





## SHORT TAKES

## Teen dies after duo beat him with stick in road rage

**Noida:** A 15-year-old, class 8 student who doubled up as a vegetable vendor to help his family, was beaten to death by two men in a case of road rage in Noida, police officials said on Tuesday. The teenaged student was beaten up on Friday night after which he was hospitalised first in Noida and then in Delhi, where he died on Sunday, police said. The two accused, identified as Likhit Raghav and Ashish Singh, were arrested on Monday, Central Noida's Deputy Commissioner of Police Harish Chander said. An argument broke out between the accused duo and the boy after their motorcycle and his vegetable cart collided on a road, he said. The two sides had come to blows after which the boy was admitted to Yatharth Hospital here and later referred to Delhi for treatment. We subsequently got to know that the boy died at the hospital in Delhi, Chander said. The officer said an FIR was lodged in the case on Friday itself and the two accused have been arrested. After the body's death, new charges are being added to the FIR and further proceedings are being carried out, the DCP said. The FIR was lodged at the local Phase 2 police station under sections 304 (culpable homicide not amounting to murder), 323 (voluntarily causing hurt), 504 (intentional insult), among others of the Indian Penal Code, said officials. The duo has also been booked under Section 3(2)5 of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, which draws a punishment of 10 years for an IPC offence against a member of either community, the officials added.

## 40-year-old man arrested in ₹3cr cheating case

**New Delhi:** A 40-year-old man was arrested for allegedly cheating Religare Finvest Limited (RFL) to the tune of over ₹3 crore, police said on Tuesday. The accused has been identified as Ashish Gupta, a resident of Rana Pratap Bagh, they said. One Mukesh Kumar from RFL alleged that Gupta availed two loans of ₹2.90 crore and ₹86 lakh on the basis of forged conveyance deed of mortgaged property — 76, Harsh Vihar, Pitampura — and sold the same without intimating the lender, a senior police officer said. Gupta had to repay interest of ₹7 to 8 lakh per month on the loans availed from PNB and PSB to the tune of ₹12 crore. For this purpose, he availed loan from RFL hiding the facts that property was already mortgaged with Punjab and Sind Bank, C P. In order to cheat the NBFC, he later sold the property to Bhatia Estates, who cleared the loan of PSB. Accused defaulted the loan amount and ran away from Delhi, police said. A case was registered on April 5, 2014 at Rani Bagh police station and later, transferred to economic offence wing in 2020. "During investigation, it was found that Gupta took loans of Rs six crore each from Punjab and Sind Bank, Connaught Place, against 76, Harsh Vihar, Delhi and from PNB, Shalimar Bagh, against 396, MIE, Bahadurgarh, Haryana respectively. He defaulted in both the loans," Joint Commissioner of Police (EOW) O P Mishra said. The accused was arrested on Monday, he said.

## Journalist robbed at gunpoint in E. Delhi

**New Delhi:** A 30-year-old journalist of a news agency was allegedly robbed at gunpoint by three bike-borne men in east Delhi's Shakarpur area, police said on Tuesday. According to police, they received information regarding the incident on Tuesday around 12.30 am. Police rushed to the spot and found the victim. The victim said that three persons on a bike robbed his mobile phone and ID card at gunpoint and he also got injured. A case under relevant sections has been registered at Shakarpur police station, a senior police officer said. The investigation is underway and they are checking the nearby CCTV footage to identify the accused person, police added.

## Ex-MLA held after 2 years on the run

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, DEC. 22

The Delhi police on Tuesday arrested former MLA Rambeer Shokeen, a close associate of gangster Neeraj Bawana. He had escaped from the Uttar Pradesh police custody in 2018 while being brought to Safdarjung hospital for treatment. The police said that he has been sent to judicial custody till January 4.

Shokeen, who was elected to the Delhi Legislative Assembly in 2013, was found using the clout of criminals of this syndicate for contesting MLA elections in furtherance of



Rambeer Shokeen

NCR along with Neeraj Bawana and other associates to create havoc by committing a series of sensational crimes including gruesome and inimical murder, extortion from some businessmen, obstruction of government servants to deter them from discharge of

official duties, and offences under the Arms Act," said the police.

In August 2015, he was declared a proclaimed offender in a MCOCA (Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act) case. On November 27, 2016, he was arrested with an illegal 9-mm pistol and two live cartridges, the police said.

On December 1, 2016, he was arrested in the MCOCA case and on March 8, 2017, a charge sheet against him was filed. On September 26, 2018, he escaped from the custody of the Uttar Pradesh police from Safdarjung hospital.

## BJP-ruled MCDs' mayors sit on protest outside AAP office

‘Delhi govt not releasing ₹13,000cr dues to civic bodies willfully’

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, DEC. 22

The Delhi BJP leaders including three mayors and municipal councillors of party ruled civic bodies on Tuesday staged a sit in protest near AAP office on DDU Marg demanding release of due funds for civic bodies from the Delhi government.

Addressing the party councillors and leaders, Delhi BJP president Adesh Gupta said Arvind Kejriwal government has never fulfilled its "moral responsibility" towards the municipal corporations but "hampering" development work by holding back the due funds of ₹13,000 crore.

**ADDRESSING THE** party councillors and leaders, Delhi BJP president Adesh Gupta said Arvind Kejriwal government has never fulfilled its "moral responsibility" towards the municipal corporations but "hampering" development work by holding back the due funds of ₹13,000 crore. The AAP government has been alleging the BJP ruled municipal corporations of corruption and inefficiency

The AAP government has been alleging the BJP ruled municipal corporations of corruption and inefficiency with Chief Minister Mr Kejriwal saying in recent special session of Delhi Assembly that all due funds have been paid to them.

Leader of Opposition Ramvir Singh Bidhuri, north Delhi mayor Jai Prakash, South Delhi

mayor Anamika, East Delhi mayor Nirmal Jain and other BJP leaders also attended the day-long protest (Satyagrah).

North Delhi mayor, Mr Prakash said that Delhi Government is willfully not releasing the dues of ₹13,000 crore to make corporations financially cripple so that corporations can neither do any development work for the citi-

## Pollution deaths in India rose to 1.67 million in 2019: Lancet

**New Delhi, Dec. 22:** Toxic air killed more people in India in 2019 than in 2017, the Lancet said in a report shared by the government on Tuesday, with 1.67 million deaths accounting for 18 per cent of all fatalities.

India, whose cities top global pollution lists, faces a growing economic as well as human toll from bad air quality, which was linked to 1.24 million, or 12.5 per cent of total deaths in the previous such study for 2017.

The analysis found pollution led to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, respiratory infections, lung cancer, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, neonatal disorders

**THE ANALYSIS** found pollution led to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, respiratory infections, lung cancer, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, neonatal disorders and cataracts. Land-locked New Delhi, the world's most polluted capital whose winter skies are often obscured by its filthy air, recorded the highest per-capita economic hit.

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Land-locked New Delhi, the world's most polluted capital whose winter skies are often obscured by its filthy air, recorded the highest per-capita economic hit, the journal said.

The fatalities in 2019 led to a total loss of \$36.8 billion, or 1.36 per cent of India's gross domestic product (GDP), with Uttar Pradesh and Bihar

experiencing the highest economic loss as a percentage of their GDP.

Although the death rate due to household air pollution fell 64.2 per cent from 1990 to 2019, that due to ambient particulate matter pollution more than doubled, the Lancet said. "The improvements in air quality across India during the COVID-19 lockdown period, and its upsurge again with

the easing of restrictions, provide interesting pointers to the extent of air pollution reduction that is possible with reduced human activity," it added.

The government said in a statement that India would need to invest more in state-specific pollution control programmes if it were to meet its goal of becoming a \$5 trillion economy by 2024, from around \$2.9 trillion now.

India's three main cities, New Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai, were on the list of the world's 20 worst polluted cities, Swiss air quality technology company IQAir reported on Tuesday.

— Agencies

## Delhi riots accused Ishrat Jahan alleges beating by inmates in jail

**New Delhi, Dec. 22:** Former Congress councillor Ishrat Jahan, arrested under the stringent Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act in a Northeast Delhi riots case, alleged before a court here on Tuesday that she was beaten badly by inmates at Mandoli jail and was continuously facing harassment in prison.

Additional sessions judge Amitabh Rawat directed the jail authorities to take immediate steps to ensure Jahan's security and see to it that she is not harassed further.

The court sought a detailed report from the prison authorities on Wednesday on the steps that have been taken to address the issue and to also state if shifting her to another jail was necessary.

When the judge asked the assistant superinten-

dent of Mandoli jail whether such an incident had taken place, she confirmed it and said necessary steps have been taken.

The court also directed the prison authorities to produce her before the court on Wednesday through video conferencing.

While making the submissions directly to the court, Jahan said it was the second incident in one month and she was under immense stress due to the continuous harassment, both physical and verbal.

"This is the second incident in a month. On

Tuesday, at around 6.30 am, they (inmates) beat me badly and abused me verbally. One of the inmates even slit her hand so that I was punished on a false complaint.

Fortunately, the jail officials did not listen to

them. I have submitted a written complaint as well. They keep calling me a terrorist. They also demanded money from me in the canteen," Jahan alleged.

She further alleged that she has been facing harassment in the jail for the past four months and requested to be shifted to Tihar prison but it was refused due to the current Covid-19 pandemic.

Advocate Pradeep Teotia, appearing for Jahan, further alleged that previously also she was beaten up by her inmates, following which one of the inmates was shifted to another jail.

Advocate Misbah Bin Tariq, who was also present at the hearing, requested the court to take immediate action and view her situation with urgency as Jahan was a member of the advocates' bar.

— PTI

## Delhi records 939 Covid-19 cases, 1.14% positivity

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, DEC. 22

Delhi recorded 939 fresh Covid-19 cases and 25 new fatalities on Tuesday, even as the positivity rate slipped to 1.14 per cent, authorities said. The infection tally in the city mounted to over 6.18 lakh and the death toll rose to 10,329, they said.

This is the second consecutive day when the daily cases count has remained below the 1,000 mark. On Monday, 803 cases were reported, the lowest since August 17.

These 939 cases came out after the 82,386 tests conducted the previous day, including 39,843 RT-PCR tests and 42,543 rapid antigen tests, according to the latest bulletin issued by the Delhi health department.

On August 17, Delhi had recorded 787 cases. The active cases tally on Tuesday stood at 8,735.

The bulletin said that the total number of cases has climbed to 6,18,747.

## Passengers from UK being tested at Delhi airport: Jain

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, DEC. 22

Amid mounting concern over a new strain of Covid-19 detected in the UK, the Delhi government on Tuesday said it will check the health condition of passengers, who have arrived here recently from the UK, by visiting their houses. All passengers arriving from the UK are now being tested for Covid-19 at Delhi airport, health minister Satyendar Jain told.

"The Delhi government is on alert in the wake of a mutated coronavirus strain detected in the UK. The situation is being closely monitored and mandatory tests are being conducted at the Delhi airport for all passengers arriving from that country," he said.

Mr Jain said Delhi has fought difficult battles with COVID-19 and all efforts will be made to ensure that the improvement made in the management of the pandemic is "not reversed".

The Civil Aviation Ministry on Monday said all flights from the UK to

India and vice versa will remain suspended from Wednesday to December 31, in view of the emergence of a mutated variant of the coronavirus there. In the last two weeks, about 6000-7000 people have landed at Delhi airport, many of whom would have travelled to other places like Punjab from thereon, Jain said.

"We will go house-to-house and do check-up of passengers to assess their condition, and also advice them to isolate themselves for some time," he said. Sources said passengers coming from the UK are being administered RT-PCR tests at the airport. Anyone testing negative but with symptoms will be kept in institutional isolation and those testing negative will also be asked to go into self-isolation for seven days, they said.

Jain has also appealed to those who have recently come from the UK to monitor their health and go for tests at the slightest of Covid-like symptoms, and inform the government.



Delhi BJP president Adesh Gupta, Leader of Opposition in Delhi Assembly Ramvir Singh Bidhuri, state office-bearers along with all councillors stage a protest near AAP office in New Delhi on Tuesday.

— G.N. JHA

## Cold wave to continue for next 4 days: IMD

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, DEC. 22

Cold wave conditions are predicted in parts of Delhi over the next four days as the minimum temperature is expected to drop to three to four degrees Celsius, the India Meteorological Department said on Tuesday.

Moderate to dense fog is also predicted during the period, it said.

The Safdarjung Observatory, which pro-

vides representative data for the city, recorded a minimum of 5.3 degrees Celsius on Tuesday, the IMD said.

The observatory had recorded a minimum of 3.4 degrees Celsius on Sunday, the lowest this season so far.

The minimum temperature had increased slightly to 5.5 degrees Celsius on Monday under the influence of a fresh Western Disturbance (WD) affecting the upper reaches of the

Himalayas. The maximum temperature settled at 23.5 degrees Celsius, two notches more than normal.

After the WD withdraws on Tuesday, the temperatures are expected to drop again, Mahesh Palawat, an expert at Skymet Weather, a private forecasting agency, said.

The WD led to light to moderate snowfall in the upper reaches of Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh, he said.

## ‘Home Dept. told to withdraw FIRs against migrants’

New Delhi, Dec. 22:

Delhi home minister Satyendar Jain said on Tuesday that instructions have been issued to the department to withdraw all FIRs and complaints lodged during the coronavirus-induced lockdown against migrant workers.

Cases were registered by the police for violations of prohibitory orders during the lockdown announced on March 24 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

"As per the directions of Hon'ble CM Arvind Kejriwal necessary instructions issued to Home department to withdraw all FIRs/complaints lodged during lockdown against migrant labourers," Jain said in a tweet.

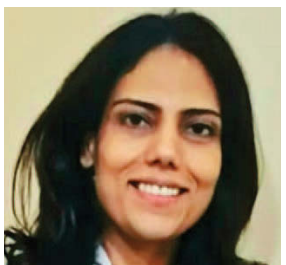
— PTI

During the Covid-19 era,

one of the health professionals amongst many others, who have come out shining, is Dr. Sunali Khanna. Her keen interest in public health addresses issues that need to be dealt with. In the wake of Covid-19, Dr. Khanna feels public health infrastructure of rural areas should be focussed upon more, along with places where marginalised people live, old-age homes, homes for differently-abled and orphanages.

Addressing a panel discussion of Covid-19 challenges and opportunities, Dr. Khanna said while Covid-19 has been the most serious challenge of 2020, it should be converted into an opportunity. Infrastructure expansion, its optimal utilisation, and the functional challenges should be focussed upon, urged Dr

**DR SUNALI** Khanna feels that in the wake of Covid-19, public health infrastructure of rural areas should be focussed upon more, along with places where marginalised people live, old-age homes, homes for differently-abled and orphanages.



Dr. Sunali Khanna

International Conference on Environmental Health Research held in 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018 and 2019.

The conferences attracted over 450 delegates and were aimed at development of environment health indicators to establish better links and improvement in the cumulative burden of environmental change and its impact on society. It also focused on development of approaches to integrating public concerns and precautionary principles into public policy on

health. She has conducted surveys on tobacco related diseases and cessation practices. She has co-authored HIV/AIDS manuals for health professionals in association with Mumbai District AIDS Control Society which is a big step towards developing community awareness particularly among doctors in interior and remote areas.

As we see certain gaps in the health apparatus in the country, Dr. Khanna has been arguing that presently it is the right time to fill those gaps so we are well-equipped in non-Covid times too. Apart from public health, she is an eminent educationist serving as a faculty member of the Maharashtra University of Health Sciences. She teaches and also undertakes research in the areas of oral medicine, maxillofacial radiology, trace elements and oral cancer at Nair

Hospital Dental College, a premier institute in Mumbai.

During the earlier years, she won academic distinctions and was recognised by the International College of Dentists. She has also contributed towards development of curriculum for under and post-graduate dental surgery courses. She has been instrumental in designing training modules and suggesting reforms in higher education especially the prevailing examination system. She is on the expert panel of University Grants Commission.

Dr. Khanna became the first and only candidate to qualify the D.N.B. (Diplomate of National Board Examination) in Oral Medicine & Radiology till now. Dr. Khanna has worked extensively towards the healthcare of elderly and marginalised sections of society.



The farmer leader said that a meeting of farmer leaders from across India will be held on Wednesday where a decision on the government's talks offer will be taken. — PTI



IN BRIEF

DELAY IN FILING PLEAS: SC PULLS UP GOVT OFFICERS

**New Delhi, Dec. 22:** The Supreme Court has said it is an “irony” that despite its repeated observations deprecating the practice of government authorities filing appeals before it belatedly to complete a “mere formality”, no action has ever been taken against officers who sit on file and do nothing.

The apex court, which dismissed the plea filed by Deputy Conservator of Forests against the Bombay High Court’s February last year order on grounds of delay and imposed a cost of ₹15,000 on the petitioner for “wastage of judicial time”, observed that it has repeatedly deprecated such a practice.

“The irony is that despite observations, no action was ever taken against officers who sit on the file and do nothing,” a bench headed by Justice Sanjay Kishan Kaul said.

“The matter is further aggravated in the present case and even the present petition is filed with a delay of 462 days and once again the excuse is of change of counsel. We have repeatedly deprecated such attempts of the state governments to approach this court only to complete a mere formality,” said the bench, also comprising Justices Dinesh Maheshwari and Hrishikesh Roy.

The top court noted in its order that it has dealt with the issue of government authorities approaching courts belatedly as if the statute of limitation does not exist for them. The special leave petition has been filed after a delay of 462 days. — *PTI*

Gupkar alliance set to win

■ **Continued from Page 1** very encouraging for the @JKPAGD. The BJP had made this election a prestige issue about Art 370 & J&K’s special status. The people have now spoken & it’s for those who believe in democracy to pay heed to these voices”.

Among the PAGD winners is Waheed Ur Rehman Parra, a youth leader of its constituent People’s Democratic Party (PDP), who was arrested by the National Investigation Agency on charges of helping separatist militants on November 25, a day after he filed his nomination papers from home district Pulwama. Mr Parra polled 1,323 votes, defeating his nearest BJP rival Sajad Ahmad Raina by a margin of 1,002 votes. PDP president and former CM Mehbooba Mufti tweeted: “Couldn’t be prouder of PDP’s @parawahid who won his maiden election by a huge margin of votes. Despite being arrested on baseless charges right after filing his nomination people have shown their love & trust for Waheed. Hope justice prevails.”

The BJP’s victors from the Valley are Aijaz Hussain (Khonmoh-II seat in DDC Srinagar), Aijaz Ahmad Khan (Tulail seat in Bandipora district) and Minha Latief (Kakapora (Pulwama). After being declared winner, Mr Hussain told reporters outside the counting centre: “This is a win for the BJP. The propaganda has been bust as people have shown their faith in the Prime Minister and his policies. This is a message that nationalists are prospering in Kashmir.”

However, among the BJP’s prominent losers is its spokesman Altaf Thakur, who finished third in Dadsara segment of Pulwama DDC. Mr Thakur bagged 235 votes as against 246 polled by Independent Avtar Singh, whereas PAGD nominee Ali Muhammad Butt secured 243 votes.

Voting for 280 DDC seats — 14 in each of J&K’s 20 districts — took place in eight phases over 25 days and ended on December 19. Nearly 4,200 candidates, including over 450 women, had joined the fray.

These are the first elections held in J&K after the abrogation of Article 370. PAGD was formed initially by seven mainstream parties to seek restoration of the erstwhile state’s special status. However, the BJP termed its launch as a “conspiracy” against the people of J&K.

Omar Abdullah, after the PAGD’s fabulous performance in the DDC elections, said it “is an alliance that emerged out of the betrayal of the people of J&K on 5th Aug 2019. We have faced every obstacle -- illegal detentions, agency threats & pressures, our candidates were locked up to stop them campaigning & from all this we are emerging victorious”.

TMC works like private company, says Adhikari

Trinamul ‘opportunistic’, took bjp help in early days, says BJP leader

**RAJIB CHOWDHURI**  
KOLKATA, DEC. 22

Calling the ruling Trinamul Congress a “private company”, newly-inducted BJP leader Shubhendu Adhikari on Tuesday said that he would not need an “MLA ticket” to defeat chief minister Mamata Banerjee’s party in the next year’s Assembly election in West Bengal.

Mr Adhikari, while addressing his first public meeting at Purbasthali in East Burdwan after joining the saffron party last Saturday, claimed, “TMC is no more a political party. It has become a private company, which does not believe in upholding democratic principles.”

“When I spoke to Union home minister Amit Shah and senior leaders Dilip Ghosh and Kailash Vijayvargiya before joining the BJP, I set no condition



Shubhendu Adhikari

except to save Bengal from *tolabaj bhaipo* (extortionist nephew),” he added.

He underscored that the TMC would not have lasted beyond 2001, had it not taken help from the BJP after coming into existence in 1998.

Digging up Ms Banerjee’s past with the NDA to reply to the TMC’s campaign of betrayal, Mr Adhikari said, “Those who have been branding me as a traitor and calling me ‘Mirzafar’ for the past three days, I want to ask them who were with the

TMC, after its foundation in 1998, in the Assembly, panchayat and Lok Sabha polls and Lok Sabha polls in 1999? Had the then Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Lal Krishna Advani not offered shelter to the TMC, the party would have vanished before 2001.”

He added, “When Chhoto Angaria killings took place, the NDA government at the Centre sent a team led by BJP leader and then Union minister Vijay Goyal to Garbeta and stopped the attackers. In 2004, the TMC contested Lok Saha elections as an NDA partner, and I had held the TMC flag in one hand and BJP flag in another,” the 50-year-old leader said.

Stressing that none but the BJP had extended support to the TMC during the Nandigram agitation over land acquisition, Mr

Adhikari said, “After mass killings on March 14, 2007, a BJP delegation of Rajnath Singh, Sushma Swaraj had visited the area. On March 16 Mr Advani, the then Leader of the Opposition, and Sushma Swaraj and Rajnath Singh entered Sonachura via Khejuri and Heria. The saffron party had stalled parliamentary proceedings for over 60 days in protest against the firing. Today you are denying everything. Mr Singh had fed you the juice at the site of fast during the Singur movement.”

Similarly, the TMC supremo (Mamata Banerjee) had taken help of the Congress in 2011 Assembly polls to defeat the Left, forgetting that she had deserted the same grand old party to form her own outfit earlier, he pointed out.

Will BJP leaders quit if party fails to get 200 seats, asks PK

**New Delhi, Dec. 22:** A day after claiming that the BJP will struggle to cross double digits in the West Bengal Assembly polls, strategist Prashant Kishor challenged its leaders to say on record that they will quit their positions if the party failed to get 200 seats.

“BJP will struggle to cross double digits and will get less than 100 seats in West Bengal. Will quit my work if they do,” Mr Kishor said, reiterating his assessment. He also clarified that if the saffron



Prashant Kishor

party does any better than what he has predicted, he would quit his work.

Mr Kishor, who managed Narendra Modi’s successful campaign for prime ministership in 2014, has been roped in by

TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee to boost her party’s prospects in the assembly polls likely in April-May next year.

On Monday, he tweeted that the BJP would struggle to cross double digits in West Bengal, setting off a war of words with BJP leaders on the microblogging website. His remarks came after Union minister Shah’s visit to West Bengal during which political heavyweight Suwendu Adhikari, nine MLAs and a TMC MP joined the saffron party. — *PTI*

Massive fire at slum near Kolkata’s EM Bypass



Fire-fighters attempt to douse a fire that broke out at a locality near Bengal Chemicals at EM Bypass near Ultadanga, Kolkata, on Tuesday. While no injuries have been reported so far, several shanties were gutted in the EM Bypass fire. According to local authorities, around 30-35 shanties have been destroyed in the fire. — *PTI*

MP varsity introduces course on Ramcharitmanas

**RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY**  
BHOPAL, DEC. 22

Even as the construction of Ram temple in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh is expected to commence on January 15, a university in Madhya Pradesh is all set to spread the story of ‘Ram’ across the globe through a short-term online and offline course.

The first of its kind initiative by an educational institution in India, Vikram University in

Ujjain has launched a 6-month certificate science and culture course on Ramcharitmanas, the epic poem narrating the story of Lord Ram by the 16th century devotional poet Tulsidas, in the current academic session, the university vice-chancellor Dr A.K. Pandey told this newspaper on Tuesday.

“This is the first time a university in India is launching a certificate course on an ancient Indian epic. The objective behind introducing the

course is to highlight the science behind the epic, which has hitherto been viewed as merely a work of literature,” Prof. Pandey added.

Ayodhya Research Institute in Uttar Pradesh has designed the syllabus of the course.

The course will be taught both online and offline and minimum educational qualification for admission into the course is 12th pass.

There is no age bar for admission into the course.

According to him, the epic has been a source of inspiration for people for centuries in terms of value of life, religion, spirituality, philosophy and devotion.

The work variously acclaimed as ‘the greatest book of all devotional literature’ has also made references related to physics, chemistry, biology, environment science, and medicinal science.

“The students interested to pursue the course will be exposed to the aspects

of science, technology, and pharmaceutical heritage of ancient India to help them to do further research on ancient Indian culture and heritage”, head of department of Hindi in the university professor Shailendra Kumar Sharma said.

The course will also help the scholars to do research on the holy cities of India such as Chitrakoot, Ayodhya, Prayagraj, Varanasi and Ujjain, the vice-chancellor said.

Farmers ask UK MPs to stop Boris’ trip to India

■ **Continued from Page 1** Meanwhile, at the Singhu border, a group of farmers wrote a letter with their blood to the Prime Minister urging him to immediately repeal the new laws. The letter said: “Good morning Narendra Modi ji, we are writing this letter with our blood. You are the Prime Minister of our country, elected by our votes. By passing these three laws, the farmers have been betrayed. We request you to take back these laws.” Besides the letter, some even wrote messages with their blood, that read: “We reject black laws... take back black laws”.

In a letter to 40 farmers’ leaders on Sunday, agriculture ministry joint secretary Vivek Aggarwal had asked them to specify their concerns over the government’s earlier proposal of amendments in the laws and to choose a convenient date for the next round of talks so that the ongoing agitation could end at the earliest. Agriculture minister Narendra Singh Tomar said the Centre was ready to continue talks with the protesting farmers, “clause by clause, with an open mind”. Interacting with the foreign media, he said the agriculture sector was the backbone of India’s economy and under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi the focus was on doubling farmers’ income by 2022. The minister also said

enacting the reform laws was not an overnight move but had been done after more than two decades of deliberations, suggested by numerous experts and recommendations by various committees.

As the agitation entered the 27th day, a group of farmers showed black flags to Haryana CM Manohar Lal Khattar when his convoy was passing through Ambala city. Some farmers reportedly tried to block the CM’s convoy, but the police managed to provide safe passage to Mr Khattar.

Mr Khattar had come to Ambala to address public meetings in support of the BJP’s mayoral and ward candidates for the coming

civic polls. The farmers waived black flags at the CM’s convoy as it was crossing Agrasen Chowk. They also raised slogans against the government and said they would continue to protest till the three farm laws were not repealed. The farmers had also tried to block the Ambala-Hisar highway.

The ongoing agitation has caused a lot of traffic disruptions in the Delhi-NCR region.

Vehicular movement on the Delhi-Meerut expressway was completely halted at around 7.30 am Tuesday as the protesters blocked all its carriageways. The Delhi traffic police used its Twitter handle to update the public about the closure of the carriageways

at the Ghazipur-Ghaziabad border. The sudden blockade of the expressway prompted the Delhi and Uttar Pradesh police to divert traffic to alternate borders, such as the ones at Anand Vihar, Bhopra and Apsara.

As the blockade may lead to traffic chaos during morning office hours, officials from the Uttar Pradesh administration and the Delhi police are discussing the reopening of at least one carriageway with the protesting farmers. Those protesting at the UP Gate border have occupied the expressway’s carriageway and service roads going towards Delhi from Ghaziabad since they began their agitation last month.

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Amit Shah’s next visit to Bengal likely on Jan. 12

Shah owes me a treat, says Didi

**AGE CORRESPONDENT**  
KOLKATA, DEC. 22

West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee on Tuesday sought a treat of dhokla or any other Gujarati delicacy from Union home minister Amit Shah after claiming her achievement in proving his allegations wrong with facts and figures about her government’s performance.

“Mr Shah owes me a treat. I love Dhokla and other Gujarati delicacies also,” the Trinamul Congress supremo said at the state secretariat Nabanna after countering Mr Shah’s charges. She pointed out that the state has not only ranked the top position in the country for eradicating poverty but also created more than one crore jobs.

To justify her statement,

ing the state every month till the assembly polls, he would be spending almost a week in the poll bound state from February.

Since 2014, the BJP has significantly increased its vote share and organisational base in the state. With the two other Opposition parties — Left and the Congress — losing their

Ms Banerjee quoted “Government of India” data. The CM added, “Bengal is No 1 in the eradication of poverty in India, in 100 days work, rural housing, rural road, MSME sector, e-tendering and e-governance. GSDP of Bengal has increased 2.6 times.”

Taking a dig at Mr Shah, Ms Banerjee said, “The home minister said a lot of things. But I think when someone in the stature of the Prime Minister or home minister talks about something, they need to get facts right. He painted a very sorry picture about Bengal. Where was he ten years ago when we came to power here?”

Rejecting Mr Shah’s claims on the poor law and order situation, Ms Banerjee said even suicides were being termed as “political killings”.

political grip in West Bengal, the BJP has emerged as a credible contender against the ruling TMC, which has been marred by anti-incumbency as a result the BJP made a sizable dent in its vote bank during the last Lok Sabha polls by bagging 18 of the total 42 parliamentary seats.

US body to invest \$54m in India to support infra plans

**LALIT K. JHA**  
WASHINGTON, DEC. 22

An American financial corporation on Tuesday announced that it will invest \$54 million in India to support the development of critical infrastructure projects in the country in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

India is one of the fastest growing countries in the previous three decades, but it suffers from a significant infrastructure deficit, holding back further growth for the country especially in the wake of Covid-19, US International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) said.

It said it will invest \$54 million in equity for the National Investment and Infrastructure Fund (NIIF) in India to support the development of critical infrastructure projects.

The financing is part of NIIF’s final round of fund-raising for the fund.

NIIF will work to mobilise capital to support economic growth and address critical development challenges in the country, according to a statement.

“DFC’s investment will support the growth and development of a key partner in the Indo-Pacific and allow DFC to facilitate investment in strategic infrastructure projects throughout

● **IT SAID** it will invest \$54 million in equity for the National Investment and Infrastructure Fund in India to support the development of critical infrastructure projects. The financing is part of NIIF’s final round of fund-raising for the fund.

India, said DFC CEO Adam Boehler.

DFC brings its commitment to high standards in all of our projects, and we are excited to establish this partnership with NIIF. We are pleased to announce that NIIF has completed fund raising for its Master Fund, said NIIF CEO Sujoy Bose. We are delighted that DFC is investing in this final round. Their investment will strengthen infrastructure investment across India. We are excited at all that DFC brings to the table, including its high standards such as the Blue Dot Network and commitment to best practices with respect to transparency and management of environmental and social risks, he said.

DFC said its investment will help NIIF invest in infrastructure projects that are important for the long-term sustainable growth of the Indian economy, supporting development and the US foreign policy. — *PTI*

8 coming from UK...

■ **Continued from Page 1** Niti Aayog member (health) V.K. Paul said on Tuesday that though the mutation found in the UK is an “adverse development” as it enhances the transmissibility or the spread of the Covid virus by 70 per cent and acts as a super spreader, the mutated virus is of no immediate threat in terms of affecting the disease’s severity or increasing deaths of Covid patients.

He added there was no need to panic as the mutated virus was yet to be traced in India. He said the government had taken the samples of all the passengers from the UK testing positive and sent them for genome sequencing. “There is no

reason for panic, though there is cause for us to be more vigilant. The government is closely monitoring it, but the virus’ mutation will have no impact on the potential of the vaccines,” Mr Paul said, adding so far 17 mutations in the Sars-CoV-2 were found so far.

India for the first time had less than 20,000 fresh Covid cases (19,556) — the lowest in 173 days — as overall cases rose to 1,00,75,116. The health ministry said for the first time India’s active caseload fell below three lakhs and was the lowest in 163 days. Union health secretary Rajesh Bhushan said the deaths among Covid-19 patients was largely due to the delays in hospitalisation.



# THE ASIAN AGE

23 DECEMBER 2020

## Act quickly to stave off new virus strain threat

The decision of the Union government to take pre-emptive steps against the spread of a mutated version of SARS-CoV-2 that plunged Britain into an unprecedented crisis and the rest of the world into the fear of another wave is welcome. The stoppage of the air traffic to and from Britain till December 31 and the strict conditions on those who travel to India after a visit to that country should be able to help India save itself from another devastating attack of the virus. Several other European nations, which are already into the second phase of national lockdown due to surge in the Covid numbers, are also taking early steps to keep the new virus off its limits by virtually stopping all contacts with the island nation.

India has of late been witnessing a steady decrease in the daily number of caseload though states such as Maharashtra and Kerala show no signs of a thaw. In fact, Maharashtra, which has the highest total caseload, has imposed night curfew and tightened some other controls. Kerala, which managed to contain the virus in the initial stages and has kept the fatality rate low even now, has already warned of a major spike in the coming days. The state government fears that the elections to the local bodies held last week could turn a super spreader event. Delhi government has already imposed a slew of controls and augmented the healthcare facilities to successfully ward off a major outbreak. Fortunately, India looks like having averted a major outbreak which experts feared would visit us after the festival season.

It is in this background that the new threat has emerged. The mutant version, now referred to as VUI (Variant Under Investigation) 202012/01 or known as B.1.1.7, is not more dangerous than the original one but can spread faster, according to experts. Scientists are yet to decode the virus, first noticed in Southern England in December, whether the mutation makes it spread faster. According to Public Health England, the executive agency of the British department of health and social care, the mutations in the spike protein of the virus can change how the micro-organism interacts with human cells. Scientists insist that the vaccines, which have been given emergency authorisation, and those which are in the pipeline, will work against the new variant, too.

While science and scientists grapple with the pandemic and its causes, the non-medical measures come into the focus more than ever. Public health experts insist on the importance of Covid-appropriate protocols such as social distancing, wearing of masks and washing of hands to keep the virus away. The governments must not hesitate to impose restrictions on gatherings wherever necessary before it gets too late; political, social and religious events and festivals offer no excuse to be lax. The message the mutated virus would like to pass on to humanity is that no amount of caution is too much until such time when vaccines have been made available and a sufficient number of people are inoculated to attain herd immunity.

**The governments should not hesitate to impose restrictions on gatherings wherever necessary before it gets too late; political, social and religious events and festivals offer no excuse to be lax**

## Tumble and roll

The reports of the emergence of a new highly-transmissible strain of coronavirus in the United Kingdom and a resultant suspension of air connectivity to London by several countries, including India, sent shockwaves across the global financial world. Being a part of the global financial system, India's key stock market indices — the Sensex and the Nifty — too suffered blow-backs, wiping out over ₹6.5 lakh crore worth investor wealth in just one day.

For the general public, the market reaction may appear insane. Having grown phenomenally after the worst crash during the pandemic, one may wonder as to why should investors be so panicky. However, since the investors bet their money on the foreseeable future, the investors always react ahead of the curve. Similarly, the Monday mayhem in the stock markets too could be a premature panic-driven reaction to the new strain of coronavirus. They may return to the stock markets soon as reports suggest that the new strain may be highly transmissible, but it is not more virulent than the previous versions.

While the world's toughest lockdown had wiped out nearly a quarter of economic productivity in the April-June quarter, the country's economic growth showed a robust recovery in the quarter ending in September. While full recovery of the Indian economy may take some more time, the green shoots have ended the talk of doomsday scenarios since the economy is largely driven by domestic consumption. While the developments in the UK may not have an immediate impact on India, full economic recovery, however, is predicated on the successful containment of coronavirus. Until normal economic activity remains unchecked in the country, external developments may not have a lasting impact on the economy. The government and people, therefore, must not lower their guard against the highly-transmissible pathogen.

### THE ASIAN AGE

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Dilip Cherian  
Dilli Ka Babu



## Centre spars with Mamata in bid to turn Bengal babus into stool pigeons

The battle for the West Bengal Assembly elections looms ahead but skirmishes have already started. After the attack on BJP president J.P. Nadda's convoy in the state, the Centre retaliated against the Trinamul government by recalling three IPS officers from the state on Central deputation. Further, to perhaps underline the "message", the ministry of home affairs summoned state chief secretary Alapan Bandopadhyay and director general of police Virendra to Delhi to explain the law and order situation in Bengal.

A defiant chief minister Mamata Banerjee refused to comply with the summons. Also, she declined the Centre's demand to send the three IPS officers — Bholanath Pandey, Rajeev Mishra and Praveen Kumar Tripathi — on deputation saying there was a dearth of good officers in the state, and the state could not spare the

three officers.

There is a precedent here. The then chief minister of Tamil Nadu J. Jayalalithaa had similarly denied the Centre in 1991 when the state police had conducted a raid on the house of former state chief minister and DMK leader M. Karunanidhi, her archrival. The Centre had asked the Tamil Nadu government to relieve the three officers involved for Central deputation. Like Mamata now, she had refused to spare those officers.

Apparently, there is little the Centre can do against civil service officers who are posted under the state government. For any action to be taken on an officer, the state and the Centre both need to agree.

### REBELS FOR A CAUSE?

Outliers are far and few between in the civil service, which runs on obedience rather than resistance. But sometimes momentous events reveal "rebels" with a cause.

Punjab DIG (Prisons) Lakhminder Singh Jakhar has resigned from service in support of farmers who are in Delhi protesting against the three new farm laws. There are politicians, sports people, even ex-defence forces officers who have renounced their awards and medals in protest, but an IPS officer resigning from service for the farmers' cause is a first in the state.

Of course, IAS officer Kannan Gopinathan resigned from the service to protest against the restrictions imposed in Jammu & Kashmir following the abrogation of Article 370. Similarly, Shah Faesal, the young IAS officer from J&K resigned from the service in 2019 to start a political party. And just a few months ago, the DGP of Bihar Gupteshwar Pandey opting for VRS in a bid to contest the state Assembly poll (his position his still vacant), but that was not for a public cause.

Meanwhile, Jakhar who had served the Army joined the IPS as a 1994-batch officer and was slated to superannuate in August 2022. Interestingly, he had been suspended in May earlier this year on alleged corruption charges but was reinstated within a month. Clearly, outliers defy easy definition!

### TN WON'T LET GO OF CHIEF SECY

By seeking the extension of the tenure of Tamil Nadu chief secretary K. Shanmugam, the state government has stirred up a hornets' nest in the upper echelons of the administration. An extension of tenure for Shanmugam could mean that several senior Tamil Nadu cadre officers eligible to succeed him may find their chances fading.

According to sources, Shanmugam, a 1985-batch IAS officer, has already received two

extensions.

Meanwhile, there are 30 IAS officers in the state in the additional chief secretary rank, including four who are secretaries to the Central government. For them, the third extension for Shanmugam seems to indicate that the state government doubts their abilities to handle the top job.

Interestingly, when chief minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami first sought an extension of tenure for Shanmugam, it was for one year, but the Centre granted approval only for three months. The second extension was for another three months. Now the state government has requested a six-month extension for the babu who reportedly is playing a "critical role in Covid management in the state". Will the Centre oblige again?

Share a babu experience! Follow [@dilipthecherian](https://twitter.com/dilipthecherian) on Twitter. Let's multiply the effect.

Subhani



## Bhoomi putra for Bengal: Has BJP made a mistake?



Shikha Mukerjee

The man for all election seasons, Amit Shah, Union home minister and the BJP's craftiest leader, came to West Bengal and radically revised the strategy for conquest. The state's saffronisation has been Mr Shah's goal for years.

With the acquisition of a "bhoomi putra" — an experienced, violence-hardened, mass leader with charismatic appeal in Suwendu Adhikari from Trinamul Congress, Mr Shah has found a face to challenge Mamata Banerjee. Bengali identity, Mr Shah has had to acknowledge, transcends all the different ways in which the BJP slices and spices Hindutva issues to produce electoral victories with remarkable regularity.

It's a belated realisation that neither the communal card, nor polarisation, nor verbal assaults against dynastic politics, would pose a serious threat to the fiery, feisty political war veteran Mamata Banerjee, who has charisma in loads and local knowledge that can outmatch the collective brains of the BJP machine. It's also an admission that lightweight Bengalites as proxies for Narendra Modi would be dismissed with contempt by a culturally and politically fanatically proud people.

From one visit to the next in the space of a month, Mr Shah has finally realised that he has to back away from two issues he had identified as bestsellers in the West Bengal election market. The first is aggressively selling the Citizenship Amendment Act and National Register of Citizens as a cleanup mechanism to weed out Muslim illegals on the plea that it will be "considered" for action only after the Covid-19 vaccines are rolled out. The second is shooting down the idea that President's Rule was being seriously considered before the West Bengal elections. Pulling no punches, Mr Shah seems to have told BJP state party chief Dilip Ghosh and West Bengal governor Jagdeep Dhankhar to pipe down.

These are sure signs that Mr Shah is only now beginning to gauge that West Bengal is the most complex undertaking he has ever had to handle. There is no template in the BJP's playbook that can be copied and pasted over West Bengal.

To convince the voter that the BJP is not indeed an "outsider", Mr Shah had to roll out Mr Adhikari and set him to work, the day after Christmas. The speed with which Mr Shah and the home ministry approved "Z" category security for Mr Adhikari even before he was formally inducted into the party at the Midnapore rally is an indication that it has a lot of catching up to do.

If the BJP was too complacent that its formula of communal polarisation, identity politics, homogenisation and mainstreaming within the Hindutva fold would be enough to convert the Bengali into a loyalist and thus reliable voter, the Trinamul Congress was just as smug. Obviously Mamata Banerjee can read the pulse of the people better than the BJP, which has inadequate leaders in West Bengal and out of state bosses who are clueless about the fiercely proud Bengali.

For both the TMC and the BJP, the defection of Suwendu Adhikari and nine other MLAs and MPs, as well around 100 lesser functionaries, is a turning point. As a young leader who led the Nandigram movement against the CPI(M)-led Left Front's strategy for industrialising West Bengal, Mr Adhikari shot into the limelight. He became known for his capacity to

**Bengalis can be a fanatically proud and snooty people. Suwendu Adhikari may be too local, too small time as a CM face. Every chief minister of West Bengal has been a national leader first and a local leader as well. Most were at loggerheads with the Centre, including Siddhartha Shankar Ray on occasion. Has the BJP made a mistake in stooping to conquer?**

match violence with violence and for his capacity to mobilise, equip and deploy the small army of TMC loyalists. He was rewarded for his work and elevated as a youth leader, as part of the successor generation to be groomed for the party after Mamata Banerjee. So indispensable was he, that in the 2016 Assembly elections, when Mamata Banerjee needed a robust organisation to win her seats in Purulia, Bankura and Jhargram and she felt Mukul Roy, now with the BJP, would not be as effective, Mr Adhikari was given responsibility for 60-plus seats. It was also her way of placating Mr Adhikari after the induction of Abhishek Banerjee, her nephew. The move angered many, including Mr Roy, who saw it as heaping favours on the Adhikari clan. Regardless of how her preference annoyed others in the TMC, Ms Banerjee continued to pamper Suwendu with greater responsibilities, like observer for the 2019 Lok Sabha polls for crucial districts in Malda and Murshidabad, long considered Congress bastions.

The network that Mr Adhikari built across at least seven districts out of a total of 23 in West Bengal, and his popularity, made him an asset for the Trinamul Congress. The BJP's gain is thus the TMC's loss. To capitalise on this, Mr Shah has drastically revised the BJP's campaign content and strategy.

The plan is crude, and the BJP hopes it will be effective — luring Mamata Banerjee into a personal fight against Mr Adhikari, who she was wont to see as a loyalist turned disgruntled defector with an insider's knowledge of how the TMC government and organisation failed, its corruption, its depen-

dence on a partisan bureaucracy and the police. It would challenge Mamata Banerjee's credibility and her legitimacy as a leader.

The other advantage of a Mamata Banerjee versus Adhikari fight would mean there would be two foes against the lone chief minister. It would serve to situate the BJP's best star campaigner, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, above the fray, with a solution to the problems of West Bengal by mainstreaming the marginalised, deviant locals.

The insider-outsider game set up by the BJP is theoretically neat. The question is — will it be effective? West Bengal has always seen itself as a leader in national politics. To sink to the ranks of laggard followers could be unsatisfactory. The state's chief ministers have always punched way above their weight, as they were politically important national leaders to begin with. Even though Mamata Banerjee was not a member of the social elite to which all her predecessors in office belonged, she was still a national leader, the successful leader of a party that she had founded, when she became chief minister. In contrast, Mr Adhikari is a local, perhaps too local.

The localisation of the BJP is far from complete. Adding a *bhoomi putra* is a design element and does not indicate a structural transformation. If localisation has indeed begun, it was difficult to find it, when Mr Shah's roadshow snaked through Bolpur, with a DJ managing the event, and dancers and bands preceding the leader as though it was a carnival, and not a political rally.

**Shikha Mukerjee is a senior journalist based in Kolkata**

### LETTERS

#### MUTANT VIRUS

The news coming from the United Kingdom of a fast-spreading Sars-CoV-2 variant of Covid-19 in that country is quite disturbing. The health secretary of the UK, Matt Hancock, has reportedly said that the new Covid-19 strain is "out of control". It is still to be seen whether the Covid-19 vaccine would be effective in case of the new virus strain. Several countries including India have banned flights from and to the UK. Airport authorities in India need be very particular in strictly adhering to the Covid-19 pandemic management protocol and subjecting all flyers coming from Europe and the Middle East to tests and quarantine. Slackness could be disastrous.

**M.C. Joshi  
Lucknow**

#### LEAVE NEPAL ALONE

**THIS REFERS TO** the editorial "Is China behind Oli's move?" Nepal is in the throes of a constitutional crisis which is primarily the outcome of long simmering tensions and infighting within the party. By dissolving the Parliament at this critical juncture when the priority for all nations is to combat Covid, Prime Minister Oli has cast himself in an unflattering light. Of late, he has been out of favour with India. But India, too, ought to refrain from nosing in Nepal's affairs.

**Deepak Singhal  
Noida**

#### HAZEL'S OFFERING

**CELEBRATE YOUR** Christmas this year with Hazel Parikh's online singing competition of East Indian Marathi songs. Hazel was the first person along with Polly D'Mello to release an East Indian Marathi language audio cassette comprising of original East Indian Marathi songs in 1982 when the East Indian community did not have any audio cassettes or CDs of their own. She is going live on December 25 from 9.00 pm onwards. Merry Christmas, Hazel.

**Jubel D'Cruz  
Mumbai**

Every Monday the best letter of the week wins ₹500. Email: [asianage.letters@gmail.com](mailto:asianage.letters@gmail.com).



## SHORT TAKES

PLANE CRASHES  
ALONG TEXAS  
ROAD, 1 KILLED

**Grand Prairie, Dec. 22:** At least one person was killed when a small plane crashed along a highway service road in North Texas shortly after taking off Monday afternoon, authorities said.

The Federal Aviation Administration said the single-engine Wheeler Express CT crashed about 1 miles (1.61 kilometres) west of the Grand Prairie Municipal Airport, located in the city just west of Dallas.

Grand Prairie Fire Chief Robert Fite said witnesses said the plane came down rapidly, hit a telephone pole and then struggled another 500 feet (152.40 metres) hitting the concrete multiple times before hitting a pickup truck traveling on the service road.

Fite said the person in the truck was slightly injured and was taken to the hospital.

RIVER SURGE  
HITS CANYON  
GROUP, 4 DEAD

**Mexico City, Dec. 22:** Rain unleashed a surge of water that swept away most of a 21-member group on a canyoning expedition in southern Mexico, killing at least four people and leaving three missing, authorities said Monday.

The civil defence office of Veracruz state said five more people were injured in the Rio Oro canyon, near the Gulf of Mexico. The accident occurred Sunday, and the office said searches continued Monday with police, volunteer rescue groups and firefighters participating.

The office did not release the names or nationalities of the victims, but such expeditions are popular among young Mexican tourists.

Canyoning involves hiking, climbing, rappelling and swimming through river canyons. The Rio Oro canyon includes waterfalls and relatively narrow rock passages.

CABINET  
RESHUFFLED IN  
INDONESIA

**Jakarta, Dec. 22:** Indonesia's president announced a Cabinet reshuffle Tuesday following the arrest of two of his ministers on corruption charges and his administration's lackluster pandemic response.

The Cabinet shake-up comes amid surging Coronavirus cases in the world's fourth most populous nation. Indonesia's economy has fallen into recession for the first time since the Asian financial crisis more than two decades ago as the country struggles to control the pandemic.

Four ministers lost their jobs, including Health Minister Terawan Agus Putranto, and two others were rotated to more important positions, ending weeks of speculation about the possible changes. President Joko Widodo chose the mayor of Surabaya, Indonesia's second-largest city, to become the social affairs minister, replacing Juliar Batubara, who was detained by anti-corruption commission on December 6. Batubara was accused of taking bribes related to the government's COVID-19 aid distribution.

U.S. POST OFFICE  
NAMED AFTER  
SLAIN SIKH COP

**Washington, Dec. 22:** US President Donald Trump on Monday signed into law a legislation to name a Texas post office after slain Sikh police officer Sandeep Singh Dhaliwal, who was gunned down in the line of duty during a routine traffic stop in Houston a year ago.

Trump signed H R 5317, which designates the facility of the United States Postal Service located at 315 Addicks Howell Road in Houston, Texas, as the Deputy Sandeep Singh Dhaliwal Post Office Building, the White House said in a statement.

The post office named after Dhaliwal in Houston is only the second US post office to be named after an Indian American. The first one was named after the first Indian American Congressman Dalip Singh Saund in Southern California in 2006. The House of Representatives and the Senate had recently passed the legislation in this regard. In his remarks on the Senate floor, Texas Senator Ted Cruz had said that Dhaliwal was a hero and a trailblazer whose commitment to his faith will inspire generations of Sikhs and other religious minorities.

## Vax may work on UK virus: Pharma

But CEO of BioNTech says further studies are needed to be completely certain

**Berlin, Dec. 22:** German pharmaceutical company BioNTech is confident that its Coronavirus vaccine works against the new UK variant, but further studies are needed to be completely sure, its chief executive said Tuesday. The variant, detected mainly in London and the southeast of England in recent weeks, has sparked concern worldwide because of signs that it may spread more easily. While there is no indication it causes more serious illness, numerous countries in Europe and beyond have restricted travel from the UK as a result.

"We don't know at the moment if our vaccine is also able to provide protection against this new variant," CEO Ugur Sahin told a news conference the day after the vaccine was approved for use in the European Union. "But scientifically, it is highly likely that the immune response by this vaccine also can deal with the new virus variants." Sahin said that the proteins on the UK variant are 99% the same as on the prevailing strains, and therefore BioNTech has "scientific confidence" that its vaccine will be effective.

"But we will know it only if the experiment is done and we will need about two weeks from now to get the data," he said. "The likelihood that our vaccine works ... is relatively high." Should the vaccine need to be adjusted for the new variant the company could do so in about 6 weeks, Sahin said, though regulators might have to approve the changes before the shots can be used.

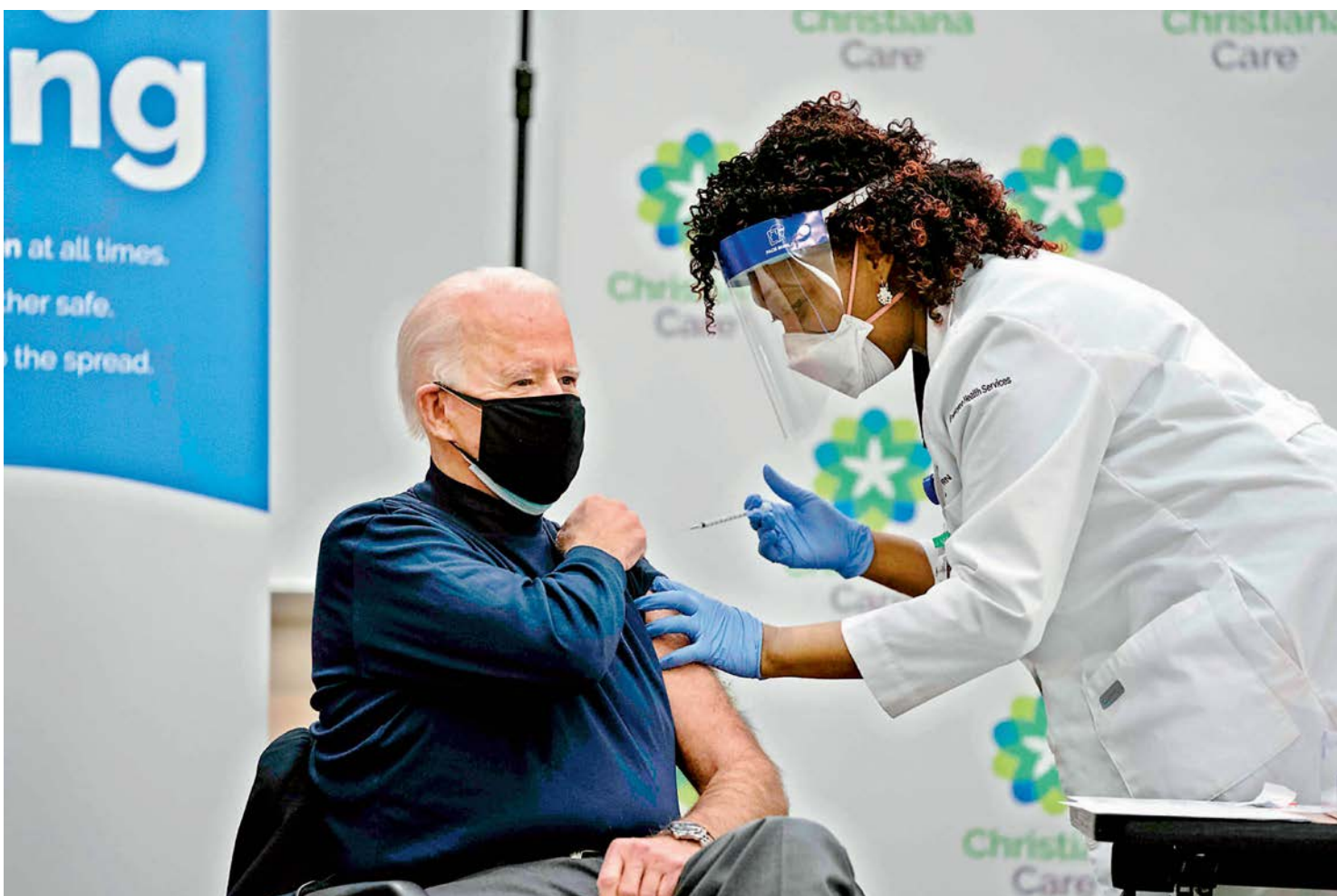
Having to adjust the vaccine would be a blow for the rollout of immunisation campaigns and rein in the pandemic that has so far killed more than 1.7 million people worldwide. BioNTech's vaccine, which was developed together with US pharmaceutical company Pfizer, has been authorised for use in more than 45 countries, including Britain, the United States and the EU.

Hundreds of thousands of people have already received the shots. The companies submitted data to regulators showing the vaccine, which goes by the brand name COMIRNATY in Europe, is 95 per cent effective in preventing infection with Covid-19.

"All countries across the EU that have requested doses will receive them in the next five days, the very initial supply, and that will be followed up next week with further supplies," said Sean Maret, BioNTech's chief commercial officer. Several EU countries have said they plan to start vaccinating on Sunday.

Germany's health minister, Jens Spahn, said he expects the country to receive more than 1.3 million doses by the end of this year. Germany is among European countries that have banned flights from the UK because of the new variant there.

— UGUR SAHIN  
BioNTech CEO



US President-elect Joe Biden receives a Covid-19 vaccination from Tabe Mase, Nurse Practitioner and Head of Employee Health Services, at the Christiana Care campus in Newark, Delaware on Monday.

— AFP

Probe finds Trump officials  
attacked CDC virus reports

**Washington, Dec. 21:** Trump administration political appointees tried to block or change more than a dozen government reports that detailed scientific findings about the spread of the Coronavirus, a House panel investigating the alleged interference said Monday.

Rep. James Clyburn, D-S.C., said his Coronavirus committee investigators have found evidence of a "political pressure campaign" to "bully" professionals at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in what may have been an attempt to "cripple the

● INVESTIGATORS HAVE found evidence of a "political pressure campaign" to "bully" professionals at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in what may have been an attempt to "cripple the

nation's Coronavirus response in a misguided effort to achieve herd immunity.

ety can be best protected by allowing younger people to get infected and develop natural immunity until vaccines are widely available.

Accusing Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar and CDC Director Dr. Robert Redfield of stonewalling his investigation, Clyburn issued subpoenas compelling them to turn over reams of documents and emails by Dec. 30. The committee's findings were detailed in a letter to Azar and Redfield that centred on the actions of two political appointees earlier this year.

— AP

Congress okays  
\$900 bn relief bill

**Washington, Dec. 22:** Congress passed a \$900 billion pandemic relief package that would finally deliver long-sought cash to businesses and individuals and resources to vaccinate a nation confronting a frightening surge in Covid-19 cases and deaths.

Lawmakers tacked on a \$1.4 trillion catchall spending bill and thousands of pages of other end-of-session business in a massive bundle of bipartisan legislation as Capitol Hill prepared to close the books on the year. The bill approved Monday night went to President Donald Trump for his signature, which was expected in the coming days.

The relief package, unveiled Monday afternoon, sped through the House and Senate in a matter of hours. The Senate cleared the massive package by a 92-6 vote after the House approved the Covid-19 package by another lopsided vote, 359-53. The tallies were a bipartisan coda to months of partisanship and politicking as lawmakers wrangled over the

relief question, a logjam that broke after President-elect Joe Biden urged his party to accept a compromise with top Republicans that is smaller than many Democrats would have liked. The bill combines Coronavirus-fighting funds with financial relief for individuals and businesses. It would establish a temporary \$300 per week supplemental jobless benefit and a \$600 direct stimulus payment to most Americans, along with a new round of subsidies for hard-hit businesses, restaurants, and theatres and money for schools, health care providers and renters facing eviction.

The 5,593-page legislation — by far the longest bill ever — came together Sunday after months of battling, posturing and post-election negotiating that reined in a number of Democratic demands as the end of the congressional session approached. Biden was eager for a deal to deliver long-awaited help to suffering people and a boost to the economy.

— AP

INDO-AMERICAN  
PHYSICIANS TAKE  
COVID VACCINE

**New York, Dec. 22:** Several Indian-American physicians, in the frontline of the fight against the Coronavirus pandemic, are publicly taking the coronavirus vaccine and encouraging others to get the shots, emphasising that the vaccine is the "only saving grace" and a "scientific blessing" that will help the world win the battle against Covid-19.

The US began administering vaccines a week ago and has approved jabs developed by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna.

"We all should take the vaccine. It is very effective and we are seeing good results. The vaccine is the only saving grace we have right now and we have to take it," former President of the American Association of Physicians of Indian Origin (AAPI) Dr. Surish Reddy said.

— PTI

## Spain holds Christmas lottery

**Madrid, Dec. 22:** Children from Madrid's San Ildefonso school have begun calling out prize-winning numbers in Spain's bumper Christmas lottery known as "El Gordo" (the fat one), which is being held under tight conditions because of the Coronavirus

pandemic.

The lottery will shell out 400,000 euros (\$489,000) or some 325,000 euros after tax, to holders of 20-euro tickets bearing the top-prize number.

The incredibly popular lottery dishes out a total of 2.4 billion euros in prizes

this year, much of it in small prizes. Other lotteries have bigger individual top prizes but Spain's Christmas lottery, staged each year on Dec. 22, is ranked as the world's richest for the total prize money involved.

— AP

## Scientists probe virus variant's spread in kids

**London, Dec. 22:** Scientists in the UK are investigating the impact of a new mutant variant of Coronavirus, named VUI-202012/01, on children and whether its faster transmission in parts of England is down to the younger segment of the population.

The government's New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (Nervtag) is monitoring the data to analyse this arc of the variant,

which has led over 40 countries, including India, to suspend travel to and from the UK in order to try and contain the more infectious mutation.

Earlier strains of Coronavirus found it harder to infect children than adults, with one explanation being that children have fewer of the doorways called the ACE2 receptor the virus uses to enter a human body's cells.

Professor Wendy Barclay,

● EARLIER STRAINS of Coronavirus found it harder to infect children than adults, with one explanation being that children have fewer of the doorways called the ACE2 receptor the virus uses to enter a human body's cells.

from Nervtag and Imperial College London, said the mutations to the virus appeared to be making it eas-

ier to breach those doorways. "Therefore children are equally susceptible, perhaps, to this virus as adults, and therefore given their mixing patterns, you would expect to see more children being infected," she explained.

Experts do not believe that the new version is any greater threat to children's health and the scientist behind the world's first approved vaccine against Covid-19 has said the

Pfizer/BioNTech jabs will work against the strain, though further investigation remains underway.

"The likelihood that our vaccine works is relatively high," said Ugur Sahin, chief executive of the German co-developer of the vaccine BioNTech.

Speaking on Bild TV in Germany, Sahin said his company would investigate the mutation in the coming days and that he viewed the matter with a

degree of soberness.

His message of some confidence comes as the UK reached the half a million milestone for vaccinations of the jabs, delivered to the elderly and most vulnerable sections of the country's population.

"I can today announce that over half a million people, more than 500,000 people in the UK, have now received their first dose," Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced.

— PTI

## EDUCATION | AFFECTED

## Drop in kindergarten enrolment is 30% of total reduction across the 33 states

## Covid-19: Enrolment in US public schools dips

**Washington, Dec. 22:** Fearful of sending her two children back to school as the coronavirus pandemic raged in Mississippi, Angela Atkins decided to give virtual learning a chance this fall.

Almost immediately, it was a struggle. Their district in Lafayette County didn't offer live instruction to remote learners, and Atkins' fourth grader became frustrated with doing worksheets all day and missed interacting with teachers and peers. Her seventh grader didn't receive the extra support he did at school through his special education plan and started getting failing grades. After nine weeks, Atkins switched to home

schooling.

It got to the point where it felt like there was no other choice to make, she said. I was worried for my kids' mental health. By taking her children off the public school rolls, Atkins joined an exodus that one state schools chief has warned could become a national crisis. An analysis of data from 33 states obtained by Chalkbeat and The Associated Press shows that public K-12 enrolment this fall has dropped across those states by more than 500,000 students, or 2%, since the same time last year.

That is a significant shift considering that enrolment overall in those states has typically gone up by

● AN ANALYSIS of data from 33 states obtained by Chalkbeat and The Associated Press shows that public K-12 enrolment this fall has dropped across those states by more than 500,000 students, or 2%, since the same time last year.

around half a percent in recent years. And the decline is only likely to become more pronounced, as several large states have yet to release information. Chalkbeat and AP surveyed all 50 states, but 17 have not released comparable enrolment numbers yet.

The data, which in many states is preliminary, offers the clearest picture yet of the pandemic's devastating toll on public school enrolment decline that could eventually have dire consequences for school budgets that are based on headcounts.

But even more alarming, educators say, is that some of the students who left may not be in school at all. I would like to hope that many of them are from homes where their parents have taken responsibility on their own to provide for their education, said Pedro Noguera, the dean of the University of Southern California's Rosier School of Education, adding that affluent fami-

lies will have an easier time doing that. My fear is that large numbers have simply gotten discouraged and given up. So far, many states have held off on making school budget cuts in the face of enrolment declines. But if enrolment doesn't rise, funding will be hit.

We've been trying to scream from the hilltops for quite some time that this is happening, Kirsten Baesler, North Dakota's schools superintendent, said of the enrolment declines. And it could be a national crisis if we don't put some elbow grease into it.

The declines are driven by a combination of factors brought on by the pandemic. Fewer parents enrol-

led their children in kindergarten, and some students left public schools for other learning environments. At the same time, students who are struggling to attend classes, as many are right now, may have been purged from public school rolls for missing many days in a row. That is a typical practice, though there is some more flexibility now.

The Chalkbeat/AP analysis shows that a drop in kindergarten enrolment accounts for 30% of the total reduction across the 33 states making it one of the biggest drivers of the nationwide decline. Kindergarten is not required in over half of states.

— AP

4.6K FROM UK  
QUARANTINED  
IN TURKEY

**Ankara, Dec. 22:** Turkey has identified and quarantined 4,603 airline passengers who arrived from the United Kingdom on and after December 14, Turkish Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said Tuesday.

Flights from the UK, South Africa, Denmark and the Netherlands were suspended on Sunday evening in response to a new strain of Coronavirus said to be circulating there.

Koca tweeted that 335 passengers flying from those countries at the time of Sunday's announcement were tested for the virus on arrival in Turkey and isolated.

— AP



quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	46006.69	0.99
Nifty 50	13466.30	1.03
S&P 500*	3,692.94	-0.05
Dollar (₹)	73.84	-0.05
Pound Sterling (₹)	99.31	-1.81
Euro (₹)	90.28	-0.48
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	49,936	480 0.95
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	50.21	-0.70
IN 10-Yr bond yield	5.951	-0.005
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	0.923	-0.018

\* As of 9:30 PM IST

Trust AMC eyes ₹10,000 cr AUM in next 2 years

Trust Asset Management Company, the latest to enter the already cluttered ₹30-lakh-crore mutual fund industry with 44 payers, plans to launch its maiden fund within a couple of weeks and garner an AUM of around ₹10,000 crore in the first two years of operations, says a top official. The fund house, which had announced a soft launch earlier this month, is awaiting the Sebi nod for its maiden scheme.

Gold prices fall amid weakness in global mart



Gold prices fell ₹243 to ₹49,653 per 10 gram in Delhi on Tuesday, reflecting the weakness in global price of the precious metal. In the previous trade, the yellow metal had closed at ₹49,896 per 10 gram. Silver prices also declined Rs 216 to ₹67,177 per kg from ₹67,393 per kg in the previous trade. In the global market, gold and silver were trading lower at \$1,868 per ounce and \$25.70 per ounce, respectively.

Manappuram raises ₹400cr via issue of bonds

Manappuram Finance on Tuesday said it has raised ₹400 crore by issuing bonds on private placement basis. The Financial Resources and Management Committee of the board of directors of the company has approved the allotment of 4,000 rated, secured, redeemable non-convertible debentures aggregating to ₹400 crore, Manappuram Finance said in a regulatory filing.

Reliance Capital gets 10 more bids for subsidiaries

Reliance Capital Ltd, part of the debt-ridden ADAG Reliance Group, has received 10 more bids, including from SBI Life, for its subsidiaries, sources said. Earlier this month, the Committee of Debenture Holders had extended the last date for submission of expression of interest to December 17. Following this, 10 new bids have come in for Reliance Capital's assets, taking the total number of bids to 70.

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Apple eyes car rollout by 2024

iPhone maker's self-driving car will have battery with better technology

New York, Dec. 22: Apple Inc is moving forward with self-driving car technology and is targeting 2024 to produce a passenger vehicle that could include its own breakthrough battery technology, people familiar with the matter told Reuters. The iPhone maker's automotive efforts, known as Project Titan, have proceeded unevenly since 2014 when it first started to design its own vehicle from scratch. At one point, Apple drew back the effort to focus on software and reassessed its goals. Doug Field, an Apple veteran who had worked at Tesla Inc, returned to oversee the project in 2018 and laid off 190 people from the team in 2019. Since then, Apple has progressed enough that it now aims to build a vehicle for consumers, two people familiar with the effort said, asking not to be named because Apple's plans are not public.

POWER BATTERY

Central to Apple's self-driving car strategy is a new battery design that could radically reduce the cost of batteries and increase the vehicle's range.

The tech major plans to use a unique "monocell" design that bulks up the individual cells in the battery and frees up space inside the battery pack by eliminating pouches and modules that hold battery materials.

The company is also examining a chemistry for the battery called or lithium iron phosphate, which is inherently less likely to overheat and is thus safer than other types of lithium-ion batteries.

Central to Apple's strategy is a new battery design that could "radically" reduce the cost of batteries and increase the vehicle's range, according to a third person who has seen Apple's battery design. Apple declined to comment on its plans or future products. Making a vehicle represents a supply chain challenge even for Apple, a company with deep pockets that makes hundreds of millions of electronics products each year with

parts from around the world, but has never made a car. It took Elon Musk's Tesla 17 years before it finally turned a sustained profit making cars. "If there is one company on the planet that has the resources to do that, it's probably Apple. But at the same time, it's not a cell-phone," said a person who worked on Project Titan. It remains unclear who would assemble an Apple-branded car, but sources have said they expect the company to rely on a man-



ufacturing partner to build vehicles. And there is still a chance Apple will decide to reduce the scope of its efforts to an autonomous driving system that would be integrated with a car made by a traditional automaker, rather than the iPhone maker selling an Apple-branded car, one of the people added. Apple has decided to tap outside partners for elements of the system, including lidar sensors, which help self-driving

cars get a three-dimensional view of the road, two people familiar with the company's plans told Reuters.

As for the car's battery, Apple plans to use a unique "monocell" design that bulks up the individual cells in the battery and frees up space inside the battery pack by eliminating pouches and modules that hold battery materials, one of the people said. Apple's design means that more active material can be packed inside the battery, giving the car a potentially longer range. Apple is also examining a chemistry for the battery called LFP, or lithium iron phosphate, the person said, which is inherently less likely to overheat and is thus safer than other types of lithium-ion batteries. "It's next level," the person said of Apple's battery technology. "Like the first time you saw the iPhone," he said. — Reuters

Centre begins process to sell stake in SCI

New Delhi, Dec. 22: The government on Tuesday invited expressions of interest for strategic disinvestment of its 63.75 per cent stake in Shipping Corp of India along with the transfer of management control. The Department of Investment and Public Asset Management (DIPAM) has issued Preliminary Information Memorandum (PIM) inviting Expressions of Interest (EOI) from potential buyers by February 13, 2021.

Shares of Shipping Corp were trading at ₹86.30, up 4.54 per cent over its previous close on the BSE. At the current market price, the government's stake sale in Shipping Corp is valued at about ₹2,500 crore. The government has appointed RBSA Capital Advisors LLP as its transaction advisor to manage the disinvestment process.



Shipping Corporation of India is largest Indian shipping company with a fleet strength of 59 vessels. It operates a fleet of 59 ships, including crude oil tankers, very large crude carriers, petroleum product carriers, liquefied petroleum gas carriers, bulk carriers, container ships and offshore support vessels.

Recently, Vedanta Resources has teamed up with Centricus Management Ltd to create a warchest of \$10 billion to acquire the state-run companies. The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs in November last year gave in-principle approval for the strategic divestment of Shipping Corp. However, the plans were delayed due to the pandemic. The 2020-21 Budget has set a record divestment target of ₹2.1 lakh crore. The government has so far raised ₹12,380 crore through minority stake sale in Central Public Sector Enterprises (CPSEs) and share buybacks this fiscal year. Strategic sale process of Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (BPCL) and Air India is ongoing and both the companies have received "multiple" EOI from potential buyers. — Agencies

Sebi to rope in agency to conduct risk assessment

New Delhi, Dec. 22: Capital markets regulator Sebi is looking to rope in an agency for performing in-depth risk assessment of its information technology (IT) infrastructure. The risk assessment needs to include identification of foreseeable threats, assessment of the likelihood and potential damage of these threats, and the sufficiency of controls to mitigate risks. In a notice last week, the regulator has invited expression of interest (EOI) from solution providers to conduct risk assessment of IT infrastructure, prepare policy documents, standard operating procedures (SOPs), documentation of procedures and processes and other IT documents. In addition, design specification document need to be prepared for all the selected processes for automation, the regulator added.

"Bidder is supposed to conduct risk assessment of IT infrastructure deployment at Sebi annually, calculate risk score accordingly, review controls and its impact on policies and SOPs and changes required in the reviewed policies and SOPs," the regulator said. Sebi noted that IT risk assessment helps to determine the vulnerabilities in information systems and the broader IT environment, assess the likelihood that a risky event will occur, and rank risks based on the risk estimate combined with the level of impact that it would cause if it occurs. It will also help in identifying controls and measures required to be included in IT policies and SOP, it added. — PTI

Industry bodies to ask Centre to relook at new wage definition

New Delhi, Dec. 22: Representatives of industry bodies, including from CII and Ficci, will hold a meeting with the labour ministry top brass on Thursday to make a case for holding back implementation of new definition of wages, which would increase social security deductions and reduce take-home pay of workers. "The representatives of CII and Ficci among other industry bodies would meet union labour ministry top brass on December 24, 2020 to discuss the new definition of

- Lobbyists want the government to hold back the new definition and fear that this would result in major cut in take-home salaries and also put additional burden on employers.
- The new definition will lead to a cut in workers' take-home pay while an increase in the employer's provident fund contribution liability.

wages which is likely to be implemented by April 1, 2021," an industry source said. The source also said that lobbyists want the government to hold back the new definition and fear that this would result in major cut in take-home salaries

and also put additional burden on employers. The new definition of wages is part of the Code on Wages, 2019 passed by Parliament last year. The rules to enforce the law was also firmed up last year. Now, its implementation is planned from April

1, 2021 along with other three codes on industrial relations, social security and occupational health safety & working conditions. The new definition provides that the allowance of an employee cannot be more than 50 per cent of the total salary. This would increase the social security deductions like provident fund. Presently, the employer and employee contribute 12 per cent each towards the social security schemes run by the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation. — PTI

Firms step up hiring after Covid impact

New Delhi, Dec. 22: Adapting to the new hybrid normal of remote and office work, cautiously optimistic corporates are looking to hire more people and provide better appraisals in the new year as they step out of the pandemic-ravaged 2020. The coronavirus pandemic emerged as the biggest inflection point for the Indian job landscape. For the corporates, work-from-home and remote workers became the new normal and for the professionals, online learning and digital skills took the centre-stage. In 2020, most companies "deprioritised" their hiring plans amid uncertain economic outlook while industries like travel, hospitality, retail, aviation, real estate, construction and automobile were severely hit. Nevertheless, there is a cautious optimism among

corporates and it is getting reflected in their recruitment plans for the new year. "Yes, the market is showing positive signs of recovery with almost all industries showing growth in hiring but with caution. Overall, the intent to hire recovered smartly from 11 per cent during the lockdown period to 18 per cent for HY (half year) and this number is growing," Deval Singh, business head, Mobilization (hiring) at TeamLease Services. While there is caution in hiring, the market is displaying optimism. He said there is a 50 per cent increase in employment opportunities from the lockdown days. Pay cuts have been reversed since Diwali in most organisations and bonuses were issued in few. Some IT companies even declared early appraisals, he noted. — PTI

Daimler AG picks Infosys to manage automotive IT infra

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, DEC. 22

German auto major Daimler AG and Infosys on Tuesday entered into a long-term strategic partnership to drive hybrid cloud-powered innovation and IT infrastructure transformation in the automotive sector. Daimler is the company that manufactures Mercedes-Benz cars. "After the receipt of all regulatory approvals, Daimler AG will transform its IT operating model and infrastructure landscape across workplace services, service desk, data centre, networks and SAP Basis together with Infosys," said a joint statement issued by the two companies. "The partnership will enable the company to deepen its focus on software engineering and to



establish a fully-scalable on-demand digital IT infrastructure and anytime-anywhere workplace. The collaboration will empower Daimler to strengthen its IT capabilities, and Infosys, its automotive expertise. "Daimler will work towards a model that ensures a robust IT infrastructure across its plants and regions, and supports consolidation of its data centers, scaling its IT operations, and bringing innovations to the fore," the joint statement said. "As a part of this partnership, automotive IT

infrastructure experts based out of Germany, wider Europe, the US and the APAC region will transition from Daimler AG to Infosys. Infosys is well-placed to realise this transition as an expert having integrated more than 16,000 employees through other partnerships in recent years with a high acceptance, retention and satisfaction rate." The transfer will also enable Infosys to bolster and grow its automotive business, while offering Daimler employees strong prospects for long-term career growth.

ICICI Bank to focus on MNCs

Mumbai, Dec. 22: With the increase in foreign direct investment into the country, ICICI Bank on Tuesday said it is upping its focus on serving the multinational companies. The lender is looking at services beyond credit needs of such overseas corporates with an eye on the fee income possibilities, its executive director Vishakha Muliyil told reporters. It already serves about 1,500 MNCs out of an overall market of up to 5,000 companies, she said. Muliyil said factors like aversion to China, favourable demographics and an improvement in the ease of doing business is leading many MNCs to look at investing in India. — PTI

Tech firms Glance and VerSe Innovation crossed \$1-billion valuation Google backs two social media unicorns

Mumbai, Dec. 22: Google investments helped create India's two young-tech unicorns: a pair of startups that feed personalised news and entertainment to the world's fastest-growing smartphone population. Glance, which feeds news and sports scores to phone-lock screens, is said to have reached a valuation of more than \$1 billion after completing a funding round led by Google. And VerSe Innovation Pvt, the company behind the popular Dailyhunt news site and TikTok-like Josh app, said it passed that threshold after winning more than \$100 million from Google and Microsoft Corp. Google and its Ameri-



can internet peers are steadily amping up their investment in India, latching onto the only other country with a billion-plus population after getting shut out of China. From Amazon.com Inc. to Facebook Inc., they're hoping to get in on the ground floor of what they envision as a smartphone

and online commerce boom that could eventually create a market to rival the world's No. 2 economy. The online search leader has struck an alliance with Mukesh Ambani's Reliance Industries Ltd. to invest \$4.5 billion and cooperate on technology initiatives including the development of afford-

able mobile phones. But they're also teaming with smaller outfits to reach more local audiences. "In the last two years alone, 100 million new internet users have come online from rural India," Google vice-president Caesar Sengupta wrote in a blog post on Tuesday, announcing its investment in VerSe. "But many of these internet users continue to have trouble finding content to read or services they can use confidently, in their own language." Of the two, Bengaluru-headquartered Glance Digital Experience Pvt is the more nascent outfit. It's the second unicorn to emerge from the group that created InMobi, a

cloud marketing platform that became India's earliest tech startup to reach the milestone. That group was founded by 43-year-old Naveen Tewari, alum-nus of the prestigious IIT and the holder of an MBA from Harvard Business School. On Tuesday, his 18-month-old firm announced it had scored \$145 of investment from Google and billionaire Peter Thiel's Mithril Capital. Glance currently has 115 million daily active users who average 25 minutes on the app each day. The app operates only in the Android ecosystem and has partnered with leading device makers including Samsung Electronics, Xiaomi Corp, Oppo and Vivo. — Bloomberg

3.75 CR ITRs FILED FOR 2019-20 FISCAL

New Delhi, Dec. 22: As many as 3.75 crore taxpayers have already filed their Income-Tax returns for Assessment Year 2020-21 (fiscal year 2019-20) till December 21, the Income Tax department said on Tuesday. "Do you know that 3.75 crore taxpayers have already filed their Income Tax Returns for AY 2020-21 till 21st December, 2020? Have you filed yours yet? If not, File NOW!," the Income Tax department tweeted. This includes 2.17 crore taxpayers filing ITR-1, 79.82 lakh filing ITR-4, 43.18 lakh ITR-3 and 26.56 lakh filing ITR-2. The deadline to file I-T returns by individual taxpayers for 2019-20 fiscal (Assessment Year 2020-21) ends on December 31, 2020, while

the same for taxpayers whose accounts require to be audited is January 31, 2021. The due date has been extended from July 31 and October 31, 2020, respectively in view of the Covid pandemic. At the close of deadline for filing ITR without payment of late fees for fiscal 2018-19 (assessment year 2019-20), over 5.65 crore returns were filed by taxpayers. The deadline last year too was extended till August 31. Giving a comparative analysis of the ITRs filed, the Income Tax department said 3.63 crore income-tax returns were filed till August 21, 2019, compared to 3.75 crore filed till December 21, 2020. — PTI



## SHORT TAKES

## Cole's goal settles point for Odisha

**Goa:** It could have been another defeat but Odisha FC clawed back a point despite taking the lead early against NorthEast United, drawing 2-2 in a Indian Super League game at the GMC Stadium, here on Tuesday. Odisha took the lead through Diego Mauricio (26') before Benjamin Lambot (45+1') drew parity. Kwesti Appiah (65') then converted a penalty to put the Highlanders ahead but soon saw his goal cancelled out by Cole Alexander (67'). Odisha named an unchanged eleven from the side that lost to Bengaluru FC while NorthEast coach Gerard Nus rang in four changes with Federico Gallego handed a start. The first half saw a cagey contest with both sides heading into the break level after creating plenty of chances. The first big chance of the game arrived during the 10th minute but Odisha keeper Arshdeep Singh produced a fine save to deny an opener for the Highlanders.

## Don's Test cap sells for \$340k

**Sydney:** An Australian businessman has purchased Donald Bradman's first baggy green Test cap for 450,000 Australian dollars (\$340,000) at auction, the second-highest price paid for a piece of cricket memorabilia. Peter Freedman, the founder of Rode Microphones who earlier this year paid 9 million Australian dollars (\$6.8 million) at an auction for a guitar used by Nirvana front man Kurt Cobain, plans to tour Bradman's Test debut cap around Australia. "The price for Bradman's 1928 Australia cap sits behind the 1,007,500 (\$760,000) paid at auction for Australian leg-spinner Shane Warne's Test cap earlier this year the world-record price for an item of cricket memorabilia," auction officials said. — AP

## CAC to interview new selectors

**New Delhi:** The BCCI's general body on Thursday will form a new Cricket Advisory Committee (CAC), which will pick three national selectors ahead of the series against England, starting February. It is learnt that the committee headed by Madan Lal was appointed for one meeting and after the Board's upcoming Annual General Meeting (AGM) in Ahmedabad, a new CAC will take over and conduct the interviews. "Madan Lal, Rudra Pratap Singh and Sulakshana Naik were appointed for one meeting where Sunil Joshi and Harvinder Singh became selectors," a senior BCCI source told on conditions of anonymity. "Since all cricket committees will be formed after the AGM, the new CAC will be formed and then the interview process is expected to start after that," he added. — PTI

## Pakistan win third T20 in NZ

**Napier, New Zealand:** New Test captain Mohammad Rizwan showed his leadership quality in a bold innings of 89 which steered Pakistan to a four-wicket win over New Zealand in the third Twenty20 on Tuesday. Rizwan will lead Pakistan in the two-match Test series against New Zealand starting on Sunday in place of Babar Azam, who is injured. — AP  
**Brief scores: New Zealand 173/7 (Conway 63, Ashraf 3-20) lost to Pakistan 177/6 (Rizwan 89, Southee 2-25).**

## Live on TV

## CRICKET

**Big Bash League:** Brisbane Heat vs Adelaide Strikers from 1.45 pm on Sony Six, HD

## FOOTBALL

**Indian Super League:** Jamshedpur vs Goa from 7.20 pm on Star Sports 2, 3

**Italian League:** Verona vs Inter Milan from 11 pm; AC Milan vs Lazio from 1.15 am (Thursday) on Sony Ten 2; Napoli vs Torino from 1.15 am (Thursday) on Sony Ten 1; Roma vs Cagliari from 1.15 am (Thursday) on Sony Six, HD

## WWE

**NXT:** Bouts from 6.30 am (Thursday) on Sony Ten 1, HD

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## KOHLI SIGNS OFF

## After pep talk, Virat leaves Australian shores for India

**Adelaide, Dec. 22:** Indian captain Virat Kohli left Australian shores on Tuesday after a pep talk with his beleaguered teammates, handing over the mantle of leading the side to Ajinkya Rahane in the remaining three Tests. Kohli is coming back to India for the birth of his first child in January. Before boarding his flight back home, the star batsman met his teammates and encouraged them to give their all in the remainder of the series, which the visitors trail 0-1 after the heavy defeat in the opening Test.

Long before setting foot on Australia, Rahane had been entrusted with the responsibility of leading in the team in Kohli's absence after the star had approached the BCCI for paternity leave.

The idea behind organising the pep talk was to boost the confidence of the players and keep them in a positive frame of mind heading into the crucial Boxing Day Test in Melbourne.

India lost the lung-opener here inside three days after crumbling to their lowest Test score of 36.

The second Test is scheduled to be held at the iconic Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) from December 26-30.

Kohli, who has been leading the Test team since 2014, urged his players to show intent and express themselves on the field without any inhibition.

While Kohli has departed for India, his white-ball deputy Rohit Sharma is quarantining in Sydney.

Kohli was India's best performer with the bat in the series opener, top-scoring with a sedate 74 in their first innings before being run out following a misunderstanding with Rahane. — PTI

● **Before boarding his flight back home, Virat Kohli met his teammates and encouraged them to give their all in the remainder of the series**

## ENGLAND TOUR STILL ON DESPITE NEW COVID WAVE

**Colombo, Dec. 22:** The new strain of Covid-19 that has hit the United Kingdom will not jeopardise England's upcoming tour of Sri Lanka even though the development is a cause of concern, the country's cricket board (SLC) said on Tuesday. Sri Lanka Cricket's (SLC) medical team feels that the tour starting January 14 is on schedule but additional Covid-19 protocols might be enforced for the visitors either before leaving their country or after arriving here.

According to a report in *ESPNCricinfo*, SLC's medical team is expected to hold discussions with their English counterparts on Tuesday on the matter. "I don't think we should (look at the new strain as something that jeopardises the

tour)," said Sri Lankan team's doctor Daminda Attanayake. "We might have to take extra precautions, but we don't need to stop the tour."

As per the itinerary, the England squad is scheduled to fly to Sri Lanka on a chartered flight on January 2. After their arrival here, the tourists would be required to undergo a three-day isolated quarantine, and will only begin their training after testing negative.

The English players will mingle with their Sri Lankan counterparts only after 10 days.

"When they come in they will not be in contact with my local people or the local providers, and they will be in quarantine. I don't see why we need to restrict them coming." — PTI



Australia's Steve Smith (left) and Virat Kohli during the first Test in Adelaide.

— AFP

## Virat deserves respect: Smith

**Adelaide, Dec. 22:** Australian batsman Steve Smith on Tuesday said Virat Kohli deserves credit for prioritising the birth of his child over cricket as "there would have been a lot of pressure" on the India skipper to stay for the entire duration of the ongoing Test series.

India are 0-1 down in the four-match rubber after losing the opening Test by eight wickets during which they also collapsed to their lowest Test score. Kohli will head home on

Tuesday. "Obviously, it's a big loss for India, not having him for the rest of the series. We just have to look at the way he played in the first innings. That was a pretty class display against some good bowling on a wicket that was doing a bit," Smith said during a virtual press conference.

"I just fist-pumped him at the end (of first Test) and said 'Mate safe travels, hope everything goes well with the baby, and pass on my best to your wife.' That was about it,"

Smith said.

"I'm sure there would have been a lot of pressure for him to stay but to stand up and want to go home for the birth of his first child, it's a credit for him. It's a milestone that he certainly wouldn't want to miss."

Kohli's 74 was the highest score by any batsman on either side in the first innings of the pink-ball day/night Test while Smith was out for 1.

Smith was also asked about legendary Australian spinner Shane

Warne's view that red ball is "pathetic" and pink ball should replace it in all Tests. He disagreed with the idea.

"Personally I'd like to keep red-ball cricket alive. I think one series or something like that is a good amount. We've seen in Adelaide for instance it's worked exceptionally well, it's a great spectacle. We played some really good day/night games."

"But I think overall, I'd like to personally play red ball cricket a lot," Smith said. — PTI

## MUMBAI NIGHTCLUB | RAID

## Raina sorry for Covid violation

**Mumbai, Dec. 22:** Former India cricketer Suresh Raina, who was among 34 people arrested and released on bail by Mumbai Police for violating COVID-19 social distancing norms at a club here, has regretted the "unintentional and unfortunate" incident.

A statement issued by the former batsman's management team said the 34-year old was not aware of the local timings and protocols at the time of the incident.

"Suresh was in Mumbai for a shoot which extended to late hours and was invited by a friend for a quick dinner post the same prior to him taking his flight back to Delhi. He was not aware of the local timings and protocols," said the statement.

"Once pointed out, he (Raina) immediately complied with the procedures laid out by the authorities and regrets the unfortunate and unintentional incident."

"He (Raina) always holds rules and laws laid down by governing bodies with the highest regard and will continue to do so in the future as well," it added.

Thirty-four people including Raina and Bollywood celebrity



Suresh Raina

Sussanne Khan were arrested after a raid at a posh club near the Mumbai airport on Tuesday for violating social distancing norms.

According to the police, those arrested in the raid at the Dragonfly Experience included seven staffers of the club.

The 13 women, who were arrested, were allowed to leave after being served notices. The men were shown as arrested and granted bail later.

Police said the raid was conducted after the club remained open beyond the permissible time limit and violated Covid-19 norms.

Raina, who has played 18 Tests, 226 ODIs and 78 T20s, announced retirement from international cricket in August earlier this year. — PTI



P.V. Sindhu

## Sindhu hopeful of travelling from UK

**New Delhi, Dec. 22:** Unfazed by the worsening Covid-19 situation in England where she is training right now, world champion shuttler P.V. Sindhu on Tuesday said that she remains hopeful of travelling to Thailand for tournaments in January despite countries increasingly banning flights from the UK.

Sindhu, who has qualified for the Tokyo Olympics, has been training in London for the last two months and is scheduled to play her first tournament since the break in Thailand. She will have to be in Bangkok by January 3 to compete in the two Super 1000 events (January 12 to 17 and January 19 to 24).

"I plan to travel in the first week of January. There is no travel ban from UK in Thailand, so I can travel from Doha. The idea is to use the Gulf route to reach Thailand," said Sindhu, who is managed by sports management firm Baseline Ventures.

Several countries around the world, including India, have imposed bans on

flights on the UK because of a new and seemingly more contagious strain of the coronavirus in England.

The 25-year-old had left for London in October to focus on her nutrition and fitness at the Gatorade Sports Science Institute (GSSI) and also has been training alongside British shuttlers Toby Pentty and Rajiv Ouseph at the National Training Centre.

"Thankfully, my training is going on pretty well. The national centre is not closed. It is run as a bubble center, so I have been able to practice ahead of the events in Thailand," Sindhu said.

The Thailand leg will mark the return of international badminton but the country has been dealing with pro-democracy protest movements and has recently seen a spike in Covid-19 cases as well.

Last Saturday, health officials in Thailand reported 548 new cases, most victims being migrant workers of the seafood industry in Samut Sakhon province, 34 kilometers southwest of Bangkok. — PTI

## Waugh sees 'no hope' of India bouncing back

**Melbourne, Dec. 22:** The Indian cricket team has "no hope" of making a comeback after the humiliation in Adelaide and will suffer a 4-0 whitewash in the four-match Test series against Australia, feels former batsman Mark Waugh.

India were bundled out for their lowest-ever Test score of 36 in their second innings as Australia claimed an eight-wicket win in the pink-ball Test to take a 1-0 lead in the series.

Asked if India could bounce back after losing the first Test, Waugh said: "No hope, no hope."

"I thought Adelaide was the Test that they could win on paper and with Virat Kohli here for just the one Test. I thought the conditions would suit them."

"I just can't see how they can bounce back (after) Australia whitewashed them on the third day. So



Mark Waugh

'no' is the answer four-nil to Australia," he said on Fox Cricket.

**CA SAYS SMITH NOT ONLY CAPTAINCY CANDIDATE**

Batting mainstay Steve Smith's reappointment as Australia's Test captain is far from certain as the sport's governing body in the country feels there are

some "great young leaders" coming through the system.

Smith was removed from captaincy due to his involvement in the 2018 ball-tampering scandal, with Cricket Australia (CA) appointing Tim Paine to the top job.

However, there have been speculations recently that Smith could be reinstated as skipper.

Asked about the board's view, CA chairman Earl Eddings told *ESPNCricinfo*: "First of all we've got three great captains in Meg, Aaron and Tim. We've got some great young leaders coming through. So it's not just about should Steve take over, it's about what's best overall."

"Steve's a great young man and he was a good captain when he was there. Like any succession there's planning in place." — PTI



Chelsea's Tammy Abraham celebrates after scoring his team's second goal during their English Premier League match against West Ham at Stamford Bridge in London on Monday. — AP

## Abraham hammers West Ham

**London, Dec. 22:** Tammy Abraham hit a quickfire late double on Monday as Chelsea beat West Ham 3-0 to reignite their Premier League challenge after a consecutive defeats.

The Hammers proved tricky opponents at an empty Stamford Bridge but lacked the firepower to hurt Frank Lampard's men, who led early through Thiago Silva's bullet header.

Chelsea enjoyed a strong start to the season before losses to Everton and Wolves checked their progress but the victory at the London Stadium lifts them into fifth spot.

Champions Liverpool have opened up a five-point gap at the top of the table but behind them, just seven points separate second-

placed Leicester from 11th-placed Wolves.

"It was nice to see that at the end because we had a period at 1-0 where it was tough, we dealt with that well," Lampard told the BBC.

"We dropped off slightly and it was important tonight we came back," he added.

"There were loads of things for the team to show their character — we want more."

West Ham had the ball in the net in the seventh minute after a cleverly worked free kick but Declan Rice was denied by the off-side flag after an impressive finish from a tight angle.

Three minutes later Chelsea were in front when

## THE RESULTS

<b>Burnley</b> (Barnes 35, Wood 51)	<b>2</b>
<b>Wolves</b> (Silva 89-pen)	<b>1</b>
<b>Chelsea</b> (Silva 10, Abraham 78, 80)	<b>3</b>
<b>West Ham</b>	<b>0</b>

Silva powered home a header from Mason Mount's corner.

The Brazilian found the net from close range after a well-timed run, leaving West Ham goalkeeper Lukasz Fabianski rooted to the spot.

Chelsea enjoyed the lion's share of possession after their goal without creating

much of note but West Ham worked their way into the game as the half wore on.

## WERNER GOAL DROUGHT

Timo Werner, who has not scored for Chelsea since early November, had a golden chance to double their lead in the closing minutes of the first period but got the ball caught under his feet and Fabianski saved comfortably.

The win lifts Chelsea to 25 points — one behind fourth-placed Everton — while West Ham stay in 10th place.

Earlier, Burnley beat Wolves 2-1 to climb out of the Premier League's relegation zone, thanks to goals from Ashley Barnes and Chris Wood. — AFP