DJB's

existing network of pumping stations and reservoirs, or by setting up new infrastructure. Waste water from the RO plant will be disposed into drains or will be taken to the nearest STP.

In a separate project, lakes are being constructed at some of the DJB's STPs, and treated water from the STPs will be transferred to these artificial lakes, with the aim that the water stored in these lakes will replenish the ground water, the official said.

The tenders are in the pre-bid stage, and the targeted deadline to set up the plants is around a year. The agencies taking up the installation of the plants will also be in charge of operations and maintenance for seven years.

The DJB has also invited bids to appoint a consultant for the project, who will be required to identify water deficit areas near the plant, evaluate the tenders received, provide technical support and supervise the sites.

In addition to the six larger RO plants, smaller ones are likely to be set up in areas with water supply shortage, according to another senior DJB official. A tender was invited for 150 such small plants, and the locations are still being finalised by zonal staff, depending on water requirement and space availability. These are likely to be set up in JJ clusters where supply is low, and water can be provided in cans of around 20 litres each, the official said.

How Gurgaon cab driver helped arrest infant traffickers

PAVNEET SINGH CHADHA
GURGAON, JANUARY 9

ON FRIDAY at 6 pm, when Umesh Lohiya, a cab driver, picked up three people from Daula Kuan to drop them to Gurgaon, he had no idea he was ferrying a gang allegedly involved in trafficking infants. A series of incidents during the trip confirmed his suspicion, prompting him to alert police.

On Saturday, Gurgaon Police announced a Rs 25,000 reward for Umesh for his efforts leading to the arrest of three people. Two infants, aged 20-25 days, were rescued.

Said Umesh, "On the way, they kept getting several calls. I could overhear some words... 'how many kids?' Two... Rs 3 lakh... deal... Alwar". On another call, one of the women, carrying an infant, insisted that they wanted Rs 3 lakh for the deal and not Rs 2.5 lakh and threatened to call it off."

He said near Mahipalpur, they asked him if he would take them to Alwar. "When I said it would cost Rs 3,000, they offered more - Rs 4,000. On two occasions, in Delhi and Kherki Daula, they did not let me stop for CNG and even offered to pay for petrol if I drove fast... They seemed to be in a hurry,

He added that when they were near IFFCO Chowk, he made

an excuse and parked the car to answer the nature's call. "I walked for a few metres and called a friend, who had the SHO's contact. The SHO told me to drive to Shankar Chowk, where police had set up a barricade. There, a policeman stopped us and sat in the car. He told the accused that since they were not wearing masks, they were being taken to the station for a challan. It was a risk if my suspicion was wrong, but I had to take it considering the safety of the children," he said.

Manoj Kumar, SHO, DLF Phase 3 police station, said, "We had held a meeting with cab driv-

ers in the area recently, which has many call centres and MCNs, and told them to report any such suspicious activity. On Friday, this driver reported that he suspected his passengers were involved in trafficking. We told him to drive towards Mousari Avenue and tell his passengers that he had to take a detour to run a small errand. The accused went into custody and taken into custody."

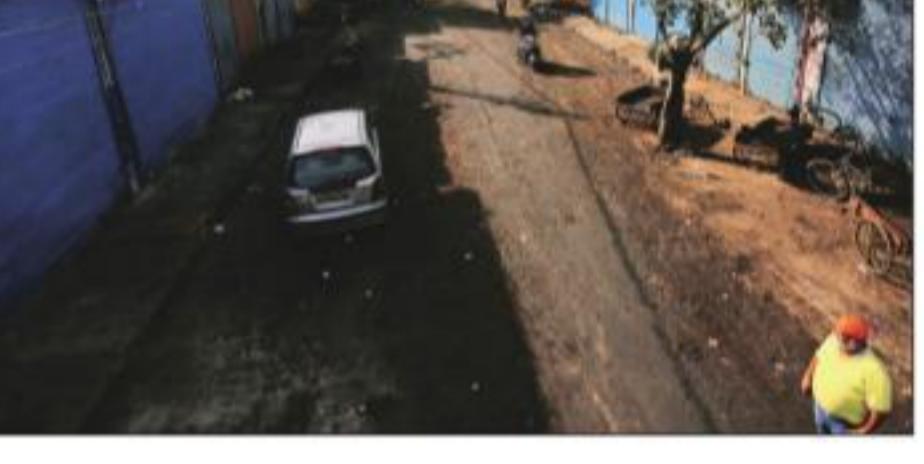
Police on Sunday said they had arrested two more persons for their alleged involvement in the racket. Five people, including four women, have been arrested so far.

Gogi gang member held

New Delhi: A 33-year-old member of slain gangster Jitender Gogi's gang was arrested from South Delhi's Sultanpur Saturday.

Police said the accused has been identified as Karamvir, a resident of Haryana's Jhajjar district. "Karamvir was earlier associated with the Kartar Mandotri gang and is currently with the Gogi gang. Police received information on Friday that he was staying at a farmhouse in Sultanpur. A team led by ACP (Inter-State Cell) Umesh Barthwal conducted a raid and apprehended him while he was trying to flee in his car," JCP (Crime) Dheeraj Kumar said.

Karamvir had allegedly killed one person, named Anil, in 2019. "He was arrested in the case. In October 2020, he got out on parole for a month, but did not surrender after the period ended. On September 23, 2021, he was chased by police and apprehended while he was trying to flee in his car," JCP (Crime) Dheeraj Kumar said.



Under the weekend curfew, all non-essential activities, including industries and factories not producing or manufacturing essential goods, were closed. Archive

What are 'trads', used by police to describe GitHub case accused?

SUKRITA BARUAH & JIGNASA SINHA
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 9

ANNOUNCING THE arrest of 25-year-old Anumakareeshwar Thakur in the 'Sulli deals' case on Sunday, Delhi Police said he was part of "trad" groups online — the first time a law enforcement agency has used the term, which has come to denote a group of individuals who are part of groups on Telegram, Reddit, 4chan and Discord devoted to targeting Dalits, Muslims and women.

According to a senior officer, Thakur told them that he was a member of 'trad' groups on Twitter and Telegram, following which they researched what it meant. Said the officer: "These are some 'traditional' and conservative groups. I saw them... the members seem to have oppressive views — from the caste system to women empowerment. They condemn changes happening around us (in society) and often share texts from scriptures or offensive memes."

This is echoed by a 23-year-old student who is a member of 'sigmatrad'. Several such groups: "Most members are upper caste... well read... and operate and interact only virtually. Talks often revolve around the shastras, 'sanatan dharm', Brahminical supremacy."

Most of the platforms are rife with casteist slurs, abuse aimed at Ambedkar, and talk of replacing the Constitution with the Manusmriti. Islamophobia also figures heavily in such groups, many of which have been deleted since police investigation turned its attention towards them.

Several memes shared on the group, such as 'Pepe the Frog', and the language used draw heavily from the American alt-right, including the term 'trad' itself.

According to police, the group Thakur was part of was called the 'Tradmahasabha'. He joined it on Twitter in January 2020, with an idea to troll Muslim women. "He was a member of several Trad groups that are now closed," said an officer. One of the Twitter accounts he operated was called 'sigmatrad'.



BJP stole a march on UP rivals before rally curbs

LALMANI VERMA
LUCKNOW, JANUARY 9

WHILE THE Election Commission has announced a ban on rallies until January 15 ahead of the February-March Assembly polls in five states amid the spiking Covid cases, the ruling BJP in Uttar Pradesh seems to have stolen a march on its rivals in terms of physical campaigning so far.

BJP sources say the party's leading UP campaigner, Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, has already toured at least 250 Assembly constituencies across the state in the past few months. They say senior BJP leaders, including Adityanath, have addressed over 399 public meetings and nukkad sabhas along with roadshows during the party's six Jan Vishwas Yatras kicked off on December 19 that concluded last week.

With a focus on 78 seats where the BJP and its allies had lost in the 2017 UP Assembly elections, Adityanath have toured these constituencies, and inaugurated and laid foundation stones of new projects while making claims about the "advantages" that the constituencies would have gained if the BJP had won there in 2017. He has also addressed most of the Samajik Pratinidhi Sammelans that the saffron party organised in different parts of the state in a bid to reach out to various castes and sections.

The BJP's principal cam-



Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath may have already toured at least 250 Assembly constituencies. File

paigner, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has already visited more than a dozen districts in UP to launch various mega infrastructure projects and address public meetings over the past two months.

A slew of senior BJP leaders, including Union Home Minister Amit Shah, party national president JP Nadda, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Union Minister Nitin Gadkari, have already held public meetings and booth president sammelans in the past two months.

At the same time, the BJP has already made preparations for the virtual rallies. "BJP has developed its own network system to hold virtual rallies with a maximum of 50,000 people at a given time. Senior leaders will address these rallies from Delhi, Lucknow and other locations.

Also live streaming of the rallies will be done through giant screen-mounted vans," said a party leader.

The physical campaigning of the principal Opposition, the SP, has so far remained centred on party president Akhilesh Yadav and his Samajwadi Vijay Yatra in various districts. The Vijay Yatra started from Kanpur on October 12 and passed through over two dozen districts of eastern UP, Bundelkhand, and western UP with its 10th leg held in Lucknow recently.

BJP president Mayawati, who is looking for a fifth term as the CM, is yet to step out to address public rallies. The Congress has organised marathons for girls and women as part of its party general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra-launched "Ladki hoon, lad sakti hoon" campaign.

UP PHASE 1: VOTING ON FEB 10

In sugarcane belt, bitter past, farmer issues likely to hold key

In 2017, when BJP swept region, BSP was runner-up in 30 of 58 seats

LALMANI VERMA
LUCKNOW, JANUARY 9

THOUGH THE BJP has so far projected the Samajwadi Party (SP) as its main rival in the Assembly elections, in the 58 seats of western Uttar Pradesh that will vote in Phase 1 of the polls on February 10, the ruling party is likely to face a bigger challenge from the BSP—at least going by the Mayawati-led party's performance in past elections in the region.

In the 2017 elections, the BJP, which won an overwhelming majority in the state with 312 of the 403 seats, swept the region too, winning 53 of the 58 seats. The SP and BSP won twice seats each while RLD won a single seat. The BSP, which stood third in the state with a mere 19 seats, however, was the runner-up in 30 of the region's 58 seats, followed by the SP on 15 seats, Congress on five and RLD on three.

In an election marked by communal rhetoric as the BJP raised the pitch on the Muzaffarnagar riots and the alleged exodus of Hindus from Kairana, the average victory margin for the BJP was more than 40,000 on majority of the seats it won. Muzaffarnagar and Kairana both go to the polls in this phase.

In 2012, it was the BSP that

KEY BATTLEGROUNDS IN PHASE 1

THE CONTEST IN '17



- 1. MUZAFFARNAGAR:**
Kapil Dev Agarwal (BJP)
Votes: 97,838
(Runner-up: SP's Gaurav Swaroop Bansal; votes: 87,134)

- 2. KAIRANA:**
Nahid Hasan (SP)
Votes: 98,830
(Runner-up: BJP's Mriganka Singh; votes: 77,668)

- 3. ATRAULI:**
Sandeep Kumar Singh (BJP, grandson of former CM Kalyan Singh)
Votes: 1,15,397
(Runner-up: SP's Viresh Yadav; votes: 64,430)

- 4. MATHURA:**
Shrikant Sharma (BJP)
Votes: 1,43,361
(Runner-up: Cong's Pradeep Mathur; votes: 42,200)

- 5. THANA BHAWAN:**
Suresh Kumar (Rana) (BJP)
Votes: 90,995
(Runner-up: BSP's Abdul Waris Khan; votes: 74,178)

won the maximum seats in the region—20—while the SP won 14 and the BJP stood third with 10 seats. The RLD had won nine seats, the Congress five. In that election too, it was BSP that was runner-up on the maximum number of seats—24—followed by the BJP(9), RLD(8), SP(7) and Congress(3).

Until the 2013 Muzaffarnagar

Muslim candidates won from the region in 2012, only three won in 2017.

Home to some of the most prosperous sugarcane farmers, the region is being wooed aggressively by all parties. While the Adityanath government, stung by the recent farm protests, has reduced power tariff for private tube-wells, the SP has promised free electricity and the RLD loan waivers to farmers.

The political impact of the recent farm agitation and the farmers' demand for MSP will face their first test in this region.

Another seat that is crucial to the BJP's plans is Mathura, from where Adityanath kick-started the BJP's Jan Vishwas Yatra. A few weeks ago, senior BJP leader and Deputy CM Keshav Prasad Maurya had tweeted: "Ayodhya Kashi bhava mandir nirman jaari hai Mathura ki taiyari hai (Grand temples are being built at Ayodhya and Kashi, preparations are on for Mathura)."

Among the seats going to the polls in this phase is Meerut, where PM Narendra Modi laid the foundation for the Major Dhyan Chand Sports University, and Jyoti, where an international airport is in the works. All the seven Assembly constituencies of Aligarh district are also going to the polls in this phase.

Mayawati to EC: curb rising 'misuse' of religion during elections

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
LUCKNOW, JANUARY 9

BAHUJAN SAMAJ Party (BSP) president Mayawati on Sunday expressed concern about the "increasing" use of religion in politics during elections and asked the Election Commission (EC) to take steps to curb it.

The former chief minister claimed that the BJP, the ruling party, would not be able to win next month's elections without misusing government machinery and manipulating voting machines.

The BSP chief's comments came a day after Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath said the elections would be one of "80 per cent versus 20 per cent", alluding to the state's religious demographic composition.

"In the past few years, during the elections, there have been attempts to derive electoral advantage using religion. This affects the election and the entire country is worried about this," Mayawati told reporters before chairing a meeting to shortlist her party's candidates for the elections.

MANIPUR

Having outsmarted Cong in 2017, BJP is now miles ahead

JIMMY LEIVON
IMPHAL, JANUARY 9

MUCH WATER has flown under the bridge since the Bharatiya Janata Party trumped the Congress to form its first ever government in Manipur, even after finishing seven seats behind it. The Congress, once the most powerful party in the state with 15 years in government before 2017, is a shadow of itself, having lost several stalwarts to the BJP.

The tally of the BJP's 21 against the Congress's 28 in the 2017 polls was also a result of the performance of the smaller parties, which between them won 10 of the total 60 seats, influencing the power dynamics for the first time. The BJP had formed the government in alliance with Conrad Sangma's National People's Party (NPP) and Nagaland's Naga People's Front (NPF), which had won four seats each.

These regional parties are likely to pull their weight this time too, though there is no clear alliance. As the ruling party both in the state and Centre, the BJP of course offers a much more promising alternative.

Incumbent Chief Minister Biren Singh also goes into the election with several positives such as policies that tried to bridge the gap between the hill and valley areas (seen as having widened under former CM Okram Ibobi Singh), and the decline in the long bandhs and



Chief Minister Biren Singh

MANIPUR CONG V-P SWITCHES TO BJP

Imphal: In yet another blow to the Congress in Manipur, the party's state vice president Dr Chaltonlai Amo joined the Bharatiya Janata Party on Sunday. The development comes a day after the Election Commission of India (ECI) announced the poll dates for Assembly election of five states, including Manipur. Amo is the MLA of Tiapi Mukh. ENS

blockades which the state used to see. While he faced rebellion from within, the former football player managed to survive.

On the flip side, the Biren government was accused of cracking down on voices of dissent, with a series of arrests under the UAPA. These included at least three of journalists, with Kishor Chandra Wangkhem detained under the NSA twice. Setting him free, the court said the allegations against him did not constitute sedition.

The Congress, on the other hand, has been sliding since the BJP outsmarted it to seize power.

Model code in, PM photo out of jab certificate

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 9

WITH THE MODEL code of conduct coming into effect in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Goa and Manipur, the Union Health Ministry has decided to "exclude" the picture of Prime Minister Narendra Modi from the Covid-19 vaccine certificates in these states.

An official source said, "Health Ministry will apply necessary filters on CoWIN platform to exclude picture of prime minister from COVID-19 certificates being given to people in five poll-bound states because of model code of conduct coming into force."

The source said that they have already applied the filters and the name and photo of the Prime Minister were removed since Saturday night in five poll-bound states.



RULE PLAY

Poll hoardings are pulled down in Ludhiana after the model code came into effect. Gurmeet Singh

SUKHBIR SIWACH

CHANDIGARH, JANUARY 9

According to Chaduni, candidate announcement was halted at the last minute.

Chaduni told The Indian Express: "Both parties had plans to announce their candidates for the Punjab polls Sunday. But in a meeting held in Chandigarh, we reached a consensus to put the list of candidates on hold for the time being. We will see whether any progress takes place for a possible alliance in the coming days. As of now, we can't say how things will take shape in the future."

Chaduni has been stating all along that he will try to bring all farm outfits on one platform for the upcoming polls.



Balbir Singh Rajewal (left); Gurnam Singh Chaduni

He said: "It would be good if we contest the elections together. I have been insisting on this since the beginning, but I did not get the desired response (from other factions) earlier. It's not good if both factions contest

the elections separately."

Meanwhile, Rajewal on Sunday ruled out an alliance with the Aam Aadmi Party for next month's Assembly polls.

During the recent farmer agitation, Chaduni had emerged as a firebrand leader of farmers, while Rajewal was seen as a good orator. It is believed that if both factions join hands, then they may pull impressive crowds in the poll rallies too.

The decision of farmer leaders to jump in the poll fray is seen as significant because the election is taking place in the backdrop of the farmers' agitation that made the central govern-

ment withdraw the contentious farm laws.

It is further believed that if both factions join hands, then it may emerge as a formidable force in Punjab with the farmer outfits having units at village level apart from an army of volunteers and dedicated supporters.

Nearly a week before it, Bhartiya Kisan Union (Chaduni) president Gurnam Singh Chaduni, who has been suggesting that farmer and majdoor leaders join politics, had launched his political outfit, Samyukt Sangharsh Party. Then, Chaduni had stated: "Those who indulged in wrong practices have entered into the politics and need to be thrown out."

Political experts say the united fight by farmer outfits may dent the vote bank of mainstream political parties in Punjab especially when the state is heading for a multi-cornered contest where even a small swing in vote share can make a huge difference.

As many as 22 Punjab farmer

Punjab farm leaders put candidate list on hold, open alliance talks

MAYURA JANWALKAR
PANAJI, JANUARY 9



Vishwajit Rane and his father Pratapsingh Rane

Rane has to take a call now that might have a crucial bearing on the prospects of the two leading contenders in the February 14 elections to the 40-member Assembly. His party, the Congress, which has been reeling under desertions and is now down to 2 MLAs from

its single largest party tally of 17 secured in the 2017 polls, has already declared Rane's candidature from his bastion, Poriem, in North Goa's Sattari taluka, which they have not lost in 45 years.

What created a stir then was his son Vishwajit Rane's announcement that he will throw his hat into the ring in Poriem. A four-time MLA from the neighbouring Valpoi constituency in Sattari, Vishwajit is currently state health minister in the BJP government.

Vehemently opposing the idea of his father contesting yet another election, Vishwajit insisted that the senior Rane must "gracefully retire" after completing 50 years as an MLA.

The Congress stalwart will

soon turn 83. At the time Goa was liberated from Portuguese rule in 1961, he was pursuing a management degree in the US. After he returned, Dayanand Bandodkar, the first CM of liberated Goa and founder of the Marathi Sanghatani Party (MGP), invited him to join his party — and thus began his political life.

Rane was first elected as an MLA in the third Legislative Assembly of Goa, Damian and Diu in 1972 on the MGP ticket. He later joined the Congress and was appointed as the Goa CM in 1980, which was followed by five other stints as the CM. He served twice as the Speaker of the Goa Assembly and twice as the

Leader of the Opposition. Following his father's footsteps, Vishwajit, 50, joined politics and got elected as a legislator. He has also not lost any election so far since he first won the Valpoi seat as a Congress candidate in 2007. He won two subsequent polls from the constituency. But upset over Congress's failure in forming government despite emerging as the single largest party in 2017, he switched to the BJP. He then won the Valpoi bypoll on the BJP ticket and became a minister.

Vishwajit had also served as

health minister in the Congress government in 2007 and has been handling this portfolio in the BJP government since 2017.

Vishwajit had also served as health minister in the Congress government in 2007 and has been handling this portfolio in the BJP government since 2017.

As many as 22 Punjab farmer

organisations had floated their own political front, Samyukt Sangharsh, two weeks back, and declared Bhartiya Kisan Union (Rajewal) president Balbir Singh Rajewal (78) as the face of their front.

Nearly a week before it, Bhartiya Kisan Union (Chaduni) president Gurnam Singh Chaduni, who has been suggesting that farmer and majdoor leaders join politics, had launched his political outfit, Samyukt Sangharsh Party. Then, Chaduni had stated: "Those who indulged in wrong practices have entered into the politics and need to be thrown out."

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As many as 22 Punjab farmer



DELHI CONFIDENTIAL



BIRTHDAY WISHES

AS EXTERNAL Affairs Minister S Jaishankar was greeted by many on his birthday, two wishes stood out. First was from Prime Minister Narendra Modi who said Jaishankar has been making outstanding contributions to Indian foreign policy as an officer and now as a minister. "His strategic insights are also very valuable. Praying for his long and healthy life," Modi tweeted. And the second was from French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian who spoke to Jaishankar and wished him on his birthday as they discussed their strategic priorities.

HOUSE CURBS

WITH THE Covid situation turning critical, Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla and Rajya Sabha Chairman M Venkaiah Naidu have placed restrictions on attendance for Parliament staff. As many as 400 staffers – 200 of Lok Sabha Secretariat, 65 from Rajya Sabha and 133 of allied services have tested positive between January 4 to 8. According to the new guidelines, 50 per cent of officials and staff below the rank of Under Secretary/Executive officer have been asked to work from home till month end. They constitute about 65 per cent of the total employees. Officials above this would be attending office everyday, with staggered timing.

POLLS AND TIES

THE CPM may have tied up with Congress in West Bengal and was part of the Congress-led alliance in Assam, but in Uttar Pradesh it will throw its weight behind Samajwadi Party. It is another matter that the party does not have much presence in UP. The CPM believes it is the SP which is in a position to challenge the BJP. The CPM has also decided not to enter into any tie-up with Congress at the national level, but there will be state-level understandings. The party's Kerala unit was vociferously opposed to any electoral understanding with the Congress at the national level. The CPM at its central committee meeting in Hyderabad also decided to hold its national conclave as planned in Kerala's Kannur in the first half of April.

Adi Sankaracharya's birthplace likely to be national monument

DIVYAA
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 9

THE NATIONAL Monuments Authority chairman Tarun Vijay last week met Kerala governor Arif Mohammad Khan regarding the declaration of the birthplace of Adi Sankaracharya in the state as a monument of national importance. After the meeting, Vijay said Khan has assured all help regarding "due importance to birthplace of one of India's greatest seers".

With water march, Congress looks for firm footing in south Karnataka

JOHNSONTA
BENGALURU, JANUARY 9

THE KARNATAKA Congress on Sunday launched a 10-day foot march amid Covid curbs to push for the creation of the Mekedatu reservoir. On the party's mind, however, is more than the project on the Cauvery that is meant to supply drinking water to Bengaluru and its surrounding regions in south Karnataka.

South Karnataka is home to the Vokkaliga — one of the two dominant communities in the state — that makes up 15 per cent of the population. The other major group is the Lingayat community that is mostly concentrated in north Karnataka and makes up 17 per cent of the state's six crore population.

The general pattern that has emerged since the 2004 state elections shows that the Lingayats support the BJP and the Vokkaligas the Janata Dal (Secular). This has resulted in poll stalemates in 2004, 2008 and 2018 — bringing mergers and horse-trading into play to form government.

Political wisdom now suggests that the BJP needs the support of the Vokkaligas to win a clear majority; the JD(S) needs the Lingayats; and the Congress needs at least one of the big communities to support it to build on the existing base among backward classes, Dalits and minorities.

This is one of the primary reasons the Congress has launched the over 100-km protest march in the midst of Covid restrictions — to galvanise support in south



The 10-day foot march to demand the implementation of water reservoir project begins in Mekedatu on Sunday. PTI

E JD(S) tries to counter

THE CONGRESS' Mekedatu march has made the JD(S), which has a considerable base in south Karnataka, sit up and take notice. Last week, the party announced a programme of its own on the water issue. It will collect water from 15 rivers in the state from January 26 and perform a "Ganga Puja". JD(S) counter shows the political importance of the Congress move.

Karnataka, where the BJP was non-existent until recently.

In the 2018 polls, the Congress won 19 of the 61 seats in the southern Mysuru-Karnataka region while the JD(S) won 29 seats and the BJP got 11 seats.

The Mekedatu march is a brainchild of the state Congress chief D K Shivakumar, himself a

NEET counselling for PG seats to begin on Jan 12

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 9

DAYS AFTER the Supreme Court ended the stalemate over admissions to NEET post-graduate programmes for the academic year 2021-22, the government announced that the counselling process will commence from January 12.

"As per the assurance given by the Ministry of Health to the resident doctors, following the order of the Hon'ble Supreme Court, the NEET-PG counselling will be started by the MCC [Medical Counselling Committee] from January 12, 2022," Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya said in a tweet on Sunday. "This will give more strength to the country in fight against Corona. My best wishes to all candidates."

On Friday, the Supreme Court in an interim order directed that counselling for NEET-PG programmes may proceed on the basis of the July 29, 2021 government notification by which 10 per cent seats were reserved for Economically Weaker Section (EWS) and 27 per cent for Other Backward Classes candidates.

Meanwhile, the National Board of Examinations in Medical Sciences (NBEMS), which conducts NEET, announced that the individual score card for NEET-PG 2021 for all-India seats will be released on Sunday evening.

"Individual score card for NEET-PG 2021 All India 50% quota seats will be available for download at NEET-PG website <https://nbe.edu.in> from 9th January 2022 onwards," the NBE said.

NBEMS had declared the NEET PG 2021 result on September 28 last year and the counselling process was supposed to begin in October but was delayed due to a stay by the SC following a bunch of petitions challenging the government's July 29 notification.

Resident doctors had protested against the delay in NEET-PG counselling, with the Federation of Resident Doctors' Association (FORDA) leading a protest that affected healthcare services in big hospitals in the national Capital such as Safdarjung, Dr Ram Manohar Lohia, Lady Hardinge and associated hospitals.

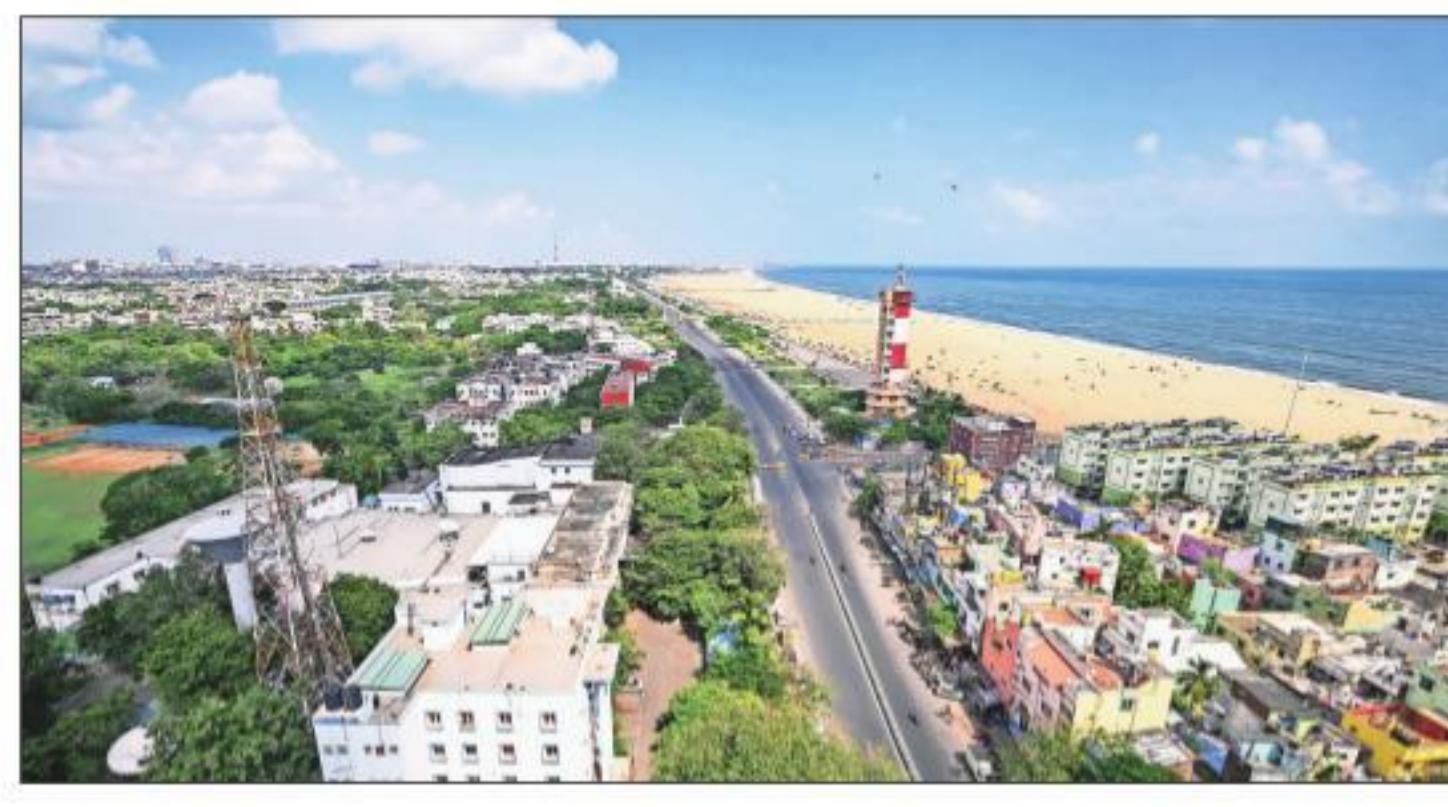
The doctors began their protest in November-end, suspended the agitation for a week on December 9, before resuming the protest on December 17. On December 31, following assurances from government that the process would be fast-tracked, they finally called off the agitation.

Delivering the order on Friday, a Supreme Court bench of Justices D Y Chandrachud and A S Bopanna also accepted the recommendation of the Ajay Bhushan Pandey Committee to stick to the prescribed Rs 8 lakh income limit for EWS quota for the current admission cycle.

"There is an urgent need to commence the process of counselling," said the bench. "We accept the recommendation of the Pandey Committee that the criteria stipulated in OM (office memorandum) 2019 (for EWS) (which prescribed the Rs 8 lakh limit) be used for 2021-2022 in order to ensure that the admission process is not dislocated," the bench said.

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RISING COVID-19 CASES

Night curfew on weekends, schools shut in Rajasthan

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
JAIPUR, JANUARY 9

THE RAJASTHAN government on Sunday decided to suspend regular teaching activities for classes 1-12 in schools and coaching centres falling under the jurisdiction of municipalities across the state till January 30.

Under new guidelines issued in the wake of rising Covid-19 cases in the state, curfew will be imposed from 11 pm on Saturdays and lifted on 5 am on Mondays. This is in addition to the daily night curfew that already exists between 11 pm and 5 am.

The government said that while the order to close schools and coaching centres would come into effect immediately, the other orders would be applicable from January 11.

The government on Sunday also brought down the number of people allowed to attend weddings in municipal areas to 50 from the previous 100. This limit is also applicable to other public, social, political and religious events.

The Home Department order said religious places could remain open from 5 am to 8 pm.

98% INFECTED IN U.P.
ISOLATING AT HOME

AS COVID-19 cases continue to rise in poll-bound Uttar Pradesh with the state reporting 7,695 new cases in last 24 hours, the government on Sunday said 98 per cent of the total 25,974 active cases are in home isolation "signifying the mildness of Omicron variant".

Gautam Buddha Nagar, Lucknow, Ghaziabad and Meerut continue to add most of the new infections. The four districts have the highest number of active infections too. ENS

CHENNAI LOCKDOWN

The Kamarajar Salai locality near Marina beach in Chennai wears a deserted look during a one-day state lockdown imposed by the Tamil Nadu government to curb the spread of Covid-19. The state recorded 12,895 cases on Sunday. PTI

Mumbai registers dip in daily cases for second day

RUPSA CHAKRABORTY
AND ASHISH CHANDRA
MUMBAI/PUNE, JANUARY 9

WHILE MUMBAI registered a slight dip in coronavirus cases for the second day running, Pune saw its biggest single-day jump during the third wave and recorded 6,464 new cases on Sunday.

Mumbai reported 19,474 cases on Sunday, slightly less than 20,318 cases registered on Saturday. Across the state, 44,388 new cases were reported.

Experts attributed the slight dip in cases in Mumbai to a small drop in testing on Sunday, unreported positive cases because of at-home antigen testing kits and backlog of RT-PCR test reports.

Mumbai is the first city in the country showing signs that the rise in Covid-19 cases may be stabilising. Delhi, which was the first to experience the surge of the third wave along with Mumbai, though, is continuing to report higher numbers every day. Other cities and states have also been on the upward journey.

Manindra Agrawal, a professor of mathematics and computer science at IIT Kanpur, who has been running a computer model to simulate the pandemic's trajectory, had said he expected Mumbai to peak around the middle of this month. At an Idea Exchange programme at The Indian Express, he said the detection of new cases in Mumbai were likely to come

down as quickly as it had risen.

But Pune's upward journey is likely to continue for some time. On Sunday, over 4,000 cases were reported from the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) areas while Pimpri-Chinchwad contributed over 1,500 cases.

Mumbai, meanwhile, hasn't witnessed any surge in numbers for four consecutive days now. Since Thursday, the daily cases have been stable. On January 6, a total of 19,780 cases were detected which increased slightly by 5.6 per cent on January 7 with 20,971 fresh cases. On January 8, it dropped to 20,318 by 3.1 per cent. On January 9, the daily cases plunged further to 19,474 with a 4.1 per cent drop.



HELPING HAND

Indian Army soldiers carry a pregnant woman on a stretcher for urgent medical assistance during heavy snowfall near Ramnagri in J&K's Shopian district. PTI

Iran offers help to send Covid aid to Afghanistan

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 9

WITH PAKISTAN dragging its feet on allowing foodgrains from India to Afghanistan, Iran has now offered to assist India in the transportation of wheat, medicines and Covid vaccines to Afghanistan, which has been reeling under a serious humanitarian crisis.

The offer was made by Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian during a telephonic conversation with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Saturday, as per the Iranian foreign ministry.

In the conversation, Amir-

Abdollahian also called for the formation of an inclusive government in Kabul, the Iranian foreign ministry said.

"Regarding Afghanistan, Amir-Abdollahian stressed the need to form an inclusive government in the country. He also referred to India's humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, announcing measures and cooperation by the Islamic Republic of Iran to transfer the aid to the country," it said.

This came a day after India on Friday delivered two tonnes of essential life-saving medicines to Afghanistan, in what is the third consignment of humanitarian assistance to the country since Taliban took over.

Kerala actor booked for 'plan to kill' officer probing assault case

SHAJU PHILIP
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM,
JANUARY 9

THE CRIME branch of Kerala Police on Sunday registered a new case against Malayalam actor Dileep after allegations he had planned to kill officers who had probed him over the sexual assault and abduction of an actress in 2017.

The sensational sexual assault case is being heard in a special court in Kochi and is in its final stages. Dileep is one of the accused.

Five others, including

Dileep's brother Anoop and his brother-in-law Suraj, have also been named in the new FIR, which follows film director Balachandran Kumar's deposition before the police that the actor had conspired to "annihilate the investigating officer and his

team members". Quoting Balachandran Kumar, the FIR says: "... pointing his fingers at the visuals of A V George (then Kochi city police commissioner), Dileep said you five officials are going to suffer... Sojan, Sudarasan, Sandhya, Baiju Poulose, then you. The hand of Sudarasan, who manhandled me, should be chopped off."

The FIR further states: "Dileep's brother-in-law Suraj said tomorrow when Baiju Poulose is going, in the event of a truck or a lorry hitting him... we have to look for Rs 1.50 crore..." The FIR states the conspiracy to target the officials took place at

FULL REPORT ON www.indianexpress.com

17 cops hurt in clash with 'cow smugglers' at Bangladesh border

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
KOLKATA, JANUARY 9

AT LEAST 17 police personnel were injured in a clash with suspected cow smugglers at the India-Bangladesh border at Melkhiganj area in Cooch Behar on Sunday. Two men and four women were arrested, and 34 cows rescued.

In a similar incident in Malda district on Saturday, a Bangladeshi national was killed in a skirmish between Border Security Force (BSF) personnel

and 30-40 suspected cow smugglers.

Sharing the sequence of the Cooch Behar incident, an officer said a police team reached Ulupukuri village after being tipped-off about cows being smuggled across the border. The team was attacked by a group of people, said the police officer.

Eight of the 17 injured police personnel were admitted to the nearby Melkhiganj Sub Divisional Hospital. Six people were arrested for allegedly attacking the policemen. Despite the attack, the police were able

to rescue 34 cows from a shed. A huge police contingent has been deployed in the area to alleviate the tension.

Reacting to the incident, BJP leader Dilip Ghosh hit out at the state government for objecting to the extension of BSFs jurisdiction to 50 km within international border areas.

"Such incidents prove how unsafe our border areas are. I want to know what these people have to say who have time and again opposed the Centre's decision to extend the jurisdiction of the BSF from 15 to 50 km in the

international border... Our borders are unsafe..." said Ghosh. TMC MLA from Cooch Behar Udayan Guha attacked the BSF for not being proactive. "If the BSF had done its job perfectly, such smugglers wouldn't have entered villages," said Guha.

In the second incident in Malda, a BSF team was attacked by suspected cow smugglers at the Pannapur border outpost early on Saturday. One Magbhol Hussain (25) from Naogaon in Bangladesh was killed in the clash. Two heads of cattle were rescued.

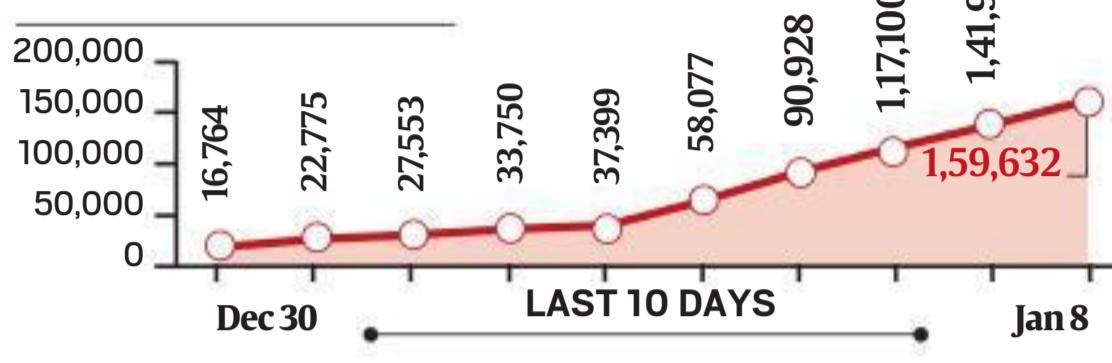
"Around 6 am, the jawans at the outpost noticed the movement of 15-20 suspected smugglers with animals near a fence in the Indian territory on the international border. At the same time, about (another) 15-20 smugglers with arms and batons (lathi) from the Bangladeshi side came 200 meters inside the Indian territory," read a BSF statement. According to the BSF, the group, when asked to stop, attacked the jawans with stones and daggers.

TRACKING INDIA'S COVID CURVE

DASHBOARD, AS ON JAN 8

678 DAYS SINCE PANDEMIC BEGAN	New cases 1,59,632	Active cases 5,90,611	Deaths 327
	Weekly CFR: 4.34% Overall CFR: 1.39% Total deaths: 4,83,790		

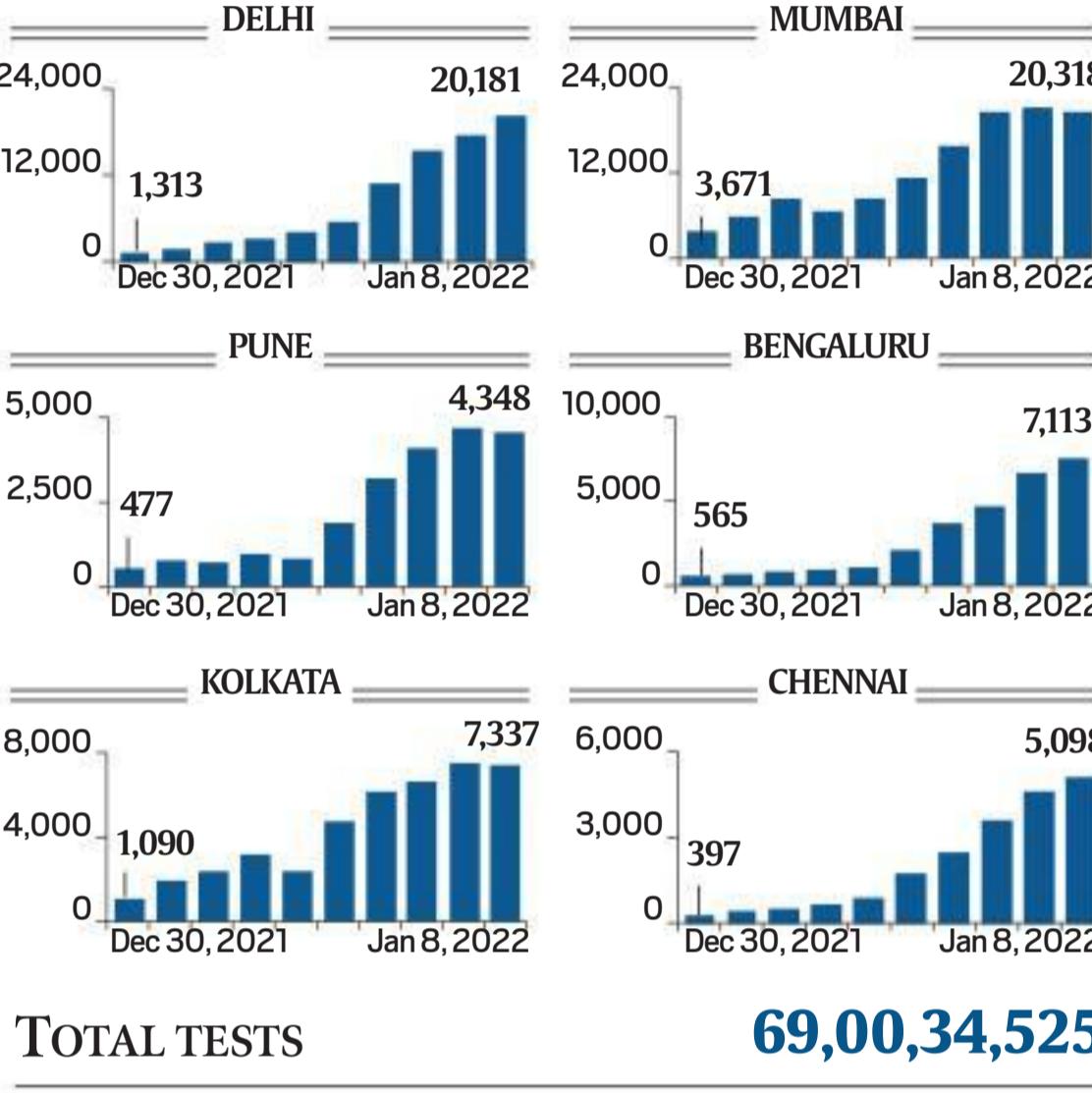
NEW CASES, DAILY



SURGE IN THE STATES

State	ON JANUARY 5			Weekly positivity
	New Cases	Active Cases	Deaths	
Maharashtra	41,434	173,238	17	15.57%
Delhi	20,181	48,178	7	12.94%
West Bengal	18,802	62,055	19	23.52%
Tamil Nadu	10,978	40,260	10	4.55%
Karnataka	8,906	38,536	4	3.48%

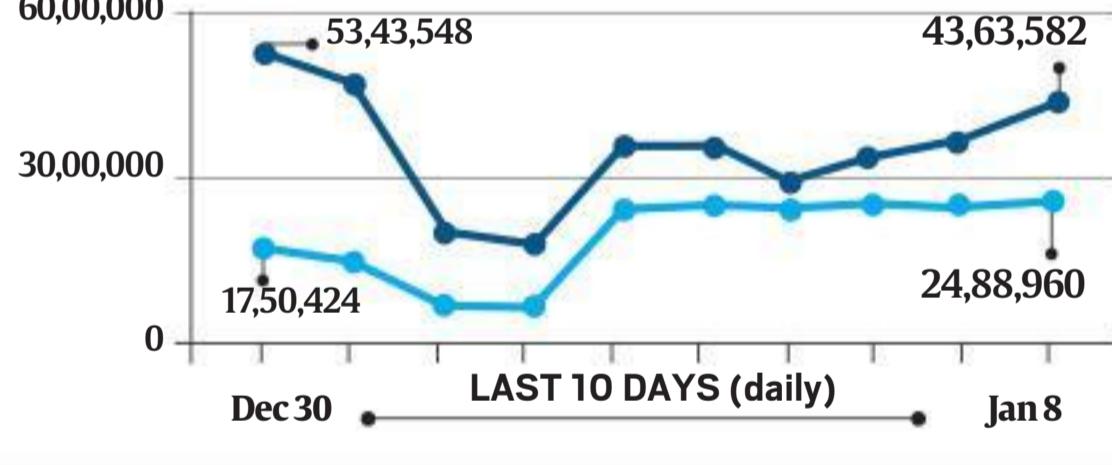
SURGE IN THE CITIES, LAST 10 DAYS



TOTAL TESTS

TESTS ON JAN 8 **15,63,566**WEEKLY POSITIVITY **6.41%**OVERALL POSITIVITY **5.15%**INDIA TOTAL DOSES **149,28,10,865**

(1st DOSE: 86,08,12,039; 2nd: 63,19,98,826)



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Dharma sansad and mahamandaleshwar: who they are, the role they play

LALMANI VERMA

LUCKNOW, JANUARY 9

THE ORGANISERS of the dharma sansad in Haridwar have announced a "pratikar sabha" on January 16 to protest the FIRs registered against them in connection with the hate speeches at the three-day meeting last month.

Several Hindu religious leaders had given incendiary addresses targeting the minority community at the closed-door conclave organised from December 17-19.

The speakers were mahamandaleshwars of the various akharas or religious orders of Hinduism. The chief organiser of the Haridwar dharma sansad, Hindutva leader Yati Narsinghanand, is mahamandaleshwar of Juna Akhara. Swami Prabodhanand Giri and Annapurna Ma, who spoke at the sansad, are mahamandaleshwars of Juna Akhara and Niranjan Akhara respectively.

VHP's dharma sansads

A dharma sansad, literally, religious parliament, is a platform of Hindu religious lead-

ers or sants, where decisions are taken on issues considered important to the dharma.

The first dharma sansad was organised by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) at Vigyan Bhawan in New Delhi in 1984, where a decision was taken to launch the Ramjanmabhoomi movement.

At the next dharma sansad held in Udupi in 1985, eight resolutions were passed, one of which demanded that Shri Ramjanmabhoomi, Shri Krishnajanmasthan and the Kashi Vishwanath complex should be immediately handed over to the Hindu samaj.

The margadarshak mandal decides the participants, which include the sants from the akharas. These sants may participate themselves or send their representatives to the sansad.

VHP joint general secretary Surendra Jain said the parishad has so far organised 17 dharma sansads, which are in the nature of

routine meetings to receive guidance from sants.

The VHP's last dharma sansad was held in Haridwar in 2019, when the sants had asked then Uttarakhand Chief Minister Trivendra Singh Rawat to free temples from government control.

VHP and other sansads

Over the years, newer organisations have called their own dharma sansads, which the VHP has tacitly approved. According to Jain, while the VHP organised the first dharma sansad in 1984, anybody could hold a dharma sansad.

"Development of new traditions and methods is the specialty of Hindu dharma," he said. "If anyone else uses this title, that does not reduce the dignity and glory of the VHP's dharma sansad."

Jain, however, dissociated his organisation from the Haridwar meeting last month.

"That was not the VHP's dharma sansad. VHP has not patented the term dharma sansad, but the entire nation understands what is the language of the VHP and what is not," he said.

Jain also said that Yati Narsinghanand was not in the VHP's margadarshak mandal, and that he had never spoken from a VHP platform.

Every akhara's sansad

Juna Akhara president Prem Giri Maharaj defined a dharma sansad simply as a meeting of sants, and said that every akhara regularly holds its own dharma sansads.

"If a mahamandaleshwar holds a meeting of 200-400 followers and preaches a sermon, that is also a dharma sansad," he said.

Ravindra Puri, secretary of Niranjan Akhara, said that dharma sansads are intended to propagate sanatan dharma, and the message of the Bhagavad Gita and the Ramayana. Ravindra Puri said that he opposed a dharma sansad of the kind held in Haridwar because, "A dharma sansad should not be a political platform. It should not be against anyone and it should have positive thoughts and a positive message."

Akhara ambassadors

All 13 akharas in the country nominate

mahamandaleshwars to propagate sanatan dharma as the representative of the akhara. The mahamandaleshwar has no role in the internal organisation and financial affairs of the akhara, which is run by an executive body of the akhara concerned.

The akharas have their own norms for appointing mahamandaleshwars. In Juna Akhara, a prospective mahamandaleshwar's name is proposed by an existing mahamandaleshwar or other senior functionary.

"It is good if he is educated. But more important is speaking skills that can attract and impress people. He must be able to hold sat-sangs, guide followers, and have knowledge of the shastras and the confidence to speak to gatherings of 50-100 people at least," Juna Akhara president Prem Giri Maharaj said.

In Niranjan Akhara, an aspiring mahamandaleshwar should be educated, have knowledge of the shastras, should be able to propagate sanatan dharma, and should have his own ashram or at least an educational institution to hold sat-sangs and teach sanatan dharma.

"They are given the honour of mahamandaleshwar with the expectation that

they will propagate sanatan dharma as our representative and brighten the name of the akhara," said Ravindra Puri.

There are more than 100 mahamandaleshwars of the Niranjan Akhara working across the country, he said.

Mahant Ramdas of Hanuman Garhi, Ayodhya, who is associated with the Nirnmoji Akhara, said his akhara has more than 1,000 mahamandaleshwars, who are given the title of "Shri Mahant". They are assigned the tasks of creating awareness about the importance of the Ganga, the conservation of heritage and the environment, protection of sanatan dharma, gau seva, giving deeksha to followers, organising camps in Kumbh melas, and working for the protection of temples, Ramdas said.

The mahamandaleshwars are part of the Peshwari process of their akharas during Kumbh Melas; they also hold sat-sangs during the Mela.

According to Ramdas: "We make sure that the person who is made a mahamandaleshwar has not been sentenced by a court in any case, and he has not been associated with any other religion in the past."

EXPLAINED POLITICS

Politics of UP, over the years

UP, which dominates national politics, has had an eventful history in its Assembly elections as well. As the state heads for polls, a look at its frequently changing governments and CMs, and the role of key leaders.

SHYAMLAL YADAV

NEW DELHI, JANUARY 9

WITH 80 seats out of the 543 in Lok Sabha, 403 in the Assembly, and 31 of the 245 in Rajya Sabha, besides a 100-member Legislative Council, Uttar Pradesh with its over 15 crore voters carries more weight than any other state in the country's politics. Yogi Adityanath, who took oath as Chief Minister on March 19, 2017, will be the third (after Akhilesh Yadav and Mayawati) to complete their five-year tenure.

Of the 403 Assembly seats, 9 are currently vacant; out of the effective membership of 394, the BJP has 303, the SP 49, the BSP 15 and the Congress 7. As UP heads for elections across seven phases between February 10 and March 7, a look at its political history:

2017: Yogi's emergence

The 2017 elections marked the return of the BJP—which swept the state with 312 seats, not counting its allied tallies—and the emergence of Yogi Adityanath. The head of Gorakhpur, Adityanath was a Lok Sabha MP when the BJP decided to install him as Chief Minister. The BJP had fought the election without projecting a CM candidate. Then MP Keshav Prasad Maurya, who had come to BJP from Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), was the state party president. Adityanath's nomination surprised many in the party.

While the RSS and state BJP general secretary (organisation) Sunil Bansal are known to have influenced his government's decisions, Adityanath has managed to create a perception that his potential challengers within the party in UP are now on the back foot. Today, his supporters see a bigger role for him at the Centre in coming years.

2012: Akhilesh's anointment

Under Mulayam Singh Yadav, the Samajwadi Party (SP) had earned the reputation of being a party of musclemen. Akhilesh, his engineer son, prevented the entry of some criminals in the SP. That, and his promises of free laptops and dole for unemployed youth, worked in his favour. In an election in which the BJP brought Uma Bharti to contest the Charkhari seat, word emerged that Mulayam would make his son the CM. The SP won 224 seats, and Akhilesh was sworn in as the youngest CM of the state at age 38.

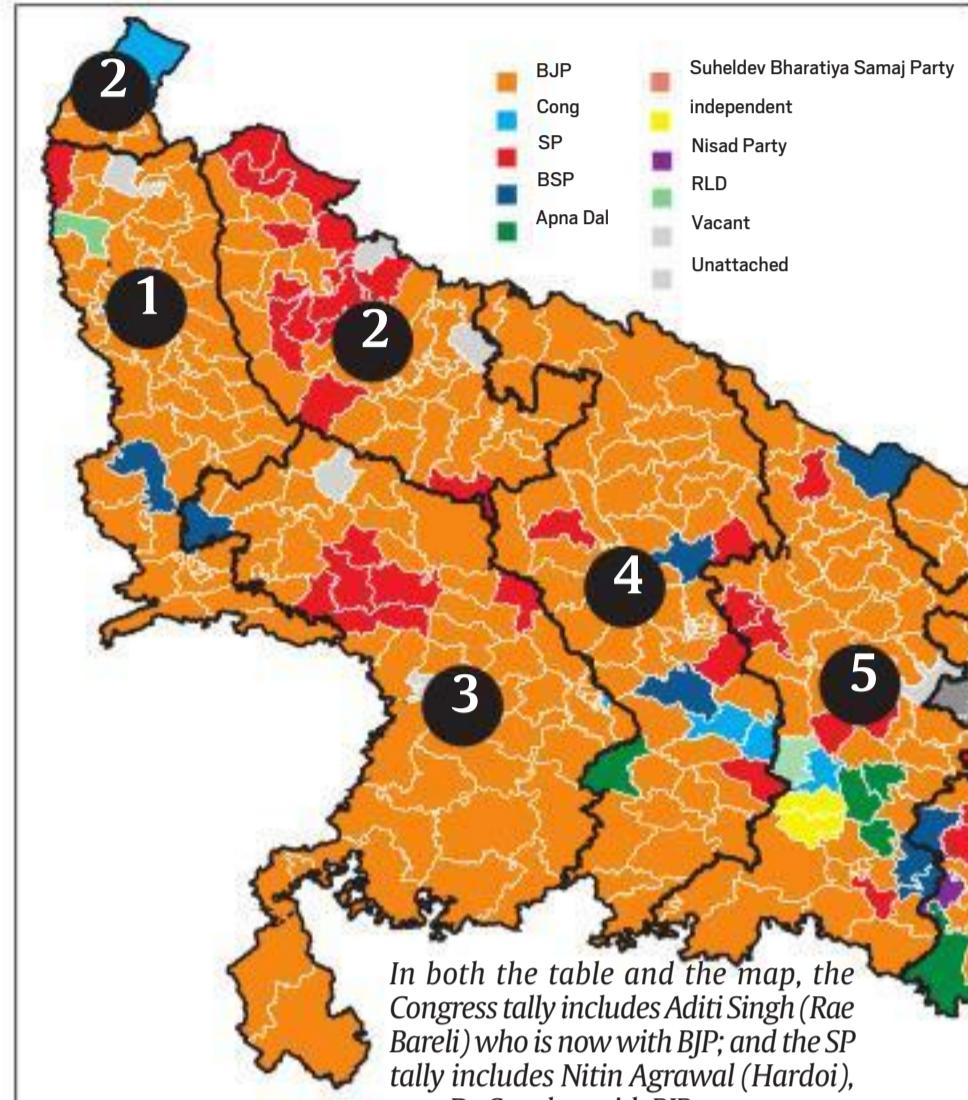
Akhilesh's regime was marked by internal problems. Akhilesh was also seen as reducing himself to a leader of Yadavs, and a large section of Muslims. He hesitated to speak on reservation and other issues that are key to his party's support base, and the BJP spread the message that a number of candidates of only his caste were being selected through the state Public Service Commission. He seized leadership of his party, sidelining his uncles, but lost the 2017 elections he once thought would be a cakewalk.

2007: Mayawati's comeback

Mayawati's fourth stint as Chief Minister was historic because she won the first single-party majority since 1991. Her social engineering included Brahmins, whom her mentor Kanshi Ram had opposed, and the Dalit-Brahmin combination brought her 206 seats. Mayawati became the first CM of UP to complete a full five-year tenure (2007-12). She and her aide Satish Mishra are trying the same caste-based formula in 2022.

2002: Mayawati's return

Following a spell of President's Rule from March to May 2002, Mayawati became Chief Minister for the third time after the BJP extended support to the BSP. But some BJP leaders started campaigning against the alliance, and Mayawati resigned in August 2003. Mulayam was sworn in with the support of BSP dissidents, and ran the government until 2007. While the NDA lost power in 2004 at the



THE OUTGOING ASSEMBLY

Party	Current strength*	2017 results
BJP	303	312
Apna Dal**	9	9
NISHAD**	1	1
SP	49	47
BSP	15	19



POLITICAL SURGE

As the incumbent in four of the five states, the polls will be a verdict on BJP — and could reshape contours of the Opposition

AMID THE SURGE of Omicron, the Election Commission has announced the dates for assembly elections in five states, beginning February 10, with several restrictions on campaigning. A consensus had emerged among political parties that polls be held on schedule. The onus is now on the parties to adhere to EC guidelines — for now, till the EC reviews the situation, they must hold virtual, digital campaigns instead of mega rallies. Political parties must let science and data on the pandemic's trajectory guide the voters' journey to the polling booths. They must take the EC's cue — it has raised the limits on campaign expenditure — and devise innovative and safe campaigns.

Of the five states that go to polls, the BJP is the incumbent in four. Uttar Pradesh is the most crucial since winning the state is central to the party's plans for the 2024 general election. The BJP's twin planks of Hindutva and "double-engine growth" — the latter formulation is based on the presumption that it needs the same party to hold office at the Centre and state to facilitate development — will be tested in UP, which sends 80 MPs to the Lok Sabha. The BJP, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi personally, have invested much political capital in UP in the past five years. Chief Minister Adityanath's governance model, which addresses and privileges "Hindu sentiment" while being unforgiving of protest or dissent, will also be on test — no party has won two successive terms in UP since 1985. Modi's frequent forays into the state, whether for laying the foundation stone of the Ram mandir in Ayodhya or for the inauguration of the Kashi Vishwanath corridor complex in his parliamentary constituency of Varanasi, have only served to up the stakes for the BJP. If UP is the state where other parties will find it challenging to battle the BJP, Punjab is for the Congress to lose. For the first time, the state is witnessing a multi-polar contest with the Congress, Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), Aam Aadmi Party, farmers' unions and the BJP in the fray. The farmers' movement forced a split in the SAD-BJP alliance and diminished the influence of both parties but the leadership crisis and the rise of multiple power centres may hurt the Congress's prospects. In Uttarakhand and Manipur, infighting threatens the BJP's prospects of retaining office — the party was forced to change its CM twice in Uttarakhand and factionalism seems rampant in the Manipur BJP. The entry of Trinamool Congress and AAP complicates the picture in Goa, where elections have historically been bipolar and determined by local issues.

While the BJP has much to lose in these elections, the results could be transformative for the Opposition. The Congress is the main challenger of the BJP in the poll-bound states barring Punjab, where it is in a pivotal position. Failure to perform well in these elections will further dent the Congress's claim to lead the Opposition space which is now bristling with ambitious regional forces. Goa is an important test for the TMC, while Punjab offers another opportunity for the AAP to grow beyond Delhi. March 10, when results come in, is likely to be a day of reckoning for both the ruling party and the Opposition.

SIMMERING CHALLENGE

Recent developments on China front are disquieting. Delhi has broken its silence, but road ahead is not easy

CHINA AND INDIA are scheduled to meet on Wednesday for another round of border talks in Eastern Ladakh in the shadow of developments that are none too reassuring. The Chinese People's Liberation Army is building across a portion of the Pangong Lake, which while being on China's side of the LAC, has implications for India's defence of its territory. Meanwhile, Beijing has also "standardised" names of several places in Arunachal Pradesh, giving them Chinese names. Then, a junior diplomat in the Chinese Embassy in Delhi ticked off Indian parliamentarians for attending a Tibet-related event. While 13 previous rounds of talks between the ground commanders of the Indian Army and PLA have yielded disengagement at Pangong and Gogra, an anticipated agreement for disengagement at Hot Springs could not take place. Moreover, the continuing tensions all along the LAC, particularly the build-up by the Chinese in the Western sector of the contested line, offer no comfort. Until the two sides can resolve differences in the strategic Depsang Area, where Indian troops are being prevented from accessing traditional patrolling points, de-escalation will remain elusive. The construction of the bridge over Pangong is an indication that Beijing is in fact preparing for a long haul. Beijing is also building other roads and bridges and reinforcing military infrastructure, all on its side of the LAC, but certainly not a sign of two countries moving towards resolution.

Last week, the Ministry of External Affairs denounced the "standardisation" of names in Arunachal as "ridiculous", and rightly said this would not alter the fact that Arunachal is an inalienable part of India. It also reprimanded the Chinese Embassy for "hyping normal activities" by Indian parliamentarians. Significantly, it described the new bridge as a construction in Indian territory that China had "illegally occupied" in the 1962 war, declaring that India had "never accepted such illegal occupation". That it took days for Delhi to break its silence on these matters, however, is puzzling. Now that this is done, the real question is how India is going to deal with China's heightened military activity along the LAC, apart from getting it to vacate areas that Delhi says are illegally occupied.

Dealing with a powerful neighbour that has unilaterally discarded three decades of agreements that laid down the path to deal with the border issue is not easy. Strangely, the country's political leadership, usually out there projecting global clout with hashtag diplomacy, is yet to take full ownership of the crisis with China which is the first step towards addressing it more frontal.

FREEZE FRAME

E P UNNY



Making room to grow

Government needs to ramp up infrastructure spending, while reducing deficits over medium term



DHARMAKIRTI JOSHI

THE INDIAN ECONOMY is expected to expand at 9.2 per cent in 2021-22 as per the first advance estimate (FAE), broadly in line with expectations. The professional forecasters' survey, published by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in December, had pegged the median value of GDP growth for this fiscal at 9.5 per cent.

One striking feature of the GDP data is the sharp increase in nominal GDP, which is estimated to expand by 17.6 per cent this fiscal, much faster than the 14.4 per cent growth the Union budget had assumed. Double-digit wholesale price inflation and the persistence of high consumer price inflation have led to the surge in nominal GDP and added an upside to tax collections this year.

However, there are three reasons these advance estimates could change.

First, these estimates are based on the limited information available till December and typically undergo a change when new information is available. Second is the emergence of a wild card — the Omicron variant — in this last quarter of the current fiscal year. Although we are yet to grasp the impact it will have on the overall economy, it has certainly injected some uncertainty in the fourth-quarter outlook. Third, as pointed by the National Statistical Office, "the First Revised Estimates for 2020-21 (benchmark year), due for release on 31.01.2022, may also lead to a revision in growth rates reflected in FAE."

Experience tells us that successive waves impact the healthcare sector disproportionately compared with the economy. So, even as this Omicron wave plays out, more vaccinations and learning how to live with the virus will result in more nuanced and progressively less-stringent lockdowns. That said, Omicron will certainly prevent a broad basing of recovery as the contact-based services will slacken again. The budget next month will need a flexible approach to account for these uncertainties.

But what does the GDP data tell us about the state of the economy that could influence budget priorities?

One key worry from the point of sustainability of growth is weak private consumption demand and the frail consumer sentiment. The share of private consumption in GDP has

been falling since the pandemic struck, and the latest RBI survey confirms the weakness.

While consumer sentiment has picked up according to this survey, it still trails the pre-pandemic level. The level of private consumption is still 2.9 per cent below its pre-pandemic year. Consequently, the ratio of private consumption to GDP fell to 54.7 per cent in 2021-22 from 55.6 per cent in 2019-20.

The advance estimates also show that GDP in construction is barely above its pre-pandemic level, while trade, hotels, tourism and other contact-based services, which are also labour-intensive, lag the pre-pandemic levels. Omicron will again hit and delay the normalisation of employment in these segments. These activities are largely urban-centric and will likely need hand-holding from the budget.

Similarly, a pick-up in demand for MGNREGA jobs means a lack of rural employment opportunities. Additionally, rural wages for agriculture and non-agriculture have been flat in real terms. Weak tractor and motorcycle demand mirror the weakness in the rural economy. The budget will need to extend support to rural areas till the situation normalises.

A revival of consumption demand is also needed for a broad-based revival of investments.

The GDP data shows that investments are doing somewhat better than private consumption with their share in GDP crossing the 2019-20 levels. But this is largely due to government investments. While the pre-conditions for an upturn in the private investment cycle are being met gradually, it is too early to label it as broad-based. Uncertainty from the emergence of Omicron will only further delay private investment decisions.

Next month's Union Budget will, therefore, need to continue pressing the pedal hard on infrastructure-focused capital expenditure, which has a higher multiplier effect on the economy and is known to crowd-in private investments. Together with higher allocations, attention also needs to be paid to enhancing execution capacity as well because slackness is creeping into public investments.

The pandemic has also inflated debt and deficit levels across countries. India's debt, estimated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) at around 90 per cent of GDP, is amongst

the highest in the peer group of similarly-rated economies.

Meanwhile, the normalisation of monetary policy has begun. The US Federal Reserve (Fed) no longer views inflation as "transitory" and has brought forward its timeline for normalisation. The Fed is now expected to complete its tapering of asset purchases and raise interest rates three times in 2022. That is a significant change from its guidance a few months ago. Together with domestic inflation concerns, this can trigger the beginning of calibrated rate hike cycle beginning as early as April.

Attention will, therefore, shift to fiscal policy, which needs to play a supportive role while engineering a calibrated reduction in deficits over the medium run. The fiscal position of the government till November 2021 was a tad better than envisaged when the budget was unveiled. Due to robust tax collections, the deficit in the first eight months of the fiscal was 46 per cent of the annual target this year compared to 135 per cent during the same period last year. Spending in the last quarter could rise at a faster pace due to Omicron-led turbulence. Even with that, the deficit target of 6.8 per cent of GDP is very much in sight.

The Finance Commission had estimated the government debt to GDP ratio to decline very gradually from close to 90 per cent currently to 85.6 per cent by 2025-26. The IMF too has a similar prognosis for India's debt trajectory and expects the fiscal deficit/GDP to reduce gradually. Interestingly, debt and deficits as percentage of GDP are projected to remain above their pre-pandemic levels even by 2025-26.

I see the forthcoming budget engineering a similar fiscal trajectory of deficit and debt reduction over the medium run to be achieved with a mix of revenue and expenditure measures. Here, the credibility of divestment targets assumes greater significance as it will improve the fiscal headroom the government has to support the economy.

The upcoming budget for the next fiscal year will show us how the government intends to create and use the fiscal space.

The writer is Chief Economist, CRISIL Ltd



VANDANA CHAVAN

WHILE THE COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on lives and health systems across the world, it has also forced governments globally to become more cognisant of the public health blueprints of their countries. In her budget speech for 2021-2022, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced the government's policy to bolster support for holistic health and well-being. The policy revealed a strong commitment to tackling infectious diseases by pledging to fund four new national virology institutes, nine new high-containment laboratories for studies on highly infectious pathogens, and a National Institute of One Health to coordinate research and surveillance on animal and human infections and several measures to control the spread of Covid. Unfortunately, it did not address other infectious diseases like tuberculosis that have taken a large toll on the country's population in recent decades.

According to the WHO's Global TB Report 2021, an 18 per cent decline in case notifications is perhaps the biggest indicator of the pandemic's impact on global tuberculosis programmes. India reported a substantial drop in notifications — the country reported 18 lakh tuberculosis cases in 2020 compared to 24 lakh cases in 2019. The report observes that with a total estimated incidence of 25.9 lakh TB cases, India is home to a quarter of the global burden of the disease. Since 2016, India has been on a mission mode to eliminate TB by 2025, five years ahead of the global target.

THE NEGLECTED CRISIS

Grassroots workers must breathe new life into TB care, which has suffered due to Covid

Fear of Covid lockdowns and economic stress discouraged people from visiting medical facilities to get tested. This exacerbated the pre-existing health-seeking behaviour of people who, under normal circumstances too, would shy away from getting medical care. For the TB mitigation strategy to be effective, it is important to ensure that the people affected by the disease overcome social insecurities and access TB care and utilise the government's TB programme. To this end, the Active Case Finding (ACF) drives organised by the National TB Elimination Programme merit mention. These drives, implemented for systematic screening of TB among vulnerable populations or regions since 2017, have helped in early case detection. Even during the pandemic, in 2020, approximately 17.9 crore people were screened, and 52,273 TB cases were identified, according to the India TB Report 2021.

With a four-fold increase in the budget to tackle the disease and a patient-centric National Strategic Plan for TB elimination, India had taken enormous strides towards reaching its goal. However, the pandemic has caused massive disruptions since resources, both human and technical, were diverted to control the spread of SARS-CoV2.

Fear of Covid lockdowns and economic stress discouraged people from visiting medical facilities to get tested. This exacerbated the pre-existing health-seeking behaviour of people who, under normal circumstances too, would shy away from getting medical care. For the TB mitigation strategy to be effective, it is important to increase levels of awareness of people about the disease. It is also crucial to ensure that the people affected by the disease overcome social insecurities and access TB care and utilise the government's TB programme. To this end, the Active Case Finding (ACF) drives organised by the National TB Elimination Programme merit mention. These drives, implemented for systematic screening of TB among vulnerable populations or regions since 2017, have helped in early case detection. Even during the pandemic, in 2020, approximately 17.9 crore people were screened, and 52,273 TB cases were identified, according to the India TB Report 2021.

While ACF drives have helped identify TB patients at the district/sub-district level, public participation and community ownership remain intrinsic to any sustainable strategy

for TB elimination. It is time for a people's movements for the elimination of TB. Elected representatives' initiative and participation can certainly help to amplify the right messages about available care services, destigmatise the disease and encourage people to seek care. This could be achieved by supporting grassroots workers such as ASHAs, anganwadi workers and self-help groups who strive hard to sustain a responsive health system at the local level.

As a public representative, I have had the opportunity to work closely with several SHGs in Pune. In my experience, empowering these groups with accurate information and enhancing their ability to communicate effectively can transform how health programmes deliver at the grassroots level.

We will have to fill in the gap created by nearly one and a half years of Covid. While it remains essential to push for more finances and supportive policies at a national level, any tangible impact inevitably happens when the fundamentals of any movement are robust. In this case, the fundamentals are the people and community leaders. Collectively, we must keep alive this *jan andolan* against TB till the most vulnerable can secure themselves a safer future. Only then will we as a people achieve the ultimate objective of a "TB-mukt Bharat".

The writer is a Rajya Sabha member from the NCP and member, advisory board, Global Coalition Against TB

JANUARY 10, 1982, FORTY YEARS AGO

INDIA TO NEIGHBOURS

INDIA HAS ASSURED its neighbours of its commitment to respect their sovereignty and stressed the need to stay out of the big power confrontation. External Affairs minister P V Narasimha Rao said, "The security environment in our immediate vicinity has deteriorated. The countries of South Asia cannot afford to get embroiled in the vortex of power conflicts in the region".

OIL IN PALK STRAITS

TRACES OF OIL and gas have been found in the second well drilled by the UB ship, Gettysburg in the Palk Straits area of the

Cauvery Basin. Hydrocarbon was last found in September last year when the first well was drilled off the salt pan town of Vedaranyam in the Straits.

ANTULAY'S SUCCESSOR

THE DAY-LONG DISCUSSIONS with her Cabinet and party colleagues, including members of the Parliamentary Board, did not help Indira Gandhi to nominate a successor to the outgoing chief minister A R Antulay. The party general secretary Vasantrao Patil said that there's still a stalemate on the decision. The other general secretary G K Moopanar, who is also in charge of

Maharashtra affairs in the party, said that Mrs Gandhi was continuing her consultations with senior leaders of the party. According to informed sources, Mrs Gandhi's task has been compounded by the defiance of Antulay's supporters who insist that a successor should be from amongst them.

BOAT MISHAP

MORE THAN 30 persons were feared dead in a country boat accident in the Sasthamcotta lake, 30 km from Quilon. The mishap happened when passengers of a leaking boat jumped over to another boat which was also ferrying passengers in the lake.



THE IDEAS PAGE

Health of the nation

National Family Health Survey-5 indicates progress has been made in all areas, population will stabilise by 2050. In some states, public health risks call for targeted policy intervention



C RANGARAJAN AND
J K SATIA

THE RECENT NATIONAL Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019-21) has shown that fertility continues to decline in India. The Total Fertility Rate (TFR) — the number of children a woman can be expected to have during her lifetime — has declined from 2.2 (NFHS-4, 2015-16) to 2.0, below the replacement rate of 2.1, where a mother is replaced by a daughter. Will fertility continue to decline? From an estimated TFR of around 6 in 1951, the rate declined to 5.2 in 1971, 3.6 in 1991 and 2.4 in 2011, according to the SRS report 2018. Since 2000, the pace of decline in TFR may have slowed. As the TFR in most states declined during the period 2015-16 and 2019-21 (Table 1), we can expect it to continue to decline for some time.

However, the data reveals that there may be some resistance to a very low fertility regime. Both Kerala and Tamil Nadu show the TFR rising from 1.6 and 1.7 respectively to 1.8 during this period. Only a few large states have a TFR below 1.7 — Punjab, West Bengal and the UT of Jammu and Kashmir.

The two states with the highest fertility rate — Bihar (TFR 3.0) and Uttar Pradesh (TFR 2.4) — require special attention as together, they comprise nearly a fourth of India's population. The TFR in UP was higher than in Bihar until about 2000. Since then, the TFR declined at a faster pace in UP. Family planning and maternal and child health (MCH) programmes, as well as improvement in women's status, are known to be major drivers of fertility decline.

Both Bihar and UP need to strengthen their programmes. The contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) by modern methods is nearly the same in both states at around 44.5 per cent compared to 56.5 per cent for India as a whole. However, the CPR by all methods (modern and other methods such as rhythm) is higher in UP (62.4 per cent) compared to Bihar (55.8 per cent), although both are lower than India (66.7 per cent).

Women's status indicators are generally somewhat better in UP compared to Bihar but lower than in India as a whole. The percentage of adult literate women is 57.8 in Bihar and 66.1 in UP, compared to 71.5 in India. Women with 10 or more years of schooling are 28.8 per cent in Bihar and 39.3 per cent in UP compared to 41.0 per cent in India. A major difference between the two states, which may account for fertility differential, is that the proportion of women aged 20-24 years married before 18 years of age is estimated to be 40.8 per cent in Bihar compared to 15.8 per cent in UP.

Use of modern contraceptive methods increased from 47.8 per cent in NFHS-4 to 56.5 per cent in NFHS-5, which largely contributed to fertility decline. For a long time, female sterilisation has been the single most dominant method of contraception, accounting for 67 per cent of the total in NFHS-5. It is not clear how well the method mix in the programme meets the diverse needs of couples. The proportion of female sterilisation has, however, reduced from 75 per cent in NFHS-4, which implies some improvement in meeting the choice of users. Contraceptive use by men (con-

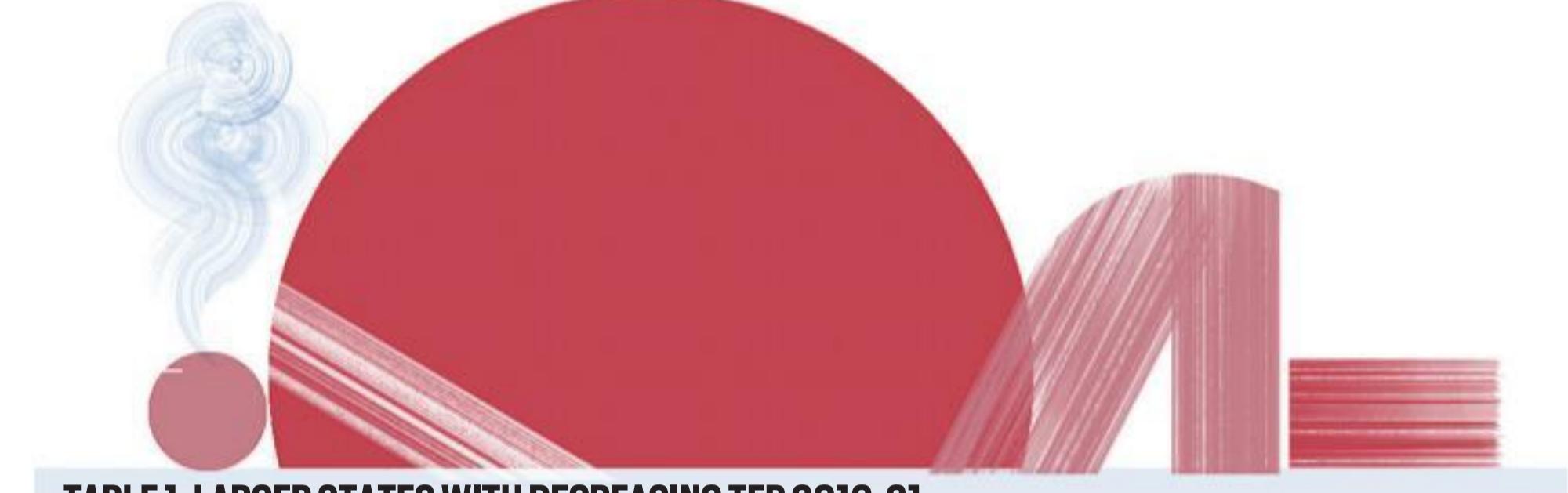
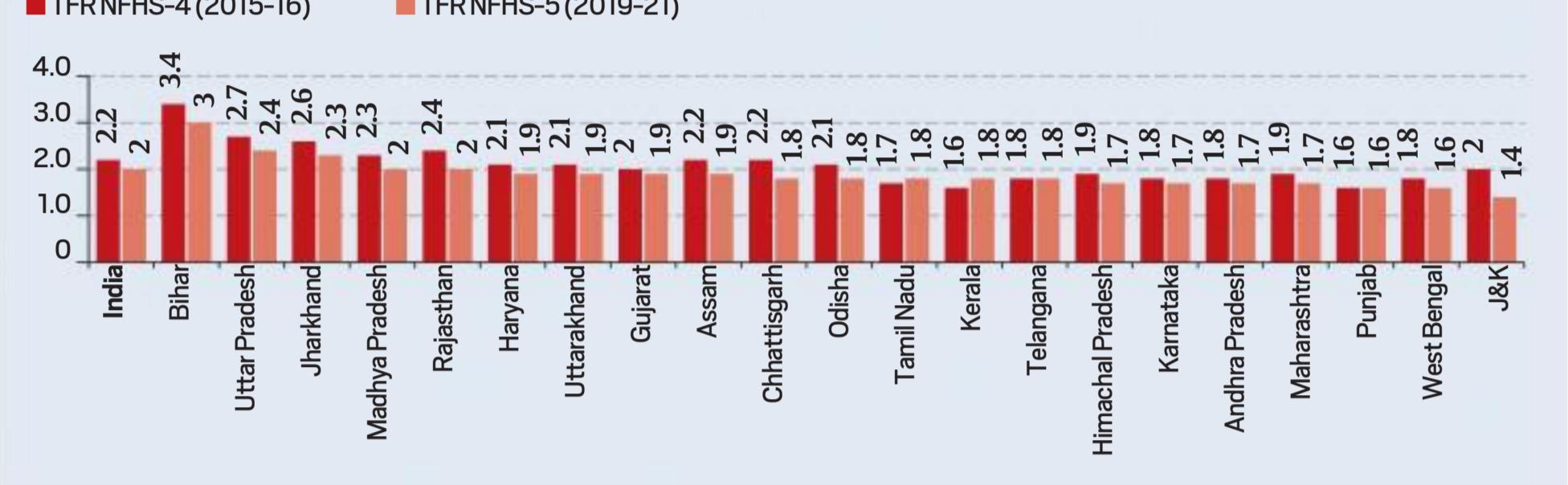


TABLE 1: LARGER STATES WITH DECREASING TFR 2019-21



CR Sasikumar

doms, sterilisation) is only 17 per cent of the total contraceptive use, leaving women to bear most of the burden of contraception. Improving the quality of care would contribute to a sustained decline in fertility.

The current level of TFR sets the stage for the population stabilisation process to begin for India. The pace of acceleration in population growth rate because of rapidly falling mortality was arrested in 1981. Currently, the population growth rate is estimated to be 1.37 per cent according to SRS (2018). This will continue to decline but the population will continue to grow because of population momentum resulting from a larger number of people entering the reproductive age group of 15-49 years compared to those leaving this age group — the age composition effect of previous high fertility.

It is difficult to predict population size for a long period in advance. However, we can be more optimistic that the medium-fertility variant of the UN Population Division's estimate of population peaking at 165 crore around 2050 will be realised. According to SRS, the birth rate is higher and the death rate is lower than its model estimates. However, the TFR estimates in NFHS-5 are lower than that predicted by the model, which may provide some balancing effect.

The estimates for sex ratio at birth (SRB), the number of girls per 1,000 boys, vary. The SRS report 2018 had estimated that it declined from 906 in 2011 to 899 in 2018. However, NFHS-4 estimated it to be 919 in 2015-16. NFHS-5 estimates that since then SRB has increased to 929, which is encouraging. If this pace of progress can be maintained then we may expect to reach a natural biological ratio of 950 in about a decade. The ratio has improved in many states. However, it decreased in Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Odisha, Tamil Nadu and Kerala among the large states.

The proportion of stunted children below the age of 5 has marginally declined from 38.4

The NFHS-5 results also highlight two major public health concerns — obesity and tobacco use — both known to be risks for non-communicable diseases. Nearly a fourth of all women and men and men are overweight or obese ($BMI = 25.0 \text{ kg/m}^2$) and this proportion is increasing over the years. More than a third of men (38 per cent) were reported to be using some kind of tobacco.

per cent to 35.4 per cent during this period. This decline has occurred among all states except for a significant increase in Himachal Pradesh, Kerala and Telangana among the large states. Inadequate diet among children less than 23 months of age is perhaps a major cause. Both breastfeeding and non-breastfeeding children 6-23 months of age receiving an adequate diet are estimated to be only 12.7 per cent and 11.3 per cent respectively. The government has several programmes to address this issue. However, child malnutrition is high and has persisted for long, action is needed at all government levels and the community to strengthen nutrition programmes.

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In conclusion, the NFHS-5 results indicate that progress has been made in almost all areas. However, one, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh need to strengthen their family planning and maternal and child health programmes as well as improve women's status to bring TFR to replacement level or below. Two, the pace of improvement in improving sex ratio at birth needs to be maintained. Three, child nutrition programmes may require a rethink and more active involvement of the community is needed to address this serious problem. And, four, attention is required to reduce public health risks arising from increasing obesity and high tobacco use.

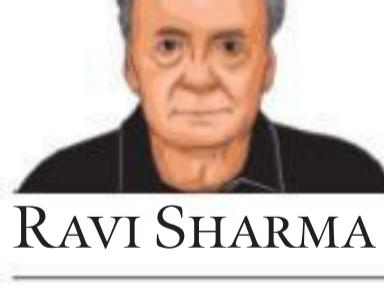
Rangarajan is former Chairman, Prime Minister's Economic Advisory Council and former Governor, Reserve Bank of India. Satia is professor emeritus, Indian Institute of Public Health, Gandhinagar (IIPH)

Hemant Contractor, Pune

Sumeetha M is a senior research fellow at International Institute of Migration and Development (IIMAD); Rajan is founder-chairman, IIMAD; and Kumar is research fellow, Centre for Public Policy Research

A hero of the sea

Admiral SH Sarma played an important role in the 1971 war



RAVI SHARMA

VICE ADMIRAL SH Sarma, PVSM, passed away on January 3 in his hometown of Bhubaneswar. He was 99.

We are all familiar with the big names associated with the 1971 Indo-Pak war such as the prime minister and the three service chiefs. However, barring a few, the brave deeds of heroes at the ground, or shall I say, sea or air level, remain unknown outside their service. I would like to highlight the important role that Admiral Sarma played in the war.

The Eastern Fleet was formed just a month before the onset of war and Admiral Sarma was appointed as the Flag Officer Commanding Eastern Fleet (FOCEF). It was appointed as the Fleet Communications Officer (FCO) on the operational staff of FOCEF and we were embarked on the aircraft carrier, Vikrant, which operated as our flagship throughout the war.

Normally, a fleet commander gets time to work up his fleet of ships with peacetime exercises so that the admiral, his staff and the commanding officers (CO) of the ships can gel together to function as a team. In this case, the fleet was thrust into the war from the word go. It is to the enormous credit of the admiral that in the short time available to him, he was able to knit the fleet into a cohesive unit and deliver all that was asked of it and more. Admiral Sarma was specially chosen for this job as Admiral S M Nanda, the then Chief of the Naval Staff (CNS), had faith that the former would be able to deliver. Months before

the event, the CNS had told Admiral Sarma that as and when the fleet was formed, he would be given its command. The latter did not let the CNS down and accomplished the destruction of enemy ships and bases, blockade and contraband control. Extensive damage was caused to the Pakistan Air Force and port facilities by airstrikes and the fleet effected tight control over the Bay of Bengal so that no enemy ship could enter or leave the then East Pakistani ports and we could take 93,000 prisoners of war.

The admiral was more than willing to take necessary risks to accomplish his tasks. For example, considering Vikrant's limited speed due to one of its boilers being non-operational, Naval Headquarters had advised that the carrier should operate more than 100 miles from the coast to be out of range of Pak Sabre jets. The admiral thought this was too far and in consultation with Captain Parkash, CO Vikrant, decided to operate from a 55-60 mile range. This enabled Vikrant to carry out as many as 90 highly effective air attacks.

Then there was the unique minesweeping effort to clear the entrance channel to Chittagong harbour. This was not envisaged earlier and was not really a job for the fleet, which had no minesweepers. A "jugaad" way of sweeping was devised by renting local fishing boats trawling a length of wire.

A couple of lighter moments come to mind. The fleet was anchored off the northernmost Andaman Island, Port Cornwallis,

awaiting further instructions from NHQ. Signals needed to be made to Visakhapatnam for some urgent supplies. Not wanting to break radio silence in order not to compromise our location, I found out that there was a police wireless station on the island. I told the admiral that I would go ashore and get the messages cleared from there. As there was not much activity going on at that time, the admiral said he would accompany me. On landing, we met a local man who informed us that the police station was miles away at the other end of the island. Just then, a jeep came by and I requested the driver to take us to the police station. He flatly refused upon which the admiral thundered, "By the emergency powers invested in me by the President of India, I commandeer this vehicle and order you to take us to the police station." I do not know whether the driver understood what was said but that was enough for him to take us to the station and back!

A deeply-ingrained memory is of the classic reply the admiral gave to the message from the CO of one of our ships, Beas, inquiring what action to take if we came across ships of the US 7th Fleet. Without batting an eyelid, the admiral replied, "Exchange identities and wish them the time of day."

In normal circumstances, the news of a 99-year-old man passing away would have been routine — after all, how many people live to reach that age? What made it shocking was that I had just met Admiral Sarma in Delhi

The writer is a retired officer of the Indian Navy

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"Biden really had no choice but to go on the offensive. Trump and Trumpism's world of 'alternative facts' has had a free run for too long."

— THE GUARDIAN

A shelter in pandemic

Covid crisis has underlined urgent need for policy interventions to provide housing for migrant workers



SUMEETHA M,
S IRUDAYA RAJAN AND
RAHUL V KUMAR

a competitive market for houses. On the other hand, an extreme condition is that neither does the owner provide the houses nor are the migrants willing to stay. This is the stage where the state might be forced to get involved in the housing market to explore and ease conditions. In addition, more transparency in the case of contracts may also be necessitated. The other possibilities are — either the migrant is not willing to stay in rented housing or the owner is not ready to provide housing to migrants.

In the context of Covid-19, either the migrant was not willing to stay in rented housing or the owner was not willing to provide housing. These possible scenarios also indicate the necessity of coordinated efforts of the state and the contractors to address housing issues. It also calls for long-term policymaking and analysis of the housing sector.

Let us see how policy has responded to the needs of the urban poor, especially marginalised migrant workers. The smart cities initiative was launched in June 2015. A smart city is an urban region that is highly advanced in terms of urban infrastructure, sustainable real estate, high density of communication network and a wider market. The Smart Cities Mission identified 100 cities, covering 21 per cent of India's urban population, for a transformation in four rounds starting January 2016. Some of the core infrastructure elements in a smart city include proper water supply, assured electricity supply, sanitation, and affordable housing especially for the poor. Government data shows that 49 per cent of 5,196 projects for which work orders were issued across 100 smart cities in India remain unfinished. This lag in implementation often raises questions about the efficacy of innovative policy prescriptions.

How has the pandemic affected the housing of migrant workers? Firstly, when the pandemic struck and the national lockdown was announced, most workers rushed back home on foot, leaving behind their temporary abodes. Those who were left behind lost their shelter because workplaces were shut. Migrants living in rented apartments could not maintain social distancing. In suburban regions with a sizeable number of migrants, the local population wanted them to vacate houses as soon as the pandemic began, citing the lack of hygienic conditions in these dwellings. Even though most state governments appealed to house owners to waive two months' rent, they began mounting pressure soon after. Up to 88 per cent of migrants reported that they could not pay the rent for the next month, according to a survey conducted by Azim Premji University of 5,000 self-employed, casual, and regular wage workers across 12 states of India in April and May 2020.

According to a 2020 ILO report on internal labour migrants, the absence of dignified housing is further aggravated by a lack of adequate water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities. Even though there has been an installation of public toilets through Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, their availability may not be adequate in migrant-dense clusters. Migrant workers find housing in slums, which is often subject to a sudden increase in rent, and have access only to the poorest infrastructure and services.

There can be various strategic responses of stakeholders (owners and migrant tenants) in the context of existing housing conditions. The first is when the owner provides a house and the migrant stays. This is an optimal condition, where rent could evolve for

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

NEHRU AND MANDELA

This refers to the article, 'We, the cricketers' (IE, January 8). Cricket in South Africa and India would not have benefited much from the removal of the shackles of apartheid and colonial rule, respectively, had it not been for the constitutions of both countries, which ended discrimination and gave equality of opportunity to everyone. Without the constitutions to guide them, both countries would have been mired in uncertainty and confusion, and cricket, like everything else, would have suffered. Equally important was the fact that sagacious leaders like Nelson Mandela and Jawaharlal Nehru were there to lead both nations in the difficult early period and usher in changes to provide a more level playing field to all.

Hemant Contractor, Pune

SECURITY POLITICS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Special protection' (IE, January 7). The lapse in the PM's security is definitely a matter of serious concern and needs to be thoroughly probed to rule out any recurrence. How did the farmers manage to block the road? Why was the inadmissible error made? Was it an inadvertent error or was there a "conspiracy" angle as alleged by the BJP? These and more such questions must be answered. At the same time, it is unfortunate that the incident is being politicised by both the state and

Centre, with the shrill electronic media too jumping on to the bandwagon. With state elections not too far away, anything and everything is fair game.

Vijai Pant, Hemparna

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Special protection' (IE, January 7). On one hand, the security lapse of the PM is no doubt a major issue, on the other hand, the issue got political overtones in no time. This seems to be an attempt of the ruling dispensation at the Centre to extend the rift between the majority and minority communities in Punjab. Defaming Sikh brethren has been on the rise through social media posts. It is hoped that the so-called "security-lapse" around the PM does not result in the lapse of governance in a land where people tread on the path of peace, love and brotherhood as propagated by the Sikh Gurus.

Sakshama, Patiala

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Players in the game' (IE, January 7). The strong-arm tactics of China are forcing new defence pacts and agreements among countries at the receiving end of Beijing's aggressive postures. The Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) between Japan and Australia is one such development. India also needs to up its game to keep the not-so-friendly China at bay.

Vipul Pande, Nainital

MANINDRA AGRAWAL, PROFESSOR OF MATHEMATICS AND COMPUTER SCIENCE, IIT KANPUR

‘By the middle of March, the third wave of the pandemic is likely to be more or less over in India’

Manindra Agrawal talks about his prediction of the third wave peaking in Mumbai and Delhi in mid-January, projecting four to eight lakh cases a day in India and why he thinks this model is more accurate than others. This session was moderated by Amitabh Sinha, Resident Editor (Pune), *The Indian Express*

Amitabh Sinha: How high do you think the third wave peak can go, and how long do you think this wave will continue?

For Mumbai, the third wave should peak somewhere around the middle of this month. That is not very far from now. Same with Delhi. According to our current calculation, which is preliminary, because we don't have enough data for entire India, we expect the wave to peak somewhere in the beginning of next month. The height of the peak is not being properly captured currently because the parameter values are changing rapidly. As of now, as an estimate, we predict a wide range between four and eight lakh cases a day.

The Delhi and Mumbai curves are likely to come down as rapidly as they have gone up. The all-India curve has just started to rise. It should take another month's time to peak and come down. By the middle of March, the third wave of the pandemic is likely to be more or less over in India.

Amitabh Sinha: How reliable are predictions of a computer model considering that there is a great degree of randomness in the spread of a pandemic?

It is true that pandemics by nature are extremely random phenomena, but there are some basic principles. Infection gets transferred when an infected person and an uninfected person come in contact. It's quite a simple analysis that the more infected persons there will be, the more new infections will get created, because the more transfers can happen. The more uninfected people there will be, the more infected people will get created. Based on this, one creates a model.

The basic model was created about 100 years ago. It is called the SIR model and has been very useful in predicting the trajectory of several pandemics. We have applied some tweaks to this model to account for some local ground realities. In our model, we have allowed the parameters to learn their values from input data itself. All we need is the daily time series of reported new cases. From that time series, we are able to estimate the parameter values required for our model.

This also means that the parameter values should not be changing when we are doing an estimate. If they are changing, then our estimates will go wrong. The model requires some time for the parameters to stabilise. Every time the parameters change, we have to re-compute. The good thing is that apart from input data, the model doesn't need any other calculation to compute the parameter values; it picks up from the data itself. That's where we have been successful in predicting or capturing trajectories, when many other models could not.

Amitabh Sinha: How good is the quality of data that the state governments are putting out?

We have found that the quality of Indian data is superior to that of many other countries, including a few very advanced countries. Sometimes we don't give ourselves enough credit, but this is at least one time when I think our machinery can justifiably claim the credit.

Anil Sasi: The initial assumption was that the India trajectory in third wave would perhaps mirror South Africa but the Indian trajectory clearly seems much more steep. What has gone wrong?

Initially, since there was no Indian data, we thought to run our model on South African data because it is closest to India in terms of population, age-profile, as well as level of natural immunity. We thought a similar thing would happen in India. It didn't

We thought that South Africa is closest to India in terms of population as well as level of natural immunity. We thought a similar thing would happen in India. It didn't



WHY
MANINDRA AGRAWAL

Manindra Agrawal, one of the best-known mathematicians in India, is the man behind the SUTRA computer model that has been simulating the Covid-19 trajectory in the country. The model, developed with other researchers, has produced some remarkable predictions, but also failed on other occasions. For the third wave, the model is currently projecting a peak twice as high as the second wave



lot less. So, we have factored the worst-case assumption, that everyone has lost immunity, and our current projections are based on that. It is possible that the third-wave peak goes beyond our upper limit of eight lakh cases in a day, but I don't think it would be too high, possibly around 10 lakh. When the current phase of rapid growth stabilises, we will be able to make a more accurate prediction.

Asad Rehman: How effective are lockdowns?

In the first wave, the very strict lockdown cut down the spread rate by a factor of two. During the second wave, different states adopted different strategies. The states which properly imposed a mild or medium lockdown were also able to cut down the spread. So it helped.

A strict lockdown always helps more but then it has to be traded off with the downside, which is the complete loss of livelihood for a lot of people. We always talk about Covid-induced deaths, but we should also sometimes talk about deaths induced by this loss of livelihood.

For cities, where we are expecting the peak to be in the middle of January, there is absolutely no need for a lockdown. For states that are still in the growth stage, such as Tamil Nadu, which has imposed a lockdown, it is a little premature, because this time the hospitalisation cases are not that many.

It could be a worthwhile strategy to let it grow if your hospitalisation or medical system can handle it. Let it grow and be done with it quickly. That will minimise the time of discomfort for the entire population. Of course, your medical system should be ready to deal with that kind of short, but intense pressure.

Shubhajit Roy: You've been conducting these mathematical models for the last year and a half. Has there been any conversation with the government on this?

We have been asked to make presentations by the Central government, as well as several state governments. Since it's the Central government, the Covid Task Force had taken input from us on several occasions. Several state governments, including UP, Delhi, Maharashtra and others, have occasionally asked to share our findings with them.

Sohini Ghosh: How are epidemiological factors accounted for in a mathematical model?

The great advantage of a mean field model like ours is it just averages out everything. The reproduction rate, for example, is going to be different in a very dense region compared to a very sparse

Ritika Chopra: The SUTRA model has not always given accurate predictions. Is the team working to improve it?

We are keen to improve the model. The drawback of the model is that when the parameter values are changing, it has no way of predicting what will be their eventual value. When there may be a possibility of that kind of prediction with a more advanced analysis, we would certainly love to take anybody's help to do that.

Amitabh Sinha: One common criticism has been that all that you are doing is retrospective curve-fitting. Another is that there isn't any biology in your model.

That charge is absolutely correct. There is no biology in our model. But I don't think a modeller should look at whether or not there is biology or philosophy or anything else in a model. The objective simply is, are you able to predict accurately? Our model hasn't been 100 per cent correct. But I would submit that we have been better than any other models in existence. And I would love to be proven otherwise.

Shubhajit Roy: You've been conducting these mathematical models for the last year and a half. Has there been any conversation with the government on this?

It is the nature of any pandemic essentially that if you don't apply too many external controls, then the curve on the rise will mirror the fall also.

Sandeep Singh: Do the small numbers in UP come as a surprise to you, because maybe it isn't being reported properly?

It takes time. UP is a large state, and in any large state, this particular variant will take time to move about. So, it's not a surprise. We always start with larger cities and then move on to smaller cities and to villages. I expect cases in UP to go through the roof over the next couple of weeks.

Amitabh Sinha: Several studies have

region but when you take a mean-field approach, you just kind of take the average out of the entire race. Delta, Omicron, and maybe some other variants are also floating around. So, the mean-field model will just compute one single average value of the reproduction rate.

Sohini Ghosh: Would that not then affect the accuracy of the models? Other epidemiological factors like immune response and immune escape are also getting evened out.

At the individual level, there is a lot of

randomness such as individual immune responses. How a person responds to the pandemic could be very different.

There is this famous principle of statistics, the law of large numbers, which is that whenever there are large numbers, the individual or local random variations smoothen out.

Just with a few parameters you can

capture the entire phenomenon.

Kaushik Dasgupta: Why do you expect the cases to drop as quickly as they are rising?

It is the nature of any pandemic essentially that if you don't apply too many external controls, then the curve on the rise will mirror the fall also.

Sohini Ghosh: How are epidemiological factors accounted for in a mathematical model?

The great advantage of a mean field model like ours is it just averages out everything. The reproduction rate, for example, is going to be different in a very dense region compared to a very sparse

put the actual number of dead in India between 4 and 5 million. Do you think that such large numbers can go completely missing from records?

It's very unlikely. We are not living in the stone age where such a large number of deaths will go completely unreported. There have been reports from many states about graveyards being full, long queues outside but those have happened in a very small time period — a week or 10 days — when the second wave was at its peak. When you average over the entire timeline of the pandemic, the impact of such excess deaths will not be that high. So, I find it very difficult to believe that the number of deaths would be 10x of what has been reported. Yes, 2x or 3x is certainly possible.

Amitabh Sinha: A lot of states report

Amitabh Sinha: One of the big points of discussion on this death debate has been the floating bodies that were seen in UP and that has been used to make a claim that the state had a massive underreporting of deaths. You actually praised the handling of the Covid pandemic by UP government. Why do you suggest that UP has handled the pandemic better than it is given credit for?

What many people do is that they look at a state's performance vis-a-vis some other state's performance without factoring in the health infrastructure of the state. There is no doubt that many deaths happened in UP. I come from UP, from Prayagraj. During my childhood, we would find bodies floating in the Ganga. It's not a new phenomenon. But it's still quite possible that this time the numbers are much more. UP has many poor people and clearly they cannot find resources to cremate a body. This is why they resorted to putting bodies in the Ganga. One has to evaluate the performance of UP with respect to the health infrastructure that it has, which is in a pathetic situation. If you start with a pathetic health infrastructure, you are expected to encounter utter disaster. The fact that that did not happen is at least, to a significant part, thanks to the way it was handled.

Ritika Chopra: Given that we don't have correct figures for Covid deaths for the second wave, do you think it's a little premature to actually label a state's handling of the pandemic as great or otherwise?

Since the death data was not available, we did not analyse the handling from that aspect. But data was available to analyse so many other aspects. For example, the handling of the migrants, loss of livelihood, distribution of food. Every single village was lucky to have these committees, which were created three years ago to handle Japanese encephalitis. So these committees were tasked to monitor every household in the village. They were given basic preventive medicine, paracetamol and such stuff. It worked really well.

There may still have been many deaths. But what if none of this was done? The number of deaths would have gone through the roof.

Harikishan Sharma: Did you factor the fact that if the panchayat elections that happened in UP had been held in a Covid-appropriate manner, we could have saved thousands of lives? What initiatives of the UP government do you think were effective?

The state government made a very important decision to provide transport to all the workers returning in the second wave. Apart from gaining some political mileage, they could control when and where the migrants arrived.

So, they set up centres at each of those points. Every migrant who came down there recorded full details, including the expertise of that migrant. They were quarantined, symptomatically treated at those places, provided with some food and then sent to their homes. Along with that, in their district, the DMs were given a list of these migrants that contained information about their expertise, with the suggestion that wherever there is a project going on, to see if they can be employed. A lot of them found employment through that mechanism.

About the elections, here is something we have been sitting on for a while. We did an analysis of 16 states during the second wave. Five of them had elections — West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Assam and Puducherry — and 11 states did not. We ran proper statistical experiments to study the surge in these states. And we found statistically there is no difference between the two groups. Which means or suggests that elections did not play a major role in the spread of the pandemic in the five states. This came as a surprise, but it is true.

It's not that election rallies do not cause a spread, of course they do. But there are many other things which are causing the spread, and this is just one of them. So, if you just remove one and retain the others, it does not seem to be making much difference.

Illustration: Suvajit Dey

death data with a lag. Given that, on a day-to-day basis, there would certainly be some number of deaths that would be missed, what do you think would be the best estimate for the number of deaths?

I would say somewhere between 2x and 3x. How do I arrive at this estimate? Partly by my own studies, but also there was a very interesting paper that came out in *The Lancet*, which looked at the excess deaths in Chennai. They found that there were around 25,000 excess deaths during the pandemic period. If you look at the reported deaths in July, they were around 9,000. This means that it is slightly less than 3x to the actual deaths in Chennai.

I have tried to look at every single study that has come about which claims some factor of deaths. In every '10x' type of claim that I've seen, the methodology used is seriously flawed.

I will give you one example, which I believe is clearly a mischievous methodology. They look at the CRS data from July 2020 to June 2021 and compare it with July 2019 to June 2020 and look at the deaths in these two periods. This is a somewhat unusual time period to choose. Why chose July-starting and June-ending specially, when we know that April, May and June 2020 was a very strict lockdown period in the entire country, literally everything was shut down. If there are deaths happening in that three-month period, it stands to reason that they will all get reported or recorded after July.

Without there being any excess deaths, if you just compare the deaths in these two time periods, you will find the second time period reporting a much larger number of deaths because some deaths are missing from the first period and those deaths get added to the second.

It's not that election rallies do not cause a spread, of course they do. But there are many other things which are causing the spread, and this is just one of them. So, if you just remove one and retain the others, it does not seem to be making much difference.

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THE INDIAN EXPRESS, MONDAY, JANUARY 10, 2022

THE WORLD



MEANWHILE

MARILYN BERGMAN, OSCAR-WINNING LYRICIST, DIES

Marilyn Bergman, the Oscar-winning lyricist who teamed with husband Alan Bergman on "The Way We Were," "How Do You Keep the Music Playing?" and hundreds of other songs, died at her Los Angeles home. She was 93. The Bergmans were among the most enduring, successful and productive songwriting partnerships, specialising in introspective ballads for film, television and the stage that combined the romance of Tin Pan Alley with the polish of contemporary pop.

TOP OF THE
WORLD

A firefighter team looks for victims in Capitolio. Reuters

BRAZIL

7 dead after rock face collapse at waterfall

Brasilia: At least seven people died and nine were seriously injured when a wall of rock collapsed on top of motor boats below a waterfall in southeastern Brazil on Saturday, the fire department said. A tower of rocks suddenly broke away from the canyon wall and came crashing down on several leisure boats, sending out a huge wave over the lake at Capitolio, in Minas Gerais state. Videos posted on social media showed tourists shouting as the column of rock crashed into the water, smashing two boats. Authorities said three people were missing after others feared lost were located by telephone. Some 23 others were treated for light injuries. **REUTERS**

TALIBAN

Popular Afghan professor critical of govt arrested

Kabul: The Taliban have arrested a popular university professor and outspoken critic of successive Afghan governments, including the new rulers in Kabul, the group's spokesman said Sunday. Zabiullah Mujahid said in a tweet that professor Faizullah Jalal was being held by the Taliban's intelligence arm. The group accused the professor of "nonsense remarks on social media, which were provoking people against the government and playing with people's dignity." There was no official response from the government to queries about Jalal's arrest. **AP**

UNITED STATES

Chinese man attacked in NYC dies months later

New York: A Chinese immigrant who was brutally attacked in April while collecting cans in East Harlem has died of his injuries, and his case is now deemed a homicide, New York City police said. Yao Pan Ma (61), died on December 31, police said. Jarrod Powell (49), of New York City, was previously charged with attempted murder, felony assault and hate crime charges in the case, which remains under investigation. A family representative said the charges against Powell should now be enhanced. **AP**

UK Covid death toll exceeds 1.5 lakh after Omicron surge

DAVID MILLIKEN
LONDON, JANUARY 9

THE UNITED KINGDOM'S official death toll from the Covid pandemic rose above 150,000 on Saturday, government figures showed, following a record wave of cases caused by Omicron.

Some 313 deaths within 28 days of a positive Covid-19 test were reported on Saturday, taking the total number of fatalities on this measure to 150,057.

A broader but less timely measure of deaths with Covid on the death certificate - which includes deaths early in the pandemic when testing was limited - stood at 173,248 as of the last data on December 24.

"Coronavirus has taken a terrible toll on our country and today the number of deaths recorded has reached 150,000," Prime Minister Boris Johnson said in a statement. "Our way out of this pandemic is for everyone to get their booster or their first or second dose if they haven't yet."

Britain has seen a surge of cases linked to the Omicron variant in recent weeks, though death rates have been lower than during previous infection waves.

The government has focused on rolling out booster vaccinations - which have reached more than 60% of the population - rather than requiring a return to the lockdown measures seen earlier in the pandemic.

Some 1,227 million people tested positive for Covid-19 during the past seven days, 11% more than the week before, while the weekly number of deaths was up 38% on the week before at 1,271. There are tentative signs the number of new cases may have peaked, with 146,390 new cases reported on Saturday, down from the record 218,724 recorded on January 4.

Britain's cumulative death toll is the second-highest in absolute terms in Europe, behind only Russia's. **REUTERS**



Britain's cumulative death toll is the second-highest in absolute terms in Europe, behind only Russia's. **Reuters**

US, Japan to keep troops on base to curb spread

YURI KAGEYAMA
TOKYO, JANUARY 9

THE US and Japan on Sunday agreed to keep American troops within their bases as worries grew about a sharp rise in Covid cases in the country. The restrictions starting Monday will last 14 days, confining US military personnel to base facilities except for "essential activities," a statement from the US Forces in Japan said. The Japanese Foreign Ministry released the same statement.

The allies will share information and cooperate on coronavirus measures, "given the extraordinary virulence of the omicron variant spreading throughout Japan," the statement said.

US military members will wear masks both on and off base, when outside their homes, and will continue to carry out strict testing before leaving for and after arrival in Japan, it said.

AP



The US Marine Corps' Camp Hansen, in Kin, Okinawa. **AP**

New Covid-19 cases have surged in Japan, jumping above 8,000 on Saturday, a four-month record. The spike has been most pronounced in areas near US bases. Last week, Japan asked the US for cooperation in keeping its military personnel on base.

Okinawa, a southwestern group of islands that houses most of the 55,000 US troops in Japan, is among the three prefectures where separate government restrictions kicked in Sunday. **AP**

OMICRON SCARE IN CHINA'S TIANJIN

Beijing: China on Sunday scammed to test 14 million residents of Tianjin as the port city near the capital has set off alarm bells ahead of the next month's Beijing Winter Olympics by reporting a cluster of Covid-19 cases, including two with the dreaded Omicron variant. Officials said Tianjin, a municipality that neighbours Beijing, has decided to start a citywide nucleic acid testing after 20 people tested positive. **PTI**

AUSTRALIA'S NEW SOUTH WALES SEES 16 DEATHS

Sydney: Australia's New South Wales state reported 16 deaths on Sunday in its deadliest day of the pandemic, even as it relaxed rules to allow some essential workers in isolation to return to work if they are asymptomatic. Just over 30,000 new cases were reported in Australia's most populous state, forcing those people to join more than 200,000 others in isolation. The 16 who died on Sunday included eight women and eight men. **AP**

'VACCINE PASS BETTER THAN MANDATORY ORDER'

Paris: A mandatory order would not be the most efficient way to encourage those not vaccinated against Covid-19 to get the shot and that plans to toughen health pass conditions were already yielding results, government spokesman Gabriel Attal said. "We stand by the decision to put pressure on the non-vaccinated," Attal said on Sunday. People in France already have to show either proof of vaccination or a negative test to public places. **REUTERS**

AP

No concessions: Russia takes hard line before crucial talks with US

REUTERS
MOSCOW, JANUARY 9

Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov. **Reuters**

Russia said on Sunday it would not make any concessions under US pressure at talks this week on the Ukraine crisis and its demands for Western security guarantees, and that there was a risk they might end quickly.

The hard line from Moscow underscored the fragile prospects for negotiations that Washington hopes will avert the danger of a new Russian invasion of Ukraine, at the tensest point in US-Russia relations since the Cold War ended three decades ago.

Talks are due in Geneva, Brussels and Vienna but the state-

owned RIA news agency quoted Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov as saying it was entirely possible that diplomacy could end abruptly after a single meeting.

"I can't rule out anything, this is an entirely possible scenario and the Americans... should have

ings only to civilians or if law-enforcement deaths are included. Kazakh authorities said earlier Sunday that 16 police or national guard had been killed. Authorities previously gave the civilian death toll as 26. Most of the deaths - 103 - were in Almaty where demonstrators seized government build-

ings and set some afire.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's office said on Sunday that order has stabilised in the country and that authorities have regained control of administrative buildings that were occupied by protesters, some of which were set on fire. **AP**

AP

Kazakhstan says 164 killed in week of protests

Moscow: Kazakhstan's health ministry said on Sunday that 164 people have been killed in protests that have rocked the country over the past week.

The figures reported on the state news channel Khabar-24 are a significant rise from previous tallies. It is not clear if the deaths re-

lated to the new law, which the City Council approved a month ago. Unless a judge halts its implementation, New York City is the first major US city to grant widespread municipal voting rights to non-citizens.

More than a dozen communities across the US already allow non-citizens to cast ballots in local elections, including 11 towns in Maryland and two in Vermont. Non-citizens still wouldn't be able to vote for President or members of Congress in federal races, or in the state elections that pick the governor, judges and legislators.

AP

EXPECT RBI TO DELAY ACCOMMODATIVE MONETARY POLICY NORMALISATION

As third Covid wave sets in, bankers see likely NPA surge, growth impact

SUNNY VERMA &
GEORGE MATHEW
NEW DELHI/MUMBAI, JAN 9

THE BANKING sector, which is anxiously viewing the rising Covid graph in the country, doesn't expect a repeat of 2020 but bankers are bracing for a rise in non-performing assets (NPAs). On the other hand, they expect the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to delay normalisation of the accommodative monetary policy and any possible hike in interest rates, with focus remaining on growth.

"We don't expect any significant decline in credit offtake but there could be some slippages in loans if states impose stringent lockdown to tackle the pandemic," said an official of a nationalised bank. Credit offtake growth has already declined to 0.4 per cent (Rs 43,484 crore) in December from 1.1 per cent (Rs 1,18,951 crore) in November.

Bankers note that prolonged curbs on economic activity such as closing time of malls, weekend curfew, restrictions on cinemas,

gyms and restaurants could affect repayment capacity of borrowers. While bankers say it's too early to make an assessment on the likelihood of a hit on EMIs, the situation could deteriorate if the pandemic lingers for a prolonged period and lay-offs happen in various sectors like travel, tourism, retail and hospitality. Banks have already cut down the number of employees in branches across the country to tackle the spread of the virus.

Rating agency ICRA said a third Covid wave poses high risks to performance of borrowers who were already impacted by the earlier waves. ICRA estimates that the overall standard restructured loan book for banks increased to 2.9 per cent of standard advances, or Rs 2.85 lakh crore as on September 30, 2021, up from 2 per cent as on June 30, 2021. "Economic impact is expected to be shallower than the second wave, drawing on past/international experience. Slower policy normalisation is likely to be accompanied by gradual reduction in fiscal deficits," said Radhika Rao, senior economist, DBS Bank.

"With the increased spread of

EXPLAINED E Repayment capacity

PROLONGED CURBS on economic activity such as weekend curfew, restrictions on cinemas, gyms and restaurants might affect borrowers' repayment capacities.

the new Covid-19 variant, i.e. Omicron, there is a high possibility of the occurrence of a third wave. As banks restructured most of these loans with a moratorium of up to 12 months, this book is likely to start exiting the moratorium from Q4 FY2022 and Q1 FY2023. Therefore, a third wave poses high risk to the performance of the borrowers that were impacted by the previous waves and hence poses a risk to the improving trend of asset quality, profitability, and solvency," said Anil Gupta, vice president, financial sector ratings, ICRA Ratings.

Macro stress tests for credit risk indicate that the gross non-performing asset (GNPA) ratio of banks may increase from 6.9 per cent in September 2021 to 8.1 per cent by September 2022 under the baseline scenario, and to 9.5 per cent under a severe stress scenario, according to the Financial Stability Report of the RBI. NPAs to advances ratio declined from 8.2 per cent at end-March 2020 to 7.3 per cent at end-March 2021 and further to 6.9 per cent at end-September 2021.

With states imposing Covid-related restrictions (night curfew on movement of people, restaurants allowed at 50 per cent capacity, offices to operate at 50 per cent capacity in various states), economic activity is likely to get impacted in Q4FY22, according to Abheek Barua, chief economist, HDFC Bank.

"There is a downside risk to our growth forecast to the tune of 20-30 bps. The current forecast is 6.1 per cent for Q4 of FY22."

"Downside risks emanate from additional states imposing restrictions, restrictions extending

beyond January 2022 and a slowdown in global recovery to weigh on exports," Barua said. "The RBI's liquidity normalisation/adjustment to continue while rate hike expectations could moderate as Omicron risk looms. The reverse repo rate hike in February is now uncertain."

The economy expanded by 8.4 per cent year-on-year in July-September 2021, with the level of GDP exceeding pre-pandemic levels (July-September 2019) for the first time since Covid struck. More recent high-frequency indicators of economic activity suggest some loss of momentum in the third quarter of 2021-22. The pace of the recovery remains uneven across sectors, inflation formation is being subjected to repetitive supply shocks and the outlook is overcast with global risks. Omicron haunts near-term prospects, the RBI said in the report.

"If India wants to become a \$5-trillion economy then obviously we can't be happy with a 5-6 per cent economic growth. We need to grow above 8 percent," said former SBI Chairman Rajnish Kumar.

KALPEN PAREKH, MD and CEO, DSP Investment Managers, spoke to GEORGE MATHEW on mutual fund investments and stock markets. Edited excerpts:

Where is the stock market headed in 2022? What are the major factors to watch out for? Can investors expect decent returns in the new year?

Stock markets have been marred by high valuations for long and FY22 could see some flattening thereof. Having said that, staying invested and using the correction opportunity to increase the quantum of investments will be rewarding. The Budget will set the tone of fiscal policy for the year and the monetary policy will derive itself from it. (The US) Fed is already tapering but will it move towards tightening? Will funding of fiscal deficits invite higher taxes? India will have 7 state elections lined up in 2022, therefore it will be a politically interesting year as well. Additionally, the West and China relations in a post-Covid world will create strong geopolitics dynamics. The trend is quite clear. We had two tough years of economic disruption and recovery. Over the course of the next few years, we will see growth rates normalise to trend levels. For the investing journey, nothing works like staying invested and reaping the benefits of compounding.

What's drawing new investors, especially young people, to the stock markets?

Young investors, given their qualifications, have a better understanding of the stock markets. Fixed deposits are giving sub-4 per cent return post-taxation. The lack of attractive risk-adjusted returns in fixed income instruments has made MFs, especially the hybrid category, an interesting entry-level asset for many new investors. Also, most young investors have been seeking education and ideas online and the learning curve is faster than at any time in history.

Do you expect the RBI to normalise the accommodative monetary policy and interest rates to rise in 2022?

A lot of it depends on how the

MARKET WATCH

FPIs NET BUYERS OF EQUITIES IN JAN SO FAR

New Delhi: After three months of selling spree, foreign investors have turned net buyers in the first week of January by infusing Rs 3,202 crore in Indian equities, as correction in markets provided them good buying opportunity. PTI

INTERVIEW WITH MD AND CEO, DSP INVESTMENT MANAGERS

'Markets marred by high valuations for long, FY22 may see some flattening'



Kalpen Parekh

and India's prospects vis-à-vis peers.

What should be the investment strategy of retail investors in 2022? Do you expect SIP inflow to continue in 2022?

Opting for SIPs is an all-weather advice. For example, an SIP in an equal-weighted Nifty fund has yielded 9 per cent more CAGR than lumpsum since inception. Similarly, in one of our international investing strategies, the last 3 years CAGR has been 4.2 per cent excess via SIP than lumpsum investing. If there are sharp corrections, investors could look at monetising those by investing in lumpsum, but otherwise a disciplined SIP remains advisable.

What's drawing new investors, especially young people, to the stock markets?

The IPO steam wasn't just domestic scenario. In 2017, India saw \$15 billion in IPOs but the global number stood at \$215 billion. This time, the IPO rally is a huge global sweep with total IPO issuances at a whopping \$600 billion. India recorded the 'best IPO year' in two decades with proceeds worth over \$16.9 billion in 2021. The pipeline for 2022 looks strong with expectations beyond \$20 billion. This is a common bull market phenomenon and the pipeline may shrink if the markets correct here on. The overall market valuations are buoyant and IPOs are no exceptions.

Rising interest rates usually impact most asset classes negatively. Interest rates are like gravity, they pull everything down. The long duration bond funds have a peculiar advantage currently. The interest rates on long-dated bonds like 10 years or more are enjoying a higher spread over short-term rates. This makes them a little less vulnerable. During rising interest rates, it's better to stick to the short end of the curve with short-term maturity funds to navigate rising rates.

What's your assessment on the IPO market? Are IPO valuations high?

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Full interview on www.indianexpress.com

SECTOR WATCH E-COMMERCE

Amazon moves NCLAT against CCI order nixing deal with Future

The case is likely to be heard this week

AMAZON HAS moved the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) against the Competition Commission of India's (CCI) order suspending the company's 2019 deal with Future Coupons, sources said. The case is likely to be heard this week.

The appeal comes after the CCI had in December suspended the deal Amazon had made with Future Coupons after an investigation revealed that the former had concealed significant information while seeking regulatory approval for the pact. In 2019, Kishore Biyani-led Future Group's Future Coupons had inked a deal with Amazon. As part of the deal, Amazon had acquired 49 per cent stake in Future Coupons, the promoter firm of Future Retail in a deal worth nearly Rs 2,000 crore.

While Future Retail would be able to place its products on Amazon's online marketplace, the two had also agreed that the Future Retail's products would also be a part of Amazon's new plan, which intended to deliver products in select cities within two hours of a customer ordering them.

The deal had also given Amazon a 'call' option, which

enabled it to exercise the option of acquiring all or part of Future Coupon's promoter, Future Retail's shareholding in the company, within 3-10 years of the agreement.

Later, in 2020, Biyani's Future Group entered into another agreement with Reliance Retail, a subsidiary of the Reliance Industries Limited (RIL) group, to sell its retail, wholesale, logistics and warehousing to the latter.

The second deal, however, ran into legal trouble, with Amazon claiming it to be a violation of the pact it had with Future Coupons. The global e-commerce giant said that Future Group-Reliance Retail deal was a violation of a non-compete clause and a right-of-first-refusal pact it had signed with the Future Group.

The deal also required Future Group to inform Amazon before entering into any sale agreement with third parties.

On its part, the Future Group has said that it had not sold any stake in the company, and was merely selling its assets and had therefore not violated any terms of the contract.

On October 27, 2020, a US court

'Dec: Signs of revival in hiring activity in multiple sectors'

December witnessed signs of revival in hiring activity in multiple sectors beyond IT, such as retail, hospitality and education, according to the latest Naukri JobSpeak report



A lot of talent is shifting back to their cities of work with most companies drafting their return to work policies, as per the report. As companies continue to press the pedal on their digital transformation journeys, the demand for certain functional areas and sectors will keep growing

Source: Naukri JobSpeak/PTI

Canada court allows Devas shareholders to seize 50% of AI funds

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 9

A CANADIAN court has allowed Devas Multimedia shareholders to continue to seize 50 per cent of Air India's funds that have been held by global airlines body IATA.

The court also granted relief to the Airports Authority of India (AAI), freeing its funds that were seized by the Devas Multimedia shareholders. Earlier this month, the court had ordered seizure of funds of Air India and the Airports Authority of India (AAI), which have been held by the International Air Transportation Association, in a case filed by Devas Multimedia shareholders to enforce the arbitration award regarding Antrix deal's cancellation.

On October 27, 2020, a US court



The court also granted relief to the AAI. File

had asked Antrix Corporation, the commercial arm of ISRO, to pay a compensation of \$1.2 billion to Devas Multimedia for cancelling a satellite deal in 2011. While hearing the appeal of AAI and Air India against seizure of their funds, the IATA told the Canadian court on January 3 that it held \$17.3 million on behalf of the national carrier and \$12.76 million on behalf of AAI as on December 31.

'Urjit Patel named vice president of AIIB'

Beijing: Former RBI Governor Urjit Patel has been appointed a vice president of the Beijing-based multilateral funding institution AIIB, according to sources in the bank on Sunday.

India is a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) with the second highest voting share after China. It is headed by former Chinese vice minister for finance Jin Liqun.

Patel, 58, will be one of the five Vice Presidents of the AIIB with a three-year tenure. He is expected to take over his posting next month.

He will succeed outgoing Vice President D J Pandian, who is in charge of sovereign and non-sovereign lending of the AIIB in South Asia, the Pacific Islands and Southeast Asia, AIIB sources said. PTI

had asked Antrix Corporation, the commercial arm of ISRO, to pay a compensation of \$1.2 billion to Devas Multimedia for cancelling a satellite deal in 2011. While hearing the appeal of AAI and Air India against seizure of their funds, the IATA told the Canadian court on January 3 that it held \$17.3 million on behalf of the national carrier and \$12.76 million on behalf of AAI as on December 31.

simply not ordered enough chips and parts fast enough. When Tesla couldn't get the chips it had counted on, it took the ones that were available and rewrote the software that operated them to suit its needs. Larger auto companies couldn't do that because they relied on outside suppliers for much of their software and computing expertise.

Just a few years ago, analysts saw Musk's insistence on having Tesla do more things on its own as one of the main reasons the company was struggling to increase production. Now, his strategy appears to have been vindicated. Cars are becoming increasingly digital, defined by their software as much as their engines and transmissions.

"Tesla, born in Silicon Valley, never outsourced their software — they write their own code," said Morris Cohen, a professor emeritus at the Wharton School of the University

of Pennsylvania who specialises in manufacturing and logistics.

Tesla sold 936,000 cars globally in 2021, an 87 per cent increase for the year. Measured by vehicles delivered globally, Tesla vaulted past Volvo and Subaru in 2021, and some analysts predicted that it could sell two million cars this year, as factories in Berlin and Austin, Texas, come online and a plant in Shanghai ramps up production.

Tesla did not respond to a request for comment for this article. It has said little publicly about how it managed to soar in a down market. "We have used alternative parts and programmed software to mitigate the challenges caused by these shortages," the company said in its third-quarter earnings report. The performance is a stark turnaround from 2018, when Tesla's production and supply problems made it an industry laughingstock. Many of the manu-

Taxmen to give 'reasonable time' to explain reasons for mismatch in GSTR-1, 3B

ENS ECONOMIC BUREAU
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 9

TAX OFFICERS will give reasonable time to erring businesses to explain reasons for mismatch in turnover reported in sales return GSTR-1 and tax payment form 3B before initiating recovery action for short payment or non-payment of taxes.

The Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC) has issued guidelines on recovery proceedings and said that taxmen would give a "reasonable time" to businesses to explain the reasons for such mismatch.

As per the changes in the GST law effective January 1, GST officers were allowed to directly initiate recovery action against those errant businesses which showed higher sales in monthly return GSTR-1 but under-report it during tax payment in GSTR-3B.

The move was aimed at curbing the practice of fake billing whereby sellers would show higher sales in GSTR-1 to enable a purchaser to claim an input tax credit (ITC) but report suppressed sales in GSTR-3B to lower GST liability. **WITH PTI**

Interest calculator soon in GSTR-3B

New Delhi: The GST Network, which provides technology backbone for the indirect tax regime, will shortly release interest calculator functionality in monthly tax payment form GSTR-3B to help taxpayers in calculating interest for delayed tax payment. PTI

GSTR-1 but under-report it during tax payment in GSTR-3B.

The move was aimed at curbing the practice of fake billing whereby sellers would show higher sales in GSTR-1 to enable a purchaser to claim an input tax credit (ITC) but report suppressed sales in GSTR-3B to lower GST liability. **WITH PTI**

UK trade minister on 2-day India visit this week

REUTERS
LONDON, JANUARY 9

BRITISH TRADE minister Anne-Marie Trevelyan will visit India this week to hold talks to try to deepen trade and economic ties as part of London's push in the Indo-Pacific region, her department said.

As part of a two-day visit to New Delhi, Trevelyan will hold bilateral talks with Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal on Thursday on green trade, the removal of market access barriers and other issues. They are also expected to confirm the launch of a new UK-India free trade deal, the trade department said in a statement.

Alliance Air issues tender to refurbish aircraft fleet</h2

ATP Pune Open to be held in bubble after new curbs

SHAHID JUDGE
MUMBAI, JANUARY 9

FOLLOWING THE Maharashtra government's order on Saturday calling for curbs to reduce the spread of the Covid-19 infection, the ATP 250 Tata Open Maharashtra tennis event in Pune will now be conducted in a bio-secure bubble. The order called for the organisation of all sporting events in the state to be postponed, however, "national and international (level) competitions already scheduled" will be allowed to go ahead provided they are held behind closed doors and inside a bubble.

"It'll happen in a bubble, but importantly it will happen," says Sunder Iyer, honorary secretary of the Maharashtra State Lawn Tennis Association (MSLTA), the host for the tournament. "Players will have to clear the RT-PCR test 72 hours before arriving in India. Once they land, they will head straight to the hotel where they will be tested again. After that, they'll get tested on the fourth and seventh day."

India's only ATP tournament was added to the professional tour 2022 calendar back in November, and will take place starting January 31. This will be the first time since the 2020 edition that the event will be held, as the tournament last year was cancelled since the Indian government had made it mandatory for all travellers arriving from abroad to enter a 14-day quarantine.

The ATP had made it clear that events will not be held in countries where quarantine is mandatory. Under the new guidelines set by the Government of India, seven-day quarantine is compulsory for international arrivals. However, the players arriving for the Pune event will be exempt from being in isolation.

"No quarantine (will be required). We have got a special exemption from the Maharashtra government," Iyer adds. However, Iyer makes it clear that there will be no medical exemptions made available to unvaccinated players or their support staff. "Double vaccination is compulsory to enter the stadium. No exemptions, this is the Government of India rule. Even if you have to enter a mall you need to be double vaccinated, so the same will apply here," he says.

The organisers, according to Iyer, are finalising the lodging arrangements with hotels near the Balewadi Sports Complex, where "everyone involved in the tournament will be staying." However, he's uncertain about the use of ball kids during the event. Since vaccines were only recently opened for under-18s, there will not be any fully vaccinated ball kid available to volunteer at the event. "It's not decided what will happen, we will have to discuss it with the ATP. We don't know where the kids are coming from, and they will not be fully vaccinated right now," he concludes.

Tenacious tailenders secure draw for England

Chasing an improbable 388 against in-form hosts, England just about hold on

ASSOCIATED PRESS
SYDNEY, JANUARY 9

ENGLAND'S TAILENDERS resisted Australia's bowlers in fading light on Sunday to clinch a draw on a dramatic final day of the fourth Test at the Sydney Cricket Ground.

Jack Leach, Stuart Broad and then Jimmy Anderson batted out the final 10 overs under immense pressure after Pat Cummins and Scott Boland took three quick wickets in the final session before Steve Smith removed Leach with two overs remaining to set up a nervous finale to a gripping test match.

At stumps, England finished on 270/9 with Broad unbeaten on eight and Anderson not out on nought to give England its best result of the five-match series that Australia leads 3-0.

"It's a small step forward," said captain Joe Root. "I think coming into the game I spoke a lot about putting some pride back into English cricket and into the test performance. The fight, desire and character shown today and throughout the five days has done that in a small way."

Opener Zak Crawley was aggressive, scoring a commendable 77 while Stokes chipped in with 60.

Later in the innings, with the final hour approaching, Cummins removed Jos Buttler and Mark Wood in the space of three balls to turn the test on its head after it was looking increasingly likely that England would earn a draw after its most determined batting effort of the series.

Boland then continued his torrid start to Test cricket by having first-innings centurion Jonny Bairstow caught by Marnus Labuschagne for 41. It was Boland's 14th wicket in just his second Test after making his test debut in the third test at Melbourne where he was named man of the match.

Stubborn tailenders

Broad and Leach saw out the remaining 10 overs despite Australia having all its fielders around the bat in catching positions. Fading light forced Australia to bowl spinners Nathan Lyon and Smith in the final three overs.

"From the position we found ourselves in at certain points in this game, to be able to sit here having drawn... was going to take a good performance and I'm really proud of the way the guys dug in and managed to do that," Root said.

Boland then had Bairstow caught to expose England's tail, but Leach and Broad and



Australia tried using nine fielders in close catching positions, but could not get the final English wicket to win the fourth Test. AP

HOW ENGLAND HUNG ON TO AVOID DEFEAT

In the final three overs, Australia were unable to use pace because of the fading light. Forced to bring on Steve Smith, the former captain dismissed Jack Leach for his first Test wicket in almost six years.

That left Australia needing one wicket in the last two overs but Stuart Broad and James Anderson, despite the fielders crowding around them, stood firm to frustrate the home side.

Australia still hold an unassailable 3-0 lead heading into the final day-night Test in Hobart. But England restored some pride having shown the fight captain Joe Root had asked of them.

It was the third time in the past 12 months that Australia failed to bowl out a team on the final day, having twice squandered winning positions against India, and again on Sunday.

then Anderson found a way to survive despite up to nine fielders in close catching positions.

It was the third time in the past 12 months that Australia's attack has failed to bowl out a team on the final day, having twice squandered winning positions against India last season, and again here at the SCG on Sunday.

"I think first of all the weather played a bit of a part in this game and you basically can't predict it at all," said Cummins when asked about the timing of his declaration on Saturday.

"I thought the wicket still wasn't playing too many tricks and I thought if they batted really well, 350 was pretty achievable out

there. I thought 110 overs was enough time but having the luxury after the way Uzzie (Khawaja) and (Green) batted we had enough runs in the bank and that we could effectively attack for those whole 110 overs."

Usman Khawaja was named man of the match for his twin centuries - just the third player to achieve the feat at the SCG - in his first match since 2019. Khawaja, who scored 137 in the first innings, followed up with an unbeaten 101 off 138 balls as part of a 179-run partnership with Green in the second innings.

BRIEF SCORES: England 294 and 270/9 (Zak Crawley 77, Ben Stokes 60; Scott Boland 3/30, Nathan Lyon 2/28) draw Australia 416/8d and 265/6d.

Verstappen now eyes virtual Le Mans 24 title

GAURAV BHATT
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 9

A MONTH after winning his maiden Formula One World Championship, Max Verstappen will take part in one of the world's most dangerous and taxing races... from the safety of his living room.

The 24-year-old will race in the virtual Le Mans 24 Hours next week, going against some of the top names in motor racing and 'sim racing'. A star-filled grid of 200 drivers will compete in a video game race on simulators around the world for a \$125,000 winners' prize.

What is the 24 Hours of Le Mans?

The world's oldest active endurance racing event, 24 Hours of Le Mans is won by the car that covers the greatest distance in 24 hours. The race - run on the iconic Circuit de la Sarthe in Le Mans, France - is also one of the most dangerous motorsport events: 22 drivers have lost their lives over 99 years and 83 spectators were killed in a single crash in 1955.

What is the virtual 24 Hours of Le Mans?

The inaugural virtual race was run in the summer of 2020, after the real-world annual race was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The event was watched by more than 14 million viewers. Last year, it grew to become a full-fledged digital championship series.

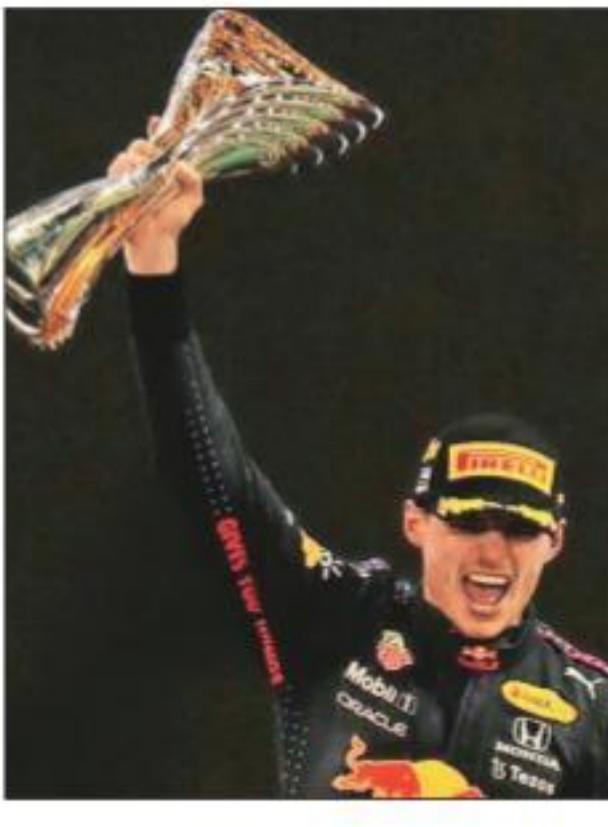
Next weekend's event will be the second officially-sanctioned virtual 24 Hours of Le Mans race and will be broadcast live on YouTube, Twitch and Facebook.

How is the virtual race run?

The race uses the rFactor 2 simulation game and allows the competitors to drive either the LMP (Le Mans Prototype) or GTE (Grand Touring Endurance) cars on a virtually-recreated Circuit de la Sarthe. Racers can compete from their homes using driving simulators - a wheel and pedal setup is mandatory. Teams can customise their machines with liveries, leaving some areas free for the official partners.

Raffaele Marciello, the winner of the 2020 edition, uses a "quite expensive" setup from his days as a Formula 1 testing driver. There are three monitors for better immersion, but it's still "easy to get distracted by the outside world. Your girlfriend passes by. You look above and there's no car, only your house roof. Sometimes the doorbell or the phone goes." Marciello told *The Indian Express*. "But it is also good training because you learn how to keep your focus for many hours at a time. When you're in an actual car on the track, keeping focus is not a worry."

According to the rules, a driver will not be able to race for more than seven hours. The working day-night cycle of the rFactor 2 game



The F1 champ has been a sim-racing regular since the pandemic struck. AP

means portions of the race will be run in the dark like the real-life counterpart. Vehicle damage is also set to 100 percent, which means damage will affect the car visibly and how it drives. It can be repaired in the pitstop, but "very bad accidents and incidents could result in terminal damage e.g. wheels falling off".

Is Verstappen new to sim-racing?

He is an avid sim-racer. Early on in 2020, when asked about the coronavirus-prompted limbo, and his off-season training, Verstappen told his official website: "Simulator racing is keeping me sharp. What else can you do at this moment, you have to stay inside, and it's fun. I really enjoy sim racing anyway. Over the winter I did it a lot and I try to practice my skills and make it even better. That's why I love doing it."

Verstappen competed in the inaugural virtual 24 Hours of Le Mans that year with fellow gamer-F1 driver Lando Norris. They were leading for Team Redline when a frozen screen led to a collision with eventual winners Rebellion-Williams Esports.

This time around, Verstappen's 'Team Redline' colleagues include Swedish IndyCar driver Felix Rosenqvist and sim racers Max Benecke and Atze Kerkhof.

Who are the others in the competition?

Spain's reigning IndyCar champion Alex Palou is in the field along with double Indianapolis 500 winner and former F1 racer Juan Pablo Montoya, Dutch two-times F1 esports champion Jarno Opmeer and an all-female W Series team. Double Formula One world champion and two-times Le Mans winner Fernando Alonso is non-driving captain of the Alpine esports team.

DAY TODAY

BY PETER VIDAL

ARIES (Mar 21 - Apr 20)

Try not to take others for granted or you may come unstuck. There is a great deal waiting to be explained and, if major moves are planned, you would be wise to wait until the picture is clear. Also, rely on your natural charm to win rivals over to your side.

TAURUS (Apr 21 - May 21)

Wait for another few days for major family meetings or decisions. Today's stars are sociable, indicating that you will make progress only if you operate as part of a team. Equality is the watchword, so try to make sure that everyone has a fair chance.

GEMINI (May 22 - June 21)

Partners may still be in disagreement, but not for much longer. You could find it difficult to accomplish your tasks and feel as if one particular goal is slipping from your grasp. But be assured that friends and allies will continue to carry the torch on your behalf, probably right through to next year.

CANCER (June 22 - July 23)

Now is a good time to reconsider your attitude to close partners. Also, develop all foreign contacts and get in touch with friends and relatives abroad. Adventure is in the air, even in a small way, and you may be tempted to take major risks, in moderation, of course.

LEO (July 24 - Aug 23)

Relatively sympathetic stars favour financial adventures. You are inclined to spend your hard-won money on luxuries and may be tempted to take a gamble. As to this last point, you must take responsibility for your own actions: if plans do come unstuck then it's up to you to get them back on track.

VIRGO (Aug 24 - Sep 23)

Nobody really knows what you are thinking at the moment, or even what you are experiencing. Either your thoughts have sped ahead of your actions, or plans are lagging behind what is actually happening. One way or the other, you've got to catch up with yourself.

PISCES (Feb 20 - Mar 20)

You're on top form, and if you are true to yourself you won't put a foot wrong. The general tone of the day is argumentative, so you must decide whether to confront someone now or bide your time. Plus, if you know what's good for you, you'll make sure you pick the right target.

CROSSWORD 4633



ACROSS

- 1 Stretches between bends (7)
- 5 We are kept away from home in it (5)
- 8 Sort to disturb adder and live? (9)
- 9 A bird stuck in the mud (3)
- 10 Part of a film about the Spanish (4)
- 12 Lively cartoon films are (8)
- 14 Pass on an account as many shopkeepers do (6)
- 15 Winning smash volley (6)
- 17 This plant requires proper drainage (4)
- 18 Put away five letters (4)
- 21 Published in error (3)
- 22 He'll be out of place in bar seat (9)
- 24 Worked for a model employer? (5)
- 25 Laughs at what could be desired (7)

- DOWN
- 1 It locates aircraft climbing or descending (5)
- 2 Dry manner (3)
- 3 How to save one's skin? (4)
- 4 See 13 Down
- 5 Arc light (4)
- 6 Well no one wants it (9)
- 7 Duly ran out one's washing (7)
- 11 Come in; it is not an infectious disease (9)
- 13 and 4 Down: Numbers out of order (5,3,6)
- 14 About to get together again (7)
- 15 Incorrectly be said to be prejudiced (6)
- 19 Diet for early birds (5)
- 20 Henry's last catch from the river? (4)
- 23 An agreeable gesture (3)

Solutions Crossword 4632: Across: 1 Regulate, 5 Blue, 9 Nails, 10 Clients, 11 Standing army, 13 Endows, 14 Tenses, 17 Shot in the arm, 20 Neither, 21 Score, 22 Duet, 23 Meanders. Down: 1 Rand, 2 Glint, 3 Losing weight, 4 Tossin, 6 Liner, 7 Essayist, 8 Single person, 12 Reasoned, 15 Scrooge, 16 Starve, 18 Olive, 19 Fees.

OVER THE HEDGE by Michael Fry & T Lewis



CALVIN & HOBBES by Bill Watterson



MARVIN by Tom Armstrong



JUMBLED WORDS

Given below are four jumbled words. Solve the jumbles to make proper words and move them to the respective squares below. Select the letters in the shaded squares and jumble them to get the answer for the given quip.

Success is how high you hit bottom. —George S. Patton (6,6)

RWEEO

BHRCNU

LOOTT

MOBBED

SUDOKU 4709

Difficulty Level 3s
Instructions
To solve a Sudoku puzzle, every digit from 1 to 9 must appear in each of the nine vertical columns, in each of the nine horizontal rows and in each of the nine boxes.
Difficulty Level
1s = Very easy; 2s = Easy;
3s = Medium; 4s = Hard;
5s = Very Hard; 6s = Genius

57 Covid cases put U-19 Cooch Behar knockouts in jeopardy

DEVENDRA PANDEY

MUMBAI, JANUARY 9

A TOTAL of 57 positive cases of Covid-19 have been reported among players, support staff and others involved in the upcoming Under-19 Cooch Behar Trophy knockouts, which are to be held in Pune. Among the persons found infected, 30 are players, nine support staff, and the rest groundsmen and match officials designated for the tournament.

The development comes on the heels of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) postponing the Ranji Trophy, Col CK Nayudu Trophy and the Senior Women's T20 League for the 2021-22 season due to the rising Covid-19 cases in the country. The Board hasn't called off its under-19 tournament yet, but a decision in this regard is expected soon.

The Indian Express understands that there have been some emergency calls among top BCCI office-bearers and they are likely to postpone the under-19 tournament.

"We will take a call on it soon. As the tournament was already on, we didn't want it to stop but soon we will have to take a decision on it," a BCCI official said.

Out of the 30 players found Covid positive, six are from Mumbai but there have been cases in each team. A majority of the players have not yet been vaccinated as they have been in a bio-bubble for the last one month playing league games. However, it is learnt that most of the cases detected are asymptomatic.

The eight teams to have qualified for the Cooch Behar Trophy knockouts are Mumbai, Maharashtra, Vidarbha, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Haryana and Bengal. They were

scheduled to play four-day knockout games in Pune starting Tuesday. Mumbai and Maharashtra had played their league games in Pune itself and were already stationed there. One player from Mumbai tested positive on Saturday and his roommate was isolated.

Scheduled quarantine

The other teams involved in the knockouts flew in from their respective locations on Saturday and were scheduled to undergo three-day quarantine. As per arrangements, the players have to share rooms and undergo daily tests for the next three days.

A few days ago, the board had taken the call to postpone three domestic tournaments. In a press release, BCCI secretary Jay Shah had stated that the health and safety of the players and everyone else involved in the game was paramount.

"BCCI does not want to compromise the safety of the players, support staff, match officials and other participants involved and hence, has decided to put the three tournaments on hold till further notice. The BCCI will continue to assess the situation and take a call on the start of the tournaments accordingly," Shah had said.

His statement had come just a few days after BCCI president Sourav Ganguly had said that the board will go ahead with its domestic cricket season despite the rise in Covid-19 cases.

But the Board's hand was forced by a Covid outbreak in the Bengal Ranji squad, with several players testing positive. Ganguly himself had to be hospitalised as a precautionary measure after being found infected by the virus. Even Cricket Association of Bengal president Avishek Dalmiya had to be admitted to a hospital "as a precaution" after contracting Covid.

Worldwide scare

Around the world, the pandemic, and the virus' omicron variant, has affected cricket to various degrees. It has influenced team selection and availability of coaching staff during the ongoing Ashes series, while the schedule of the Big Bash League Down Under has been severely impacted when several players in various teams tested positive.

During the Ashes, Australian captain Pat Cummins missed the second Test in Adelaide after being deemed a close contact of an infected person. Middle-order batsman Travis Head couldn't play the fourth Test in Sydney after testing positive. Several members of the England coaching staff had to be isolated after many members of the touring party caught the virus. But the matches went ahead as per schedule.

BRIEFLY

Ramkumar-Bopanna crowned champions

Adelaide: Teamming up for the first time on the ATP Tour, India's Rohan Bopanna and Ramkumar Ramanathan won the Adelaide International doubles trophy with a hard-fought 7-6 (6) 6-1 win over top seeds Ivan Dodig and Marcelo Melo here on Sunday. Bopanna's excellent service returns at crucial times and Ramkumar's all-round game tilted the match in their favour. In the one hour and 21 minutes contest, the Indians saved all the four break points they faced and broke their rivals twice.

Nadal wins 89th career title

Melbourne: Former world number one Rafa Nadal said made a successful return to competition from a niggling foot injury that had kept him out for nearly four months by winning the Melbourne Summer Set 1 on Sunday. The 35-year-old captured his 89th career title after seeing off American qualifier Maxime Cressy 7-6 (6) 6-3 in the final of the ATP 250 event ahead of the Australian Open, which begins on Jan. 17. Former world number one Simona Halep stormed past Veronika Kudermetova 6-2 6-3 to win the women's title.

Sai Praneeth out of India Open

New Delhi: Former World Championship bronze medallist B Sai Praneeth pulled out of the season-opening India Open tournament after testing positive for COVID-19. Another Indian player, double specialist Dhruv Rawat, also tested positive for the virus ahead of his departure for the national capital to participate in the tournament starting on Tuesday. Meanwhile, former champions Kidambi Srikanth and PV Sindhu of India have been given the top billing in the men's and women's sections, respectively.

Bharath becomes 73rd Indian GM

Chennai: Fourteen-year old Bharath Subramaniyam on Sunday became India's 73rd chess Grandmaster, securing the third and final GM norm at an event in Italy. The Chennai-based player scored 6.5 points from nine rounds along with four others to finish seventh overall in the event held at Cattolica. He obtained his third GM norm here and also touched the requisite 2,500 (Elo) mark. Fellow Indian player M R Lalith Babu emerged winner in the tournament with seven points.

ISL: Kerala win, move to top of table

Vasco: Alvaro Vazquez's first-half strike proved to be decisive as Kerala Blasters ended Hyderabad FC's unbeaten run with a 1-0 win and also jumped to the top of the points table in Indian Super League. The Blasters stretched their unbeaten streak to nine games and moved to the top owing to a better goal difference than Mumbai City. Both teams are on 17 points from 10 games. Hyderabad, on the other hand, saw their eight-game unbeaten run come to an end as they dropped to third in the table, having 16 points from 10 matches.

PTI & REUTERS

A different court battle

With hearing in Djokovic's deportation case set to begin, one question looms large: Will he stay or will he go?

ASSOCIATED PRESS & REUTERS

JANUARY 9

AFTER FOUR nights in an Australian immigration detention hotel, Novak Djokovic will get his day in court Monday in a deportation case that has polarized opinions and elicited heartfelt support for the top-ranked tennis star in his native Serbia.

Djokovic had his visa cancelled after arriving at Melbourne airport last week when Australian border officials ruled that he didn't meet the criteria for an exemption to an entry requirement that all non-citizens be fully vaccinated for COVID-19.

His lawyers have since filed court papers in his challenge against deportation from Australia that show Djokovic tested positive for COVID-19 last month and recovered. He used that as grounds in applying for a medical exemption to Australia's strict vaccination rules. On Sunday, Australian media reported that a federal government bid for extra time to prepare its case against Djokovic was denied. The application, made on behalf of Home Affairs Minister Karen Andrews during the weekend, sought to adjourn the final hearing by two days — just five days from the start of the Australian Open.

Federal Circuit Court Judge Anthony Kelly refused the application and the case will resume on Monday as planned. In Serbia on Saturday, Djokovic's family held a rally in support of him in Belgrade for the third successive day, and Prime Minister Ana Brnabic assured him of her government's support over his visa battle to ensure he can enter Australia and defend his Australian Open title.

The tournament begins Jan. 17 — just a week from his court date. "We've managed to make sure gluten-free food is delivered to him, as well as exercising tools, a laptop and a SIM card so that he is able to be in contact with his family," Brnabic said.

No guarantee given: Aus govt

The Australian government had not given Djokovic an assurance that a medical exemption he said he had to enter Australia without a COVID-19 vaccination would be accepted, government lawyers said in a court filing.

The Djokovic filing said the player had received an assessment from the Department of Home Affairs that his responses on his Australia Traveller Declaration indicated he met the requirements for quarantine-free entry into the country.

But the government's submission said the department's email was not an assurance "that his so-called 'medical exemption' would be accepted", and his responses could be questioned and verified on his arrival.

Deported or Melbourne Park? Possible results from Novak's appeal

Seven days from the Australian Open, Novak Djokovic will take the court in a battle against the Australian government on Monday. The world No. 1's visa was cancelled upon arrival at Melbourne airport last week after Australian border officials ruled that he didn't meet the criteria for an exemption to an entry requirement that all non-citizens be fully vaccinated for COVID-19. Djokovic has since spent four nights in an Australian immigration detention hotel and his lawyers have since filed papers claiming he has the all-clear because of a positive Covid-19 test in December. The highly-publicised case is scheduled for an online hearing in a federal court on Monday (10 am Melbourne time, 4:30 am IST).

The court and the judge

Formed last September, the Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia is the result of the merger of the Federal Circuit Court of Australia and the Family Court of Australia. Under the two divisions, the court has jurisdiction over family law matters — divorce applications, parenting disputes, property division — and over matters broadly relating to family law and child support, administrative law, admiralty law, bankruptcy, copyright, human rights, industrial law, migration, privacy and trade practices.

After nearly 30 years at the Bar, Anthony Kelly was appointed a judge of the federal circuit court in 2017. His prior practice features high-profile cases such as oil and gas company Exxon-Mobil's litigation from the Longford explosions (1998-2008) and the Bank of Melbourne case (1990 to 1993).

On Sunday, Kelly refused Home Affairs Minister Karen Andrews' request for Djokovic's hearing to be postponed till Wednesday. The delay would have ruled Djokovic out of the Australian Open as Tennis Australia's lawyers have said it would need to know by Tuesday whether Djokovic could compete, for scheduling purposes.

On Thursday, Judge Kelly had ordered minister Andrews not to deport Djokovic while he fights his appeal. Kelly had also enquired about the tennis facilities at the immigration hotel where Djokovic is detained.

"I don't think it's unreasonable for the court to ask... whether the particular hotel at which the applicant is staying... might have available to him tennis practising facilities," Kelly said. "I don't expect you to answer that, but it just seems a realistic question to pose."

If Djokovic wins

If Judge Kelly decides in favour of Djokovic,



Novak Djokovic's supporters gather outside the hotel in Melbourne. AP

the latter's visa would become valid again.

In a 35-page submission ahead of the hearing, the Serb's legal team called for his "immediate release" from detention no later than 5:00 pm on Monday. They have also asked the judge to rule "at the earliest possible", without waiting to craft his legal reasoning that they say could be re-leased later.

Arguing that Djokovic's visa was wrongly cancelled and should be reinstated, allowing him to compete, his legal team claimed that he received a document from the Department of Home Affairs seemingly clearing his way into the country. The documents say he had received a visa on November 18, tested positive for Covid-19 on December 16, and was provided the "Medical exemption from COVID vaccination on the ground that he had recently recovered from COVID" on December 30.

Legal expert Christopher Levingston told AFP that the government's case relied on a section of migration law that he be-

If the Aus govt wins

Djokovic will likely be deported on the next available flight out of Melbourne. Judge Kelly's order not to remove Djokovic while he fights his appeal expires at 4:00 pm on Monday. Australian border officials have already ruled that he didn't meet the criteria for an exemption to an entry requirement that all non-citizens be fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

"The government has always been clear about what is necessary in terms of the entry requirements into Australia," Federal Finance Minister Simon Birmingham told Today on Friday. "We made that clear to Tennis Australia. It's been publicly clear for a long time. You have got to be double-vaccinated if you are not an Australian citizen to enter Australia when we open the borders."

Legal expert Christopher Levingston told AFP that the government's case relied on a section of migration law that he be-

lieves "will ultimately see Mr Djokovic fail in his application". He continued that the minister only has to show that the presence of the visa holder "may, would or might be" a risk to the health, safety or good order of Australians.

The appeals

According to legal experts, both parties are expected to appeal the ruling.

If the government appeals, "Mr Djokovic would remain in immigration detention", Levington, an accredited specialist in migration law with more than 20 years of experience, told AFP. Djokovic could also opt for a challenge if his case is dismissed, with his lawyers flagging some untested point of law. John Findley, a solicitor-director who focuses on migration, family, business and tax matters, told AFP.

According to Levington, however, even if an appeal is lodged, Djokovic would not be able to walk free. The judge could not order the government to allow Djokovic to exit detention.

Other possibilities

Other experts believe that the tennis star could be granted a reprieve.

Partner at Thomson Geer Lawyers, Justin Quill, told Today on Friday: "I suspect what's going to happen is – and I suspect not so much because he is going to win his case, but that it is going to be found that there needs (to be) more time, and he will be allowed to stay in the country, compete in the Australian Open, and then the lawyers will argue about this in the weeks and months to follow."

"The imposition on Djokovic not being allowed to compete is arguably greater than the imposition on the Minister for Home Affairs. So, I suspect the court is going to land there and say, 'I'm going to allow you to stay in the country while we sort this out over the following weeks and months,'" Quill said.

Djokovic could also be barred from the country for up to three years, if he gets deported. In an emailed response to The Associated Press, the Australian Border Force said: "A person whose visa has been cancelled may be subject to a three-year exclusion period that prevents the grant of a further temporary visa. The exclusion period will be considered as part of any new visa application and can be waived in certain circumstances, noting each case is assessed on its own merits."

GAURAV BHATT

Bumrah didn't make batsmen play too often, feels Fanie de Villiers

PRATYUSH RAJ
NEW DELHI, JANUARY 9

THE WANDERERS Test was an aberration for Jasprit Bumrah. The lead script-writer of several of India's recent overseas victories — be it Melbourne or Kingston, Oval or Trent Bridge, North Sound or Centurion — he was comparatively ineffectual at Wanderers in both innings. In the first, he took the solitary wicket of Keshav Maharaj; in the second, he bled 70 wicket-less runs in 17 overs.

Numbers could often be misleading, but in this case, they fully capture Bumrah's uncharacteristic listlessness. He seemed to be rushing through his action, perhaps over-eager against Dean Elgar's defiance in the second innings, and was bereft of his machete-like sharpness. Perhaps, he was a victim of the high standards he had set for himself, and unable to match that, he withered.

It was equally a case of the South African batsmen blunting him diligently, showing heart, purpose and application, remarks former seamer Fanie de Villiers. "I don't think it is a question of him lacking ability or bowling badly. I think South Africa have worked him out. Since he has been India's most important bowler, a lot of team discussion has gone on how to tackle and survive Bumrah. I think South Africa have learned their lessons from the first Test."

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FANIE DE VILLIERS

FORMER SOUTH AFRICA PACER



Jasprit Bumrah in Cape Town on Sunday. He tweeted: "Cape Town, January 2018, is where it all began. Four years on... to return to this ground brings back special memories." Jasprit Bumrah/twitter

I think South Africa have learned their lessons from the first Test," de Villiers tells *The Indian Express*. A vital aspect was that unlike the first Test, Bumrah didn't make the batsman play enough. "This is where he lacked in the second Test as South African batters were leaving so many deliveries from him. Even Elgar played him better than before, although he got hit a couple of times," de Villiers observes.

According to Cricinfo stats, South Africa's batters left as many as 67 Bumrah deliveries in 38 overs, the most batsmen from either side had left of any bowler. In general, the host seamers made the Indian batsmen play more often. Two factors, though, should be considered. First, Bumrah's natural method of setting up right-handed batsmen is to soften them up with away-going deliveries before ripping in the fast and fierce nip-backer. So invariably, he ends up bowling a few away from the stumps.

The Wanderers strip was bouncier than the SuperSport track, and importantly, the variable bounce was not as pronounced. So batsmen could, fairly confidently, leave on length.

In contrast, the Proteas pacers operated on a fuller length, and hence made batsmen play more often, inducing the edge. De Villiers concurs: "In South Africa, fuller deliveries have always been more successful."

The bowler who has got the ability to bowl both inswinger and outswinger will be more effective. That's the reason why Vernon Philander enjoyed his greatest successes at home and especially at Newlands [venue of the last Test]."

In this context, Mohammed Siraj's breakthrough hurt India badly, as he was the most natural full-length plunger among the four Indian fast men.

A rare bad outing

Usually, Bumrah sizes up the length he needs to hit quite early. At Wanderers, he didn't. How Bumrah responds to this setback, or an aberration rather, would be an interesting subplot. It has the potential to form the chief narrative of the third Test too, as more often than not when he gets wickets, India end up on the winning side. It's not the first time he has endured a bad game, but almost always, he has turned it around. For instance, he had a shocker in the World Test Championship final, but came back strongly in the next outing, picking up nine wickets and setting up the match at Trent Bridge. He had a poor game in Adelaide, but whipped up fury in Melbourne.

There wouldn't be a better deck for a turnaround than Newlands, where the pitch usually favours seamers. It is not going to be easy for the batters at Newlands," warns De Villiers. "That has been the