

SHORT TAKES

Fire breaks out in tent at Singhu border: SKM

New Delhi: A fire broke out in a tent at Delhi's Singhu border where farmers have been protesting the Centre's three agri laws, the Samyukta Kisan Morcha claimed on Saturday. Sukhwinder Singh, a protester, said the incident took place around 10 am near an under-construction flyover where the tent was put up. However, there was no official word about the incident from the police or the fire department. The tent was completely burnt, said the Morcha, which is heading the agitation. A man was also injured while trying to extinguish the blaze. The incident took place after a cylinder caught fire, the SKM claimed. There were around 10 to 12 people inside the tent when the blaze broke out. Five mobile phones, 20 mattresses, 20 chairs and dry ration was destroyed, it said, adding that a fire tender from Kundali doused the fire. Dilpreet Singh, a resident of Punjab's Patiala district who is taking part in the agitation, said a man named Rajwant Singh was injured in the incident. "The fire broke out when we were making tea. Rajwant was injured while dousing the fire. There were 12 to 13 people in the tent. We will make our new tent tomorrow," Dilpreet said. Hundreds of farmers are camping at Delhi's borders points at Ghazipur, Singhu and Tikri since November demanding that the Centre repeal the three contentious farm laws and make a new one that would ensure legal guarantee on the MSP. Enacted in September, the three farm laws have been projected by the Centre as major reforms in the agriculture sector that will remove middlemen and allow farmers to sell their produce anywhere in the country. The protesting farmers, on the other hand, have expressed apprehension that the new laws would pave the way for eliminating the safety cushion of the Minimum Support Price (MSP) and do away with the "mandi" (wholesale market) system, leaving them at the mercy of big corporates. — PTI

Bagchi new MEA spokesperson

New Delhi: Senior Indian Foreign Service (IFS) officer of the 1995 batch Arindam Bagchi on Saturday took over as the spokesperson of the MEA, succeeding Anurag Srivastava as the joint secretary—external publicity and public diplomacy (XP). Bagchi, who was earlier ambassador to Croatia, was posted as the MEA's Joint Secretary (North). Mr. Srivastava, in turn, is the new JS (North). The MEA's JS (North) deals with matters relating to Nepal and Bhutan. "Honoured to assume charge as the Official Spokesperson of @MEAIndia. Looking forward to working closely with everyone to fulfil my responsibilities in this new role," Bagchi tweeted, after taking over.

3 held for sexually assaulting woman

New Delhi: Three men have been arrested for allegedly sexually assaulting a 25-year-old woman and robbing a truck driver at two different places in south Delhi, police said on Saturday. The accused have been identified as Yogesh (26), Naveen Lohmod (25) and Baljeet (30), all residents of Aya Nagar here, they said. On the intervening night of Thursday and Friday, police received information that a woman had been sexually assaulted by three to four men who had also tried to rape her and had torn off her clothes, a senior police officer said. Police reached at the spot and met the victim who alleged that three men had a quarrel with her brother in a car. When she came to save him, they sexual assaulted her, the officer said, adding that a case under relevant sections was registered at Fatehpur Beri police station. Police said another call was received where the caller alleged that three men had beaten and robbed him of his ₹30,000 at Aya Nagar. After reaching the spot, complainant Shahjad (30), a truck driver, said when he along with some labourers were unloading bricks from the truck, three men came and started abusing and beating him and his labourers, the officer said. Later, they took his wallet, containing ₹30,000 and other documents, police said. — PTI

'Doorstep ration delivery scheme will have no name'

We will accept all conditions of Centre but will not allow any obstruction: Kejriwal

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 20

A day after the Centre red-flagged the "Mukhya Mantri Ghar Ghar Ration Yojna," which was scheduled to start from March 25, Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal on Saturday said the doorstep ration delivery scheme of his government would not have any name.

"We will accept all the conditions of the Centre but will not allow any obstruction in the implementation of the scheme," Mr Kejriwal asserted in a press conference.

The Centre on Friday asked the Delhi government not to implement the "Mukhya Mantri Ghar Ration Yojna" saying it is "not permissible" to

We dreamt of this scheme for 20-22 years and I was personally preparing for it for the last 2-3 years. So our hearts sank after receiving the Centre's objection but now we will not let any obstruction come in its way and accept all its conditions.



use subsidised food grain allotted under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) for a state scheme.

The chief minister said a letter from the Centre, on Friday noon, informed that the doorstep delivery of a ration scheme cannot be named "Mukhya Mantri Ghar Ghar Ration Yojna."

"Perhaps they had objection over the word 'Mukhya Mantri.' There will be a Cabinet meeting

on Monday and its proposal will be sent to the Centre," he said.

Mr Kejriwal claimed it was important for him to ensure ration delivery to poor people by removing ration mafia from the public distribution system.

"We dreamt of this scheme for 20-22 years and I was personally preparing for it for the last 2-3 years. So our hearts sank after receiving the

Centre's objection but now we will not let any obstruction come in its way and accept all its conditions."

He said the doorstep delivery of ration was a revolutionary scheme in view of powerful mafia active in the field and hoped the scheme without any name would satisfy the Centre and it would have no objection now.

CM Kejriwal was scheduled to launch the scheme with doorstep delivery of ration to 100 households in Northeast Delhi's Seemapuri on March 25.

The Central government, however, said it would have no objection if the Delhi government came out with a separate scheme without mixing the elements of the NFSA.

Nursery admissions: Delhi schools release 1st list, 2nd on Mar. 25

New Delhi, March 20: Schools in the national capital on Saturday notified their respective first lists for admission to nursery classes which began in February after a two-month delay. The schools have put out their first list using the point-based criteria announced by them earlier.

The Directorate of Education (DoE) has said that the private unaided recognised schools shall develop and adopt criteria for admission which shall be fair, reasonable, well-defined, equitable, non-discriminatory, unambiguous and transparent.

The process for nursery admissions in over 1,700 schools in Delhi began from February 18, bringing respite for anxious parents who have been waiting for the notification for over two months.

"The first list of selected children has been displayed today and will be followed by second list on March 25 and subsequent list for admission, if any, on March 27. The entire admission process will conclude on March 31," a senior DoE official said.

The DoE has also directed that since schools are closed in view of the COVID-19 pandemic and physical class room learning is not going on for entry level classes at present, no fee except pre-

scribed registration fee, admission fee, caution fee (if school already charges) and tuition fee, shall be charged at the time of admission by the schools and thereafter only tuition fee shall be charged from the students till further orders.

Usually, nursery admissions in the national capital begin in the last week of November.

The DoE releases guidelines and schools are asked to furnish required information, following which the application process is rolled out in December. However, there was no development on it in 2020.

Delhi government officials in December had said that a proposal to scrap nursery admissions was being considered as the schools were closed for nine months due to the pandemic. But school principals had opposed this idea.

As per norms, all private unaided recognised schools admitting children in pre-school, pre-primary and class-I level shall reserve 25 per cent seats for EWS or DG category students and children with disability. A monitoring committee has been constituted in each district under the chairmanship of the deputy director (district) concerned. — PTI

Centre asks CJI Bobde to recommend his successor

New Delhi, March 20: With a little over a month left before Chief Justice of India S.A. Bobde retires, the government has started the process of appointment of next CJI, asking the incumbent to recommend his successor, sources said Saturday.

Law minister Ravi Shankar Prasad Friday sent a letter to Justice Bobde, who is set to retire on April 23, seeking his recommendation, the sources said.

As per the Memorandum of Procedure governing the appointment of members of the higher judiciary, "appointment to the office of the Chief Justice of India should be of the senior-most judge of the Supreme Court considered fit to hold the office".

It stipulates that the law minister would, at an appropriate time, seek the recommendation of the outgoing Chief Justice of India for the appointment of the next CJI.

Under this process, after receipt of the recommendation of the CJI, the law minister puts it before the Prime Minister who advises the President in the matter of appointment. — PTI

Farmers' body seeks withdrawal of 1 of 3 agri laws recommended by Parl panel

New Delhi, March 20: The Samyukta Kisan Morcha on Saturday sought the withdrawal of a parliamentary panel's recommendation asking the Centre to implement the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020, one of the three agri laws against which the farmers have been protesting at Delhi borders for over 100 days.

The SKM, an umbrella body of over 40 farmers' union leading the farmers' agitation, alleged that the ECAA allows "unlimited private hoarding and black marketing".

Their remarks comes after a parliamentary panel asked the government to implement in "letter and spirit" the ECAA. This panel also has members from opposition parties including Congress, TMC and AAP. These parties have been demanding repeal of all three farm laws enacted by the Centre recently.

"It must not escape attention that the ECAA makes a wholly anti-poor recommendation that food, which is the most essential item for the survival of human beings, should be removed from the list of EC.

"It allows unlimited private hoarding and black marketing. It will lead to the winding up of the PDS facilities and structures," the SKM said in a statement.

It added that the implementation of the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act will "expose 75 crore beneficiaries to open market purchase of food requirements, promoting Corporate and MNCs in food markets".

In its report tabled in the Lok Sabha on March 19, the Standing Committee on Food chaired by TMC leader

Woman chops off man's genitals for rape attempt

AGE CORRESPONDENT
BHOPAL, MARCH 20

A woman in a Madhya Pradesh village chopped off a man's genitals for attempting to rape her, police said on Saturday.

The incident took place in the village of Amilia under Rampura police station in Sidhi District late on Friday.

According to the police, the accused, identified as Ramesh Saket (45), barged into the house of the woman (45) late on Friday night.

The woman was at home with her 13-year-old son then.

Her son however ran to safety out of the house, thinking that the intruder was a thief.

The accused then attempted to rape the

accused, following which the accused was booked the accused under IPC section 354 (criminal force on woman with an intent to outrage her modesty), 456 (house-trespass), 294 (obscene acts) and 506 (criminal intimidation)", Khaddi police outpost sub-inspector Dharmendra Singh Rajput said.

The accused was admitted to the district hospital in Sidhi and later shifted to Sanjay Gandhi Medical College and Hospital in Rewa. Ramesh also lodged a complaint against the woman alleging attack on him by her.

The woman who resisted his move for around 20 minutes. Later, the woman picked up a sickle kept under the bed and cut off the genitals of the man.

The woman's husband was out of station for work when the incident took place, police said.

"The woman lodged a complaint in the local police station against the

accused, following which the accused was booked the accused under IPC section 354 (criminal force on woman with an intent to outrage her modesty), 456 (house-trespass), 294 (obscene acts) and 506 (criminal intimidation)", Khaddi police outpost sub-inspector Dharmendra Singh Rajput said.

The accused was admitted to the district hospital in Sidhi and later shifted to Sanjay Gandhi Medical College and Hospital in Rewa.

Ramesh also lodged a complaint against the woman alleging attack on him by her.

The woman was arrested after being booked under IPC section 327 (voluntarily causing hurt), Mr Rajput said.

■ Madhya Pradesh Congress observes the day as 'Loktantra Samman Divas'

Shivraj, Scindia celebrate 1-yr of BJP rule

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY
BHOPAL, MARCH 20

Exactly a year after the fall of 15-month-old Kamal Nath government, ruling BJP and Opposition Congress here on Saturday observed the occasion in two contrasting ways.

While Madhya Pradesh chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan hosted lunch for senior BJP leader Jyotiraditya Scindia, the architect of the collapse of Kamal

Nath government on March 20, 2020, coinciding the occasion, Congress observed the day as 'Loktantra Samman Divas' to highlight the threat to democracy.

Mr Chouhan also planted a sapling along with Mr Scindia at the Smart City complex here after he threw the lunch party for Mr Scindia in which his ministerial colleagues were also invited.

In fact, Mr Scindia made a sudden unscheduled tour of Bhopal to attend the events along with Mr



Chouhan Scindia

Chouhan on Saturday amid Congress observing the first anniversary of the fall of Kamal Nath government as 'Loktantra Samman Divas'.

"Kamal Nath government had become synonymous with corruption. It was in the interest of Madhya Pradesh; the Kamal Nath government

was pulled down", Mr Scindia told reporters here.

"Congress is perhaps celebrating the departure of Kamal Nath government and return of Shivraj government by observing the day as Loktantra Samman Divas", BJP leader Pankaj Chatravedy, a staunch loyalist of Mr Scindia, said while trying to make light of the Congress event.

Former chief minister Kamal Nath lambasted BJP for pulling down his 'democratically elected' government, saying that

"My government was formed with people's mandate, but Shivraj government was formed with purchase of MLAs".

Mr Nath said he had 2 options left before him when his government lost majority following resignation of 22 Congress MLAs in March last year—either to resign from the post of the chief minister or purchase MLAs to run his government.

"But, I chose to resign from chief minister's post in the interest of democracy", he added.

Jharkhand Maoists under ED scanner, assets to be seized

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 20

A day after attaching eight immovable assets of a Bihar-based Maoist and his family under the anti-money laundering law, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) has identified assets, worth several crores of Jharkhand based Maoists that will be seized in a day or two.

The ED on Friday attached assets worth over ₹40 lakh of a Bihar-based Maoist, Rambabu Ram alias Rajan/Prahar/Nikhil, an active member and leader of the banned CPI (Maoist) of Madhuban in east Champaran district. The

Naxal leader had been booked on charges of extortion and indulging in alleged unlawful activities. The Central probe agency said the "accused invested the proceeds of crime for acquiring various immovable properties in the name of his family members, so as to project them as untainted."

Prior to this, the ED had attached assets worth over ₹2 crore of Jharkhand-based Maoist Bindu Ganju and his firm Maa Gange Coal Trading Pvt. Ltd. "The ED has identified fresh assets of Ganju and his associates and it will be attached in a day or two", sources said.



Indian Navy personnel during Samudri Virasat Paddarshan on Swarnim Vijay Varsh on Ganga river in Kolkata on Saturday. — PTI

NIA takes over investigation of Mansukh Hiren death case

SONU SHRIVASTAVA
MUMBAI, MARCH 20

The NIA on Saturday took over Mansukh Hiren death case from Maharashtra ATS, which was trying to seek the custody of API Sachin Vaze. The Shiv Sena denied it was a setback for the state government, while also criticising the Centre's interference in the state. Meanwhile, the NIA recreated the crime scene on Carmichael Road near Mukesh Ambani's residence on Friday late night. The NIA took Vaze to the spot and asked him to walk on the road as a part of its probe into explosives-laden Scorpio case near Mr Ambani's house.

Using the special power under the National Investigation Agency (NIA) Act, 2008, the ministry of

home affairs (MHA) on Saturday handed over the probe of Mansukh Hiren's death. According to the section 8 of NIA Act, there is power to investigate connected offences. "While investigating any scheduled offence the agency may also investigate any other offence which the accused is alleged to have committed if the offence is connected with the Scheduled Offence," the section 8 reads.

As the NIA is already investigating the explosive case, now Mansukh Hiren's death is also related to it, therefore, the agency has taken over the case, a senior official said. The Central agency would re-register the Maharashtra police's FIR in the murder case and take over case file as well as the post-mortem report.

4 ancient beams excavated from Lingaraj temple found damaged

AKSHAYA KUMAR SAHOO
BHUBANESWAR, MARCH 20

The four stone beams that were excavated from Sibatirtha Mutt, just 50 metres away from the wall of the Lingaraj temple in Bhubaneswar, are found to have been damaged. These beams were kept near the Gadi (sanctum sanctorum) of the Mutt. The 20-ft single piece square stone beams are at least 15 tonnes each.

Historians say these stone beams are unique finds; blocks of this size are not even found at the



Historian Anil Dhir takes a look at the broken beams at Lingaraj temple in Bhubaneswar

Konark temple site. According to historian and researcher Anil Dhir, these huge beams were used in the foundation of

the Lingaraj temple. These must have been discarded because of faults. The ancient temple makers could detect

honeycombs and hollows in these beams just by tapping them.

The stone blocks had become the center of attention for the locals, who had flocked to see them when they were unearthed four months ago. But for the intervention of Mr Dhir, these blocks would have been broken and carted away for disposal along with the other rubble. Even last week, he had written to the authorities to remove these blocks either to the Odisha State Museum or the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) office.

SEARCH FOR MISSING/KIDNAPPED FEMALE

General Public is hereby informed that one female (depicted in the photo) namely Komal (Aged:21Years) W/o Badal R/o Flat No.460, Deep Apartment, Sec A/9, Pkt-I, Narela Delhi, with her son namely Vansh (Aged:0.5 Months) has been reported missing since 25.02.2021 at 07:00 AM from her residence vide DD No.82A Dated 26.02.2021 registered at Police Station Narela, Delhi. Their physical description is as under:-



Komal

Mrs. Komal: Complexion: Shallow, **Height:** 5'2", **Face:** Round, **Built:** Thin **Hair:** Long Black **Wearing:** Blue coloured suit & salwar, Chunnai and Havai slipper in feet.

Any one having any information/Clue about these persons, may inform SHO, Narela, Delhi at E-mail : cic@cbi.gov.in or website : <http://cbi.nic.in>

Tele No. : 011-24368638 or 24368641
FAX No. : 011-24368639
DP/853/ON/2021

Sd/-
SHO, Narela, Delhi
Tel.: 011-27282350, 27280435



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Shri Bhupesh Baghel
Hon'ble Chief Minister, Chhattisgarh

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SHORT TAKES

Raut says Pawar should lead UPA

Mumbai: The Shiv Sena leader Sanjay Raut on Saturday said that NCP chief Sharad Pawar should lead the UPA (United Progressive Alliance) in the country. If the UPA has to be strengthened and new regional parties need to be added in the UPA, a leader like Mr Pawar should head the UPA, he said. Speaking with the reporters in Nashik, Mr. Raut said, "We want Sharad Pawar to lead the UPA. So far the Congress has led the UPA. So far Congress leader Sonia Gandhi has led the UPA very well. But she cannot participate in active politics regularly because of health reasons. The UPA at the moment appears to be weakened. We need someone of Mr Pawar's stature. There are many regional parties, which are neither with the NDA nor with UPA, in the country. These regional parties, which want to stand against the BJP, can be brought under UPA," the Shiv Sena leader said. Mr Raut further said that the Congress must accept the reality. "If the UPA becomes strong, the Congress will also become strong," he said.

Aaditya Thackeray tests +ve for Covid

Mumbai: Maharashtra minister Aaditya Thackeray on Saturday said he has tested positive for coronavirus and urged people not to let their guard down. Taking to Twitter, Mr Thackeray said, "On having mild symptoms of Covid. I had myself tested and I am Covid positive." The guardian minister of Mumbai suburbs also requested people who came in contact with him to get themselves tested. "I urge everyone to realise that it is extremely important not to let your guard down. Please follow Covid protocols and stay safe," the son of chief minister Uddhav Thackeray said. With the detection of 3,062 cases on Friday, Mumbai reported its highest single-day spike ever. The city has recorded 3,55,897 Covid cases and 11,565 casualties so far. — PTI

2 Maoists shot dead in gunfight

Bhopal: Two hardcore Maoists, together carrying bounties of ₹4 lakh on their head, were gunned down in an encounter with security forces in Chhattisgarh's south Bastar district of Dantewada on Saturday. The encounter took place in Kawasipara forest, Dantewada district superintendent of police Abhishek Pallav said. Two weapons and an improvised explosive device (IED) weighing 5 kg were recovered at the encounter site. The slain Maoists were identified as Madvi Hadma, a deputy commander of Maoists, and Aya Etapal, a Jan militia commander of Naxals.

MODI WISHES PAK PM IMRAN KHAN SPEEDY RECOVERY

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 20

In perhaps yet another sign of the thaw between India and Pakistan at top levels, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday evening wished speedy recovery for his Pakistani counterpart Imran Khan who is down with Covid. "Best wishes to Prime Minister @ImranKhanPTI for a speedy recovery from Covid," PM Modi tweeted. This comes about a month after India and Pakistan agreed to a "strict observance" of the ceasefire along the LoC. Just recently, the visit of the Pakistani Equestrian National Tent Pegging Team to India to "participate in the World Cup Qualifiers of Equestrian Tent Pegging Championship 2021 from March 16-18" took place and generated a lot of buzz, triggering speculation that ties between the two neighbours could finally be headed for better times. Just recently, foreign secretary (FS) Harsh Vardhan Shringla had also said India "desires good neighbourly relations with Pakistan and is committed to addressing issues, if any, bilaterally and peacefully," adding however that "any meaningful dialogue can only be held in a conducive atmosphere and the onus is on Pak to create such an atmosphere".

After writer, Byapari gears up for new role

From rickshaw-puller, cook and author to Trinamul Congress' bet from Balagarh

SANJAY BASAK
BALAGARH (BENGAL),
MARCH 20

As the gamble to woo the backward castes intensifies between Trinamul Congress and BJP in West Bengal, a face that stands out is that of Manoranjan Byapari, the first Dalit writer in the state. Mr Byapari is the Trinamul candidate from Balagarh Assembly constituency in Hooghly. The author of "Interrogating My Chandal Life" among other books, Mr Byapari virtually emerged from the underbelly of the society. He was a Naxalite, an undertaker, a cook, and a rickshaw-puller. The magic word which changed Mr Byapari's life was "jijibisha" (the will to live). After being released from prison, Mr Byapari earned his livelihood as a rickshaw puller. One afternoon, he had parked his rickshaw in front of a college. While

waiting for passengers, he got engrossed in a Bengali book. He then spotted a "familiar figure of a teacher" and a young man. He got up "unwillingly" and pushed the book under the seat. The two got on his rickshaw. After a while the young man got off and the "lady teacher" was to be dropped off at Jadavpur.

In his autobiography, Mr Byapari writes: "I remember this difficult word I had come across in a book by Chanakya Sen some days ago—*jijibisha*. Nobody had been able to tell me the meaning. So I asked her. 'Didi, if you don't mind, can you tell me the meaning of *jijibisha*?' Somewhat surprised she said, '*Jijibisha* means the will to live. But where did you get this word?' 'In a book,' I answered.

"A silence followed. There was no way I could see her face as she sat behind me on the passenger seat. After getting off, she asked me to



write for a journal she published and wrote her name on a piece of paper."

Mr Byapari writes in his book, "My world turned upside down when I read what was written on that piece of paper."

He then narrates the incident: "You! I exclaimed in surprise. 'Do you know me?' she asked. 'I have read your books. Your book *Agnigarbha* is right here.' I then pulled the

book from under the seat." The "teacher" was the famous Bengali writer, Mahasweta Devi.

Today, Mr Byapari is a powerful Dalit voice and chairperson of Dalit Sahitya Academy. His election slogan is: "Rickshaw ebar Bidhan Sabhay (the rickshaw will now enter the Assembly)."

As Mr Byapari has emerged as a prominent face among the backward candidates in the fray, both the BJP and TMC are showering promises to woo Bengal's OBCs.

BJP chief J. P. Nadda has promised OBC status to the left out Hindu backward castes, which include Telis and Mahisyas, countering that the TMC's manifesto promises OBC reservation for backward castes like Telis, Mahisyas, Sahas, and Tamuls. During the 2019 Lok Sabha polls, the majority of the backward vote bank had moved to BJP, which helped it trounce

TMC in North 24 Parganas, Hooghly, Howrah, Midnapore, and Jangalmahal.

The Telis and Mahisyas, who dominate nearly 50 constituencies, started moving away after Mamata Banerjee introduced the West Bengal Backward Classes (other than SC and ST) Reservation of

Vacancies in Services and Posts Bill in 2012 paving the way for the inclusion of some Muslim communities in the OBC reservation fold. The Tomars, Telis, and Sahas were excluded from the OBC category as they were regarded as "privileged and part of the mainstream." BJP swung into action and accused Ms Banerjee of ignoring the backward classes to benefit the Muslims.

As the fight rages on, TMC is desperately hoping that the promise of reservation would not bring back this powerful vote bank to its fold.

Mamata dubs TMC rebels as 'Mir Jafar'

RAJIB CHOWDHURI
KOLKATA, MARCH 20

Stung by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's salvo, West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee has called the Trinamul Congress deserters as Mir Jafars for joining the BJP and mocked the saffron party over its failure to find candidates for the Assembly election while her MP nephew Abhishek Banerjee linked Mr Modi's theme of "double engine" government to a future of "bigger corruption."

Ms Banerjee told a TMC rally at Panskura in East Midnapore on Saturday, "Some Mir Jafars (traitors) made an exit from our party. This has only made us happy. Those who left were bought by the BJP for a huge amount of money. We know that. They are working for BJP in exchange of crores of money. We have the information. Remember, the gang of Harmad (mercenaries) of the CPI(M), who earlier unleashed atrocities, created unrest in the Jangalmahal and Midnapore, and built a factory of human skeletons, have become the biggest ringmasters of the BJP now."

She, however, expressed her regret of "bringing up some traitors" in Midnapore in an oblique reference to BJP candidate in Nandigram Shuvendu Adhikari and his father Sisir Adhikari, who is all set to join the saffron

Some 'Mir Jafars' (traitors) made an exit from our party. This has only made us happy. Those who left were bought by the BJP for a huge amount of money.

— Mamata Banerjee, CM, BENGAL

party. The TMC chief then wondered, "Which BJP is this? This is not the BJP of Atal Behari Vajpayee. This is of the goons, riotists, torturers, autocrats, monsters, Ravanans, and Dushasanas."

Referring to the candidates of five BJP MPs—Babul Supriyo, Nisith Pramanik, Locket Chatterjee, Swapan Dasgupta, and Jagannath Sarkar—for the Assembly polls, the TMC chief said, "Don't you see they are failing to find candidates? Even MPs are being made candidates! We have made only one MP (read Manas Bhunia), that too from the Rajya Sabha, a candidate. No one else among our party MPs was made a candidate. We have plenty of people."

Slamming Mr Modi for making big promises during the polls, the two-time CM also argued that he could not deposit ₹15 lakh, one of his key assurances, to every citizen's account till date.



Trinamul Congress candidate from Gazole constituency Basanti Barman during a door-to-door election campaign at Gazole in Malda district on Saturday, ahead of the West Bengal Assembly polls. — PTI

Bengal polls: PM to hold mega rally today, Sisir set to join BJP

AGE CORRESPONDENT
KOLKATA, MARCH 20

The last Sunday, before the high-voltage Assembly election starts from March 27 with the first phase in West Bengal, is going to witness a grand show by the BJP when Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union home minister Amit Shah will address mega campaign rallies, one by each, in the western belt of the state.

All eyes are, however, set on the BJP manifesto, which Mr Shah will release in Kolkata after the induction of three-time TMC MP of Contai Sisir Adhikari to the saf-

ron party.

Mr Modi, who addressed a rally in Kharapur in West Midnapore on Saturday after a day's gap, will visit the state again within 24 hours. He will address a party rally on Tilabedya Maidan in Bankura at 1 pm.

An hour before his event, Mr Shah will address a BJP rally at Mecheda in East Midnapore where Mr Adhikari, according to sources, is all set to defect to the saffron party. Union minister of state for shipping Mansukh Mandaviya visited Mr Adhikari during the day and invited him to Mr Shah's rally.

■ 'Will protect indigenous ethos if Congress voted to power' BJP attacking Assam's culture: Rahul

Mariani/Gohpur (Assam), March 20: Congress leader Rahul Gandhi Saturday slammed the ruling BJP in Assam for allegedly attacking the culture, language, history, heritage and bonds of brotherhood in Assam and assured to protect the indigenous ethos if his party is voted to power in the state.

Mr Gandhi, who had arrived for campaigning in poll-bound Assam on Friday, blamed the ruling BJP for "handing over" the entire state to outsiders and accused Prime Minister Narendra Modi of working only for two-three richest industrialists and not the general public of the country or for their welfare.

"The BJP in Assam and across the country is attacking culture, language, heritage and brotherhood ... We will protect you, your culture

Will implement Nyay scheme, if voted to power, says UDF

GILVESTER ASSARY
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM,
MARCH 20

The Congress led UDF on Saturday promised that if its government came to power in Kerala it would implement Rahul Gandhi's minimum income guarantee scheme Nyuntam Aay Yojana (Nyay).

Nyay scheme was one of the main highlights in the UDF election manifesto, which was released here today. The Congress leadership wants to focus on Nyay since Rahul Gandhi is going to campaign in Kerala exten-

sively from next week. During his meetings and interaction, the Congress MP from Wayanad is likely to highlight the importance of NYAY scheme.

Under Nyay, which is aimed at benefiting the poor sections of society, a minimum monthly income of ₹6,000 would be ensured for each family and ₹71,284 annually. In a bid to bring the Sabarimala issue back to the centre stage, the UDF manifesto also promised to bring a special legislation to protect the traditional customs and rituals at the hill shrine.

and identity. This is your state and it cannot be run from Nagpur (RSS head-

quarters)," he said at rallies at Mariani and Gohpur. Hitting out at the

ruling BJP for "handing over" the Assam to outsiders, he said "The government spent ₹2,000 crore of your money to modernise Guwahati airport. Now the airport been snatched from you and given to Adani. This way everything in the country is being given to two-three richest businessmen friends of the prime minister."

Mr Gandhi said if a Congress chief minister assumes power in Assam the "5 guarantees" promised by the party will be implemented. A law will be introduced in the state assembly to nullify the CAA, five lakh government jobs will be given to the state's youths, each household will get upto 200 units of free electricity, housewives will get ₹2,000 per month and minimum wages of tea garden workers be raised to ₹365.

— PTI

‘Cong backing those trying to tarnish Assam tea image’

MANOJ ANAND
GUWAHATI, MARCH 20

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on Saturday, accused the Congress of supporting forces trying to tarnish the image of Assam tea.

Addressing a public rally in Chabua, the tea-belt of Upper Assam, the Prime Minister said, "I was pained to see that Congress, which ruled the country for 50-55 years, supports those who want to ruin the reputation of India's tea. A toolkit has been circulated that aims to defame Assam's tea and Yoga. The Congress party supports these toolkit makers and then has the audacity to ask for votes in Assam." The PM went on saying, "A few days ago, the Congress party



Narendra Modi

shared a photo from Sri Lanka and said it was Assam. A few days ago, they shared another photo from Taiwan and said it was Assam. It is an injustice and insult to our beautiful Assam."

He also accused that the Congress has joined hands with parties that are a danger to Assam's culture and heritage.

"The Congress party, which is contesting elections in Assam, doesn't even recognise Assam's tea gardens. This is how they insult the people of Assam," the PM said.

He added that the Congress is playing with Assam's tea, culture, and emotions of lakhs of tea workers.

"If a chaiwala will not understand your pain, then who will? The development of every region of Assam is a priority for the Bharatiya Janata Party government. We are committed to ensure that the culture and heritage of the state are preserved," he said.

The Assam Assembly elections are scheduled to take place in three phases—March 27, April 1, and April 6—while the counting of votes will take place on May 2. In the first phase, 47 constituencies will go for the polls while voting will be held on 39 seats in the second phase and 40 seats in the third phase.

Ex-top cop: Maha mantri wanted ₹100cr per month

■ **Continued from Page 1** he had a target to accumulate ₹100 crores a month by telling there are about 1,750 bars, restaurants and other establishments in Mumbai and if a sum of Rs two-three lakhs each was collected from each of them, a monthly collection of ₹40-50 crores was achievable. The home minister added that the rest of the collection could be made from other sources.

"The hon'ble home minister has been calling my officers bypassing me and other superior officers of the police department. He instructed them to carry out official assignments and collection schemes, including financial transactions based on his expectations and targets to collect money," he further said.

Mr Singh also alleged that he has been made a scapegoat to divert attention from the actual wrongdoers in the Mukesh Ambai security scare case..

Mr Deshmukh has rubbished the allegations of extortion made by Mr Singh, saying the former Mumbai top cop is trying to save himself.

"The former commissioner of police, Parambir Singh has made false allegations in order to save himself as the involvement of Sachin Vaze in Mukesh Ambani and Mansukh Hiren's case is becoming clearer from the investigation carried out so far and threads are leading to Mr Singh as well," he tweeted.

What will make things difficult for the Thackeray government is Mr Singh's claim that several ministers, including the CM as well as the NCP chief were aware of Mr Deshmukh's "misdeeds". "At one of the briefing sessions in the wake of the Antilia incident held in mid-March 2021 when I was called late evening at Varsha (CM's official residence) to brief you, I had pointed out several misdeeds and malpractices

being indulged into by the hon'ble home minister. I have similarly briefed the hon'ble deputy chief minister, the president of the Nationalist Congress Party, Shri Sharad Pawar, and other senior Ministers also about the misdeeds and malpractices. On my briefings, I noticed that some of the ministers were already aware about some aspects mentioned by me to them," the letter says.

The letter also refers to several other officers, home minister's PA, specific places and dates. BJP leader Devendra Fadnavis said that Mr Deshmukh should either resign or the chief minister should sack him. "Mr Singh's letter is not only sensational, but also shocking. This is the first time in the state's history that a DG rank officer has publicly levelled serious accusations against the home minister. He has even attached a chat, which appears to be a direct evidence," he said.

Hosabale replaces Bhaiyyaji Joshi as RSS general secy

■ **Continued from Page 1** and the RSS supports this," he said. When asked about the nomenclature, Mr Hosabale said "Love Jihad" was used by the courts and not the Sangh. "Karnataka and Kerala high courts have confirmed the practice of Love Jihad," he said, adding that there was no question of religion in this.

He also distanced the RSS from Uttarakhand CM Tirath Singh Rawat's state-

ment on women wearing ripped jeans. Asked about criticism linking the RSS to Mr Rawat's comments, he said: "(Rawat) is capable of answering. It's not that everything in the country happens due to the RSS. What the Sangh has to communicate it does from its forums... there's no reason to bring RSS into all allegations."

Talking about political parties targeting the RSS for various issues, he said

they were free to express their opinions in a democracy but "it is wrong to say that the government is controlled from one place."

On the Ram Mandir issue, Mr Hosabale said, "The entire country comes together for a cause when needed. The Ram Mandir, for example, saw crores of people across party lines coming together. Not just Hindus, even people of other religions became a part of the campaign."

PM cites WhatsApp outage to attack Didi

■ **Continued from Page 1** Bengal," he alleged without taking Mr Banerjee's name. Mr Modi, who has a huge fan following on social media, said, "Many of you know last night WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram remained down for 50-55 minutes. People became impatient and worried. Questions cropped up in their mind. Though it was only for 50-55 minutes, everyone kept thinking about what happened. While some things on social media were

down for 50-55 minutes worldwide, in Bengal development has been down for the last 50-55 years. So was the trust, dreams and resolve. I can understand your impatience."

Seeking votes for the BJP, he added, "In the last 70 years you gave chances to many. You have seen the exploitation by the Congress, experienced the destruction by the Left parties and realised how the TMC shattered your dreams in the last 10

years. Give us a chance of five years. We will ensure the waste of the last 70 years is removed. Give us your blessings once. We will not care about our life for your welfare."

While he wooed the public with the promise of a "double engine" government, the PM remained silent on the statewide massive dissent in the BJP over the distribution of tickets for the Assembly polls which came to light throughout the day.

US def secy: Discussed human rights with Modi govt

■ **Continued from Page 1** only underscores the deteriorating situation of democracy in India," Senator Menendez said.

Secretary Austin said that he and defence minister Rajnath Singh had a bilateral meeting during which they discussed India's planned purchase of Russia's S-400 air defence system. He said that US has urged all of its allies to move away from Russian equipment and avoid any kind of acquisition which can trigger sanctions. He said that since there has been no delivery of S-400 systems to India the issue of sanctions was not discussed.

"We are keen to work together to realise the full potential of the India-US Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership," Mr Singh said. He said both sides reviewed the wide gamut of bilateral & multi-lateral exercises and agreed to pursue enhanced cooperation with the US Indo-Pacific Command, Central Command, Africa Command.

THE ASIAN AGE

21 MARCH 2021



Ranjona Banerji

Off the beaten track

What cooking teaches, how tastes are learned

The cooking revolution was perhaps one of the upsides of the pandemic. Entitled people who employed cooks suddenly found themselves staring at unprepossessing bunches of bottle gourd and cabbages and tried to imagine how to make them appetising. I shared with great enthusiasm some 10 “one-pot” recipes with family and friends until I ran out of steam and they ran out of ingredients.

Early in the lockdown of 2020, a friend started a recipe-sharing online group. It was brilliant. A bunch of similarly middle class but otherwise disparate people tried to make each other’s lives easier with tips and recipes and answers.

It was a very happy experience for a short while. And then as the group grew, it became a cesspit of gender, ethnic, caste, caste biases. (There would have been race if we had enough varied races in the group.) Anger and accusations, offence and defence, and suddenly we weren’t talking about how to best temper a daal but oh, in my high caste family we never eat X, Y and so on.

That something so beautiful in its conception and its early days could descend so quickly into fractious lines of othering and hatred is testament to the human ability to destroy anything worthwhile with our inherent stupidity.

That said, I learnt a lot in my first few weeks and top of the list is an onion chutney for idlis and dosas. With due apologies to our esteemed Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman and anyone else who doesn’t eat onions or care how much they cost. It is delicious so the loss is not mine.

My journey as a cook started somewhat before the online world governed our lives. Like many of my sort, I tried a little baking. At 10 I proudly made a hard as rock cake that wasn’t supposed to be a rock cake and watched in awe as a visiting family friend munched through it saying “delicious” after every long torturous chewing expedition. I haven’t forgotten his kindness and he still claims it was delicious!

This story is my Mother’s. When I was about 16, my grandparents were horrified that she hadn’t taught me how to make proper “Indian” food. Baking did not count in the marriage mart scheme of things. (This turned out to be correct. During one of my parents’ many short-lived disasters into the murky world of arranged marriages for me, one grandmother said all her grandson wanted from a bride was the ability to make fried brinjal wheels. The conversation did not go any further nor did the fancy cake I had baked.) My Mother told me that her honour was at stake and it was up to me to uphold it.

I cooked whatever I did. At the end of the meal, my Mother informed the grandparents of the reality. They blustered “but, but you never taught her”. My Mother, a teacher, had the last word: “I taught her how to gather knowledge.” No answer to that.

But I really learnt how to cook by experimentation. And by eating. To replicate tastes and memories. To try new things and ideas that were floating about in my head. And all that means stepping out of your comfort zone. For instance, when I was in my late teens all I wanted to eat at a Chinese restaurant was chilli chicken. I know, right. Even if “Indian Chinese” in the early 1980s was not as resplendent in choice as it is now, that was a pretty dumb choice to have set in stone.

I also experimented with vegetarianism in my early 20s. Until I got tempted by taste. O dear. Crabs at Kamling and chicken at Baghdadi. I got done in by Bombay, you might argue and that set me on my culinary journey. Underlying that of course is childhood. Bengalis have a terrible phrase inflicted on children and on us by our grandmother: “khethe shekho”. Learn to eat.

Attached to this phrase were some pretty gruesome vegetables like chichinge or snake gourd and bobboti or yardlong or asparagus beans. There is no taste connection between this bean and an asparagus, it has to be made clear. To this day, I cannot and will not eat these. Add to this cluster beans aka gawar ka phalli, which is not a Bengali staple but which I won’t eat anyway.

Conversely my Mother hated arbi or taro root or Colocasia corms. So we never ate that at home. I love it. My paternal grandfather hated pumpkin of all kinds so that was banned, but now we find we love it. What sense does it make? None at all. The Chinese ability to get over food taboos may be unpalatable for some, but shows a remarkable ability to adapt. There is no moral high ground in proclaiming that you are too superior to eat onions. It only means that your mind is consumed by taught rigidities.

Food taboos however are a topic of great sensitivity and resultant anger, so let’s not go there! To each her own.

But I made two fabulous new finds recently: buds of the *Bombax ceiba* and Bauhinia flowers. In both cases, the vegetable vendors were pleasantly amazed that I wanted to buy these local delicacies, having stereotyped me as a “broccoli and salad patta” buyer. One asked me to look up the Internet for recipes, the other explained how to cook the kachnar. The look of his joy when I came back to buy more was delightful.

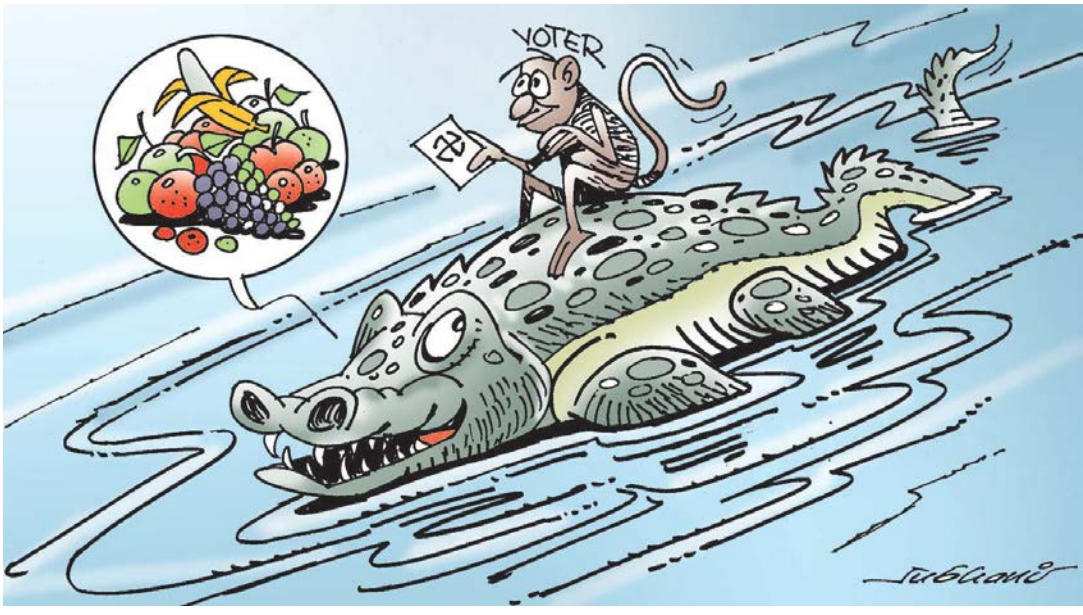
I realise I have left the door open for the great controversy of “veg biryani”. Maybe for another time?

The writer is a senior journalist who writes on media affairs, politics and social trends. She tweets at @ranjona.



Kachnar, in the raw and curry (right) forms

Subhani



Let it rip! Stop us turning into the Republic of Hurt



Pavan K. Varma

Chanakya’s View

In a land which has valued creativity and creative freedom since time immemorial, there are new glass ceilings — and sometimes steel ones — coming up all around. This sense of creative claustrophobia is the direct result not of “reasonable restrictions”, but subjective biases in those who either have the power to decide, or think they have the right to do so because of their proximity to power. The cumulative result is a sense of trepidation and apprehension, even fear, among the artistic fraternity about what they can depict, and what is likely to cause offence, and render them liable to arbitrary legal and punitive action.

The area of morality, religion and societal behaviour is the most contested area. We have new custodians of morality who are easily outraged by anything that does not fit into their conservative, upper-caste, patriarchal and outdated notions of “correct” behavior. Newly appointed CM of Uttarakhand, Tirath Singh Rawat, waxed eloquent on this gem of wisdom just a few days ago. Ladies who wear ripped jeans, he said, “pave the way for societal breakdown leading to substance abuse”. He was outraged that this “kainchi ka sanskaar” actually enables females “to reveal their knees” (what sacrilege!), when “the most important thing for women is to look after their family and children”.

So much then for women’s liberation, and the decades of struggle that has gone into

empowering women rather than confining them only to the home and the perpetuation of progeny. It could be argued, of course, that these are the personal views of a certain Mr. Rawat. In a free Republic anyone has the right to their opinion, and if Rawatji is an unapologetic male chauvinist. So be it. Alas, it is not that simple. People like Rawatji are in power today. They live in a time warp, and the greater their misogyny the more they their conviction that they are right. More worrisome, is the fact that they quote sanskaar or culture as the reason for their indignation. The corollary to this appropriation is only logical: anyone violating sanskaar must be reined in, brought to book, dealt with, and Bharat that is India must remain unsullied from all these evil progressive tendencies.

But sanskaar becomes even more lethal when it is coupled with religion. So, the religious sentiments of two BJP leaders were outraged by the fact that a serial was named *Tandav*, which they interpreted to be an insult to Lord Shiva. Such an allegation needs to be laughed out of the room, simply because the word *Tandav* is both an adjective and a proper noun, and when used as the title of a serial, the content of the story itself makes it obvious that there is not even a remote connection to the dance of destruction of Mahadeva. But a case was filed against Amazon Prime Video, and such is the fear, that the production house issued an abject apology,

deeply regretting the unintended “hurt” that may have been caused, and agreeing to cut out any “objectionable” scenes. What is even more inexplicable is that the Allahabad high court, instead of providing protection to the serial makers, proclaimed that no one has the right to hurt religious sentiments.

The real reason for the ire against *Tandav* may be quite different. In the serial, there is a university suspiciously sounding like “JNU”, whose students “subversively” shout slogans of “*azadi*”, and politicians are depicted as having no compunctions in fueling religious divides for political dividends. The whole script sound strangely familiar, and what better way to put this impudence in its place than to file an FIR against the impertinent producers on grounds of hurt religious sentiments?

We are fast becoming the Republic of Hurt. Some people were hurt by a Muslim boy kissing a Hindu girl with a temple in the background in the Netflix adaptation of *A Suitable Boy*. The iconic Marathi playwright, Vijay Tendulkar, recently faced a posthumous storm of protest because his play, *Jaat hi Poocho Sadhu ki*, used the Hindu word “sadhu”, and thus hurt Hindu religious sentiments. The fact is the play is not about faith at all, but about the ills of casteism. But obviously the Bajrang Dal, which raised objections, does not read beyond the title of the plays they want

What is even more inexplicable is that the Allahabad high court, instead of providing protection to the makers of *Tandav*, proclaimed that no one has the right to hurt religious sentiments

banned. In any case, it succeeded. The staging of the play was cancelled in Madhya Pradesh.

The real problem in our Republic of Hurt is that one doesn’t know what will next cause someone to be hurt. For instance, just the other day, the BJP-ruled Madhya Pradesh government decided to remove eggs from the midday meals given to anganwadi centres. The decision to provide high-protein eggs was taken by the previous Congress government. At the time the BJP had protested, seeing in this “nefarious” move the attempt to change the dietary habits of Hindus. But this begs the question: don’t Hindu children eat eggs too? Those who don’t are welcome not to, but the decision to replace eggs by milk has been questioned by child health experts. Such experts would, of course, then be called anti-national. The dilemma before filmmakers is that if their next production shows people eating eggs, or eating non-vegetarian food, would they have an FIR filed against them for “hurting religious sentiments”. One never knows.

A highly unwarranted subjectivity driven by medieval cultural notions and political hubris is seriously threatening creative freedoms in India. It is in this light that we need to see the government’s latest guidelines to control social media and OTT platforms. These guidelines may talk about self-regulatory mechanisms, but the final decision in the three-tier process lies with the ministry of information and broadcasting. If Tirath Singh Rawat becomes the minister of I&B, ladies in ripped jeans exposing their knees, and eating eggs to boot, must watch out.

The writer, an author and former diplomat, is in politics

LETTERS

ASHOKA NOT GREAT

Pratap Bhanu Mehta and Arvind Subramanian, intellectuals steering the course of Ashoka University, have resigned. They are fed up of the government’s anathema to alternate views. The government clearly intends to ensure that students are not thus influenced to pursue passions of any description other than its prescribed narrative. Too easily we forget that genius is sparked by freethinking. Mankind stands to benefit from it all. It’s the beginning of the end; Ashoka isn’t all that great anymore.

R. Narayanan
Navi Mumbai

ANTILIA CONNECT

TRUTH HAS BECOME the casualty in the battle between the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra and the BJP at the Centre with both parties using the investigative agencies to further their respective political agendas. While there is something fishy about the behaviour of Sachin Vaze, his motives for parking the car at Antilia are yet to be established. Extorting money from the India’s richest man guarded by many layers of security? Get real, Shobhaa De. The earlier reported Tihar Jail link is nowhere in the picture. The antecedents and background of deceased car owner Mansukh Hiran are yet unknown. Why?

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

CREDIT DUE TO MODI

WHAT COULD BE the compelling reasons for Pakistan’s change of heart? The one reason could be a strong and resolute Narendra Modi government as Pakistan has realised that it can no longer take India for a ride with its sinister designs. Pakistan extension of the olive branch ought not to be brushed aside. Cautious engagement options should not be ruled out.

Deepak Singhal
Noida

QUIBBLING OVER GRAIN

SHAKESPEARE HAS said that there is not a great deal in a name and a rose by any other nomenclature will smell as sweet. This is, however, not true for foodgrains with the Centre and the Delhi government clashing with one another. The central government has objected to the AAP’s doorstep ration scheme, saying that the word, “Mukhyamantri” cannot be used in the title of a scheme that involves distribution of foodgrains allocated under the National Food Security Act. It appears that this grave controversy can only be resolved by the intervention of Shakespeare. Till then, the people of Delhi will have to wait.

D.B. Madan
New Delhi

DEATH OF MANEATER

THE DISCOVERY of a large tiger carcass near the Nagarhole Tiger Reserve on Friday morning must make residents of Kodagu heave a sigh of relief. We believe the big cat to be the same elusive beast that killed three people and injured one. Three of the tiger’s canines were missing, and the feline may have ventured out beyond the forest fringes in search of easy prey.

N.J. Ravi Chander
Bengaluru

Every Monday the best letter of the week wins ₹500. Email: asianage.letters@gmail.com.

Anita Katyal

Political Gup-Shup



Mithun made to wait after biting bait; Mamata’s game of drones

It has been two weeks since actor Mithun Chakraborty was inducted into the BJP with great fanfare in the presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a rally in Kolkata. However, there is still no clarity about his exact role in the upcoming Assembly polls. No one knows if he will only campaign for the BJP or whether he will contest these elections and be projected as the party’s chief ministerial candidate. In his initial interviews, Chakraborty had been circumspect when asked if he was the BJP’s face for the top job but has subsequently warmed up to this suggestion, saying he will not mind taking on this responsibility if directed by the BJP leadership. However, the actor is still awaiting his turn as he has yet to participate in any major party programme. According to the buzz in Kolkata, BJP leaders Kailash Vijayvargiya and Dilip Ghosh are avoiding Chakraborty. Apparently, they are not confident about including him in the poll campaign as the actor is reputed to be an “unguided missile.”

Here’s more on the high-voltage West Bengal Assembly poll. The battle between the

Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamul Congress and its main challenger, the BJP, is intensifying with both sides pulling no punches in showing the other one down. As the campaign picks up momentum, several photographs have appeared in the local press showing the sparse crowds at the public rallies addressed by BJP leaders, including its president J.P.Nadda and home minister Amit Shah. It appears the Trinamul Congress has been using a drone to take aerial shots of the BJP’s election rallies, which are then brandished by it to mock its chief political rival.

Rahul Gandhi may have stepped down as Congress president close to two years ago but he continues to have a major say in the party’s internal matters. For instance, the Nehru-Gandhi scion was involved in the selection of candidates for the upcoming Assam and Kerala Assembly polls. The Wayanad MP is learnt to have asked the Youth Congress to provide a list of potential candidates for both states, preferably who do not belong to political dynasties,

come from humble backgrounds and have been working at the grassroots. As a result, 15 Youth Congress office bearers made it to the Kerala list. Most of them are in the 25-50 years age group. Another 10 tickets have gone to those who moved from the Youth Congress to the party’s district and state units in the last 10 years. In Assam, six members of the Youth Congress non-dynast candidates have been fielded. The only exception here is Angkita Dutta. Rahul Gandhi has also told the Youth Congress leaders that this experiment will be replicated at the national level if these candidates perform well in the Assembly polls, provided they intensify their agitations and protests against the government.

There appears to be no end to the Ashok Gehlot-Sachin Pilot saga. After their brief show of solidarity when the Rajasthan chief minister and his former deputy held joint public rallies for the forthcoming four by-elections, their cold war has resurfaced once again. Mr Pilot apparently saw red when he heard that Mr Gehlot planned to

field his son Vaibhav Gehlot from the Rajsamand Assembly seat. There was also talk that Rajasthan Assembly Speaker C.P. Joshi’s son Himanshu would be fielded from the Sahada Assembly segment. Mr Gehlot is keen on rehabilitating his son ever since he lost the 2019 Lok Sabha poll from Jodhpur. However, the two veteran leaders hit a hurdle when Mr Pilot and his camp followers objected to their choices. Meanwhile, Mr Pilot is getting impatient and has been petitioning the Congress leadership in Delhi to meet his long pending demands. Though he has been reassured that he will be adequately compensated for the loss of the deputy chief minister’s post, nothing concrete has emerged so far.

The Modi government is extremely sensitive to criticism, especially when it comes from civil society groups or politicians in the West. Recently, the government reacted sharply when US-based non-governmental organisation Freedom House and Sweden-based Varieties of Democracy Institute

downgraded India on the democracy ratings with the Swedish institute describing India as an “electoral autocracy”. And yet the Modi government’s actions speak louder than its words. For instance, the ruling dispensation has gradually restricted the entry of media persons to several ministries and the Parliament House. It was helped in this exercise by the year-long pandemic as the fear of infection was used to keep out journalists. These restrictions remain in place even though the government never fails to point out how it succeeded in containing the coronavirus pandemic. Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla has been proactive in denying access to journalists to Parliament. Not only has entry to Parliament been severely restricted but now even the routine exercise of renewing a journalist’s annual pass has become problematic. Apparently, the applications for the renewal of passes has been sent to the Speaker’s office for further scrutiny.

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist

IN BRIEF

Lankan bus crash kills 13, injures 31

Colombo: A passenger bus plunged off a road in central Sri Lanka on Saturday, killing 13 people and injuring more than 30. Police said the bus fell into a precipice near the town of Passara, about 240 kilometres east of Colombo, its stated destination. Police spokesman Ajith Rohana said an initial investigation showed the negligence of the driver caused the accident. It wasn't immediately clear if the driver survived. Local media reported over 70 passengers were on the bus.

Saudi coalition attacks Huthi rebels

Riyadh: The Saudi-led coalition in Yemen said on Saturday it had launched air strikes in support of pro-government forces battling a quickening Huthi rebel advance on the northern city of Marib. The move came after a drone strike set a Riyadh oil refinery ablaze on Friday, in an attack claimed by the Huthis, as the rebels made major advances on Marib, seizing a strategic mountain. The dawn strike on the refinery was the second major assault this month on Saudi energy installations.

Bangla Hindu home attacker arrested

Dhaka: Police in Bangladesh on Saturday arrested the alleged prime accused and instigator in connection with the attack on about 80 houses of Hindus by a hardline Islamist group in the country's northeastern Sylhet division following a social media post reportedly by a youth from the minority community. Shahidul Islam Swadhin, a Union Parishad member who is also the president of the local ward Jubo League, was arrested by the Police Bureau of Investigation (PIB) from Moulvibazar district, bdnews24.com reported. A total of 23 people, including Swadhin, have been arrested so far, the police said.

Eruption of Iceland volcano easing

Reykjavik (Iceland): The eruption of a long-dormant volcano that sent streams of lava flowing across a small valley in southwestern Iceland is easing and shouldn't interfere with air travel, the Icelandic Meteorological Office said on Saturday. The fissure eruption began at around 8.45 pm on Friday in the Geldinga Valley, about 32 kilometres (20 miles) southwest of the capital, Reykjavik, the Met Office said. The eruption is "minor" and there were no signs of ash or dust that could disrupt aviation, the agency said. "The more we see, the smaller this eruption gets," geophysicist Pall Einarsson said on Saturday after monitoring the volcano throughout the night.

JUDGE NOT TO MOVE TRIAL IN FLOYD'S DEATH

Minneapolis, March 20: A judge said on Friday he won't delay or move the trial of a former Minneapolis police officer charged in George Floyd's death over concerns that a USD 27 million settlement for Floyd's family could taint the jury pool, but he'll allow limited evidence from a 2019 arrest. Jury selection in the trial of Derek Chauvin will stretch into a third week after attorneys seated just one additional juror Friday. The 13th juror picked is a woman who said she'd seen only clips of the video of Floyd's arrest and needs to learn more about what happened beforehand. Late on Friday, the court said up to 16 jurors would be chosen. An earlier court order in November had said as many as four alternates would be picked, but once Chauvin's trial was separated from the trial of three other former officers charged in Floyd's death, the court had said only two alternates would be chosen for this case. Seven jurors had been picked last week when the Minneapolis City Council announced it had unanimously approved the massive payout to settle a civil rights lawsuit over Floyd's death.

Chauvin's attorney, Eric Nelson, subsequently sought to halt or move the trial, saying the settlement timing was deeply disturbing and jeopardized Chauvin's chance for a fair trial.

EU threatens Astra with ban on export

Commission has sent a formal reminder to pharma company on supply of vaccine

Berlin, March 20: The European Union's executive arm is increasing its pressure on pharmaceutical companies to speed up their vaccine delivery to the continent as virus numbers are rising again in many member countries.

The European Commission said on Saturday that AstraZeneca in particular could face export bans to countries outside the EU if it didn't quickly deliver the promised amount of vaccines to the 27-nation bloc. "We have the possibility to ban planned exports," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said on Saturday. "This is a message to AstraZeneca: You fulfill your part of the deal toward Europe before you start to deliver to other countries," von der Leyen said in an interview with a German media group. Von der Leyen said the contract between the EU and AstraZeneca clearly regulates how much vaccines the EU gets from

AstraZeneca's plants inside the EU and in Britain.

However, von der Leyen added, "We didn't get anything from the Brits while we are delivering vaccines to them." She said the commission had sent a "formal reminder" to AstraZeneca regarding this issue. AstraZeneca's Coronavirus vaccine is one of three vaccines that's approved in the EU. However, its usage has been overshadowed by several problems, including a slow start, recurring delivery problems and a temporary ban for several days earlier this week in many of the bloc's member countries after reports of blood clots in some recipients of the vaccine.

Most countries in the EU resumed giving shots of AstraZeneca again on Friday as infection numbers were spiking again across the continent and AstraZeneca's vaccine, too, is seen as critical to ending the coronavirus pandemic. — AP

PAK PM TESTS POSITIVE FOR CORONAVIRUS

Islamabad, March 20: Pakistan Prime minister Imran Khan on Saturday tested positive for the Covid-19 and is self-isolating at home, his top aide on health said, two days after he got the first shot of vaccination. Khan, 67, was vaccinated on Thursday as part of the nationwide anti-Coronavirus vaccination campaign which is underway in its first phase.

Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on National Health Services, Regulations and Coordination Dr Faisal Sultan took to Twitter to confirm that Khan has contracted the coronavirus. "PM Imran Khan has tested positive for Covid-19 and is self-isolating at home," he said in a tweet. Khan's spokesman Dr Shehbaz Gill said that the prime minister has just a slight fever and cough. — PTI

HONDURAS PREZ TOOK BRIBES IN 2019, SAYS U.S.

New York, March 20: Honduras President Juan Orlando Hernández accepted bribes from a drug trafficker as recently as 2019 — not just while running for office years earlier — a US prosecutor said.

In the closing arguments of the trial on Friday of accused Honduran drug trafficker Geovanny Fuentes Ramirez in New York, Assistant US Attorney Michael Lockard said the defendant had met with and paid bribes to Hernández twice in 2019. The repeated allegations against Hernández, who has been president since January 2014, have overshadowed the allegations against Fuentes Ramirez, even though Hernández has not been charged with any crime. Hernández has repeatedly denied any connection to drug trafficking, though one of his brothers faces the possibility of a life sentence for drug trafficking in the same court later this month.

Lockard said Fuentes Ramirez spoke of these meetings to Devis Leonel Rivera Maradiaga, former leader of the Cachiros cartel, while both were locked up in New York. "As recently as 2019, the year before his arrest, the defendant continued to meet with and pay bribes to President Hernandez," Lockard said. — AP

U.N. MEET: U.S., CHINA CLASH ON TACKLING RACISM

United Nations, March 20: The United States accused China on Friday of committing "genocide and crimes against humanity" against Uighur Muslims and other minorities, and China accused the US of discrimination, hatred "and even savage murder of people of African and Asian descent."

The clash came at the UN General Assembly's commemoration of the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and was sparked by one line in the speech by US Ambassador Linda Thomas Greenfield, who talked about being a descendent of slaves, growing up in the segregated South, and surviving racism including being called "an N-word." It came after the top US and Chinese diplomats wrapped up two days of contentious talks in Alaska. — AP

Cuomo's current aide accuses him of sexual harassment

Albany (US), March 20: A woman who currently works in the office of New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo says he looked down her shirt and made suggestive remarks to her and another aide, according to a newspaper report published on Friday.

Alyssa McGrath told The New York Times that Cuomo called her beautiful in Italian, referred to her and her female colleague as "mingle mamas," asked why she wasn't wearing a wedding ring, and inquired about her divorce, McGrath said. McGrath is the first current aide to come forward publicly on the mounting allegations of sexual misconduct against Cuomo, who is the subject of an impeachment investigation by the New York Assembly, the state's lower legislative chamber, presumably over those accusations and questions about the governor's handling of



Andrew Cuomo

data about Covid-19 nursing home deaths.

McGrath told The New York Times that her female colleague was the same woman the governor is accused of groping in the Executive Mansion, an allegation that was revealed in a report last week in the Times Union of Albany. That aide hasn't been identified publicly. McGrath did not accuse the governor of inappropriate touching. Cuomo, a Democrat, has repeatedly denied allegations of sexual misconduct. — AP

Strong quake hits northern Japan

Tokyo, March 20: A strong earthquake struck on Saturday off northern Japan, shaking buildings even in Tokyo and triggering a tsunami advisory for a part of the northern coast. There were no immediate reports of damage or injuries.

The US Geological Survey put the strength at magnitude 7.0 and depth at 54 kilometres (33.5 miles). The shaking started just before 6.10 pm. The quake was centered off the coast of Miyagi prefecture, in the country's rugged northeast, which was heavily damaged during the huge earthquake

and tsunami of 2011 that left more than 18,000 people dead. Japan's Meteorological Agency issued an advisory for a tsunami up to 1 metre (yard) in height for Miyagi prefecture immediately after the quake, but lifted it about 90 minutes later. The tsunami might have reached parts of the Miyagi coast already, Japan's NHK public television said.

Officials there said there were no immediate reports of damage. The strong tremor caused a temporary blackout in some areas and suspended bullet train services in the

'End Covid restrictions'

A protester carries a placard reading 'Human dignity for all' during a demonstration to demand the compliance of basic rights and an end of the restrictive Coronavirus measures in Kassel, central Germany, on Saturday. — AFP

Biden, Harris decry Atlanta attack

President calls on all Americans to stand up to bigotry

Atlanta, March 20: President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris offered solace to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders amid what he called a "skyrocketing spike" of harassment and violence against them. "We have to change our hearts," he said. "Hate can have no safe harbour in America."

Biden called on all Americans to stand up to bigotry when they see it, adding: "Our silence is complicity. We cannot be

complicit." "They've been attacked, blamed, scapegoated and harassed; they've been verbally assaulted, physically assaulted, killed," Biden said of Asian Americans during the Coronavirus pandemic.

The president also called the shootings an example of a "public health crisis of gun violence in this country," as his administration has come under scrutiny from some in his own party for not moving as swiftly as promised on

reforming the nations gun laws. Harris, the first person of South Asian descent to hold national office, said that while the motive of the shooter remains under investigation, these facts are clear: Six of the eight killed were of Asian descent and seven of them were women. "Racism is real in America. And it has always been. Xenophobia is real in America, and always has been. Sexism, too," she said. — AP

Striking Myanmar rail staff move out amid stir

Mandalay (Myanmar), March 20: Residents of Myanmar's second-biggest city helped striking railway workers move out of their state-supplied housing on Saturday after the authorities said they would have to leave if they kept supporting the protest movement against last month's military coup.

Mandalay residents carried the workers' furniture and other household items to trucks, van and pickup trucks. The state railway workers last month went on strike as key and early supporters of the civil disobedience movement against the Feb. 1 coup that toppled the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi. The

military regime has sought to force them back to work through intimidation, which included a nighttime, gun-firing patrol last month through their housing area in Mandalay and a raid in the railway workers' housing area in Yangon. Protests against the coup continued on Saturday in cities and town across the country, including in Mandalay and Yangon.

The coup reversed years of slow progress toward democracy in Myanmar after five decades of military rule. In the face of persistent strikes and protests against the takeover, the junta has responded with an increasingly violent

crackdown and efforts to severely limit the information reaching the outside world. Internet access has been severely restricted, private newspapers have been barred from publishing, and protesters, journalists and politicians have been arrested in large numbers.

The independent Assistance Association for Political Prisoners has verified 235 deaths and has said the actual total — including ones where verification has been difficult — "is likely much higher." It said it has confirmed that 2,330 people have been arrested or charged since the coup, with 1,980 still detained or remaining charged. — AP

HINDU SCRIBE KILLED IN PAKISTAN

Karachi, March 20: A 31-year-old Hindu journalist in Pakistan has been shot dead by some unidentified assailants while getting a haircut at a barber shop in the country's Sindh province, the police said on Saturday.

Ajay Lalvani, a reporter with a private Royal News TV channel and an Urdu language newspaper Daily Puchano, died on Thursday after he sustained bullet injuries in stomach, arm and knee. He was sitting in the barber shop in Sukkur city when assailants on two bikes and a car drove by and opened fire. Lalvani was rushed to a nearby hospital where he died.

His father Dileep Kumar said that the family did not have any enmity, dismissing the police's claim of the murder being the result of a personal enmity, according to The News International. Condemning the killing, Hindu member of Pakistan's National Assembly (MNA) Lal Chand Malhi said that it is a "matter of great concern".

A group of journalists, holding the police responsible for the incident, protested against Lalvani's killing and carried out a march, claiming that it was a targeted killing. Lalvani's body was cremated amidst tension in Sukkur city which remained shut on the second consecutive day, the police said. — PTI

COMBAT | VIOLENCE

Conservatives claim the charter damages family unity, encourages divorce

Turkey pulls out of treaty protecting women

Istanbul, March 20: Turkey has pulled out of the world's first binding treaty to prevent and combat violence against women by presidential decree, in the latest victory for conservatives in President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling party.

The 2011 Istanbul Convention, signed by 45 countries and the European Union, requires governments to adopt legislation prosecuting domestic violence and similar abuse as well as marital rape and female genital mutilation.



Recep Tayyip Erdogan

Conservatives had claimed the charter damages family unity, encourages divorce and that its references to equality were being used by the LGBT community to gain

broader acceptance in society. The publication of the decree in the official gazette early on Saturday sparked anger among rights groups and calls for protests in Istanbul. Gokce Gokcen, deputy

chairperson of the main opposition CHP party said abandoning the treaty meant "keeping women second class citizens and letting them be killed." "Despite you and your evil, we will stay alive and bring back the convention," she said on Twitter.

Turkey had been debating a possible departure after an official in Erdogan's party raised dropping the treaty last year.

Since then, women have taken to the streets in cities across the country calling on the government

to stick to the convention. Labour and social services minister Zehra Zumrut Selcuk told the official Anadolu news agency that Turkey's constitution and domestic regulations would instead be the "guarantee of the women's rights." "We will continue our fight against violence with the principle of zero tolerance," she said on Saturday.

Domestic violence and femicide remain a serious problem in Turkey.

A man was arrested on Sunday in the north of the country after a video on

social media purportedly showing him beating his ex-wife on a street sparked outrage.

Last year, 300 women were murdered according to the rights group We Will Stop Femicide Platform. The platform called for a "collective fight against those who dropped the Istanbul convention," in a message on Twitter.

"The Istanbul convention was not signed at your command and it will not leave our lives on your command," its secretary general Fidan Ataselim tweeted. — AFP

OUR CRITIC'S RATING

Outstanding ★★★★★ | Great ★★★★ | Good ★★★ | Okay ★★ | Poor ★ | Truly Terrible TT

A reluctant road film that goes adrift

Sandeep Aur Pinky Faraar

CAST: Arjun Kapoor, Parineeti Chopra, Jaideep Ahlawat, Raghubir Yadav, Neena Gupta
DIRECTOR: Dibakar Banerjee
RATING: ★★
 Playing in theatres

SUPARNA SHARMA

There is really no reason to dislike *Sandeep Aur Pinky Faraar*.

The film — directed by Dibakar Banerjee that he's co-written with Varun Grover — opens with a scene that has the sharp bite and gritty traces of Kanu Behl's saga of urban discontent and fury, *Titli* (2015).

We get a skewed view of three boys in a moving car in Haryana. They are discussing women.

Somewhere nearby, a girl is idling in her room at a posh hotel. She gets dressed, puts on red lipstick and goes to a restaurant to meet someone.

A journalist tries to draw her out, get her attention, invites her to a party.

A text is answered by a cop who arrives with a note and a car.

Bang bang... Two worlds collide.

This opening sequence of events is an exciting forewarning that whips up high expectations. And for a while *SAPF* is engaging. The characters have layers, they feel real and are inhabited with warmth and confidence by skilled actors.



The problem is that the film's plotting is sparse, and the direction confused.

Sandeep Aur Pinky Faraar is a road film that doesn't want to be a road film. It doesn't want to go in the usual direction of, "and then they fell in love". That's a welcome though, a noble enterprise!

Problem is that *SAPF* doesn't know what else to do.

So while it takes the same road, and en route picks items from the buffet of events common to almost all road films — two strangers face threat, are forced to escape together, have arguments, reconcile because of fear of discovery, meet creepy and non-creepy people, suffer at least one assault or attempted rape, bad people get closer, tense climatic escape and, finally, *ishk* — it just does it all slowly.

It also replaces melodrama with an immersive *dekho* around. Instead of giving us maudlin moments and *mohabbatain*, *SAPF* keeps a straight face, is often sullen, and prefers to gaze at trees and stuff. As I said, there's nothing to dislike about *Sandeep Aur Pinky Faraar*. It's a decent film that promises more than it eventually delivers.

Satinder Dahiya *urf* Pinky (Arjun Kapoor) is a suspended cop, and Sandeep Walia *urf* Sandy (Parineeti Chopra) is a top honcho at Parivartan Bank. They are thrown together because of a massive bank scam around a government scheme that has the power to bring down the bank, and maybe the government as well.

Pinky thinks he's just running a chore, doing his former boss a favour till he realises his irrelevance and their treachery. She takes a while to figure what is going on.

Desperate to survive, they head to Pithoragarh to cross over to Nepal. And this journey they undertake together highlights the difference between the two and the worlds they come from.

Sandy has money and Pinky understands how this strange, devious world works. She carries a ₹2 lakh bag and he is helping her for ₹10 lakh.

In Pithoragarh, Uncle (Raghuvir Yadav) and Auntie (Neena Gupta) and a shopkeeper father-son duo add some recuperative Uttarakhandi flavour to the film. There are also some cute moments around *roti* and *achar* when

Pinky and Sandeep are forced to play house-house. But then...

Dibakar Banerjee is a fabulous director and he does small town India very well. He is also very political.

Here too what's quite nice is that Dibakar and Varun make the girl rich, independent and someone who doesn't think much about sleeping with her boss. "I'm not some local chamiya," Sandy says to Pinky.

And then there is Swabhiman scheme, Parivartan bank and a cop for us to read stuff into.

Shopkeeper's son Munna with his blonde mohawk hairdo, Uncle and Auntie who are forever quibbling, try to anchor the film. But *SAPF* wants to meander in Pithoragarh, instead it goes adrift.

There's a dance at an engagement party, fighting off a creepy bank officer, and then a man dresses as a woman and dances in a *baraat*. In between are moments of dull nothingness.

What works for *Sandeep Aur Pinky Faraar* are its actors. All of them are very good though some of them are also playing the same roles we have seen them play before. Jaideep Ahlawat is a cop (Pataal Lok), Neena Gupta-Raghubir Yadav are husband wife (Panchayat), and Arjun Kapoor-Parineeti Chopra have been a thing since *Ishaqzaade*. She slapped him then, and she slaps him here.

Having said that, both Arjun Kapoor and Parineeti Chopra are quite good. He more than her.

Watch *SAPF*, but don't expect big thrills and high jinx. Expect some sweet moments and some pointless, dull meandering.



The Courier, in which Cumberbatch is an everyman spy

LINDSEY BAHR

The new Cold War film *The Courier* about a Soviet whistleblower and the British businessman who helped transport information to Western intelligence agencies is both based on real events and people and also is very much the product of a screenwriter's imagination. That's not to criticise the film written by Tom O'Connor (*The Hitman's Bodyguard*) and directed by Dominic Cooke (*On Chesil Beach*). It's simply to say that it is more historical fiction than it is history. The whole truth of this extraordinary chapter has likely died with the principal characters and/or been obscured and distorted by the people who write these things down.

What we know is that there was indeed a Soviet official named Oleg Penkovsky, played in the film by Georgian actor Merab Ninidze, who was an essential source for the Americans during the Cold War and the leadup to the Cuban Missile Crisis. One of Penkovsky's contacts was a British civilian named Greville Wynne, who wrote an autobiography about his experiences. Even the reliability of that account has been questioned. Still, it provided an intriguing jumping off point for O'Connor to write a classic espionage thriller that opens in select theaters Friday.

In *The Courier*, after Penkovsky makes an initial outreach to the West, MI6 and the CIA are at a loss for how to cultivate him as a source. They decide a civilian who might do business in the Soviet Union is the best bet and somewhat casually land on Wynne.

Cumberbatch, who we've seen play suave, cruel and egotistical many times over the years, plays Wynne as an ordinary middle class schlub just trying to keep his family afloat and club memberships intact. He doesn't suspect he's dining with spies when his government friend Dickie (Angus Wright) and an American CIA agent, Emily (Rachel Brosnahan), sit down with him to recruit him into service. He reacts with a boyish giddiness as though it was Ian Fleming himself sitting across the table.

Emily is one of the inventions of the film. O'Connor has said he just decided to make the CIA agent a woman. It certainly breaks up the monotony of such a male cast and it's always a delight to see Brosnahan in 60s garb. But it also feels a little insincere to just insert women in specific historical settings where they weren't. It was also done with the Felicity Jones character in *The Aeronauts* and the effect is often the opposite of empowering. Since *The Courier* is so fictionalised, however, it's easier to accept here. Plus, she gets to be the more persuasive agent.

Not that Wynne, who was in a bit of a rut, needed much convincing. He jumps on the opportunity and starts taking extended trips abroad, leaving his wife (Jessie Buckley) and young son at home. The film has an almost ebullient tone for much of the first half as Wynne and Penkovsky get to know and like each other over caviar lunches, big drunken nights out and tearful evenings at the ballet. It lightly zips along despite the fact that the stakes include death and nuclear holocaust. The honeymoon is soon to end, though, as suspicions start to arise around this business relationship and things get infinitely more complicated for our protagonists, which I won't spoil here, but it's a tonal whiplash.

The Courier is a story we haven't seen on film but it still feels very familiar most of the time, with espionage film tropes and clichés to spare. While it might not be on the same level as *Bridge of Spies*, it's solid, well-acted and enjoyable nonetheless. Just don't use it as the text for any history reports.

The Courier, a Lionsgate/Roadside Attractions release in select theaters Friday, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association of America for "violence, partial nudity, brief strong language, and smoking throughout."

Running time: 111 minutes. Two and a half stars out of four. —AP

The Courier

CAST: Olga Kurylenko, Gary Oldman, Amit Shah
DIRECTOR: Zackary Adler
RATING: ★★★

No style, no substance, just bhai log ki much-much

SUPARNA SHARMA

All backbenchers in schools across schools and millennials are bound by an experience and habit unique to them. Whenever stumped by the deadly combo of not studying at all and a really tough paper, they first stare wantonly at the top-poppers who are writing furiously with their heads down, raising their hand only to ask for extra sheets. Then they gaze at the wide expanse of the blank answer sheet that needs to be filled.

I and my backbencher ilk had a time-honoured solution — we would set out on the mission to fill at least four pages. But since we knew nothing, we would write whatever we could recall from whichever subject, but in a cursive style invented by lag-gards.

We'd elongate each letter, stretch the connecting lines between them as far as possible, ensuring that the rule that would usually take eight words now had only three. This would fill the time and page, though it never ever fooled the teacher.

But, *umeed pe duniya kayam hai*. And we'd do it again, only to irritate, not impress yet another teacher.

Director Sanjay Gupta is a bit like us backbenchers.

He thinks he can fool his audience by elongating shots, by putting everything that he can in slow-motion, hoping they'll mistake it for substance, or even style. He is wrong.

If you take away all the slo-mo

Mumbai Saga

CAST: John Abraham, Mahesh Manjrekar, Amol Gupte, Prateik Babbar, Emraan Hashmi, Kajal Aggarwal, Rohit Roy, Samir Soni, Gulshan Grover, Suniel Shetty
DIRECTOR: Sanjay Gupta
RATING: ★
 Playing in theatres

shots of people walking in various types of footwear, of cars and jeeps swerving, of one man bashing, many men flying and blood sprouting, Sanjay Gupta's Mumbai Saga will become a Mini Mumbai Bliip.

The film's story, set in the Eighties and Nineties, is purportedly of a real-life Mumbai gangster, one D.K. Rao, who was an aide of Chhota Rajan but then branched off on his own into extortion, escaped three encounter attempts, including one in which he received seven bullets. He is currently in jail.

But Gupta takes liberties with the story, characters, events. He picks random incidents and people from the long history of Mumbai underworld purely because of their swag.

Mumbai Saga has four main characters and a story that's been done to death.

There is Bhau (Mahesh Manjrekar) the politician who keeps giving speeches about Marathi Manooos,

threatens non-Marathis, talks about renaming Bombay to Mumbai. He wears a beard, a shawl, and he sketches.

Then there's a vegetable seller, Amartya Rao (John Abraham). He's a *seedha-sadha* guy till he is really pissed off by hafta-demanding gangsters. He chops off one guy's hand. This irks Gaitonde (Amol Gupte), who runs Mumbai's EMI hafta scheme from his prison cell.

And finally there is Inspector Vijay (Emraan Hashmi) who introduces himself as "Encounter Specialist", as if Police Encounter were a legit department, like narcotics and accounts.

The plot is about a simple man becoming a don by doing lots of *don-giri* on the instructions of Bhau. This is all made up of scenes in slo-mo where Amartya and his minions in terrible wigs do bodily harm to goons with fists and guns. In between there are some pointless appearances by Suniel Shetty, Gulshan Grover, Arjun (Prateik Babbar) and Seema (Kajal Aggarwal) the chatter-box. And for dialogue, there are gems such as these:

"Mard ka kaleja bada hona chahiye, moonch-h e nahi."

"Dumm (tail) toh teri hai hanin, toh Gayatonde ke saamne kya hilate ho?"

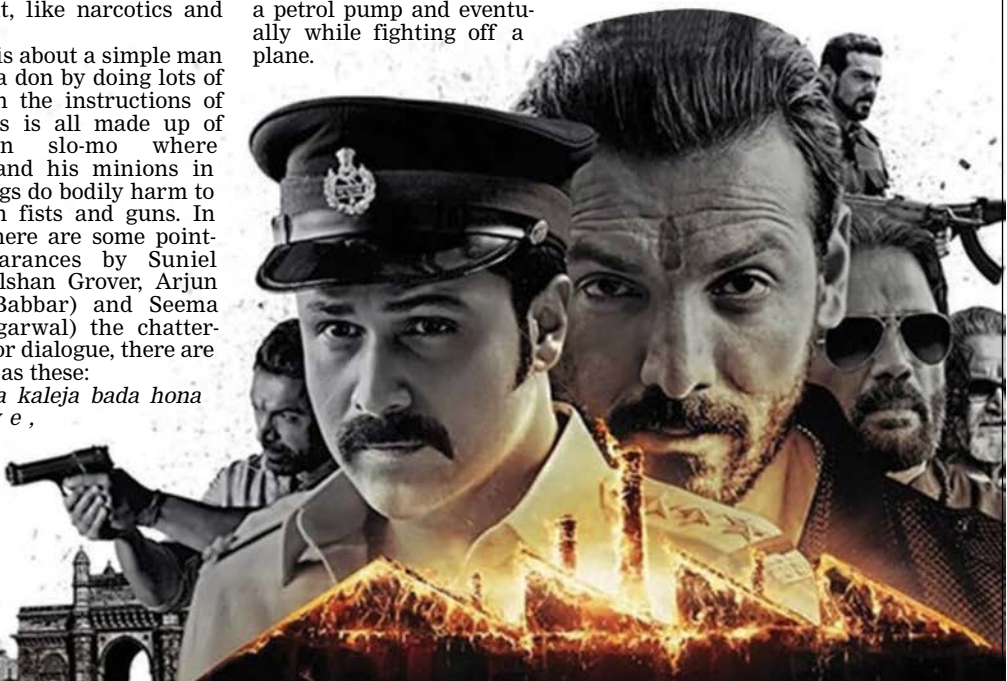
The plot contrives and makes its way to one Harvard educated businessman who strikes a deal with Gaitonde to evict people and sell mill land.

But Amartya warms him, "Teri gaadi bullet proof hai, tu nahin."

Ganeshji and an item girl make their respective appearances before Encounter Specialist Vijay chases and shoots them all — in a brothel, at an anda-pav stand, at a petrol pump and eventually while fighting off a plane.

There is no reason to waste your time on this nonsense in slo-mo expect for three things: One, Mahesh Manjrekar as Balasaheb is eerily fabulous. Two, to study the camera angles every time Amole Gupte is on screen. He's always shot from low angles as if the camera man was asked to do *pocha* while shooting him during Covid-lockdown. Three, when some people are doing drugs, the text at the bottom of the screen said, "Give hugs not drugs."

I swear. *Bhai kasam*.



In Yes Day, kids get their way for 24 hours



JAKE COYLE

Like an innocuous kid version of *The Purge*, Miguel Arteta's *Yes Day* imagines an annual 24-hour holiday of lawlessness.

The concept comes from Amy Krouse Rosenthal's 2009 picture book, which suggested a day when parents — regularly such fonts of "No!" — have to answer in the positive to their children's demands. For some, the idea had real appeal not just for giving kids a shot at decision-making freedom but for momentarily relieving parents of the burden of constant disapproval.

One parent, in particular, took to *Yes Day*: Jennifer Garner. The actress has previously spoken on social media about holding the holiday with her three children. And she's a producer of the film, which debuts Friday on Netflix.

"No is part of the job," narrates Allison Torres (Garner) in the film's opening scenes. But so stern is Allison —

Yes Day

CAST: Jennifer Garner, Edgar Ramirez, Jenna Ortega
DIRECTOR: Miguel Arteta
RATING: ★★★
 Streaming on Netflix

the bad cop next to her more easy-going husband Carlos (Edgar Ramirez) — that her three children's school projects suggest a dictatorship in need of a coup. One makes a video comparing her to Stalin and Mussolini.

When a guidance counselor (Nat Faxon) suggests *Yes Day* as a remedy, Allison goes along, with a few stipulations. You can't break laws and you've got to stay within 20 miles of home. This leads to a day of wall-to-wall fun, with bed-jumping, ice-cream feasts, a car wash trip with the windows down and a surprise theme-park visit. The day tests both Allison's helicopter parenting impulses

and the kids' own desire for independence. That's especially true for 14-year-old Katie (Jenna Ortega), an impressively poised young actor), who wants to attend a concert without her mom.

It's all lightly predictable as the family works out a level of comfort that isn't all yes or entirely no.

There's something to be said for lower-stakes family films, a genre that has increasingly aped the world-ending scale of superhero films. (One pandemic discovery for my family was 1974's *Swallows and Amazons*, a charming British film about kids just playing on a lake. On their own, they're plenty capable of making their own tents and adventures.)

Yes Day isn't nearly so sweet. Arteta (*The Good Girl*, *Cedar Rapids*) has an underrated ability at crafting comic, humanistic movies out of commercial concepts. But *Yes Day* slides too often into contrived, loudly scored montages of "fun" that don't

transfer to those of us watching. And while Garner and Ramirez are both very fine actors, neither of them is funny. Not to be negative on *Yes Day*, but it would be a lot better if, say, Will Ferrell and Maya Rudolph played the parents. (Though what movie wouldn't be improved with that casting?) The film's best moments come courtesy of Faxon and the very funny Arturo Castro, the *Broad City* actor who makes every scene he's in better. Here he plays a hapless and needy police officer.

Of course, after a pandemic year that has ruled out so much for kids, *Yes Day* may be a welcome reprieve for them. My kids, naturally, loved the idea and will probably take me to task for saying anything but "Yes" to *Yes Day*.

Yes Day, a Netflix release, is rated PG by the Motion Picture Association of America for some rude and suggestive material, and brief language. Running time: 86 minutes. Two stars out of four. —AP

SHORT TAKES

Yashaswini pips Manu for gold

New Delhi: India's Yashaswini Singh Deswal personified consistency and calmness on her way to winning the gold medal in the women's 10m air pistol ahead of the more celebrated Manu Bhaker in the ISSF World Cup here on Saturday. Deswal shot 238.8 to comfortably finish on top of the podium in the eight-women final while Bhaker managed 236.7 to settle for the silver medal. Viktoria Chaika of Belarus bagged the bronze medal with 215.9. The other Indian in the final, Shri Nivetha, started well but had to eventually settle for the fourth place with 193.5. Deswal secured her Tokyo Games quota with her gold medal in Rio. Deswal and Bhaker added to the bronze medal won by Divyansh Singh Panwar in the men's 10m air rifle earlier on the second competition day. — *PTI*

Three shooters test +ve at WC

New Delhi: Three shooters, including two from the Indian pistol men's team, have tested positive for Covid-19, National Rifle Association of India sources said on the second competition day of the ISSF World Cup here on Saturday. The shooters are currently self-isolating in their team hotel. Those who were sharing the rooms with the three shooters as well as their other teammates have also been isolated after undergoing Covid tests. The results of the roommates and other team members, though, have returned negative. A source said two among the three shooters are from the Indian contingent. "The shooters have been sent into isolation as per protocols. Testing is being done on a daily basis and that's their results have come to light," a source close to the federation said. — *PTI*

Vijender's winning run ends on 'ship'

Panaji: The unbeaten run of star Indian boxer Vijender Singh in the professional circuit ended on Friday night after he was defeated by his Russian opponent Artshy Lopsan in the 'Battle on Ship' here. Vijender, who had turned professional in 2015, entered the bout with a 12-0 record. In the opening round, Vijender was cautious in his approach as the Russian outplayed the Haryana boxer and used his height to perfection. The Russian, who was fighting his seventh bout, out-punched Vijender on the rooftop of the 'Majestic Pride Casino' ship, which resulted in a heart-break for the partisan crowd. The referee, after one minute and nine seconds in the fifth round, declared the Russian as the winner as the eight-round game ended in a knockout. — *PTI*

Leeds end London hoodoo with win

London: Patrick Bamford responded to his omission from the England squad with a goal as Leeds ended their misfortunes in London by beating Fulham 2-1 in the Premier League. Fulham missed a chance to move out of the relegation zone for the first time since December. After Bamford's 29th-minute opener, Fulham's Joachim Andersen equalized with his first goal for the club, and Raphinha notched Leeds' winner. — *AP*

Live on TV

CRICKET

India vs South Africa women: 2nd T20 from 7 pm on Star Sports 2, 3

BADMINTON

All England Open: Finals from 3.30 pm on Star Sports 2 HD, Star Sports 3

FOOTBALL

FA Cup Quarterfinals: Chelsea vs Sheffield United from 7 pm; Leicester City vs Manchester United from 10.30 pm on Sony Ten 2

English Premier League: West Ham vs Arsenal from 8.30 pm; Aston Villa vs Tottenham Hotspur from 1 am (Monday) on Star Sports Select 1, HD

Italian League: Juventus vs Benevento from 7.30 pm; Fiorentina vs AC Milan from 10.30 pm on Sony Six, HD

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LAST LAUGH

India crush England in last T20 to clinch 'see-saw' series

Ahmedabad, March 20: India defeated England by 36 runs in the fifth Twenty20 International to claim the series 3-2 here on Saturday. Rohit Sharma's sensational 64 and skipper Virat Kohli's well-crafted 80 powered India to a massive 224 for two, their best ever total against England, in the winner-takes-all fifth Twenty20.

Skipper Virat Kohli contributed unbeaten 80 while Suryakumar Yadav scored 32 off 17 balls before Chris Jordan's stunning piece of fielding resulted in his dismissal off Adil Rashid.

Hardik Pandya remained unbeaten on 39. India struck early with Bhuvneshwar Kumar dismissing dangerous Jason Roy for a duck and kept consistent pressure on England.

Dawid Malan (68) and Jos Buttler (52) scored half-centuries but the required run rate kept mounting. They managed 188/8 for in their 20 overs.

After losing the toss for the fourth time in the series, India were predictably put in to bat by Eoin Morgan. Preparing themselves for success in all conditions ahead of the T20 World Cup, India thrived under the pressure of a series-decider to produce their best total of the series.

Jofra Archer and Mark Wood had troubled the Indians with their extra pace in earlier games but Rohit and Kohli sent them to the cleaners on way to their 94-run stand.

The hosts hammered 67 runs in the last five overs to give the innings a perfect finish.

Barring Ben Stokes and Adil Rashid, all England bowlers leaked more than 10 runs per over with Chris Jordan (0/57) being the most expensive.

India decided to drop



India captain Virat Kohli (right) and batting partner Hardik Pandya celebrate scoring runs against England in the fifth Twenty20 at Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad on Saturday. India won by 36 runs.

NUMBERS GAME

- Virat Kohli sets the record of most runs against England in Twenty-20. The Indian skipper reached this milestone during his unbeaten 80-run knock in the final Twenty-20 in Ahmedabad on Saturday.
- He made 577 runs at an average of 44.38 and a strike rate of 136.72 in 17 innings of as many matches with four fifties till the end of the Indian innings.
- India recorded their highest total against England by making 224 runs for the loss of two wickets in 20 overs.

— *S. PERVEZ KAISER*

SCORECARD

India: Rohit Sharma b Stokes 64, Virat Kohli (not out) 80, Suryakumar Yadav c Roy b Rashid 32, Hardik Pandya (not out) 39. Extras (lb-3, wd-6) 9. **Total (For 2 wickets, in 20 overs) 224.**

FoW: 1-94, 2-143.

Bowling: Adil Rashid 4-0-31-1, Jofra Archer 4-0-43-0, Mark Wood 4-0-53-0, Chris Jordan 4-0-57-0, Sam Curran 1-0-11-0, Ben Stokes 3-0-26-1.

England: Jason Roy b Kumar 0, Jos Buttler c Pandya b Kumar 52, Dawid Malan b Thakur 68, Jonny Bairstow c Yadav b Thakur 7, Eoin Morgan (c) c sub (KL Rahul) b Pandya 1, Ben Stokes c Pant b Natarajan 14, Chris Jordan c Yadav b Thakur 11, Jofra Archer run out (Yadav/Pant) 1, Sam Curran (not out) 14, Adil Rashid (not out) 0. Extras (lb-9, w-11) 20. **Total (for 8 wickets, in 20 overs) 188.**

FoW: 1-0, 2-130, 3-140, 4-142, 5-142, 6-165, 7-168, 8-174.

Bowling: Bhuvneshwar Kumar 4-0-15-2, Hardik Pandya 4-0-34-1, Washington Sundar 1-0-13-0, Shardul Thakur 4-0-45-3, T. Natarajan 4-0-39-1, Rahul Chahar 3-0-33-0.

ALL ENGLAND | BADMINTON

Sindhu's quest halts in semis

Birmingham, March 20: Reigning world champion P. V. Sindhu suffered yet another semifinal defeat at the prestigious All England Championships as she went down tamely in straight games to Pornpawee Chochuwong of Thailand in the women's singles here on Saturday.

Sindhu, the Olympic silver medallist, couldn't match the pace, power and precision of her younger world number 11 rival Chochuwong and lost 17-21, 9-21 in a match that lasted 43 minutes.

The world No. 7 Indian had also lost at the semifinal at the 2018 edition as well.

Sindhu came into the semifinal contest with an overwhelming 4-1 head-to-head lead over the 23-year-old Chochuwong, whom she had beaten at the HSBC BWF World Tour Finals in January.

But all that statistics didn't matter as Chochuwong showed immaculate defence and played at a searing pace to outclass the Indian.

On Friday night, Sindhu, seeded fifth, had defeated Japan's third seed Akane Yamaguchi 16-21, 21-16, 21-

● **Sindhu couldn't match the pace, power and precision of her younger world number 11 rival Chochowong and lost 17-21, 9-21 in a match that lasted 43 minutes.**

19 in an intriguing quarter-final match to make it to the last eight stage.

Sindhu had battled for an hour and 16 minutes to eke out her first win over world number five Yamaguchi in last four meetings.

Sindhu, who had reached the finals at Swiss Open, played an aggressive game, matching Yamaguchi with her speed and retrieving skills but unforced errors allowed the Japanese to jump to a 11-6 lead, a deficit she couldn't erase as the Japanese pocketed the first game.

After an error-prone start to the second game, Sindhu moved to 6-2 with some superb shots. She then led 8-4 with the Japanese missing the lines twice. Sindhu got five game points and won the game easily.

— *PTI*



P. V. Sindhu plays a shot against Thailand's Pornpawee Chochuwong in their All England Open Badminton Championships semifinal match at the Utilita Arena in Birmingham on Saturday.

— *AP*

NIKHAT, GAURAV SETTLE FOR BRONZE IN ISTANBUL

New Delhi, March 20: Indian boxers Nikhat Zareen (51kg) and Gaurav Solanki (57kg) settled for bronze medals after going down in their respective semifinals at the Bosphorus boxing tournament in Istanbul.

Asian Championship bronze medallist Nikhat, who defeated world champions Paltceva Ekaterina of Russia and Nazym Kyzaibay of Kazakhstan in her last two bouts, suffered a 0-5 loss to 2019 Worlds silver medallist Busenaz Cakiroglu of Turkey in the semi-final on Friday. The opening round had both the boxers playing the waiting

game but the subsequent rounds saw them attack a lot in an intense bout. However, the home favourite landed more punches and secured an unanimous win.

Commonwealth Games gold medallist Solanki, who notched up impressive wins in the previous rounds, lost 0-5 to Argentina's Nirco Cuello.

The Indian fought hard and displayed his attacking prowess from the start but conceded clear punches in the dying minutes to lose and bow out of the tournament.

India ended their campaign with two bronze medals.

— *PTI*

Sharath, Manika seal Tokyo spot

Doha, March 20: India got its best shot at a maiden table tennis medal at the Olympics on Saturday when Sharath Kamal and Manika Batra became the first Indian pairing to qualify for the mega event in Tokyo, beating world no. 8 duo of Sang-Su Lee and Jihee Jeon 4-2 in the final of the Asian qualification tournament here.

The 2018 Asian Games bronze medallists staged a remarkable comeback after being two sets down to outwit the top seeded Korean pair 8-11, 6-11, 11-5, 11-6, 13-11, 11-8 in a thrilling final to seal their Tokyo qualification in mixed doubles. Only the winner of the event qualified for the Games.

The Indian pairing had beaten the Koreans en route to a historic medal in Asian Games before losing to them on the pro tour the following year.

"Manika was unstoppable today. It is very important for her to play with flow so that I am able to play my power game. That is the only way we compliment each other.



She was outstanding.

"I never thought we could win the tournament. Now we are three games for winning an Olympic medal. It will be tough but it is our best shot," Sharath said referring to the 16-pairing draw at the Tokyo Games.

Sharath, who has also qualified for the singles event alongside G. Sathiyana, has now set sights at reaching at least the mixed doubles quarterfinals at the Games.

"I think if we can reach the quarters, it would be a fantastic result for us at the Games. Anything else from there is a bonus," said the world number 32.

The unprecedented result in mixed doubles means India will now have five entries in Tokyo (two each in men and women singles besides mixed). The delayed Tokyo Games will be held from July 23 to August 8 this year.

"I was really happy with

myself to be able to withstand the attack and services of a player like Lee Sang Su and Jion Jihee. Sharath *bhaiya* capitalised well with his attack to keep the pressure on them," Manika said.

On Friday, Sharath and Manika had defeated Singapore's Koen Pang Yew En and Lin Ye 4-2 in the semifinals to get to touching distance of making it to the showpiece event.

— *PTI*

SA WOMEN EASE PAST INDIA IN T20 OPENER

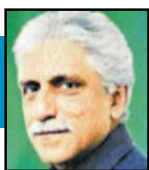
Lucknow, March 20: All-rounder Anneke Bosch first pegged the Indian women with a couple of wickets and then smashed an unbeaten 66 off 48 balls to ensure an easy eight wicket victory for South Africa in the first T20 International here on Saturday.

Harleen Deol's (52) confident maiden international fifty was the only silver lining for an otherwise lacklustre display by the Indians who posted a modest 130 for 6 after being invited to bat.

The South Africans chased down the target easily with five balls to spare with opener Bosch (66 not out) and captain Sune Luus (43 off 49 balls) sharing 90 runs for the second wicket. SA reached to 133 for 2 in 19.1 overs.

— *PTI*
Brief Scores: India 130/6 in 20 overs (Harleen Deol 52, Jemimah Rodrigues 30) lost South Africa 133/2 in 19.1 overs (Anneke Bosch 66 not out; A Reddy 1/20).

Ishan, Surya announced their arrival with a bang in T20



Ayaz Memon Over The Top

Controversy over the on-field umpire's 'soft signal' that led to his dismissal in the 4th T20 match overshadowed Surya Kumar Yadav's splendid debut innings at the international level. Starting with a breathtaking 6 first ball off dangerous Jofra Archer, Yadav sped to 57 off just 31 deliveries in a match-winning knock before his contentious dismissal.

Yadav had got his India cap in the second match in which he didn't get to bat. There was much cluck-clucking when he was

dropped for the next match. Would he end up among several talented players whose career was truncated by ill-luck was the question swirling in cricketing circles?

Luckily for Yadav, young Ishan Kishan developed a groin niggle which opened up a batting place in the playing XI. Captain Virat Kohli then did him a better turn by sending him to bat at no.3. Yadav slayed nay-sayers with a sizzling half century that is still being talked about.

This season has actually been quite remarkable for the impact made by India's

new caps, across formats. Mohamed Siraj and Washington Sundar in Tests — against Australia and England — were hugely impressive in tough and demanding situations.

In the T20 series against England, Ishan Kishan and Yadav have announced their arrival with a bang.

Of the four players mentioned here, three — Siraj, Washington and Ishan Kishan — belong to the 'young brigade', highlighting the rich cricketing potential that exists in the country. Yadav, 30 is from an older age group. In the context of Indian cricket, this can be a big hurdle to cross, which makes his story interesting and important.

In India (and the sub-continent), players who haven't made the cut by their mid-20s, are considered to have missed the

boat. Talent scouts and selectors usually focus on even younger players, in the 18-23 age group. Understandable, given the huge pool of players to choose from, and for forward planning. Players picked to play after age 25-27 are few. Those beyond 30 even rarer.

Whether Yadav's belated arrival and instant success is a one-off or something more significant is moot. I think it suggests a twist in the pattern of how players would view their own careers going ahead, and consequently how the selectors will respond too in the future.

Yadav's been playing first class cricket since 2010. He's had some excellent seasons, interspersed with some modest ones for Mumbai. He was seen as a player with high skills and potential, but not consid-

ered favourably by selectors for his lack of consistency.

In the normal course of things, by 30, he would have passed his sell-by date. Instead, what Yadav did was reinvent himself. The IPL, as he admits, helped him catch the attention of those who matter. Two successful seasons, particularly the 2020 one in the UAE, brought him back into the reckoning, though his performances for Mumbai should not be overlooked.

He should have been on the tour of Australia but was left behind. However, instead of moping, he steered himself for when the chance would come his way. When it did, he made it count in thrilling style. The path into the India colours wasn't as straightforward as this sounds though.

Yadav had to shed unwanted kilos, work hard to enhance his skills knowing that his opportunities, compared to a 20-22 year old would be limited. Most importantly, he had to develop a mindset that wouldn't dither. With time running out, it was virtually make or break for him when he got the India cap.

The message in Yadav's story is of ambition and survival. The incentives that the IPL provides — fame, and money certainly — has compelled players who may not have made it to the India team in early youth to remain competitive instead of letting fate and luck dictate their future. This has made them work harder on fitness, skills and mental toughness.

Years spent in first class experience, which would otherwise become of aca-

ademic value to writers and selectors after a player passes a certain age, then becomes hugely important. The same players appear better prospects in the eyes of the selectors, as with Yadav.

So brilliantly did he bat in the fourth T20, he was immediately picked in the ODI squad too. It's highly speculative at this stage to think he can make it to the Test team. But who knows, a great ODI series, could well interest the selectors. Irrespective of what happens, Yadav has certainly created a flutter this season, just as the three young debutants I've mentioned. In doing so, they've become an inspiration for aspiring cricketers of all ages, and also handed out a warning to the established players that they cannot take their places for granted.