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NEARBY



Delhi reports 1,819 fresh COVID-19 cases

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI
The Capital reported 1,819 new COVID-19 cases over 24 hours, taking the total to 6,62,430, stated a health bulletin released by the Delhi government. Health Minister Satyendar Jain said 230 ICU beds and 842 hospital beds have been added for COVID-19 treatment in 33 private hospitals in the city.

CITY ▶ PAGE 3



At 457, India reports highest toll due to COVID-19 in 2021

Maharashtra registers 39,544 cases and 227 deaths



Taking precautions: Corporation staff taking swab samples from police personnel in Chennai on Wednesday. ■ R. RAGU

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI
India on Wednesday reported 457 deaths in the last 24 hours – the highest since December 17 when 355 COVID-19 fatalities were reported in a single day. This is also the highest single-day spike in casualties this year.

The data was based on releases by various State Health Departments as of 10 p.m. Maharashtra registered more than half the number of deaths with 227 fatalities, while Punjab registered the second highest toll with 55 deaths on Wednesday.

The total registered death toll due to COVID-19 has now reached 1,62,959 in India, the fourth highest tally for

any country in the world. The daily case load remained high with 72,019 new infections registered on Wednesday. Maharashtra

once again led the tally with 39,544 fresh cases being reported from the State.

CONTINUED ON ▶ PAGE 8

Govt. sharply cuts rates on small savings instruments

Move comes after retail inflation breaches 6% mark

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The government has sharply slashed the rates on all small savings instruments for the first quarter of 2021-22, bringing the rate of return on the Public Provident Fund down from 7.1% to 6.4% and effecting cuts ranging from 40 basis points (0.4%) to 110 basis points (1.1%) through a notification on Wednesday.

The sharpest cut was seen in the quarterly interest rate paid on one-year term deposits, from 5.5% in the January to March quarter to 4.4% in

this quarter. The rate of return on the Senior Citizen Savings Scheme was cut from 7.4% to 6.5%, while the Sukanya Samridhi Account Scheme's return was reduced from 7.6% to 6.9%.

While the government resets the interest rate on small savings instruments every quarter, this round of rate cuts assumes significance as retail inflation has been breaching the 6% mark and the government is keen to lower interest rates to make it easier to execute its borrowing plans for the year and spur growth.

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INFLATION TARGET ▶ PAGE 14
CORE SECTOR OUTPUT CONTRACTS 4.6% ▶ PAGE 14

Instruments	Rates till June 30 (%)	Rates till March 31 (%)
Savings Deposit	3.5	4.0
1-year time deposit	4.4	5.5
2-year time deposit	5.0	5.5
3-year time deposit	5.1	5.5
5-year time deposit	5.8	6.7
5-year recurring deposit	5.3	5.8
Senior Citizen Savings Schemes	6.5	7.4
Monthly Income Account	5.7	6.6
National Savings Certificate	5.9	6.8
Public Provident Fund Scheme	6.4	7.1
Kisan Vikas Patra	6.2 (will mature in 138 months)	6.9 (will mature in 124 months)
Sukanya Samridhi Account Scheme	6.9	7.6

Pakistan allows import of cotton and sugar from India

SUHASINI HAIDAR
NEW DELHI

Partially reversing a two-year-old decision to suspend all trade with India, Pakistan announced on Monday that it would allow the import of cotton and sugar from across the border. The decision follows the Line of Control (LoC) ceasefire announced by India and Pakistan in February, and a

number of moves seen as part of a larger dialogue process to de-freeze ties.

Addressing the media at the end of a Cabinet meeting that cleared the two proposals from Pakistan's Commerce Ministry, newly appointed Finance Minister Hammad Azhar said, however, that the decision was driven by rising prices and Pakistani industry's need for

CONTINUED ON ▶ PAGE 8

Let's unite against BJP, Mamata tells 14 leaders

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The BJP wants to establish a "one-party authoritarian rule" in India, reducing the State governments to "mere municipalities", West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said in a letter to the leaders of 14 Opposition parties, including Congress president Sonia Gandhi and Shiv Sena chief Uddhav Thackeray.

Ms. Banerjee, who is also the chairperson of the Trinamool Congress, urged them to come together to counter the BJP.

In her three-page letter, Ms. Banerjee expressed concern about the "series of assaults" by the BJP and the Union government on "democracy and Constitutional Federalism".

CONTINUED ON ▶ PAGE 8

CBI court discharges three police officers in Ishrat encounter case

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
AHMEDABAD

A special CBI court in Ahmedabad on Wednesday discharged three police officers – G.L. Singh, Tarun Barot and Anaju Chaudhary – in the 2004 Ishrat Jahan alleged fake encounter case.

The officers will not face any proceedings or trial in the case as the court held that they had acted as per their duty. Special CBI Judge V.R.

Raval allowed the discharge applications of Mr. Singh, Mr. Barot, who is now retired, and Mr. Chaudhary.

No prosecution sanction

Earlier, the CBI on March 20 had conveyed to the court that the State government had declined prosecution sanction against the three accused. The court had observed in its October 2020 order that the officers had "acted in

their official duties" and so the CBI was required to obtain prosecution sanction. The court had discharged key accused P.P. Pandey, D.G. Vanzara and N.K. Amin from the proceedings earlier.

Ishrat Jahan, a 19-year-old woman from Mumra, was killed along with Javed Shaikh, Amjadali Akbarali Rana and Zeeshan Johar by the Gujarat police in an "encounter" on June 15, 2004.



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Users can now recharge metro card via app

STAFF REPORTER
NEW DELHI

The Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) on Wednesday said that following a tie up with Amazon Pay, commuters will now be able to recharge metro cards through the Amazon application.

Delhi Metro officials said that commuters travelling on the Delhi Metro network can recharge their metro cards by clicking on the "metro recharge" option under the Amazon Pay tab.

"After entering their metro smart card number, they can choose any amount between ₹100 and ₹2,000. After successful payment, they need to tap the card at the automatic vending machine (AVM) at any Delhi Metro station and select 'top-up' to add the balance to their card," the DMRC said.

DMRC Managing Director Mangal Singh said: "The initiative is in line with DMRC's commitment towards supporting the digital drive to promote cashless transactions among metro commuters."

Free dental camp winds up at Singhu border protest site

Volunteers manning the clinic claim a protesting farmer has been harassing them

HEMANI BHANDARI
NEW DELHI

A 'free dental camp' that had been running from inside a bus at the Singhu border protest site since December 2 last year shut its doors on Wednesday, possibly for good.

Manjeet Singh, the driver of the bus and an employee at Jap Jee Family Clinic, and Dr. Gurpreet Singh sat in the vehicle with their luggage, mattresses, boxes of medicines, and chairs. The air-conditioned cabin they had built next to the bus has been dismantled. The men said they were disappointed with the leaders at the protest site.

Manjeet said that a protesting farmer had been attacking them for a week, and even though they had complained to the stage management committee, no action was taken. "The old man would come and accuse us of giving him fake medicines. He just wouldn't listen to us. He was probably mentally ill. He thrashed me with a stick and broke my phone on March 30," he said.

"We do not wish to go but we do not have any other option. If someone gives it to us in writing that we will be taken care of then we will stay," said Dr. Gurpreet.



Manjeet Singh (left) and Dr. Gurpreet Singh in front of the dental clinic at the Singhu border on Wednesday. ■ SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

What really hurt the two volunteers, however, was the inaction by the protest leaders. "We showed them videos of the man but they still didn't do anything," Manjeet said, while asking who would be responsible if something happened to them.

"For us, those leaders were everything, but no one ever asked if we needed any medicines or how we were operating. We did everything ourselves. We came on our own and now we are leaving on our own," said Dr. Gurpreet, visibly disheartened.

The owner of the bus, Sunny Ahluwalia from Mohali, had come to the Singhu border

protest leader had come to ask them whether they needed anything or had adequate food or water.

"It is a great movement but it is directionless as of now," Dr. Gurpreet said.

He added that not a single

An unknown homeless person died on the spot. Three injured persons, including Khan, were shifted to trauma centre where Khan was declared dead. The injured homeless are in a serious condition and are unfit to give statement, the officer said.

An injured has been identified as Ramesh (52), a resident of Ludhiana, however, the identity of the other injured person is yet to be revealed.

A case has been registered against the tempo driver, the police said. There were some plants and saplings in the vehicle, the police said.

Khan, who used to work in civil defence, was returning home after dropping his mother. He is survived by his pregnant wife, mother and four brothers, the police said.

Mr. Kumar told that the accused Saroj Rana showed them a rosy picture about the Bakaro project and assured that the company was an NGO for the benefit of Army personnel and it was not working for any profits. The accused asked the investors to deposit money in the account of SWO India Ltd.

The NGO provided allocation letter-cum-agreement on receipt of total amount, but it neither provided the plots nor did they return their money. It was later found that the alleged company didn't have land and requisite sanction from the authority concerned.

The police said that Economic Offence Wing of Delhi Police registered an FIR after Havaldar Chandan Kumar filed a complaint.

It was alleged that he, along with 16 other victims had been cheated by Sainik Welfare Organisation (SWO) India Ltd., Dwarka, New Delhi, for over ₹88 lakh.

Man held for duping Army men with 'housing scam'

Around 17 victims cheated of ₹88 lakh

STAFF REPORTER
NEW DELHI

Delhi Police arrested a man who allegedly duped several Army personnel after enrolling them in an NGO on the pretext of providing them affordable houses in Delhi, said a police officer on Wednesday.

The police said that Economic Offence Wing of Delhi Police registered an FIR after Havaldar Chandan Kumar filed a complaint.

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Mr

Timings

DELHI

THURSDAY, APR. 01

RISE 06:12	SET 18:39
RISE 22:50	SET 08:45
FRIDAY, APR. 02	
RISE 06:10	SET 18:40
RISE 23:58	SET 09:34

SATURDAY, APR. 03

RISE 06:09	SET 18:40
RISE 00:00	SET 10:27

Delhi Weather

max min

Delhi City 35 20

Safdarjung 35 20

Palam 36 20

Delhi Palam Today

35°C Dryness would increase again.

Dry moderate gusty winds would prevail. Sunny warm day likely.

Delhi Palam Tomorrow

35°C Surface winds speed would decrease. Light to moderate surface winds would continue during the sunny warm day.

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THE HINDU

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IN BRIEF

DTC signs deal with IGL for CNG supply to buses

NEW DELHI

The Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) on Wednesday signed an agreement with Indraprastha Gas Limited (IGL) for the supply of CNG to DTC buses and private vehicles in Delhi. The agreement was signed by Vijay Kumar Bidhuri, Managing Director of DTC, and A.K. Jana, Managing Director of the IGL, in the presence of Transport Minister Kailash Gahlot. The agreement will be operational for 10 years, the government stated.

Judge M.M. Dhonchak bids farewell after 'eventful' career

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

GURUGRAM
District and Sessions Judge, M.M. Dhonchak, known as a staunch advocate of individual liberty, attained superannuation on Wednesday, after an "eventful" career spanning over three decades.

Serving as District and Sessions Judge for around six years in three districts of Haryana, including Nuh and Kaithal, Mr. Dhonchak laid special emphasis on adherence to Supreme Court guidelines in "Arvind Kumar vs State of Bihar and Others" against arrest for offences punishable with imprisonment for a term of seven years or less. He tirelessly persisted in awakening the magistracy against such illegal arrests. He also stressed on priority hearing of undertrials' cases.

Though the courts remained partially shut for a large part of his tenure in Gurugram due to the pandemic, the number of inmates in district jail went down from 2,880 on September 30, 2019 to 2,605 on January 31, 2020 during the first four months of his posting in Gurugram.

Described as "honest" and "uncompromising" with zero tolerance for the police's high-handedness by his colleagues,

Mr. Dhonchak was serving 30-odd times.

He had the dubious distinction of never completing his mandatory three-year tenure except during his posting in Nuh.

In 1993, Mr. Dhonchak, as Judicial Magistrate First Class at Kaithal, imposed fines on the police personnel for not turning up in court for evidence.

Also, at least twice the Bar went on long strikes against him, but he never recognised any strike by the Bar.

Heritage, cultural and public spaces discussed at MPD-2041 meeting

Officials suggest preparation of safe neighbourhood norms

STAFF REPORTER

NEW DELHI

In the second Advisory Council meeting for the preparation of the Master Plan for Delhi-2041 on Wednesday, Delhi Development Authority officials said that heritage, cultural and public spaces, transport and mobility and physical infrastructure were some of the areas discussed, among others.

The meeting, which was chaired by Lieutenant-Governor Anil Baijal, who is also the Chairman of the DDA, saw the participation of 18 members from various departments.

"Members suggested enhancement of circular economy, significance of cultural heritage and explore economic viability by recognising the role of PPP [Public-

Members highlighted the need to explore the establishment of a unified body for 'Business or Economic Bureau'

DELHI DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

Baijal added that special emphasis was laid on promotion of renewable energy, integrated water management and solid waste management.

Enhanced share of public transport, moving towards low carbon mobility, including a walkable and cycling city, provision for dynamic parking systems, regeneration of unplanned areas and provisioning of affordable and liveable housing were some of the issues discussed, said Mr. Baijal.

DDA officials added that the next meeting, which is scheduled for April 5, will have members deliberate on proposed plans, which include spatial development framework, action and monitoring framework and development code of MPD-2041.

Special emphasis

Stating that DDA was asked to incorporate suggestions made by the members, Mr.

AAP attacks BJP over dry rations for students

BJP is an anti-poor party, alleges AAP

STAFF REPORTER

NEW DELHI

The AAP on Wednesday alleged that the BJP is an "anti-poor" party and the BJP-ruled civic bodies distributed dry ration to only one school. The party also said that the BJP has stalled the home delivery of ration, a scheme of the Delhi government, to "harass" the poor.

"It's shameful that the BJP-ruled civic bodies distributed dry ration to only one school and the tender of this scheme is yet to take place. Delhi BJP chief Adesh Gupta, North Corporation Mayor and other BJP leaders

inaugurated this scheme in a school," AAP chief spokesperson Saaurabh Bhardwaj said. The AAP leader said that on March 19, Mr. Gupta and others inaugurated the scheme of providing dry ration to municipal corporation-run schools.

"The North body distributed the Delhi government-allocated ration to only one school, and soon after, conveniently did away with the scheme. Yesterday, when our councillors raised this issue in the House, they learnt that the tender process has not yet begun," Mr. Bhadrawaj said.

Govt. trims process to get learner's licence for e-rickshaws

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

NEW DELHI

The Delhi government has decided to allow applicants seeking a learner's licence for e-rickshaws to directly approach the licensing authority without taking a prior appointment.

According to another decision taken by the transport department, driving tests will also be conducted on Sundays.

The applicants can directly approach the licensing authority between 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. on every working day after depositing fee through the online software of Sarthi. Transport department has issued an official order in this regard.

Over the past few months, the government has put in place contactless service for registration certificates and licence-related activities, which are currently undergoing trial.

The department is planning to scale this up to 70 essential services in two phases over the next few months.

In another significant decision, the department has given the option to applicants to take a driving licence test on Sunday.

Shops must display if meat is halal, jhatka: North body

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

NEW DELHI

The North Delhi Municipal Corporation has made it mandatory for all restaurants and shops falling within its jurisdiction to display whether the meat being sold or served is 'halal' or 'jhatka' as certain religions permit eating one form of meat, while others do not."

mal was slaughtered was cleared in a meeting of the House on Tuesday.

North Delhi Mayor Jai Prakash said, "Restaurants and shops in north Delhi will now have to mandatorily display whether the meat being sold or served is 'halal' or 'jhatka' as certain religions permit eating one form of meat, while others do not."

A proposal to make it "mandatory" to display the method by which the ani-

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Delhi sees 1,819 cases, govt. reserves over 1K more beds

Vaccination drive for people above 45 to start from today

STAFF REPORTER

NEW DELHI

Health Minister Satyendar Jain on Wednesday said that 230 ICU beds and 842 hospital beds have been added for COVID-19 treatment in 33 private hospitals in the city. He also said that vaccination drive will start for 65 lakh people, who are above 45 years of age in Delhi, from Thursday.

"All 500 vaccine centres will be operational from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Walk-in hours have been set from 3 p.m. onwards, in which those not registered can directly come to the centre and get inoculated," Mr. Jain said



6,42,565 people have recovered and there are 8,838 active cases in Delhi at present.

"We have enough vaccines available. The number of eligible beneficiaries is quite large. We will make efforts to complete the inoculation as soon as possible," he said.

"Orders were issued yesterday to add 230 ICU beds in private hospitals. Along with this, 842 normal beds were directed to increase. In Delhi government hospitals, enough beds are vacant. Overall occupancy rate including private and government hospitals is 25%. It is a com-

fortable situation, but there were instances of shortage of beds in two-three hospitals. Therefore, orders were issued yesterday to increase 220 ICU beds in 33 hospitals," he said.

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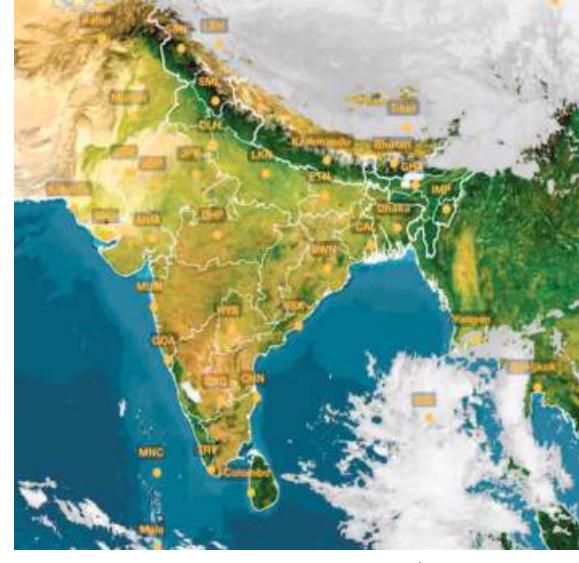
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ASSEMBLY POLLS

THE HINDU | THURSDAY, APRIL 1, 2021

WEATHER WATCH

RAINFALL, TEMPERATURE & AIR QUALITY IN SELECT METROS YESTERDAY



TEMPERATURE DATA: IMD, POLLUTION DATA: CPCB, MAP: INSAT/IMD (TAKEN AT 18.00 HRS)

Forecast for Thursday: Heavy rainfall likely at isolated places over Andaman & Nicobar Islands. Thunderstorm with lightning/gusty winds likely at isolated places over Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Kerala. Heat wave conditions likely in isolated pockeets over coastal Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry

CITY	RAIN	MAX	MIN	CITY	RAIN	MAX	MIN
Agartala	35.2	27.0	Kozhikode	33.8	27.4
Ahmedabad	40.2	25.8	Kurnool	47.6	26.2
Aizawl	1.6	26.2	14.4	Lucknow	37.8	22.7
Allahabad	39.5	24.5	Madurai	40.5	24.6
Bengaluru	37.2	22.4	Mangaluru	35.6	26.4
Bhopal	39.1	21.0	Mumbai	32.7	21.5
Bhubaneswar	44.2	25.9	Mysuru	37.9	24.4
Chandigarh	34.0	16.4	New Delhi	34.6	20.0
Chennai	39.6	27.0	Patna	35.2	22.2
Coimbatore	38.2	25.4	Port Blair	32.7	26.2
Dehradoon	33.4	16.7	Puducherry	35.9	25.0
Gangtok	0.6	17.4	11.1	Pune	38.9	19.2
Goa	34.5	24.6	Raipur	42.0	22.8
Guwahati	43.5	27.2	17.8	Ranchi	35.5	25.6
Hubballi	38.0	22.0	Shillong	28.4	24.7	12.1
Hyderabad	39.9	23.2	Shimla	24.4	14.0
Imphal	46.2	26.6	13.6	Srinagar	18.1	5.7
Jaipur	37.0	21.2	Tiruvananthapuram	33.5	26.7
Kochi	32.4	26.2	Tiruchi	41.0	25.5
Kohima	22.6	20.2	10.0	Vijayawada	42.3	26.4
Kolkata	39.3	26.8	Visakhapatnam	34.5	26.8

(Rainfall data in mm; temperature in Celsius)

Pollutants in the air you are breathing Yesterday

CITIES	SO ₂	NO _x	CO	PM _{2.5}	PM ₁₀	CODE
Ahmedabad	54	65	120	140	140	Red
Bengaluru	5	133	62	141	141	Red
Chennai	..	23	54	25	53	Red
Delhi	13	25	38	294	263	Red
Hyderabad	51	51	22	118	142	Red
Kolkata	23	24	39	112	123	Red
Lucknow	4	23	50	260	224	Red
Mumbai	43	16	102	104	132	Red
Pune	6	49	41	85	81	Green
Visakhapatnam	16	71	74	117	143	Green

Air Quality Code: Poor Moderate Good (Readings indicate average AQI) SO₂: Sulphur Dioxide. Short-term exposure can harm the respiratory system, making breathing difficult. It can affect visibility by reacting with other air particles to form haze and stain culturally important objects such as statues and monuments.

NO_x: Nitrogen Dioxide. Aggravates respiratory illness, causes haze to form by reacting with other air particles, causes acid rain, pollutes coastal waters.

CO: Carbon monoxide. High concentration in air reduces oxygen supply to critical organs like the heart and brain. At very high levels, it can cause dizziness, confusion, unconsciousness and even death.

PM_{2.5} & PM₁₀: Particulate matter pollution can cause irritation of the eyes, nose and throat, coughing, chest tightness and shortness of breath, reduced lung function, irregular heartbeat, asthma attacks, heart attacks and premature death in people with heart or lung disease

Will accept Assam NRC, issue ID card to every citizen: Cong.

Party also assured steps for early hearing and disposal of appeals of 19.06 lakh people who were left out of the final draft

**RAHUL KARMAKAR
GUWAHATI**

Assam Congress president Ripun Bora on Wednesday announced that the Congress, if voted to power, will accept and notify the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and issue identity card to every citizen of the State.

Addressing a rally in western Assam's Barkhetti along with Wayanad MP Rahul Gandhi, Mr. Bora also assured steps for early hearing and disposal of appeals of the 19.06 lakh people who were left out of the final draft of the NRC published in 2019.

About 3.3 crore people had applied for inclusion in the NRC.

"I promise you that if our party comes to power, we will take the help of the Supreme Court to accept and

formally notify the NRC that has been stalled by the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) government. We will also issue identity card to every citizen of Assam," the State Congress president said.

"We will also ensure that the hearings of the appeals by the 19.06 lakh excluded from the final draft at the earliest and the genuine Indian citizens' names are enrolled without further delay," Mr. Bora, who contested the Gohpur Assembly seat in the first phase, said.

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"I promise you that if our party comes to power, we will take the help of the Supreme Court to accept and



Election officials with EVMs leaving a distribution centre on the eve of polling in Nagaon district on Wednesday. ■ PTI

in 120 days of receiving the notice. The quasi-judicial tribunals would then have to weigh documents for declaring the appellant as an Indian or foreigner.

The rejection slips were to have been issued soon after

the final NRC draft was published on August 31, 2019.

Congress has already set up a legal cell to deal with the NRC drop-out cases at the FTS.

Meanwhile, released from

their jobs, 272 contractual ju-

nior assistants engaged in the NRC updating exercise since 2014 have sought rehabilitation. On Wednesday, these contractual employees told journalists they had assisted regular State government employees in updating the complicated exercise and were initially given to understand that the NRC would be a continuous process.

"Will SC intervene?"

They also sought to know if the Supreme Court, which had monitored the NRC updating exercise, would intervene in their case. "We cannot be abandoned like this, particularly when the NRC authority refused to give us No Objection Certificates whenever some of us wanted to take up better job offers during the updating process," they said.

"We were appointed under Assam's Home and Politici-

Goons have entered Nandigram, we want free and fair polls: CM

'BJP leaders are sitting in hotels with huge amount of money'

**SHIV SAHAY SINGH
KOLKATA**

Alleging that goons from other States have taken shelter in Nandigram, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Wednesday said she does not want any favour from the Election Commission and all she wants is free and fair polls.

"Why are outsider goons allowed in Nandigram. Don't want favour from Election Commission. We only want free and fair elections," Ms. Banerjee told journalists in Goghat in Hooghly.

She said her party has complained to the E.C. several times on the issue. Ms. Banerjee is contesting



CM Mamata Banerjee

against BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari in Nandigram which is going to the polls on April 1.

She said at a public meeting the BJP leaders are sitting in hotels with huge amounts of money under the nose of the Election Commission.

"There are several BJP leaders sitting in hotels with

huge amounts of money and distributing from there. Where is the Election Commission? Where is naka checking [checking at important intersections]?"

She also took a dig at the hundreds of BJP leaders visiting the State. "They cannot take on Mamata Banerjee alone, so they are coming in hundreds. What kind of leaders are they?" Ms. Banerjee assured her supporters that she will leave Nandigram only after the election is over on Thursday evening.

The BJP also registered a complaint with the EC alleging that the remarks made by the Chief Minister are resulting in political violence.

Now, AJP complains against Congress over advertisement to influence voters

AJP, Cong. earlier complained against BJP over similar move

**SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
GUWAHATI**

The Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) has accused the Congress of taking a leaf out of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) playbook to influence voters through an advertisement in the garb of news.

In its complaint to the State's Chief Electoral Officer, the AJP sought action against the Congress for publishing an advertisement designed as a banner headline below the mastheads of most local English and vernacular dailies. The headline read: "5 guarantees top agenda for voters - Congress wave across Assam".

AJP's office secretary Nikhil Bhattacharya said the "advertisement in the garb of news" published in local dailies on March 30 was aimed at influencing voters in the next two phases of polling on April 1 and 6. The first phase covering 47 of Assam's 126 Assembly seats was held on March 27.

EC intervention sought

"...ECI should intervene in

the matter immediately and

stop INC (Congress) from pu-

blishing such unwanted and

illegal advertisements. We

request you to examine if the

advertisements have

amounted to exit poll of a

political party," the AJP said.

The AJP, forged in the anti-

Citizenship (Amendment)

Act fire and formed in Sep-

tember 2020, had earlier

asked the Election Commis-

sion of India to restrain the BJP from publishing similar advertisements.

On March 28, the day after polling was held across 47 Assembly constituencies in the first phase, the BJP published a below-masthead advertisement reading like a banner headline. It claimed: "BJP to win all constituencies of Upper (eastern) Assam."

Congress too had lodged a complaint following which the ECI issued notices to eight dailies that carried the BJP advertisement.

"Ours is different from that of the BJP. We separated our advertisement with a thick border and made it clearer that it was an adver-

tisement from the party," a

Congress spokesperson said. +

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Maharashtra adds 39,544 cases, 227 deaths

Active case tally crosses 3.50 lakh mark; RT-PCR testing now to cost only ₹500, says Rajesh Tope

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

PUNE

Maharashtra posted its second-highest single-day spike ever on Wednesday, reporting a surge of 39,544 new COVID-19 cases as its active case tally breached the 3.50 lakh mark to reach 3,56,243.

An alarming fatality spike of 227 deaths (129 of which were reported in the last 48 hours while the rest were from an earlier period) pushed the death toll to 54,649.

As many as 23,600 patients were discharged. The State's recovery rate dipped to 85.34%. A record-high 1.67 lakh samples were tested in the last 24 hours as well.

While the total case tally has touched 28,12,980, the cumulative recoveries stand at 23,77,127.

"Of a total 1,96,25,065 laboratory samples tested thus far, 28,12,980 (with the average case positivity rising to 14.21%) have returned positive with over 1.67 lakh samples being tested in the last 24 hours," State Surveillance Officer Dr. Pradeep Awate



Visitors and staff members stand in a queue to get their COVID-19 test done before entering the sessions court in Mumbai on Wednesday. ■ VIVEK BENDRE

said, adding that the State's case fatality rate had incrementally dipped to 1.94%.

Given the increased emphasis on testing, Health Minister Rajesh Tope announced on Wednesday that the rates for COVID-19 tests performed in private laboratories in the State had been

revised once again and that henceforth, only ₹500 would be charged for RT-PCR testing. In addition, the rate of rapid antigen antibody testing has also been reduced to ₹150.

"Against the backdrop of increased cases, the State government has been conti-

nually revising rates of testing in private laboratories. It has so far revised the rates of these tests at least five to six times – from ₹4,500 to ₹500," Mr. Tope said.

As per a directive issued on Wednesday by the State Health Department, revised rates of ₹500, ₹600, and

₹800 have been fixed for RT-PCR tests.

"A patient will be charged ₹500 for taking the sample from the collection centre and reporting it, while ₹600 will be charged for sample testing and reporting from the laboratory at the hospital, COVID-19 care centre, and quarantine centre, and ₹800 for sampling and reporting from the patient's residence. No private laboratory can charge more than this ceiling," said Dr. Pradeep Vyas, principal secretary, Health Department.

Pune district clocked a record surge of more than 8,500 new cases to take its total case tally to 5,36,262.

Mumbai reported another massive surge of 5,399 new cases, taking its total tally to 4,14,773 of whom 49,953 are active. As many as 15 fatalities took the city's death toll to 11,690.

Cases continued to mount in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, with the Kalyan-Dombivli civic body recording 913 cases to take its tally to 83,813. No deaths, however, were reported.

HC reserves order on Param Bir Singh's plea seeking CBI inquiry

Without an FIR there can be no investigation, says Bench

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

MUMBAI

The Bombay High Court on Wednesday reserved its order on the maintainability of a public interest litigation (PIL) petition filed by former Mumbai police commissioner Param Bir Singh seeking a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe into his letter alleging that State Home Minister Anil Deshmukh had directed suspended assistant police inspector Sachin Vaze to collect ₹100 crore a month from bars and restaurants.

After senior advocate Vikram Nankani appearing for Mr. Singh read the letter in the court, the Bench asked, "You are seeking an investigation into what? Where is the FIR? What stopped you from approaching the police. We are prima facie of the opinion that without an FIR there can be no investigation. In a PIL can any dispute related to service matters be adjudicated?"

Mr. Nankani said this matter was related to the interference in the police force by political masters. "Mr. Singh is not challenging his transfer order from commissioner to Director General of Maharashtra Home Guard," he said.

senting the Maharashtra government, said, "The State is eager and anxious to lift this cloud of suspicion. Clear these wild allegations. This is unnecessarily affecting the morale of the force. I have a preliminary objection; the PIL is not maintainable."

Chief Justice Datta asked, "Is there an affidavit annexed of any officers that whatever the letter contains was said to them or in their presence?"

The Chief Justice continued, "Assuming whatever you have said is correct, do you support the principle of law that without an FIR there cannot be an investigation?"

Mr. Kumbhakoni contended that Mr. Singh was a disgruntled litigant, and cited judgements to show that the senior IPS officer had vested interests in filing the PIL petition.

Chief Justice Datta said, "This petition in the absence of an FIR prima facie appears to be without substance. Mr. Singh is a police officer; if he finds an offence has been committed, he is duty bound to file an FIR."

Rajasthan govt. extends night curfew by an hour

Restrictions imposed in two more towns

MOHAMMED IQBAL

JAIPUR

Amid an increase in COVID-19 cases, the Rajasthan government on Wednesday decided to extend the night curfew timings by one hour in eight cities and imposed night curfew in two more towns. Besides, the markets in the urban areas will close by 9 p.m. instead of 10 p.m. earlier.

Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot announced the decisions at a COVID-19 review meeting held through videoconferencing here. He gave instructions to the officials to formulate district-level action plans to contain the spread of the infection and regularly monitor the situ-

ation in addition to the assessment of mortality and growth rates.

The District Collectors were authorised to take a decision on closure of educational institutions in their respective areas where the cases were rising.

The teams of district administration, police and urban local bodies will regularly visit markets to conduct checking in order to ensure compliance with the protocol to check the spread of infection.

The night curfew was imposed last week from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. The curfew will now start from 10 p.m. Two more towns where the curfew has been imposed are Chittorgarh and Abu Road (Sirohi).

Amarinder hits out at Centre over virus remarks

'State conducting more tests than national average'

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

CHANDIGARH

Amid Centre's criticism of his government's management of COVID-19 surge, Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh on Wednesday said not only was the State consistently conducting more tests per million than the national average, but the situation would have perhaps been better had the Central government not delayed opening up of vaccination for 45-plus age group.

"Had the Central government acceded the State's request for allowing vaccina-

tion of all 50-plus category population earlier, the situation would perhaps have been better," he said.

He said the State government had been repeatedly requesting the Centre that the current strategy of immunisation needed a review. Capt. Amarinder also took note of the delay in receiving reports of genome sequencing. "Of the 874 samples sent, only 588 reports have been received so far, of which 411 samples were found positive for B.1.1.7 U.K. variant and 2 positive for N440K. The implication needs to be looked into and appropriate advice is required to be shared with the State," the Chief Minister urged the Centre.

Hooda lauds farmers for struggle against farm laws

'Continued protests is biggest victory'

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

GURUGRAM

Former Haryana Chief Minister and Leader of the Opposition Bhupinder Singh Hooda has lauded the ongoing struggle of the farmers against the three farm laws, saying the decision to continue with the protest after four months is their biggest victory.

Mr. Hooda, who once again reached out to the protesting farmers at the Makdoli toll plaza on Wednesday, reiterated his support to the farmers' movement and said their demands were justified. "The movement continues to grow, and this is the biggest victory for the farmers," he said.

Later, addressing a press conference at the residence of Kapoor Singh Narwal in Sonipat, Mr. Hooda said the



Bhupinder Singh Hooda in Sonipat on Wednesday. ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

announcements made by the BJP-JJP government during the Baroda by-election had proved to be a lie and this was the reason why the government had lost the confidence of the people. He said the present government had betrayed not only Baroda but the whole of Haryana.

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Re-examining the EPF tax rules

The recent policy changes are flawed and take a myopic view of the interests of beneficiaries



AMIT GOPAL

Gene Roddenberry's Star Trek had a wonderful concept, one called 'Prime Directive'. It required outer space explorers from Earth to avoid interference with the affairs of civilisations they came across. This ensured natural progression instead of a nudged progression, biased by Earth sensibilities. Events over the past few years in the Employees' Provident Fund programme can make one think that policymaking should take a 'Prime Directive' break in affairs related to the EPF.

Take, for instance, the recent amendments to tax regulation affecting EPF. For long, taxation surrounding the EPF was simple to understand and easy to execute. If one contributed more than the limit prescribed under Section 80C of the Income Tax Act, they did not get a tax break on the excess contribution. Earnings on contributions rarely suffered taxation since tax laws pegged tax-free earnings to rates higher than that of interest rate on the EPF. One paid tax on their corpus only if they withdrew it within five years of commencing contribution. Rightly so, since the EPF is a retirement product. This taxation framework incentivised employees to use the EPF as their primary retirement saving. Indeed, for many, the EPF remains the sole 'risk-free' retirement savings mode given its design, asset allocation and the 'government-run' tag.

'HNI' individuals

This will change for many because of the new tax regulation that, in effect, labels one "a high net worth individual (HNI) who is misusing EPF" if one contributes more than ₹2.5 lakh per annum to the EPF. The limit is ₹5 lakh in cases where employers do not make contributions to the provident fund. Indeed, the day after the announcement of this change, the media was filled with statistics of a staggering twenty members that had over ₹800 crore in their EPF accounts – just twenty out of the sever-



For most working Indians, the EPF remains a risk-free retirement savings programme with the promise of being state-run. ■ PTI

al crore accounts overseen by the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO). The move should be given a rethink because it is flawed in principle and difficult to administer.

Regressive view

The basis of this new tax law reeks of a 1970s' Bollywood-style narrative where the affluent do only evil and need to be punished. The 'rich man's pension vs. poor man's pension' divide, that we have seen earlier in policymaking in case of superannuation plans (the Fringe Benefit Tax and the perquisite tax on superannuation contributions), and now in the case of EPF, is regressive. It assumes that the government knows what is adequate for an individual on retirement.

We live in an era of evolving post-retirement aspirations, medical cost inflation, volatile interest rate cycles, credit busts and minimal choices for post-retirement investments. The best bet for employees, then, is to maximise savings via statutory and voluntary contributions. Intuitively, most employees who start to contribute large sums of money to their retirement plan do so when there are surpluses – when mortgages have been paid off and children's education is funded. This occurs closer to retirement. So, the need to catch up is significant.

While other investment products have grown in popularity, one does realise that for most working Indians, the EPF typifies safety with governance. For the government, therefore, to decide on a common threshold of adequacy is incorrect – it suffers the flaws of a one-size-fits-all approach.

Furthermore, the 'misuse' that was used to justify the imposition of the tax is difficult to comprehend. The EPF is solely a payroll deduction and cannot be contributed in any other manner. It, therefore, suffers taxation for amounts exceeding the limit prescribed in Section 80C of the Act. This last point makes the new clause bring the EPF to the borders of double taxation.

Further, close to 65% of EPF is invested in government securities, with the rest being invested largely in PSU bonds and the equity index. Earnings are made available to the employee via an interest credit mechanism. Despite the stickiness of these interest rate declarations and their often being higher than market rates, it is certain that the government does not subsidise this interest rate credit.

Unlike the Employees' Pension Scheme (EPS), the EPF remains a subsidy-free, pay-what-is-earned retirement fund. The flaws it suffers are related to design and administration and are equally applicable to all segments of its members – the affluent and not-so-affluent. It is accessible to employees on permanent cessation of employment and, thanks to the

Universal Account Number (UAN) regime, cannot be accessed easily before retirement. Given all this, the argument of misuse of the EPF by the higher-salaried segment is incorrect.

In addition to flaws in the principle, there can be difficulties in the administration of the new tax rule. Various interpretative inadequacies surrounding the applicability to EPF, especially in light of the changed threshold from ₹2.5 lakh to ₹5 lakh, remain. It is also unclear if the interest on such excess contributions is taxed once during the year of contribution or throughout the term of investment in EPF. The mechanism of tax communication from the EPFO to the member also remains uncertain. One assumes that the systems at the EPFO will need changes and such ongoing taxation of the annual interest rate credit is a first-time measure for the organisation.

The bigger picture

In a wider context, it is important that policymakers reflect on what the EPF has come to signify. While pension funds are seen by governments in myriad policy contexts, they should remain, foremost, the retirement funds of their beneficiaries.

Regulations governing contributions, taxation, investments, administration and benefits should be made in the interest of the beneficiary. But it may seem that other imperatives dominate the agenda in pension policymaking in India. Hence, the resultant outcomes are, at best, sub-optimal from a beneficiary point of view. An example of this is how regulation has obsessed over the coverage of lower-income employees, who have often preferred current compensation over deferred compensation such as retirement funds, while tax laws frown upon other segments of employees increasing voluntary provident fund.

Some of these re-looks are important to execute over time, but an immediate rollback of the tax rules will demonstrate the will of the policymakers to encourage retirement savings. And then, a period of 'Prime Directive' adoption will help 'energise' the vision of a pensioned society.

Amit Gopal leads Mercer's investment practice in India and has worked with retirement plan funds for over two decades

A downward spiral in Assam

Key indicators for the State point to growing economic and social distress under the BJP government



RAJEEV GOWDA & AKASH SATYAWALI

It is vital to assess the performance of incumbent governments, especially those that claim to have ushered in development. Let us take the case of Assam and examine the Sarbananda Sonowal-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government's performance on key indicators.

In 2015-16, before the BJP government had taken charge, Assam's economy clocked the second-highest growth rate at 15.67%, and its per capita income was growing at 13.02%. A credible dialogue process was also initiated and taken forward over the 15 years of Tarun Gogoi-led Congress rule, which ushered in peace. In May 2016, the BJP assumed power and since then, the growth story has petered out and distress reigns supreme.

Alarming numbers

Assam's economy had lost steam much before the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the State. In 2019-20, the economy grew at 6.30% and per capita income grew at a measly 3.46%. Within four years, Assam had gone from being ranked 2nd and 3rd on these counts to 20th and 26th respectively. Where Assam ranked highly was inflation – the fourth highest in the country.

A responsive government would have reacted to provide relief to those hurting from the loss of incomes and price rise. But that is not what the BJP government did. Taking a cue from the Narendra Modi-led Central government, the State raised Value Added Tax (VAT) on petrol and diesel in the middle of the pandemic. The price of LPG cylinders in Guwahati has risen by nearly ₹300 in the past ten months. Struggling with falling revenues, the government chose to burden the common people of Assam.

Development work has suffered since the BJP-led Central government scrapped the special category status for States, affecting Assam and other northeastern States. The 2020-21 Assam budget also saw massive cuts in several important departments like agriculture, rural development, education, healthcare, and flood control. The BJP promised a 'double-engine' government. Instead, Dispur and Delhi demolished the double-digit development.

The State is also facing a job crisis. The youth unemployment rate in urban areas for

the January-March 2020 quarter was 29.3%. Only five years ago, the BJP had emphatically promised 25 lakh jobs. Earlier this year, it admitted that only 80,000 government jobs were provided. In contrast, the unemployment rate in April 2016, the last complete month when the Congress governed Assam, was 0.7%. This had increased to 7.6% by December 2020. Further, rapid development and robust job creation by the Tarun Gogoi-led Congress government had complemented its efforts towards ending insurgency. Between 2000 and 2015, major incidents of terrorism fell by 94%.

Years of progress has been undone in the past five years. The NITI Aayog's Sustainable Development Goal Index points to Assam's worsening state on the poverty index. The National Family Health Survey-5 also supports these findings. The prevalence of malnutrition and anaemia has risen in the population. The proportion of children aged 6-59 months who are anaemic nearly doubled; the proportion of women who are anaemic increased by over 40%.

In its manifesto, the BJP has promised a "brighter future" for Assam's children. It ignores how it presided over a rise in drop-out rates in secondary schools. Incidences of crime against children more than doubled, increasing by 133% between 2015 and 2019.

Data from the National Crime Records Bureau suggests a complete breakdown of law and order in the State. Comparing the rate of crime, Assam leads other States in crimes against women, violent crimes, kidnapping and abduction of women, and procurement of minor girls.

Assam's people bear the brunt of floods and the State has a multitude of issues to resolve. Even then, the BJP government's campaign has communal and xenophobic overtones that seek to divide and pit one person against the other. How the BJP has failed Assam is best highlighted by its promise to review the National Register of Citizens (NRC), a process the party oversaw. The BJP plays up the controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Act in West Bengal, but refuses to discuss its implementation in Assam, which has seen huge protests against the law.

Overall, the BJP's five years in Assam have reversed economic growth in tangible and measurable ways. But it is the damage and division that it has unleashed in this sensitive, diverse State, which has caused immeasurable harm to the harmonious and inclusive development of Assam.

Rajeev Gowda is Chairman and Akash Satyawali is National Coordinator at the Research Department, All India Congress Committee

Turkey on edge

The removal of the governor of the Central Bank has thrown up fears over the monetary policy

GARIMELLA SUBRAMANIAM

The recent removal of the governor of Turkey's Central Bank, which initially sent the lira tumbling by 14% and rattled global investors, has yet again brought into sharp relief President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's long fixation with a debt-fuelled model of growth. The apparent reason why Naci Agbal, former finance and economy Minister, was eased out barely four months into his recent job was because he had raised the main rate of interest twice and too fast. Earlier in 2019, the term of Murat Cetinkaya, then head of the Central Bank, was ended a year prematurely because he had not reduced the lending rates soon and sharply enough. The legality of the decision was questioned by an opposition politician.

Undermining independence

Both instances underscore the extent to which Mr. Erdogan has systematically undermined the sanctity of the Central Bank's independence. In a bid to shore up the country's construction and consumption boom that has heavily relied on inflows of hot money, he has railed against high interest rates, dubbing them both the mother and father of all evil.

In one of the hallmarks of his executive presidency since 2018, Mr. Erdogan has argued, in a seeming negation of orthodox monetary policy, that higher interest rates indirectly stoked rather than slowed inflation. This unconventional stance has underscored Istanbul's reluctance to draw lessons from the 2018 currency meltdown, when 30% of the lira's value was wiped off, triggering skyrocketing inflation and the first recession in a decade.

When Mr. Agbal took over as the bank's head in November, he inherited a much-weakened lira left behind by the former Finance Minister and Mr. Erdogan's son-in-law Berat Albayrak. The currency had lost a quarter of its value to the U.S. dollar over the previous year, as investors withdrew huge volumes of lira-denominated bonds amid rising unemployment in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and more than 15% inflation. Istanbul has spent more than \$100 billion to prop up the lira, eroding its foreign exchange reserves, prompting the

ratings agency Moody's to raise concerns about a potential balance-of-payments crisis.

While at the helm, Mr. Agbal introduced a 6.75 percentage point benchmark rate increase, and more recently, a 2 percentage point rise. Both moves were hailed as a return to monetary orthodoxy, leading to an appreciation in the value of the lira. These gains compare favourably with the situation following the 2018 currency crisis. A 24 percentage point interest rate hike resulted in a significant drop in inflation from 25% to about 15% in the following year.

The turnaround in inflation figures has evidently not influenced any real shift in the government's position. On the contrary, Istanbul had last year taken recourse to proxy measures to raise the cost of borrowing and other unconventional steps to flatter its foreign exchange reserves.

The new incumbent at the Central Bank, Sahap Kavcioglu, a former legislator from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), is known to share Mr. Erdogan's unconventional monetary policy stance.

Observers, nonetheless, see hopeful signs in the Finance Minister's promise following the recent slide in the currency to maintain price stability and Mr. Kavcioglu's willingness to maintain the status quo at least until the next meeting of the Monetary Policy Committee in April.

Investors can do little else than clutch at the straws given Mr. Erdogan's highly erratic ways, as is evident from the replacement of the Deputy Governor of the bank on Tuesday. The reaction from currency markets towards Mr. Agbal's sudden removal would suggest that the decision could not have been more at odds with the President's recent remarks regarding the government's single-digit inflation target.

There are growing concerns over the implications of a potentially strengthening U.S. dollar following the Biden administration's enactment of a \$1.9 trillion economic stimulus package. The restoration of a semblance of stability to the volatile lira ought to top Turkey's current priorities.

The author is Director, Strategic Initiatives, AgnoShin Technologies Pvt. Ltd.



DATA POINT

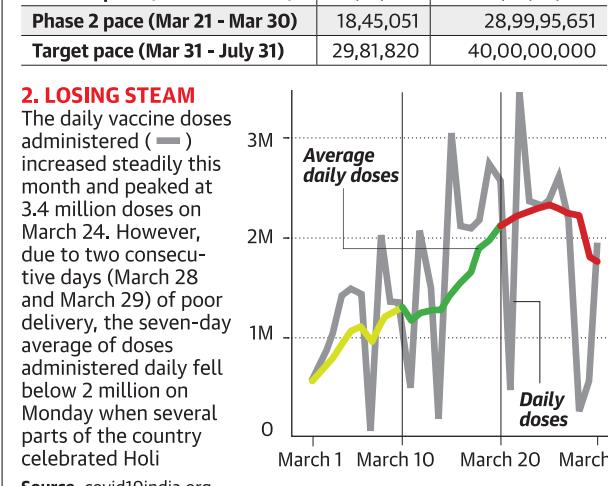
Need for speed

The pace of COVID-19 vaccinations in India picked up considerably during the second phase of the campaign, with over 63 lakh doses having been administered across the country as of Wednesday. However, the average daily vaccine doses administered between March 21 and March 30 reduced significantly across many States compared to the previous 10-day period. The decline was primarily due to fewer inoculations in the last few days of March in several major States such as Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Odisha and Maharashtra. The average number of daily doses required to meet the 400-million-doses target by the end of July and remains far higher than the current pace of vaccination. By Vignesh Radhakrishnan, Naresh Singaravelu and Sumanth Sen

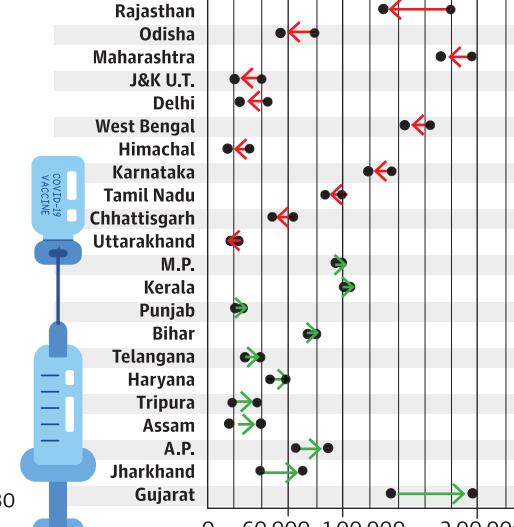
1. NOT QUICK ENOUGH | From March 21 to 30, 1.84 million doses were administered daily on an average in India compared to the 1.89-million average daily doses given between March 11 and March 20. At the current pace, India would be able to administer 289 million doses by July 31, around 111 million doses short of the target of 400 million. To meet the July 31 target, the country must administer nearly 3 million doses daily, starting March 31

2. LOSING STEAM The daily vaccine doses administered (—) increased steadily this month and peaked at 3.4 million doses on March 24. However, due to two consecutive days (March 28 and March 29) of poor delivery, the seven-day average of doses administered daily fell below 2 million on Monday when several parts of the country celebrated Holi

Source: covid19india.org



3. WHICH STATES FELL SHORT | The chart shows average daily doses administered in the period March 11-20 (P1) and March 21-30 (P2) in States where at least 5 lakh doses have been given. In 12 out of the 23 States, daily inoculations fell (—) in P2 compared to P1. In just eight States, the pace increased (↑) significantly in P2 compared to P1; in three States, a marginal rise was recorded



The Hindu

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 1, 1971

Film export to Ceylon

[Madras, March 31] Mr. AL Srinivasan, President of Commerce, will be leaving for Ceylon tomorrow, to participate in the trade talks to be held there between the Indian High Commissioner and the authorities of the Ceylon Government on the import of Indian

FROM PAGE ONE

Govt. cuts rates on small savings instruments

The government plans to borrow ₹12.05 lakh crore in 2021-22, on the back of a record gross borrowing of ₹3.71 lakh crore in 2020-21. High small savings rates have been cited by the central bank as a major impediment in ensuring policy rate cuts get transmitted into the banking system.

"After keeping rates largely unchanged over the last few quarters, the government has effected a substantial lagged revision in small savings rates, mirroring the moderation in interest rates in the wider economy seen over the last year," said Aditi Nayar, principal economist at ICRA Limited.

The interest rate paid on National Savings Certificate and Kisan Vikas Patra were also reduced significantly, from 6.8% to 5.9%, and from 6.9% to 6.2%, respectively. Consequently, the Kisan Vikas Patra, which used to mature in 124 months, will now mature in 138 months.

While savings deposits earned the lowest rate of 4% till now, that return has now been further slashed to 3.5%. Among time deposits, the return on five year deposits has been reduced from 6.7% to 5.8%.

Five-year recurring deposits, whose interest is compounded quarterly, will get a return of 5.3% instead of 5.8% in the previous quarter.

For savers, the option with the highest returns at this point is the Sukanya Samridhi Account Scheme, followed by the Senior Citizens' Savings Schemes and the Public Provident Fund.

India reports highest toll due to COVID-19 in 2021

Chhattisgarh and Karnataka registered 4,563 and 4,225 infections respectively. In the first wave of infections in India, the daily cases peaked at nearly 98,000 in mid-September 2020.

The active case load has

reached 5,80,327 with Maharashtra, Karnataka, Kerala, Punjab and Chhattisgarh cumulatively accounting for nearly 80% of the total active cases.

The cumulative recoveries stood at 1,14,72,462.

Pak. allows import of cotton, sugar from India

He added that there was also high demand for cotton and cotton yarn from India, especially from Pakistani Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) due to increased textile exports but a reduced crop in 2020.

The decision to cancel trade was taken by the Imran Khan government on August 9, 2019, days after the government amended Article 370 and reorganised Jammu and Kashmir.

India's Ministry of External Affairs did not respond to the development, nor did it respond to questions on whether it was considering any complementary steps. While India had not banned trade with Pakistan, it suspended cross-LoC trade and withdrew Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status to Pakistan in the wake of the Pulwama attack in February 2019.

Experts said that the move by Pakistan, which follows the granting of sports related visas by India after a gap of three years, scheduling a much-delayed meeting of the Indus Water

Let's unite against BJP, Mamata tells 14 leaders

Her letter comes in the backdrop of the recent passage of the National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill in Parliament. Under this law, all policy decisions taken by the elected Delhi government have to be cleared by the Lt. Governor, who is nominated by the Centre, before implementation. Ms. Banerjee wrote that the Centre had sought to make Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal "subservient to the Lt. Governor" because it has been unwilling to accept the people's mandate, who chose the AAP over the BJP twice, in 2014 and in 2019.

"The National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Act is a direct attack on the federal structure of the Indian republic as enshrined in the Constitution. It also makes a mockery of letter and spirit of democracy since it disempowers the people of the national capital," she wrote.

This legislation, she wrote, also violated the Supreme Court judgment of 2018, which upheld the pre-eminence of the elected go-

vernment in Delhi in all matters other than police, public order and land.

Sounding a word of caution, she wrote that this Act was not an exception but was increasingly becoming a rule.

She listed out seven instances of the Centre trying to upstage the State governments. These included interference by the Governors, vindictive use of agencies such as the CBI and the ED, and withholding transfer of funds to the State governments, especially to the non-BJP ruled States.

"There is a clear pattern and purpose behind all these developments. The BJP wants to make it impossible for non-BJP parties to exercise their constitutional rights and freedoms. It wants to dilute the powers of the State governments and downgrade them to mere municipalities. It wants to establish a one-party authoritarian rule."

There is a need for a "united and effective" struggle, she said, urging all the parties to come together to draft a plan of action.

CM YK

Take steps to prevent double voting: Kerala HC

ECI failed in assessing the scale of voter fraud in the State, says Chennithala

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENTS
KOCCHI

A Division Bench of the Kerala High Court on Wednesday directed the Election Commission of India and all functionaries under election laws to take all possible steps to prevent double voting or impersonated voting.

The Bench, comprising Chief Justice S. Manikumar and Justice Shaji P. Chali, also ordered the ECI and the Chief Electoral Officer to give a public notice, cautioning voters that strict action would be taken against those who attempt to cast multiple votes.

The Bench issued the directives while disposing of a writ petition filed by Leader of the Opposition Ramesh Chennithala,

seeking a directive to delete or freeze multiple entries of names on the electoral roll.

Obtain declaration

The court ordered that polling officials take photographs of all ASD (Absentees, Shifted and Dead) voters identified in the polling booths and also obtain the declaration from all absentee and shifted voters, in terms of Section 31 of Representation of the People Act, 1951. The signature and thumb impression of all the absentee and shifted voters should also be obtained.

The Bench directed that all the photographs of ASD voters taken in the booths be collected, digitised, and kept by the



A police contingent from Punjab arriving on Wednesday in Thiruvananthapuram for election duty. ■ S. MAHINSHA

EC. The court directed the EC to permit absentee and shifted voters to leave the polling booths only after the indelible ink had dried.

The court ordered that after finalising the verification of DSE (demographically similar entries)/EPIC/ASD, a

list be furnished to the political parties and Presiding Officers forthwith.

The court also directed

the EC and the CEO to ensure that sufficient Central and State forces were deployed in all the booths, especially in booths found to be in a

disturbed area, to ensure compliance with the court directions and also ensure the safety of the polling agents.

Details released

Meanwhile, Mr. Chennithala on Wednesday released what he claimed to be the particulars of 4,34,000 persons with multiple voter identity cards. He published the details on the website www.operationtwins.com.

The website tabulates the booth-wise distribution of persons with more than one electoral identity card. It also lists the "bogus cards" issued in the name of the same set of persons in neighbouring constituencies and booths.

The public can verify the online list and provide information to the Election Commission, Mr. Chennithala said. The EC had failed in assessing the scale of voter fraud in Kerala, he said.

HC allows probe against Yediyurappa in criminal case

It pertains to an alleged bid to win over JD(S) MLA's son

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
BENGALURU

In a major setback to Karnataka Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa, the Karnataka High Court on Wednesday gave green signal for investigation against him in the criminal case registered for allegedly trying to woo JD(S) MLA Naganagouda Kandukur's son Sharangouda with the promise of money and Ministry in 2019.

Offences of sedition
Interestingly, the court observed that "the allegations, if found true, would even attract offences of sedition,



criminal conspiracy and illegal payments in connection with an election under the Indian Penal Code (IPC) as the allegations made in the complaint and the material

produced clearly disclose that an attempt has been made by Mr. Yediyurappa and others accused to excite disaffection towards the government established by law by encouraging defection so as to topple the government by lure of money and position".

Referring to the complaint and materials on record, the court said that "the allegations *prima facie* make out the ingredients of Sections 120B (criminal conspiracy), 124A (sedition) and Section 171H (illegal payment for elections) of the IPC".

Eashwarappa alleges interference in administration

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
BENGALURU

In a development that has brought into the open a rebellion by Ministers against the functioning style of Karnataka Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa, senior leader and Rural Development and Panchayat Raj Minister K.S. Eshwarappa has complained to Governor Vajubabu R. Vala, the Prime Minister, the Union Home Minister, and top leaders of the BJP against "interference in administration" by the Chief Minister in his department in violation of norms.

Mr. Eshwarappa is learnt

to have personally met the Governor on Wednesday afternoon and submitted a five-page petition, in which he accused the Chief Minister of "direct interference" in the affairs of his department in clear violation of Karnataka (Transaction of Business) Rules, 1977, and also against the established practices and procedures relating to the affairs of the State Administration.

The Karnataka Government (Transaction of Business) Rules, 1977, stipulate the division of powers between the Cabinet Ministers in charge of respective de-

partments vis-a-vis the Chief Minister.

Citing the instances of interference in his department, Mr. Eshwarappa alleged that based on a letter by the Bengaluru Urban Zilla Panchayat president, who is also Chief Minister's relative, Mr. Yediyurappa had directly sanctioned ₹65 crore to the zilla panchayat and put pressure on the Principal Secretary of the RDPR to issue a notification in this regard.

The Karnataka Government (Transaction of Business) Rules, 1977, stipulate the division of powers between the Cabinet Ministers in charge of respective de-

Kerala HC says 'no' to action against ED

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
KOCHI

The Kerala High Court on Wednesday asked the Crime Branch not to proceed with any coercive action against Enforcement Directorate (ED) officials in a case registered on a charge of forcing Swapna Suresh, prime accused in the diplomatic gold smuggling case, to give a false statement against Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan.

The decision by Pakistan to allow trade in the selected items will gradually lead to restoration of normalcy in India-Pakistan trade," said Afaq Hussain, Director, Bureau of Research on Industry and Economic Fundamentals, that studies India-Pakistan and cross-LoC trade.

"It will help Pakistan's domestic manufacturers to reduce their cost of production, which had increased because of the trade ban from India. The garment manufacturing industry in Pakistan will be a key beneficiary while it is also going to benefit manufacturers and exporters in India along with the stakeholders in trade, like truckers and service staff, in Punjab," he added.

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA

Andhra Pradesh reported four new deaths and 1,184 COVID-19 infections on Wednesday, the highest single-day number since November 21 last year.

In March, infections increased by 82.7% compared to February. A total of 12,075 infections were reported in March, while only 2,080 were reported in February.

COVID-19

In January, only 5,550 infections were added. Deaths also rose by 67% as 48 persons succumbed to the virus in March while 16 died in the previous month.

In March, 11,31 lakh samples were tested and test positivity rate (TPR) was 1.07%. The TPR was 0.25% in February, 0.42% in January and 0.80% in December 2020.

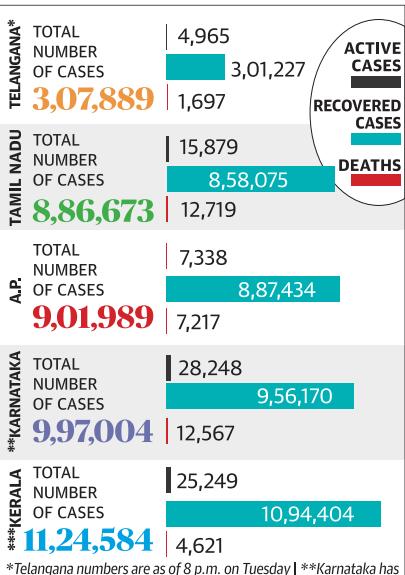
But TPR of 30,851 samples tested on Wednesday was

Creating awareness

As COVID-19 cases rise, authorities are attempting to create awareness on wearing of masks and social distancing. The graph shows the spread of the pandemic in the southern States



Spreading the word: Police officers holding placards during a campaign in Hyderabad on Wednesday. ■ AFP



3.84%. Three of the four new deaths occurred in Chittoor district and one in Nellore.

A sharp spike in cases was recorded in Telangana on Tuesday with 684 persons testing positive. Three more patients died. This is the second highest number of cas-

es in a day in about four months, and a big jump over the previous two days. Only 403 and 463 cases were recorded on Sunday and Monday, respectively. On December 8, the State had logged 721 cases.

Between February 1 and

March 9, the highest daily count across the State was 189 but on Tuesday, GHMC alone had 184 cases.

Karnataka on Wednesday reported a steep rise of 4,225 new cases, 2,928 from Bengaluru Urban alone. Fatalities also rose by 26.

With 19 more deaths, the State's toll stood at 12,719.

A total of 1,527 persons recovered.

(With inputs from Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Thiruvananthapuram and Chennai bureaus)

Mortality, positivity rate rising in south

Kerala adds 26 deaths; Hyderabad cases equal Telangana's early March peak; cases soar in Karnataka

Kerala added 2,653 new cases on Wednesday, representing a TPR of 5.37%. The addition of 15 deaths took the cumulative toll to 4,621 deaths.

Another 2,579 persons tested positive for COVID-19 in Tamil Nadu, pushing the active caseload to over 15,000 on Wednesday. Chennai's daily count inched closer to the 1,000-mark as 969 persons tested positive for the infection, while seven of the 19 fatalities were recorded in the city. The fresh cases took the State's overall tally to 8,86,673. Presently, 15,879 persons were under treatment for COVID-19 across the State. Chennai's active caseload crossed 6,000 as 6,255 persons were under treatment for the infection.

With 19 more deaths, the State's toll stood at 12,719.

A total of 1,527 persons recovered.

(With inputs from Hyderabad, Bengaluru, Thiruvananthapuram and Chennai bureaus)

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Mamata's letter a sign of BJP win, says Nadda

She has sent out an SOS signal, BJP president says

NISTULA HEBBAR
NEW DELHI

The BJP on Wednesday reacted sharply to West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's letter to a host of Opposition leaders exhorting them to form a united front against the saffron party, with party president J.P. Nadda terming the missive an "SOS (Save Our Souls) signal" from Ms. Banerjee, indicating that she was losing the Assembly election.

"In a democracy, it is everyone's right to gather like-minded parties to come together, but for Ms. Banerjee to do it at this time is like an SOS, Save Our Souls, signal being sent out by her to save her ship, and it clearly indicates that the ground has shifted from under her feet and that she is going to lose the West Bengal Assembly polls. It shows that the peo-



J.P. Nadda

ples in West Bengal has been exposed for the hypocrisy it was. Gauging that she will be losing for sure in these Assembly polls, she is now appealing for help from other parties to defeat Modi (Prime Minister Narendra Modi) and the BJP."

Asked whether the letter could also be a signal to the Congress from the Trinamool for a possible post-poll alliance, West Bengal co-in-charge for the BJP, Amit Malviya told *The Hindu*, "There is no scope for any kind of post-poll alliance because the people of Bengal have made up their minds. BJP will come to power with more than 200 seats. This letter is that of a defeated Mamata Banerjee who is unsure of her own prospects in Nandigram and knows that her political capital in Bengal stands eroded."

Battle lost?

Kailash Vijayvargiya, BJP general secretary and in-charge of West Bengal for the party, tweeted: "The issue raised by *pishi* (aunt), of outsiders coming in to fight

A test for CAA in Phase 2 of Assam election

A tight contest is likely in the Bengali-majority Barak Valley, which has 15 of the 39 seats in this round

RAHUL KARMAKAR GUWAHATI

The second phase of Assam election is expected to be a test for the pro-Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) sentiment in the Bengali-dominated Barak Valley in contrast to the first phase of polling across 47 seats in the Assamese-dominated Brahmaputra Valley, where anti-CAA emotions had run high more than a year ago.

Barak Valley has 15 of the 39 phase two seats. Eight of these are Hindu-majority and seven Muslim-majority.

In the 2016 poll, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its regional ally Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) had won 24 of the phase two seats before adding the 25th after a Congress MLA resigned to contest from the BJP in the byelection. Of the Barak Valley seats, the BJP had won eight, the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) three, and the Congress two.

Round two | Thirty nine seats in Assam will go to the polls on April 1 in the second phase. About 87% of the people in these seats are from rural areas and 12.3% belong to the ST community.

The share of households with main income from cultivation is 33.5%, around 4% points higher than the State average.

2016 PERFORMANCE IN PHASE 2 SEATS

Party	Seats won	Vote %
BJP	22	33.3%
INC	6	29.85%
AIUDF	5	17.43%
AGP	2	4.39%
BOPF	4	3.44%

RURAL/URBAN POPULATION SHARE

Type	Rural %	Urban %
Phase 2 seats	87.3	12.7
All seats	85.9	14.1

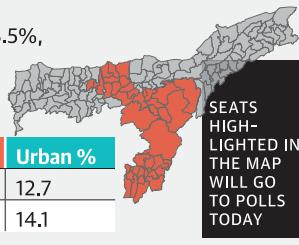
SHARE OF HOUSEHOLDS WITH MAIN INCOME FROM CULTIVATION

Type	%
Phase 2 seats	33.5
All seats	29.2

SC/ST POPULATION SHARE

Type	ST (%)	SC (%)
Phase 2 seats	12.3	9.75
All seats	12	7.2

SOURCE: TRIVEDI CENTRE FOR POLITICAL DATA, DEVDATA LAB



SEATS HIGH-LIGHTED IN THE MAP WILL GO TO POLLS TODAY

The 19 other seats are spread across central and parts of northern and western Assam. The BJP and the AGP had won 12 of them in the last election. The BJP's estranged ally Bodoland People's Front (BPF) had won four seats.

After ditching the BPF, the BJP aligned with the United People's Party (UPPL). The BPF is expected to make it difficult for both the UPPL and the BJP in the constituencies under the Bodoland Territorial Region.

RS member, 3 Ministers

Phase two will seal the fate of Rajya Sabha member Biswajit Daimary, who quit the BPF in 2020 and is contesting the Panary seat for the BJP.

The BPF may also face a tough time in five phase two seats straddling the three hill districts of Dima Hasao, Karbi Anglong and Western Karbi Anglong. The party dropped four of its MLAs, angering their supporters.

Bhoomikanya vs bhoomiputra in blistering battle for Nandigram

Following a shrill campaign by Mamata Banerjee and her main opponent, BJP's Suvendu Adhikari, a polarised electorate will cast its keenly watched vote today

SHIV SAHYA SINGH
SUDIPTA DATTA
NANDIGRAM

After three months of a relentless, high-pitch campaign by both West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee of the Trinamool Congress and the BJP candidate, Suvendu Adhikari, who switched to the party months before the election, a polarised Nandigram will cast its vote on April 1.

During the campaign, slogans veered around Nandigram, with Ms. Banerjee rhyming it with "sangram" (struggle) and Mr. Adhikari choosing "Jai Shri Ram". Another pitch of the cam-

paign revolved around the Trinamool labelling Mr. Adhikari as a "gaddar" (traitor) and "Mir Jafar" and the BJP leader propping himself up as a "bhoomiputra" (son of the soil).

The campaign began with Ms. Banerjee announcing in January that she would contest from Nandigram, which had seen a fierce anti-land acquisition movement in 2007-08 during the Left Front regime. The BJP fielded Mr. Adhikari, whose family has nurtured the Purba Medinipur constituency as a Trinamool member.

"It is not as if she has not done work as Chief Minister."

A few kilometres away, at Ms. Banerjee's rally, Rajkumar Jana spoke up for thousands of others who listened to the Trinamool supremo's words silently: "It is 100% di-

cti. Suvendu is a traitor." She had launched her campaign on a low key on March 9. The very next day she suffered a leg injury.

Ms. Banerjee has been sta-

Unlike in West Bengal, the BJP has remained silent on the issue of CAA during campaigning in Assam, apparently to not annoy Assamese voters in the Brahmaputra Valley. The Congress and the AIUDF, fighting together this time, have adopted an anti-CAA stand.

"The Congress has gone against the tide by opposing the CAA in the Barak Valley. But this may not give the BJP an edge, as it has dropped three seasoned leaders and given ticket to people accused of running various syndicates. The Congress-AIUDF alignment may also consolidate loyal voters in non-

Muslim areas," Silchar-based political analyst Arijit Aditya said.

The BJP may also face a tough time in five phase two seats straddling the three hill districts of Dima Hasao, Karbi Anglong and Western Karbi Anglong. The party dropped four of its MLAs, angering their supporters.

constituency goes to the polls, it will be a litmus test for the Election Commission of India as well. The ECI has deployed 22 companies of Central forces for an electorate of 2.6 lakh.

A lot has changed in Nandigram since the land stir in 2007 when 14 people were killed in police firing. Nandigram then was a symbol of "sangram". New concrete roads have been laid, new shops have opened in the constituency 130 km from Kolkata, but the electorate is under a lot of pressure to choose between the "bhoomikanya" and the "bhoomiputra".

themselves on the State. "I am the Chief Minister of the State. How dare you call me an outsider? Who are you? I am the *bhoomikanya* (daughter of the soil)," Ms. Banerjee, said, referring to the fact that even Mr. Adhikari, a Trinamool MLA for the past five years, was from Kanthi in the same district.

As the campaign evolved, the Trinamool found itself defending the "outsider" barb directed at Ms. Banerjee, who left her home constituency Bhawanipore to contest from Nandigram. The Trinamool had called the BJP a party of outsiders who were trying to impose

themselves on the State. "I am the Chief Minister of the State. How dare you call me an outsider? Who are you? I am the *bhoomikanya* (daughter of the soil)," Ms. Banerjee, said, referring to the fact that even Mr. Adhikari, a Trinamool MLA for the past five years, was from Kanthi in the same district.

In the battle of political titans, the Left has sprung a surprise by fielding young Democratic Youth Federation of India leader Minakshi Mukherjee who has been running an earnest door-to-door campaign raising the issue of livelihood and jobs.

As the most high-profile



Call of duty: Officials carrying election material travel towards a polling station in Nandigram on Wednesday. ■ PI

di. Suvendu is a traitor." She had launched her campaign on a low key on March 9. The very next day she suffered a leg injury.

Ms. Banerjee has been sta-

tioned at Nandigram from the last week of March, her leg still in a plaster, addressing at least three public meetings a day and occasional roadshows from a wheel-

High turnout indicative of change: Nadda

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
KOLKATA

Lauding the Election Commission of India for conducting peaceful poll in West Bengal, BJP president J.P. Nadda on Thursday said the high voter turnout in the first phase was indicative of the defeat of the Trinamool. "Kela shesh hoye gayay [the game is over]. The high polling percentage shows that people want a change," he said in Chief Minister.

He claimed that Assam did not witness any protests during the past five years and no innocent lives were lost. At least five people were killed during violent anti-CAA protest in 2019.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah had claimed that the BJP would win 26 of the 30 seats that went to the polls in the first phase.

The AIUDF is the main ally of the Congress in the 10-party *Mahajot*, or grand alliance, that seeks to oust the BJP and its regional partners from power.

At rallies in three constituencies across central and western Assam on Wednes-

day, Union Home Minister Amit Shah said Assam cannot be made infiltration-free under the leadership of Mr. Ajmal. The BJP, he asserted, would throw him out and save the State from infiltrators.

"We will open all the gates to the infiltrators if in power while only the BJP can prevent this from happening," he said.

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Panel submits report on farm laws to SC

It will be made public during the next hearing of the case

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

A Supreme Court-appointed panel has submitted its report on the three agricultural reform laws in a closed cover. The report will be revealed during the next hearing of the case.

"We submitted the report in a sealed envelope to the Registrar of the court on March 19. It will be made public on the date of the next hearing of the PIL," said Anil Ghanwat, one of the members of the committee who also heads a farm union and has advocated in favour of the laws.

Asked about the stakeholders consulted by the committee and their views on the laws, Mr. Ghanwat said, "Our role is over now. We



are not authorised to say anything about it before it is made public."

The three laws which were passed by Parliament in September and are being opposed by farmers' unions are The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act and The Farmers' (Empowerment

and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act.

On January 12, the Supreme Court suspended the implementation of the three laws and appointed a four-member committee of experts "to listen to the grievances of the farmers on the farm laws and the views of the government and make recommendations".

After one member, farm union leader Bhupinder Singh Mann, recused himself from the panel, the remaining three members met the stakeholders including farmers' groups, farmer producer organisations, officials and industry representatives from various States. However, the farmer unions refused to meet the panel.

Farmers plan 'wake-up call' to govt.

24-hour blockade of KMP Expressway on April 10, announces Samyukt Kisan Morcha

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

Thousands of farmers who have been protesting against the three farm reform laws on the borders of Delhi will march to Parliament on foot in the first fortnight of May, Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) leaders said on Wednesday. They also plan to block the Western Peripheral Expressway surrounding Delhi for 24 hours on April 10 and 11 as a "wake-up call" to the government.

Speaking at a press conference at the Singhu border, SKM leader Gurjeet Singh Chaudhuri emphasised that steps would be taken to ensure that the march to Parliament was peaceful, without any of the confusion, ruckus or violence seen during the tractor parade on Republic Day.

A committee would be formed to direct farmers in



Here to stay: Farmers and their families raising slogans at the Singhu border on Wednesday. ■ SHIV KUMAR PUSHKAR

case of police action, and to prevent any violence or property damage, said Mr. Chaudhuri, who also heads his own faction of the Bharatiya Kisan Union in Haryana.

"Apart from farmers, all who have been supporting us, including women, workers and unemployed youth, will also participate in the march. Everyone will come from their villages to the bor-

der in their own vehicles, and will then proceed to the Parliament on foot," he said.

Another SKM leader Santokh Singh said the government had been "sleeping" since it ended talks with farmers in January.

"In order to give a wake-up call to the government, we will block the KMP [Kundli-Manali-Palwal Expressway] from 11 a.m. on April 10

till 11 a.m. on April 11," he said.

Although their key demands remain the repeal of the three laws and a legal guarantee of minimum prices for their crops, SKM leaders also signalled a move to widen their cause.

On April 14, they will mark B.R. Ambedkar's birth anniversary as Save the Constitution Day. "The Preamble to the Constitution says that India is secular and democratic. But this government is neither secular nor democratic," said SKM leader Prem Singh Bhangu.

The SKM also decided to observe April 5 as 'FCI Bachao Divas' by surrounding the offices of the Food Corporation of India across the country. All programmes on Labour Day on May 1 will be dedicated to unity between workers and farmers, they added.

One of 3 men accused of gang rape held

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
LUCKNOW

One of three persons charged with gang raping a 19-year-old woman in a thicket and filming the alleged act was arrested in Uttar Pradesh's Agra on Wednesday.

The incident was reported in Etawah area. According to the FIR lodged by the woman, she was going to her maternal house on a motorbike with her husband on the evening of March 29 when three men on a two-wheeler intercepted them near a drain. They dragged her to a thicket nearby and raped her. The three also clicked pictures and made a video, she alleged.

They assaulted her and threatened to kill her if she informed anyone. They also robbed her of cash and jewellery, she said.

Expert committee will rule on Sputnik V today

More data had been sought from firm

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD

A decision on India approving a third COVID-19 vaccine is likely soon, with a subject expert committee (SEC) set to take up Dr. Reddy's Laboratories application seeking emergency use authorisation for Russia's Sputnik V vaccine on April 1.

The meeting of the SEC is scheduled for Thursday, sources in the pharma major confirmed. It will be the second time the application will go before the committee that advises the Drugs Controller General of India (DCGI). Last month, the committee had sought more data on Sputnik V vaccine trials from Dr. Reddy's. The firm should submit immunogenicity and safety data of Phase II and III trials as

per approved protocol for consideration. "Further, the firm is requested to present its data with more clarity," it had said at the February 24 meeting.

Phase III trials

Dr. Reddy's has since submitted additional data before the committee. The dosing of the volunteers under Phase III trials has also been completed. The trial data is being analysed and findings likely to be ready early April, sources said.

The Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF) has a partnership with Dr. Reddy's for the clinical trials and distribution of the vaccine, developed by Gamaleya National Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology, in India.

Health Secretaries and senior officials of the States were asked to identify and take corrective action in low vaccine coverage pockets, particularly in districts showing a case surge.

In a statement, the Health Ministry said States and Union Territories had been instructed to maintain vaccine wastage at less than 1% (present national wastage percentage being 6%), regularly review wastage across all levels to minimise the same

'Keep vaccine wastage below 1%

Health Ministry tells States to ensure timely utilisation of stocks to avoid expiry

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI



Every dose counts: Vaccine stocks are regularly reviewed at cold storage points to identify gaps. ■ AP

and ensure timely utilisation of available stocks to avoid expiry of vaccines without usage.

The States have also been told that only eligible beneficiaries should be registered and vaccinated under the category of healthcare and frontline workers.

Dr. Sharma said there was

no problem in the storage and logistics of vaccines. The States have been told that there should be no sedimentation of vaccine stocks.

The Health Ministry noted that vaccine was distributed based on consumption to avoid overstocking and understocking at cold chain points and that there was a regular review of vaccine stocks and consumption to identify gap areas.

"States have to follow this protocol along with timely updating of data of vaccine consumption on CoWIN and eVIN portals," said a release by the Ministry.

Regarding the involvement of private vaccination centres, the States were asked to conduct regular reviews of vaccinations at these facilities on capacity utilisation and other aspects.

Covaxin supply to Brazil hits a roadblock

ANVISA not to clear doses now

JACOB KOSHY
SUHASINI HAIDER
NEW DELHI

Supplies of Bharat Biotech's Covaxin to Brazil have run into trouble with Brazil's health regulatory agency, ANVISA, deciding on Tuesday not to clear Covaxin for use at present.



Earlier this week, 1 lakh doses of Covaxin were donated by India to Paraguay.

Bharat Biotech said it had agreed to the conditions laid by ANVISA but found the deadlines for compliance too tight, offering to complete procedures by June, rather than April, which may have led to the denial of clearances, the sources said.

Import partner

"The fulfilment of ANVISA's notes in the shortest time would only be possible by interrupting Covaxin's production completely, consequently affecting the supply to countries that have already received the product and have already authorised its emergency use," the PM statement said, pointing out that Brazilian laws allow the vaccine to be authorised nevertheless for emergency and exceptional use, even without the certification.

The development follows weeks after Serum Institute of India (SII) had informed Brazil's state-owned vaccine importer Fiocruz that supplies of further Covishield (AstraZeneca) doses could not be guaranteed because a fire in an SII building had hampered manufacturing.

Covishield was given emergency approval by ANVISA in January.

Food sector incentive gets Cabinet nod

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The Union Cabinet on Wednesday approved a production-linked incentive scheme for the food processing industry with an outlay of ₹10,900 crore.

Announcing the scheme, Piyush Goyal, Minister for Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, said the scheme was a "fitting tribute to farmers" and that it would lead to employment for 2.5 lakh people. He added that it would lead to additional exports of ₹30,000 crore to ₹35,000 crore.

The objectives of the scheme were to "support creation of global food manufacturing champions", "strengthen select Indian brand of food products for global visibility and wider acceptance in the international markets", "increase employment opportunities of off-farm jobs" and "ensuring remunerative prices of farm produce and higher income to farmers", a statement said.

Mr. Goyal said the scheme would cover ready-to-cook and ready-to-eat foods, processed fruits and vegetables, marine products and mozzarella cheese. Organic products, free-range eggs, poultry meat and egg products were also covered. "The implementation of the scheme would facilitate expansion of processing capacity to generate processed food output of ₹33,494 crore and create employment for nearly 2.5 lakh persons by the year 2026-27," the statement said.

The applicants selected for the scheme would be required to invest in plant and machinery in the first two years.

Military farms shut down after 132 years

Move taken to rebalance defence expenditure

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI



This photo from February 1957 shows a Shahiwal cow judged the best among military farm animals. ■ THE HINDU ARCHIVES

In December 2016, the Lt. Gen. D.B. Shekhar (retd.) committee, which was appointed to recommend measures to enhance combat capability and rebalance defence expenditure of the armed forces, said the same.

The farms were set up with the sole requirement of supplying hygienic cow milk to troops in garrisons across

British India. The first military farm was raised on February 1, 1889, at Allahabad.

Post-Independence, they flourished with 30,000 heads of cattle in 130 farms all over India. They were even established in Leh and Kargil in the late 1990s.

For more than a century, the farms supplied 3.5 crore litres of milk and 25,000 tonnes of hay yearly.

It is credited with pioneering the technique of artificial insemination of cattle and introduction of organised dairying in India, providing yeoman service during the 1971 war, supplying milk at the Western and Eastern war fronts as well as during the Kargil operations, the Army said.

Among those arraigned are the main accused, Mukesh Modi, besides the directors and partners in the Adarsh group of companies, Riddhi Siddhi group of companies, entities and the associates of accused Virendra Modi. The agency had earlier attached assets worth ₹1,489 crore.

Adarsh group scam: ED files chargesheet

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has filed a chargesheet against 124 individuals and entities linked with the embezzlement of public deposits in the Adarsh Credit Cooperative Society Limited, causing a loss of about ₹4,000 crore.

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The pandemic and its forced indoor time has brought India to the cusp of a great gaming boom. Gamers today are making a career out of streaming, and competing in eSports

PRAVEEN SUDEVAN AND SRIVATSAN S

Lokesh Karakoti was introduced to Garena Free Fire, a mobile battle-royale game, four years ago by a friend. He had just completed Class XII. Instead of figuring out which college he wanted to join, like his parents wanted him to, he spent most of his day spraying bullets and throwing bombs at his opponents in the game. He soon dropped out of his BCA course, concerned more with the matters of life and death within Free Fire.

Four years later, Lokesh, from Delhi, earns about ₹50,000 to ₹90,000 a month. About ₹40,000 of this comes through his YouTube channel, Pahadi Gaming (with over 9,27,000 subscribers), and the rest through sponsors and prize money earnings from Free Fire tournaments.

Gaming, like Lokesh discovered, can be a career in itself. The Indian gaming industry is valued at US\$930 million, and the estimated number of gamers, 628 million. Of these, a majority would be recreational gamers. But an increasing number of youngsters like Lokesh make a living from gaming. They either get into eSports, which involves competing, or gaming for audiences on streaming platforms like YouTube and Twitch. Both avenues appear lucrative.

An underground community
Competitive eSporting can be broadly classified into four main genres: fighting games (like Mortal Kombat), first-person shooters (Counter Strike and Battlefield), real-time strategy (Hearthstone) and multiplayer online battle (Battle Arena).

Each game has a set of rules laid down either by the International Esports Federation (IESF) or Asian Electronic Sports Federation (AESF), based on which tournaments – both national and international – are organised.

One of the major contributors to the growing esports community, which is device-agnostic, has been gaming cafés in metropolitan cities. "Ten years ago, online socialising was not a thing. Even now, with Discord, WhatsApp and everything, I think socialising is better if you are with the person. And, these places also conduct tournaments," says Kiran Noojibail, former director, Esports and Broadcasting at LXG, a gaming café in Bengaluru. He adds, "Last year, however, the role of cafés diminished because of COVID-19; only 10-20% activities happened in gaming cafés, the rest were online."

Yet, the pandemic also brought



Ready, player one?



about a significant increase in gamers, observes Akshat Rathee, co-founder and managing director of Nodwin Gaming, Gurugram, Haryana. His company has organised over 120 tournaments and events since its inception in 2015. In the last year, they hosted over 40 (virtual) events, which had a much better response from gamers than in previous years.

"Although it is difficult to quantify that data, I can say that our watchtime became extremely high; about 200-300% growth in these events. We measure participation based on our watchtime," says Rathee, adding, "Gamers no longer have to hide from their pa-

rents since there are lots of monetary benefits."

Chennai's Pranay M Bathija concurs. His parents have been largely supportive of his interest in gaming, as long as he "studies". Pranay has been into competitive eSports since Class IX, spending six to eight hours daily on games, and has secured a place among the top gamers in India during the Fortnite Champion Series (FNCS) held in 2019, winning a prize money of \$1,500.

"I was one among the four Indian players who qualified," says the Class XII student. "The FNCS is really hard for Indian players; we have to play on the West Asia

server, with countries such as Singapore, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates since we don't have our own server."

There is a popular misconception that gamers are usually loners sitting in the comfort of their homes, living in a virtual world. Pranay dispels this notion saying that he is a lot more connected to the people he has befriended online. "I talk to them [most of whom are from the city] way more frequently than my immediate circle. Sometimes, we are on call till midnight," he adds.

The Indian esports industry is still at a nascent stage – largely unstructured without a uniform

The stats



TIME:
Indian gamers spend an average of 8.6 hours playing every week. [Source: Limelight Networks]



MONEY:
The Indian gaming industry is valued at \$930 million. [Source: Invest India]



PEOPLE:
There are over 628 million gamers in India. [Source: Invest India]

Pause and effect (Clockwise from right) A screenshot from Free Fire, a gamer during the Asian Games 2018, Mansi Gupta; at the Asian Games 2018 • GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK, SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

GIRLS IN GAMING

Gaming is often considered an all-boys club. But recent surveys disprove this popular notion. According to a 2020 study commissioned by Google, the number of females playing video games in Asia is growing at a faster rate than their male rivals. But India's story is different: it had the lowest overall percentage of female gamers (18%) in Asia. "I think female gamers get demotivated by sexist and hate comments they get. A lot are discouraged by their families as well," reckons Mansi Gupta, whose YouTube channel, MagsPlay, has over 1,75,000 subscribers. She started it during the lockdown last year. "I told myself I will post 100 videos no matter what. If the channel doesn't take off after that, then, I will stop doing this." However, it took just 15 videos to reach 1,50,000 subscribers.

body or even market research. And still, there are many who have made money off it.

Where the money is

Kiran, from LXG, says that one can earn by even talking about games. He used to be a shoutcaster, which is the equivalent of a commentator in sports. "I know people who charge up to ₹30,000 a day for shoutcasting," he says. Observers (who control the in-game camera during broadcast), designers, animators, and video editors are among the other popular jobs in eSports.

And then of course, are the gamers. One of India's most popular YouTube channel Total Gaming, has 21 million subscribers; videos on it have been viewed over three billion times. It is run by Ajay (known as Ajubhai in the gaming circle, who is from Ahmedabad).

"Income generation is quite the same for both the gaming content creators and professional eSports players," explains Ajay, "What the content creators earn in three months through YouTube or any other platform, the professional gamer can earn by winning one big tournament. However, the amount of time that goes behind preparing for the tournament is almost two to three months. And, gaming content creators need to invest a lot of time and effort in making videos engaging as YouTube and other platforms pay for views."

Putting together a tournament is just one part of the larger responsibility that involves "evangelising eSports" and nurturing the sporting culture in India, explains Lokesha Sujji, director of Esports Federation of India (ESFI), a non-Government organisation.

While acknowledging India as

the next big market, he says the roadblocks are parental approval and the lack of support from the Government. "eSports is not recognised as an official sport in India which means that funds come from our pockets or from sponsorship," says Suji.

He is also the vice-president of AESFI (Asian Electronic Sports Federation), which has been recognised as the Technical Delegate for eSports events in the upcoming Asian Games 2022. "The biggest achievement for us was when India won its first-ever eSports medal at the 2018 Asian Games. Five years from the day



The Indian eSports industry is still at a nascent stage – largely unstructured without a uniform body or market research

the Government recognises esports, I can promise you that we can become like the West."

India is expected to add nearly 40 million online gamers during 2020-22, according to Deloitte. Maple Capital Advisors' report estimates that the Indian gaming industry will grow 41% annually due to the growth of digital infrastructure. By 2024, it claims, the gaming industry will be worth \$3,750 million. Going by these numbers, we are on the cusp of a great Indian gaming boom.



Apolitical biryani

In Tamil Nadu, political rallies are fuelled by biryani. Although sales are slower this year, the cadre's favourite cooks are gearing up for Assembly elections

CHITRADEEPAN ANANTHARAM

In Tamil Nadu, election season sees a rise in biryani sales as political parties place bulk orders for packets to distribute, or even hire a 'master' to prepare it at their meeting location.

Running a biryani catering service near Mamallapuram for 18 years, 53-year-old Basha bhai is popular with political parties looking to arrange an economical feast. He is taken to the venue three hours before a meeting ends, which gives him and his team time to cook.

"For wedding feasts, I use equal portions of meat and rice, but for a political party where there is a limitless crowd, I add more rice so that I can serve a dozen more," he says. "Basha insists on taking raw materials to the venue instead of letting his client supply them."

The wages of a 'biryani master', who is accompanied by an assistant, is based on the number of kilogrammes of rice used and the kind of biryani – ₹100, ₹20 and ₹50 per plate, for vegetable, chicken and mutton respectively. The serving includes one piece of meat, one egg and a generous portion of rice. Usually one kilogram of



Election essentials Staff at Star Biryani, Vadapalani branch packing lunch ■ K PICHUMANI

biryani with the meat is sufficient to fill six to eight boxes.

"There are two types of biryani that I prepare: dum and vadi biryani. For party cadres, I normally stick to vadi biryani, where we cook the rice and meat with masala and layer it before mixing and serving. This tastes good even if eaten later as the cadres prefer to take the packets and eat it at leisure."

When the order is too big for him to handle, he invites biryani masters from neighbouring districts to join him. "To prepare for 1,000 people, we use many cauldrons and allot one master to two. Normally, we cook 25-30 kilogrammes of rice and meat in each batch," he says.

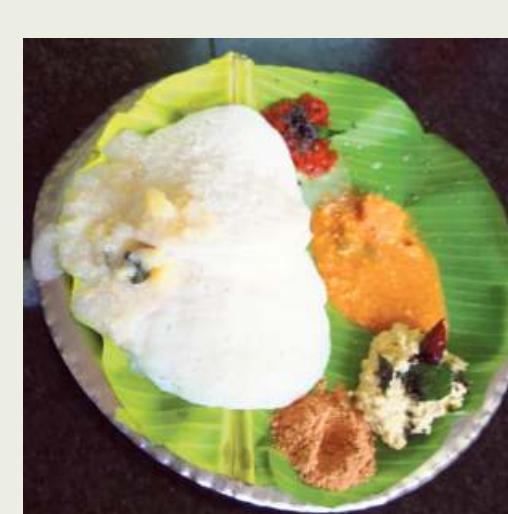
This year, the city's biryani kitchens are not as busy. "Even during lockdown, we had good sales but it dipped after the Assembly election dates were announced. None of the parties have placed bulk orders so far," says Anees Ahamed, managing partner for all the 14 branches of Star Biryani outlets in Chennai.

It is similar at the smaller stalls. Mohamad Nihal, who has a biryani stall on the ECR near Mamallapuram says, "During the previous elections, we supplied biryani parcels of 600 to 1,000 per day to all parties. This is the worst in the 20 years that we have been in business, with no orders," he says.

Muneer Ahamed, managing director, Star Biryani, Ambur, adds that the Election Commission of India has been "tracking biryani movement" and seeking details on who placed the order and how the payment was made.

"Strict vigilance has made the parties avoid spending on biryani," he says.

Basha is hopeful that there will be better sales on polling day – April 6. He adds, "Irrespective of which candidate people support, they all agree on biryani for lunch on election day."



SARASWATHY NAGARAJAN

Driving past paddy fields touched with gold, and swaying palms, we reach Ramasseri, a dusty, nondescript village about eight kilometres from Palakkad, in time for breakfast. It is 8.30 am, and the village is still waking up from the celebrations of the temple festival the previous night. Yet, a line of swanky cars is already queuing up beside small joints with bright green walls and a signboard bearing the name Sree Saraswathy Tea Stall, The Ramassery Idli Kada.

Is it an idli or a dosa? An idli, insist locals. This is the famous Ramasseri idli, a fusion of the two. Soft and fluffy and the size of a pancake, the Ramasseri idli with its distinctive texture and taste has put this little village on the food map of India. From 5 am to 11 am the Ramasseri idli is made non-stop at the 'tea stall', one among the three or four small eateries on the roadside.

The local story is that the idli was first made by Smitha's ancestor, Chittoori Ammal to make ends meet when weaving failed to get enough patrons. Initially sold to labourers and farm workers in the village, the idli could keep for a week without spoiling. But not any more. Smitha says that is be-

The crossover idli

The idli that has made Ramasseri, a small village in Palakkad, famous, now finds its way to Guruvayoor



Family secret Smitha Vijayakumar in the kitchen, making the Ramasseri idli ■ SARASWATHY NAGARAJAN

kitchen, have little time for small talk. Vijayakumar PK, the owner, says the stall is 200 years old and that Smitha Vijayakumar, his wife is the fifth generation of women continuing the tradition of making the Ramasseri idli. Given the dish's popularity, recently, for the first time, a branch of Sree Saraswathy Tea Stall was opened in Guruvayoor.

Smitha pours the dough on square pieces of cloth, stretched over a circular sieve-like clay steamer placed on aluminium pots. As she works, she explains how many of the families have roots in Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu and most of them were weavers.

The local story is that the idli was first made by Smitha's ancestor, Chittoori Ammal to make ends meet when weaving failed to get enough patrons. Initially sold to labourers and farm workers in the village, the idli could keep for a week without spoiling. The proportion and ingredients are a family secret," says

Smitha, adding that they make the batter every day.

The pots and the clay ring to hold the sieve-like net used to be made by local potters. The sieve was made with fishing nets made of cotton threads. When fishing nets switched to nylon and synthetic threads, the women began plaiting cotton to make the net. The batter is poured on the dampened cotton cloth on the earthen steamer. Three are stacked, one above the other, on a blackened aluminium pot on the gas stove. Then it is covered with another aluminium pot.

Until a few years ago, the idlis were made on firewood stoves and earthen pots. "Only firewood of the tamarind tree was used. However, all that is extremely difficult to buy nowadays," she says. Now there are not enough potters to make the pots and rings. Only the circular steamers, chipped and aged, are still made of clay.

As we speak, steam rises steadily from the pots. Ten minutes later, the one on the top is removed and hot idlis are slid on to a leaf set on a plate. Served with fragrant, creamy coconut milk stew, coconut chutney, tomato chutney and a fiery podi, the idli melts in the mouth.

About 600 to 700 idlis are made every day and on weekends it increases to 1,500. Smitha has travelled to various places to make the idli as part of events organised by the Government and private organisers. They also cater to weddings and private functions. "We have been to Thiruvananthapuram and Kozhikode as part of fêtes," she says. "Wherever we go, the Ramasseri idli is a hit with customers."

By the sword

GOWRI S

In 2004, a shy 11-year-old girl walked into Chennai's Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium for the first time, clutching her mother's hand. A student at Murugan Dhanushkodi Girls' Higher Secondary School, Tondiarpet, CA Bhavani Devi had just learnt the term 'fencing' as part of the 'Sports in Schools' initiative started by the late Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa.

Vishwanathan P, who would soon be her first coach, looked on from the parapet, and put the little girl to a 30-second test. "I don't remember what the test was! But right then, I knew she had the talent," laughs Vishwanathan. In 30 seconds, she secured a spot in the school's fencing classes, among 40 other girls.

Cut to March 15, 2021 in Budapest, Bhavani, now 27, made history by being the first Indian fencer to qualify for the Olympics. In July, she will represent India at the Tokyo Olympic games.

Currently ranked 42nd in the world and 1st in the country, the sabre fencer from Old Washermanpet qualified through the Asia/Oceanic Zone of

The first Indian fencer to qualify for the Olympics, CA Bhavani Devi from Old Washermanpet, discusses her 17-year journey as she focusses on Tokyo



official rankings after Hungary lost to South Korea in the quarter-finals of the Sabre Fencing World Cup.

Wielding a sword, dressed in an electric suit and mask that flickers when the opponent's weapon lands a jab, her swift, calculated footwork and mental focus brought her this honour. She states, "In 2016, I realised that there is a limit to which you can put pressure on yourself. It backfires." (She had failed to qualify for the 2016 Rio Olympics).

Seventeen years on, Bhavani still seems uncomfortable with the spotlight. In the few days she got to spend at home before flying to Italy to resume coaching, she has had little time to relax.

This week, the Olympic hopeful was named safety lifestyle company MY's goodwill ambassador at an event in Phoenix MarketCity's Club Crest where MetroPlus caught up with her.

Bhavani remembers starting with bamboo sticks. The little equipment they had was saved for competitions. "We used all sorts of things to practice," she reminisces. "We would go to the stadium at 5.30 am everyday and from

there to school. In the evening, from school back to the stadium and then home. This was the routine for years."

Catching the public bus on time to get to the stadium and back, was a struggle she remembers. "But, we still

enjoyed the process," Vishwanathan quips, "She was a 'jolly' child, and it was fun to train her."

Bhavani's first breakthrough came when Sports Authority of India (SAI) coach Sagar Lagu spotted her and invited her to train at the SAI academy in Thalassery, Kerala.

She finished Class X packed her bags and moved to Thalassery where she continued her studies and trained at the same time. In 2017, she became India's first international gold medallist at the Women's World Cup held in Reykjavik, Iceland.

The 40-member fencing group at school quickly diminished and five years down, Bhavani was the sole participant. Fencing then was still an unknown sport in India with no big achievements to point out, says Bhavani. "Some wanted to focus on education. Some felt fencing was not good for girls. There were no job prospects in the sport unlike athletics or volleyball," Bhavani says.

Many asked if the sport was "safe enough" for a girl to pursue. Bhavani's mother Ramani, a constant and perhaps the most significant presence in her life, nipped such negative comments in the bud. Ramani says, "Why should you bother," I asked them. The girl is interested in this, so let her be."

The proud mother is now preparing to fly to Tokyo to watch her daughter's most anticipated competition. Time and again, Bhavani reiterates that her parents – her late father was a priest and her mother, a homemaker – were her biggest support.

Modern fencing is a combination of three disciplines: the épée, the sabre, and the foil. While in épée, the entire body is a valid target area, in sabre, the

upper body becomes the target and in foil, only the torso can receive a strike. Weapons used in each also differ in terms of their make and flexibility.

All eyes on her

Bhavani specialises in sabre fencing, in which a typical competition lasts only 10 minutes. Has she ever felt intimidated? "I have never been afraid, even my parents haven't for that matter. You can get hurt anywhere, it's all about how you take care of yourself," she says.

The novelty of fencing is what kept Bhavani going, despite briefly considering giving up in 2014 as she did not want to put her family through more financial pressure.

The GoSports Foundation came to her support in 2015, and she currently trains under an athlete mentorship programme named after Indian cricketer Rahul Dravid.

Bhavani has been training under renowned coach Nicola Zanotti in Italy for the past five years. Though she knows that all eyes are on her, ever since qualifying, Bhavani has tried to block out the pressure.

Two fencing sessions of two to three hours each and physiotherapy schedules (to straighten out an injury that happened in 2015), make up most of her day. In addition, she has fitness sessions four times a week. "Fencing is a mental sport but physical strength is important for all sports," she says.

With only months to the Olympics, Bhavani recalls the times she had to travel to international competitions alone. This time though, she has the entire country backing her.

With her trademark shy smile, she concludes, "I will make you all proud. I am confident."

Your roses for my bonsai

Seed and plant sharing communities are on the rise with gardeners choosing to swap, instead of buying at nurseries



ATHIRA M

"They are my prized possessions," Mumbai-based Mamta Sukhija Joseph is talking about the *Dendrobium nobile* orchid, a double-petaled red azalea and a cherry plum in her terrace garden. She got them from Darjeeling in exchange for a gulmohar bonsai from her collection.

The pride of place in Sunita Hooda's garden in Gurugram goes to *Sansevieria cylindrica*, a snake plant variety, which she got from a grower in Chennai after she swapped her pink syngonium (arrowhead plant) for it. "I sent the person crinum lilies too because while my plant costs ₹30, sansevieria is ₹800-900. Also, he might have spent quite an amount on packing and transportation," says Sunita.

The rise now
Mamta and Sunita are gardening enthusiasts who trade seeds and plants online. Helping them do this are groups – both pan-India and city-specific – on Facebook, many of them started during 2020. There are also multiple swap/share groups for specific plant varieties.

"I was part of several online gardening groups. These pages saw unprecedented traffic during the lockdown. It felt good to make new friends via these pages," says Mamta. She is a member of



five swap groups and co-admin of Free Seeds and plant Swap, founded by Hyderabad-based P Anilkumar.

"Until I formed this group, I swapped plants only locally. After the lockdown restrictions were eased, new members are joining in large numbers," says Anilkumar. Hemant Dhingra, a teacher from Palwal in Haryana and admin of Spread free seeds and Plants is overjoyed that the membership in his group crossed 10,000 within six months of its launch.

Chennai-based Minal Thamarai Selvan, member and moderator of one of the earliest swap groups, Seeds and Plants Swap Community (India), says that they get at least 50 requests per day for membership. The group,



Bond over blooms (Top to bottom) Mamta Sukhija Joseph, Sabitha Sujith with son Ridshan, Minal Thamarai Selvan • SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

formed in 2017, has over 25,000 members.

Ludhiana-based Mona Chopra, an avid gardener and a regular swapper, feels that the spurt in members has to do with people missing new friendships in a period of social distancing. "You interact with people from all over, some of whom you will probably never meet. I learn something new about plants and also get to share what I have with others. It is fun," says Mona.

Delhi-based Dimple Agarwal chooses to swap in and around the Capital, even though she runs a pan-Indian group ('free plants exchange'). "The whole exercise makes me happy. I started this page because I had seeds and plants in excess even after distributing it to my relatives. However, I am not keen on sending them by courier and prefer people to come and collect," says the 47-year-old entrepreneur.

Swap, don't shop
The basic rule of these groups is that no buying or selling is allowed. However, postal charges can be claimed, especially if the other person does not have any plant/seeds to swap or share.

An obvious advantage of swap/share groups is that those varieties priced high in nurseries can be purchased for free or by paying only postal charges. This makes it a good platform for gardeners to fulfil their wish list.

Ever since she came across swapping groups on Facebook last July, Sabitha Sujith from Kollam, Kerala, has done over 20 swaps.

"Thanks to these groups, now I know that there are so many varieties of the same plant. Pea plant, for instance," she says, "I am part of a Kerala-based group where we even have competitions to keep the group active. Top contributors or those who get maximum likes and comments for their activities, get seeds as gifts," she says.

While Sunita, admin of Plants Paradise, says that she is "crazy about sansevieria these days" and Anil keeps looking for orchids, Minal is interested in any "unique", sturdy plant.

The groups do not allow members to post phone numbers and addresses, promotional posts and, in some cases, gardening tips. Minal says, "We don't give membership to people abroad. People must have a Facebook profile that is at least a year old. We neither allow posts asking to identify plants nor do we let members to show off their garden or plants!"

"There are elderly members who send items to 10 or 20 people and expect only a word of gratitude on the page," says Minal. "Swaps work on trust," she says.

Karthi and the 100 thugs

How the actor's gut instinct made him choose *Sulthan*, which hits screens tomorrow

SRINIVASA RAMANUJAM

Can a peace-loving man manage a hundred rowdies at once?

That is the one-liner that Karthi heard from director Bakkiyaraj Kannan a couple of years ago. The actor's ears perked up. He listened to a 20-minute narration, and gave the green signal for the project, something he has never done before in his career.

"I normally insist on reading the entire script. This one-line idea and the few scene arcs, however, sounded like it had a great scope for drama, and I went with my gut instinct," says the actor, over a phone call, "In *Kadaikuttu Singam* (one of the actor's previous hits), I had four sisters and that had so much drama. Now, I have hundred brothers who are all thugs!"

It gave Karthi the notion of an arresting visual, and that got him excited. Producer SR Prabhu too shared the same emotion, and *Sulthan* was underway.

"For the first few days, we did not know where to keep the camera...because there were just too many people in a single frame. The script was challenging for the technicians and cinematographers," says Karthi, recalling the days of shooting in a village near Dindigul. *Sulthan* also stars Napoleon, Lal, Yogi Babu and Rashmika Mandanna in vital roles.

TIME FOR THE FAMILY

Lockdown in 2020 saw Karthi reading history books and staying in shape for *Mani Ratnam's Ponniyin Selvan*. "I was working out alone; so I injured myself while doing heavyweights. I had to maintain my diet and fitness routine. I read up a lot of history as well. Most importantly, I got to spend a lot of time with my daughter (Umayaa) and parents, which made me rethink all my priorities." During this time, he became a father a second time; his second child has been named Kandhan.

'Don't put marks'

He is still receiving acclaim for his portrayal of Dilli in the 2019 *Lokesh Kanagaraj*-directed *Kaithi*, but Karthi feels that a balance of genres is a must for any actor. "With *Kaithi*, being an action film, the target group was clearly youngsters. Making a commercial film (like *Sulthan*) is the toughest, because you have to engage audiences of all age groups by packing in multiple emotions. One character has to pull off the different moods of the film. Also, audiences need to enter a commercial film with a relaxed mindset; they ought to come to be entertained, and not give marks for it!"

Like his 2017 hit *Theeran Adigai-*



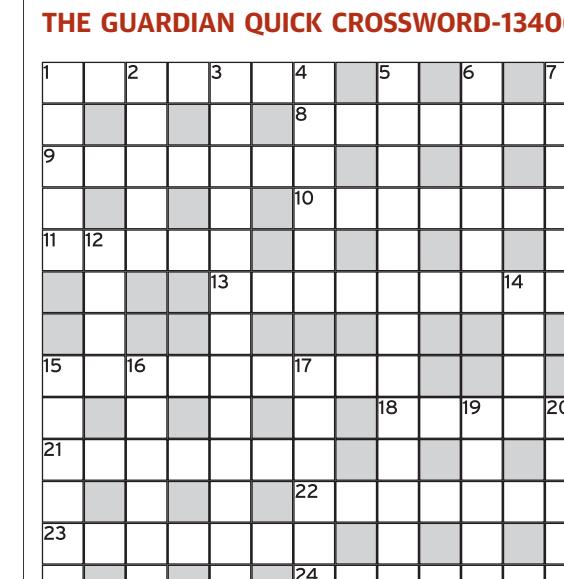
Commercial fare
Karthi and Rashmika in a still from the film
• SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Ondru, Sulthan too will have a strong villain who will have an important space in the storyline, promises the actor. Here, Karthi comes face-to-face with Ramachandra Raju, who made his presence felt in the Kannada superhit *KGF*. "The hero can become bigger only if there's a strong villain; only then does it become fun to watch. Thanks to *KGF*, Ramachandra had a great screen presence and following on set, despite not being from the film industry," he says.

Karthi and team have taken the theatre route to release *Sulthan*, despite offers from OTT platforms. "During the pandemic, we lost the sense of gathering and socialising. We filmed *Sulthan* long ago, but the fact that it is being released now is almost like it is bringing back celebration. For lovers of cinema, movie-watching in theatres is a cultural process."

That, however, does not rule out OTT for the actor. He is willing to take up a project, provided it allows him to experience a completely different culture. "They (OTT platforms) give you the freedom to explore different types of content, things you cannot do for the big screen. Last year, when we were all unsure about theatres, OTT was the only relief for a producer. We have crossed that stage now; *Master* has proved that people will still throng cinema halls."

THE GUARDIAN QUICK CROSSWORD-13406



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22 Flow (from) (7)

23 Involving

fantastical imagery (7)

24 Equalised (7)

■ Down

1 In pursuit of (5)

2 Response (5)

3 Overwhelmed by

grief (6-7)

4 Riddle (6)

5 Work very hard

(5,4,4)

6 Deceptive actions

(6)

7 Oyster (anag) –

level (6)

12 Remove and

replace (4)

14 Organ providing

oxygen to the blood

(4)

15 Small amount of

something liquid (6)

16 Regnal name of six

kings of

England (6)

17 Eric Arthur Blair (6)

19 Direction of fibres

found in wood (5)

20 Surrender (5)



To play The Guardian Quick Crossword, The Hindu Cryptic crossword, Sudoku & other puzzles online, scan the QR code.

Solution will appear on April 8, 2021
Solution No. 13405

E	L	A	B	O	R	A	T	E	T	B
A	A	E	A	M	E	A	L	A	M	E
E	C	N	O	M	I	S	E	M	U	U
K	G	O	S	A	P	S	E	M	U	U

Joe Biden set to announce \$2 trillion infrastructure plan

Proposal seeks to rebuild much of America's infrastructure in eight years

SIRIRAM LAKSHMAN
WASHINGTON

U.S. President Joe Biden will visit Pittsburgh on Wednesday afternoon to announce a massive \$2 trillion infrastructure plan, which will, over eight years, rebuild much of America's infrastructure – from roads and bridges to high-speed Internet infrastructure and water pipes. The legislation, called the American Jobs Plan, is being pitched by the White House as America's response to the climate crisis and "the ambitions of an autocratic China", and is expected to be financed by corporate taxes.

The plan will include \$621 billion for modernising roads and bridges, modernising public transit (buses, rapid bus transport, railway tracks and coaches), passenger and freight rail services and electric vehicles, according to the White House. It will call for a \$111 billion in-



Overhaul plan: President Joe Biden with Vice-President Kamala Harris at the White House on Tuesday. ■ AFP

vestment in drinking water infrastructure, including replacing all lead pipes. An outlay of \$100 billion for clean power and another \$100 for broadband infrastructure are also part of the plan. Mr. Biden will ask Congress for \$180 billion in research and development (R&D), and \$300 billion in supply chain investment and pandemic preparedness.

The plan also goes into areas that are not normally

considered 'infrastructure', with Mr. Biden asking Congress to fund a \$400 billion expansion to home or community-based care for ageing relatives and the differently abled.

To fund this, Mr. Biden will reverse some of the tax cuts pushed through by the Trump administration in 2017.

"President Biden's reform will reverse this damage and fundamentally reform the

way the tax code treats the largest corporations," a White House factsheet read. The plan proposes a hike in the corporate tax rate from 21% to 28% and seeks to set a global minimum tax of 21%. Mr. Biden will also encourage other countries to apply a "strong minimum tax" on corporations. Foreign tax preferences for fossil fuel companies will also be eliminated.

Coming weeks after Congress passed his \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan, the proposed infrastructure Bill and associated tax Bill is likely to face opposition from Republicans on Capitol Hill.

"It seems like President Biden has an insatiable appetite to spend more money and raise people's taxes," GOP Whip in the U.S. House of Representatives, Steve Scalise of Louisiana, said, according to the Associated Press.

The Defence Ministry reported the resignations – apparently unprecedented since at least the end of military rule 36 years ago. Replacements were not named. But analysts expressed fears the President, increasingly under pressure, was moving to assert greater control over the military.

"Since 1985, we haven't had news of such clear intervention of the President with regard to the armed forces," said Carlos Melo, a political science professor at Insper University in São Paulo.

Mr. Bolsonaro, a conser-

ative former Army captain who has often praised Brazil's former military dictatorship, has relied heavily on current and former soldiers to staff key Cabinet positions since taking office in January 2019, but Mr. Melo said the military itself has so far refrained from politics.

The announcement came after the heads of the Army, Navy and Air force met with the new Defence Minister, General Walter Souza Braga Netto, on Tuesday morning.

Gen. Braga Netto's first statement on the new job

showed he is aligned with Mr. Bolsonaro's views for the armed forces. The incoming Defence Minister, unlike his predecessor Fernando Azevedo e Silva, celebrated the 1964-1985 military dictatorship that killed and tortured thousands of Brazilians.

"The 1964 movement is part of Brazil's historic trajectory. And as such the events of that March 31st must be understood and celebrated."

Mr. Bolsonaro on Monday carried out a shake-up of top Cabinet positions that was initially seen as a response to demands for a course correction over his handling of the pandemic that has caused over 3,00,000 deaths.

His slide in popularity, and the likelihood that he will face leftist former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in the 2022 presidential election, has analysts saying he is looking to the armed forces for support.

Pfizer: vaccine 100% effective in adolescents

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
BERLIN

BioNTech-Pfizer said on Wednesday their vaccine showed 100% efficacy against the coronavirus in 12- to 15-year-olds, as they eye approval for adolescents to get the jabs before the next school year.

Phase 3 trials carried out on 2,260 adolescents in the U.S. "demonstrated 100% efficacy and robust antibody responses", the companies said. "We plan to submit these data to FDA as a proposed amendment to our Emergency Use Authorisation in the coming weeks and to other regulators around the world, with the hope of starting to vaccinate this age group before the start of the next school year," said Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla.

BioNTech said the results showing high protection for teens were "very encouraging given the trends we have seen in recent weeks regarding the spread of U.K. variant".

ELSEWHERE



Woman behind Indonesia attack shot dead: police

JAKARTA An armed woman shot dead at Indonesia's national police headquarters on Wednesday was an Islamic State sympathiser, police said, citing social media posts she made shortly before the fatal gun battle. The 25-year-old woman entered the police complex in downtown Jakarta and opened fire on officers at the entrance, authorities said. AFP

Suu Kyi looks healthy, says lawyer

U.S. orders non-essential Embassy staff and family members to leave Myanmar

REUTERS
YANGON

Myanmar's deposed leader Aung San Suu Kyi appeared in good health in a video meeting on Wednesday, one of her lawyers said, as the U.S. ordered its non-essential Embassy staff to leave after "horrifying" violence against opponents of a coup.

Ms. Suu Kyi, 75, was arrested on February 1, the day the military seized power. She faces charges that include illegally importing six handheld radios and breaching coronavirus protocols.

"Amay looks healthy, her complexion is good," her lawyer Min Soe Soe said, using an affectionate term meaning "mother" to refer to Ms. Suu Kyi.

Only the legal cases against her filed since the coup were discussed during the video conference, the lawyer said.

The military has also accused her of bribery in two recent news conferences.

Her lawyers say the charges were trumped up and dismissed the accusation of bribery as a joke.

The next hearing in her case is on Thursday.

At least 521 civilians have been killed in protests, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPR).

Fighting has also flared between the Army and ethnic minority insurgents in frontier regions. Refugees fleeing the turmoil are seeking safety in neighbouring countries.

Thousands of protesters were out again on Wednesday in different parts of the country. Residents in Yan-

gon banged pots and pans and honked their car horns in a clamour of defiance as a news crew from CNN was shown around in what its correspondent said was a heavily armed convoy.

The United States on Tuesday ordered the departure of non-emergency U.S. government employees and family members due to concern over what U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken called the "increasingly disturbing and even horrifying violence" against demonstrators.

The Italian frigate Captain was arrested on spying charges after a "clandestine meeting" with the Russian late on Tuesday in Rome, according to a police statement.

Special operations police

stopped both men but only the Italian was arrested. He is accused of passing on "confidential documents" in exchange for money.

The Russian, an Embassy official, avoided custody thanks to diplomatic immunity, police said.

Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio summoned Russia's Ambassador to Rome, Sergey Razov, on Wednesday morning to lodge a formal protest.

The diplomat was notified

of "the immediate expulsion of the two Russian officials involved in this very serious affair", Mr. Di Maio said.

According to *La Repubblica* newspaper, the Navy Captain worked at the office of Chief of the Defence Staff and had access "to a wide range of documents" concerning both Italian defence and NATO activities.

The *Corriere della Sera* newspaper said the captain was paid €5,000 in cash by the Russian.

Ex-PM Madhav Kumar Nepal set to launch political party

Decision taken after Oli tried to revive CPN-UML, says source

KALLOL BHATTACHERJEE
NEW DELHI

Nepal will soon have a new national political platform along the Marxist-Leninist ideological lines. Sources have told *The Hindu* that the new political outfit will be led by former Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal, who had rebelled against Prime Minister K.P. Sharma Oli in the now defunct Nepal Communist Party.

The decision to create a new political outfit was taken in the second week of March after PM Oli went ahead and held a meeting of the Central Committee of the party. "PM Oli held the meeting of the Central Committee without consulting the senior members of the CPN-UML. This showed that he is planning to centralise authority around himself. We do not believe that he



alone should be allowed to lead a party on the Marxist-Leninist lines which is a popular ideology in Nepal. We have already begun reaching to the provinces and will soon formalise the launch of the new party," said a source in Kathmandu.

Back to two parties
The Nepal Communist Party was scrapped by the Su-

preme Court in Kathmandu on March 7, which ordered that the two political formations of Communist Party of Nepal-UML and CPN (Maoist-Centre) that had united to form the NCP in 2018 should revert to their original forms. The order helped PM Oli as he became the leader of the largest political formation in Parliament with 121 members. The CPN (Maoist-Centre) of Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda' was left with 53 members in the legislature.

The court ruling came even as Mr. Oli faced a rebellion within ruling NCP led by Madhav Kumar Nepal and Mr. Prachanda which had prompted the PM to dissolve the House of Representatives in December 2020. Earlier, the court had reinstated the lower house in an order on February 23.

Suspect held over attack on Asian woman

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
NEW YORK

Police in New York arrested on Wednesday a suspect in a brutal, videotaped assault of a 65-year-old Asian-American woman, the latest incident of anti-Asian violence in the U.S.

Police announced the arrest on Twitter and said the man was charged with felony assault as a hate crime. The tweet did not give his name but U.S. news outlets identified the man as Brandon Elliot, 38.

The attack, which took place on a sidewalk in Manhattan on Monday, was caught on CCTV footage from inside a building.

In the video, posted online by police, the man can be seen walking up to the woman and kicking her in the stomach, knocking her to the ground. He then kicks her several times in the head before walking away.

Mukhyamantri Laghu Evam Kutir Udyam Vikas Board (Government of Jharkhand Undertaking)

4th Floor, Udyog Bhawan, Ratn Road, Ranchi 834001

Notice Inviting E-Tender

Date: 31.03.2021

E-tenders are invited by Mukhyamantri Laghu Evam Kutir Udyam Vikas Board from reputed Original Equipment Manufacturers/ (OEMs)/ Authorized Dealers/Distributor/Agent of OEMs having sound experience for the supply, installation, testing and commissioning of Lac processing machinery and equipment to produce Iso-Ambrettolide, Aleuritic Acid and Lac dye for M/s. Vedic Lah Foundation, Bundu, Ranchi, Jharkhand for setting up of Common Facility Centre under the SFURTI scheme of MSME, Government of India.

Detailed tender document, list of Machinery & Equipment, eligibility criteria etc. may be downloaded from the following website: mmkvjb.jharkhand.gov.in/www.jharkhandtenders.gov.in or collected from the office of the Board during office hours in between 11:00hrs to 17:00hrs on any working day.

Tender Fees: A non-refundable tender fees of Rs.10,00,000 (Rupees Ten Thousand only) to be enclosed with Technical Bid in form of Demand Draft drawn in favor of "Mukhyamantri Laghu Evam Kutir Udyam Vikas Board" payable at Ranchi;

Total Estimated Cost: Rs. 372.17 lakhs

Earnest Money Deposit: Rs. 7,50,000/- (Rupees Seven Lakhs Fifty Thousand only) in the form of DD or the Bank Guarantee in favor of MUKHYAMANTRI LAGHU EVAM KUTIR UDYAM VIKAS BOARD, Ranchi, payable at any Nationalized Bank in Ranchi, Jharkhand, India.

Time Schedule of Tender

Sl. No.	Particulars	Date	Time
a.	Tender Publication Date	01.04.2021	
b.	Document download/physical copy procurement from office	01.04.2021	During office hours
c.	Pre-bid meeting	19.04.2021	11:30 AM
d.	Last date for clarification	19.04.2021	03:00 PM
e.	Bid Submission end date and time	26.04.2021	03:00 PM
f.	Opening of Tender Documents	27.04.2021	11:30 AM

This Board reserves the right to cancel or/and postpone the tender or reject any bid without assigning any reason at any point of time.

PR 244872 (Mukhyamantri Laghu And Kutir Udyam Vikas Board) 20-21 (D) Chief Executive Officer

Contact Detail : Mukhyamantri Laghu evam Kutir udyam Vikas Board
4th Floor, Udyog Bhawan, Ratn Road, Ranchi - 834001 (Jharkhand)
Email- contact.cmlaghu@jgmail.com, Phone: 9102216666, 9262219999

Mukhyamantri Laghu Evam Kutir Udyam Vikas Board (Government of Jharkhand Undertaking)

4th Floor, Udyog Bhawan, Ratn Road, Ranchi 834001

Notice Inviting E-Tender

Date: 31.03.2021

E-tenders are invited by Mukhyamantri Laghu Evam Kutir Udyam Vikas Board from reputed Manufacturers/ Distributors/ Authorized Dealers for the supply, installation, testing and commissioning of Wood working/ processing Machines & Equipment for Annatdev Woodcraft Producer Company Limited, Chas, Bokaro, Jharkhand for setting up of Common Facility Centre under the SFURTI scheme of MSME, Government of India.

Detailed tender document, list of Machinery & Equipment, eligibility criteria etc. may be downloaded from the following website: mmkvjb.jharkhand.gov.in/www.jharkhandtenders.gov.in or collected from the office of the Board during office hours in between 11:00hrs to 17:00hrs on any working day.

Tender Fees: A non-refundable tender fees of Rs.10,00,000 (Rupees Ten Thousand only) to be enclosed with Technical Bid in form of Demand Draft drawn in favor of "Mukhyamantri Laghu Evam Kutir Udyam Vikas Board" payable at Ranchi;

Total Estimated Cost: Rs.151.36 lakhs

Earnest Money Deposit: Rs.3,00,00,000 (Rupees Three lakhs only) in the form of DD or the Bank Guarantee in favor of MUKHYAMANTRI LAGHU EVAM KUTIR UDYAM VIKAS BOARD, Ranchi, payable at any Nationalized Bank in Ranchi, Jharkhand, India.

Time Schedule of Tender

Sl. No.	Particulars	Date	Time
a.	Tender Publication Date	01.04.2021	
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c.	Pre-bid meeting	19.04.2021	03:00 PM</

MARKET WATCH

	31-03-2021	% CHANGE
Sensex	49,509	-1.25
US Dollar	73.12	0.35
Gold	43,925	-0.43
Brent oil	63.90	-0.58

EXCHANGE RATES

CURRENCY	TT BUY	TT SELL
US Dollar	73.18	73.50
Euro	85.83	86.24
British Pound	100.51	100.96
Japanese Yen (100)	66.30	66.60
Chinese Yuan	11.13	11.18
Swiss Franc	77.68	78.02
Singapore Dollar	54.29	54.54
Canadian Dollar	57.92	58.20
Malaysian Ringgit	17.62	17.72

Source: Indian Bank

Feb. fiscal deficit at 76% of RE: CGA

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

The Centre's fiscal deficit at the end of February worked out to be 76% of the revised estimate, indicating that it is likely to remain within the projections made by Finance Minister FM Nirmala Sitharaman last month.

The FM had revised the fiscal deficit projections for 2020-21 to ₹18.48 lakh crore, or 9.5% of the GDP from the original budget estimate of ₹7.96 lakh crore, or 3.5% of the GDP, mainly on account of additional outgo to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the data released by the Controller General of Accounts (CGA), the fiscal deficit at the end of February stood at ₹14.05 lakh crore or 76% of the revised estimate.

IN BRIEF



SBI signs \$1-bn loan pact with Japanese Bank

MUMBAI State Bank of India (SBI) has signed a loan agreement amounting to up to \$1 billion with the Japanese Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC). The loan is intended to promote the smooth flow of funds for the whole range of business operations of Japanese automobile manufacturers in India. The public sector lender had signed a similar deal with JBIC in October 2020.

Centre infuses capital of ₹14,500 cr. in four PSBs

CHENNAI The Centre has infused a fresh capital of ₹14,500 crore in four public sector lenders to improve their financial health. The lenders said they received the funds as part of Central Government's investment in the preferential allotment of equity shares for FY21. On Wednesday, Central Bank of India received ₹4,800 crore, IOB ₹4,100 crore, Bank of India ₹3,000 crore and UCO Bank ₹2,600 crore.

Dr. Reddy's investing in industry digital initiative

HYDERABAD Drugmaker Dr. Reddy's Laboratories said it has entered into an agreement with ABCD Technologies LLP, an industry digital initiative, to facilitate and promote efficiency in pharma supply chain. It is contributing ₹40 crore to the firm, which is to be renamed as IndoHealth Services LLP. Dr. Reddy's said the transaction is in line with its purpose of accelerating access and affordability of medicines to all.

General insurers to offer three standard products

HYDERABAD General insurers dealing in Fire and Allied perils insurance business will offer three standard products, as mandated by insurance regulator IRDAI, covering the risks of dwellings and enterprises from Thursday. Bharat Grha Raksha, Bharat Sookshma Udyam Suraksha and Bharat Laghu Udyam Suraksha will be available both as new policies and renewals with effect from April 1, according to the regulator.

Govt. retains 4% inflation target for RBI's rate panel for 2021-26

Centre's decision ensures 'continuity', ends speculation over price stability goals

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The Centre has decided to retain the inflation target of 4%, with a tolerance band of +/- 2 percentage points for the Monetary Policy Committee of the RBI for the coming five years, a top finance ministry official said.

"The inflation target for the period April 1, 2021, to March 31, 2026... has been kept at the same level as it was for the previous five years," Economic Affairs Secretary Tarun Bajaj told reporters on Wednesday.

He dismissed queries on whether the focus had shifted to core inflation or any other component of retail inflation and hinted that the



Clear focus: The Centre has agreed with RBI officials' view that the current inflation target is appropriate. ■ K. MURALI KUMAR

framework would remain 'the same' as earlier.

Economists welcomed the continuity in the framework, despite the recent spate of high inflation prints beyond the 6% upper threshold of

the inflation target.

"The range of 2%-6% as a flexible inflation target has worked reasonably well and continuing with the same target would not disturb the monetary policy framework

as such going forward," said M. Govinda Rao, member Fourteenth Finance Commission and former director of the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy. "Inflation may have breached the 6% mark a few times recently, but this has been during an exceptional situation in the economy."

The decision puts to rest speculation about the government considering a looser inflation target to enable a more growth-oriented focus in monetary policy.

RBI officials had in a report in February stressed that "the current numerical framework for defining price stability" was appropriate for the next five years.

Centre will front-load bulk of borrowings this year, says Bajaj

'Govt. confident RBI will help raise funds at reasonable rates'

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The government will front-load a bulk of its borrowing for 2021-22, and is confident that the Reserve Bank of India will manage to help raise the funds at reasonable rates, a top finance ministry official said on Wednesday.

"In the Budget, we had announced a gross borrowing of ₹12,05,500 crore and a net borrowing of ₹9,37,221 crore," said Economic Affairs Secretary Tarun Bajaj.

"In the first half of the year, for which the detailed calendar is being released today, we will be borrowing ₹7.24 lakh crore... which is 60.06% of the gross issuance

Despite record borrowings in 2020-21, yields remained very stable

es in 2021-22," he added.

The borrowings would be done across tenures ranging from two years to 40 years, Mr. Bajaj said. He added that any review of the borrowings plan would only be conducted later in the year depending on how the tax and non-tax revenue streams panned out.

Despite record government borrowings in 2020-21, yields 'generally remained very stable', Mr. Bajaj said, but admitted 'there was an issue in the last few auctions

that happened in the month of March.'

On whether the government was concerned about the possibility of paying higher rates for its borrowings in the coming year in the light of some recent securities auctions being cancelled, the Secretary said: "I have been in touch with the RBI as usual and I had a meeting with the central bank again before announcing the borrowing calendar.

"I am sure they would take appropriate action in the market to ensure that yields remain within reasonable limits and I have no reason to believe anything else," he added.

RBI defers e-mandate compliance

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
MUMBAI

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has extended the timeline for stakeholders to migrate to the process of e-mandates on recurring online transactions by six months till September 30, 2021. The move came after the regulator found that many players had not met the deadline.

"Any further delay in ensuring complete adherence to the framework beyond the extended timeline will attract stringent supervisory action," the RBI said in a circular.

In August 2019, the RBI had issued a framework for processing of e-mandates on recurring online transactions.

India GDP to grow 7.5%-12.5% in FY22, says World Bank

'New wave, variants part of risk factors to the outlook'

SRIRAM LAKSHMAN

India's economy is expected to grow at 10.1% for the year starting April 1, 2021, as the vaccine roll-out drives activity in contact-intensive sectors, as per the World Bank's South Asia Economic Focus *South Asia Vaccinates* report. However, given the significant uncertainty around epidemiological and policy factors, real GDP growth could range from 7.5% to 12.5%, stabilising at 6.7% in the medium term, it said.

The decision puts to rest speculation about the government considering a looser inflation target to enable a more growth-oriented focus in monetary policy.

"It is not normal to talk about these wide ranges in the forecast," Hans Timmer, Chief Economist for the World Bank's South Asia region, said on a briefing call with reporters. "The reason is that we are really in unpre-



cedented circumstances," he said. Fiscal year 2021 is expected to register the worst economic damage due to the pandemic, the report said (the economy contracted 8.5% in FY20-21 as per the World Bank's estimate).

The Bank expects public consumption to contribute positively, but pent-up private demand to fade by end 2021, as investment will pick

up very gradually as a result of a large government capital expenditure push.

Negative spillovers from financial sector distress (particularly concessions to debtors) are a risk to the growth outlook, the report warned. However, the Reserve Bank of India is expected to maintain an accommodative monetary policy stance during FY22. "So a big bounce back in India, but not completely out of the woods yet," Mr. Timmer said.

As to the second wave that is possibly under way now in India and its impact on the economic outlook, Mr. Timmer said that these new waves and new variants of the virus were part of the risk factors to the outlook.

Govt. extends emergency credit till June

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

The government on Wednesday extended the ₹3-lakh-crore emergency credit line guarantee scheme by another three months till June 30 and also widened its scope to new sectors, including hospitality, travel and tourism.

ECLGS 3.0 would involve extending credit of up to 40% of total credit outstanding across all lending institutions as on February 29, 2020, the Finance Ministry said.

The tenor of loans granted under ECLGS 3.0 would be 6 years, including a moratorium period of 2 years. The last date for disbursements has been extended to September 30.



Core sector output contracts 4.6% in Feb. Refinery sees steep decline of 10.9%

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

The output of eight core sectors declined by 4.6% in February, the steepest contraction in the last six months, which economists said could drag the overall industrial production in the month into the negative territory.

All the key segments, including coal, crude oil, natural gas, and refinery products, witnessed a decline in production, according to the official data released on Wednesday.

The growth rate of the eight infrastructure sectors – coal, crude oil, natural gas, refinery products, fertilisers, steel, cement and electricity – stood at 6.4% in

BPCL buys out OQ in unit for ₹2,400 cr.

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
MUMBAI

Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd. (BPCL) has signed a sales purchase agreement (SPA) with OQ (formerly Oman Oil Company Ltd.) for the purchase of their entire stake in Bharat Oman Refineries Ltd. (BORL) for ₹2,400 crore.

BPCL runs a 7.8 MMTPA refinery at Bina in M.P.

Since March 2020, BPCL had been holding 63.4% and OQ 36.6% equity in BORL. The government of M.P. holds a minor stake through compulsorily convertible warrants.

"This [acquisition] is expected to bring advantages to both the companies in terms of synergies and optimisation of returns and will facilitate future expansion or diversification in Bina," said N. Vijayagopal, director (finance), BPCL.

Divestment nets Centre ₹32,835 cr., betters RE

Govt. originally budgeted ₹2.10 lakh cr.



Tuhin Kanta Pandey

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

The government has mopped up ₹32,835 crore from CPSE share sale and buybacks, thus exceeding the disinvestment target set in the revised estimates (RE) for the current fiscal.

The realisation is, however, lower than the record ₹2.10 lakh crore originally budgeted.

In the RE, the target was scaled down to ₹32,000 crore as COVID-19 delayed planned big-ticket disinvestment.

In a tweet, Department of Investment and Public Asset Management Secretary Tuhin Kanta Pandey said the total DIPAM receipts in 2020-21 stand at ₹71,857 crore, which include disinvestment receipts of ₹32,835 crore and dividend receipts of ₹39,022 crore.

"Total dividend receipts from CPSEs in FY2020-21 have touched ₹39,022 crore, which exceeds the revised estimate (RE) of ₹34,717 crore, and is more than actual dividend receipts (₹35,543 crore) during the previous financial year," Mr. Pandey tweeted.

For 2021-22 fiscal, the Union government has set a disinvestment target of ₹1.75 lakh crore.

SpiceJet in plane leasing pact with Avenue of U.S.

Deal to aid carrier's long-term plans'

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

Low-cost carrier SpiceJet announced a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with U.S.-based Avenue Capital Group for financing, purchase and sale and leaseback of 50 new planes.

"The MoU sets out the next steps and conditions upon which Avenue, as part of the strategic alliance with SpiceJet, will assist in placing SpiceJet's new aircraft portfolio, including sale and leaseback of and also assumption of ownership of potentially up to 50 of these aircraft," the airline said.

In a sale and leaseback model, an airline acquires the aircraft at an attractive price and sells it to a lessor and leases it back for its use.



Piramal to buy peptide API firm Hemmo

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
MUMBAI

Piramal Pharma Ltd. (PPL) has entered into an agreement to acquire a 100% stake in Hemmo Pharmaceuticals Pvt. Ltd. for an upfront payment of ₹775 crore and earn-outs linked to achievement of milestones, a top official said.

Hemmo would form part of PPL's contract development and manufacturing organisation (CDMO) Piramal Pharma Solutions.

"Hemmo is one of the few pure-play synthetic peptide API manufacturers in the global marketplace," said PPL. "Hemmo has demonstrated a great quality track record with a hard-to-replicate capability," said Nandini Piramal, chairperson, PPL.

Corrigendum No-2

Some modification/correction has been done with reference to the tender notice of different packages issued vide this office letter No. 10614-23 on dated 22.03.2021 published in different newspaper. Tender stands uploaded on website and some more modification in the construction cost/maintenance cost has been occurred as below:-

Sr. Division No	Read as	Instead of
<tbl

Cellar dwellers last year, new-look Royals eye the penthouse

After finishing bottom in 2020, Rajasthan has ambitions of climbing to the top with a new captain and director of cricket, and IPL's most expensive player ever

IPL COUNTDOWN

P.K. AJITH KUMAR

It has been a chequered journey for Rajasthan Royals in the IPL. It was the champion – against all odds – in the inaugural edition in 2008. Last season, it finished at the bottom.

So this time around, things can only get better for the team, which is sporting a different look. It has a new captain in Sanju Samson, a new director of cricket in Kumar Sangakkara, the most expensive player in IPL history in Chris Morris, not to mention additions such as Shivam Dube and Liam Livingstone; and there is no Steve Smith, the skipper for most of the last two seasons.

Archer-shaped hole

While the Royals management has had time to think about re-jigging the top-order in the absence of the Australian run-machine, it probably would not have been prepared for the huge vacuum created by the unavailability of Jofra Archer, at least for the initial stages. The England star – as complete a fast-bowler as a T20 team could hope for – had surgery on his right hand on Monday.

Archer was not just the Royals' best cricketer last year, he was also the IPL's best – he was adjudged the Most Valuable Player. His deadly spells were the main reason why his team was in with a chance of making the playoffs even at the business end.

In Archer's absence, Morris will have to spearhead the attack. The South African quick must be hoping to receive support in the pace department from the likes of Kartik Tyagi, who had impressed in his maiden IPL last



SANJU SAMSON CAPTAIN

THE RAJASTHAN ROYALS DUGOUT

	P	W	L	NR
Overall*	161	81	78	2
vs. CSK	23	9	14	0
vs. DC	22	11	11	0
vs. KKR	22	10	12	0
vs. MI	22	11	11	0
vs. PBKS	21	12	9	0
vs. RCB	22	10	10	2
vs. SRH	13	6	7	0

* Royals' remaining matches were against Deccan Chargers (9), Kochi Tuskers Kerala (2), and Pune Warriors (5)

TOP GUNS IN CURRENT SQUAD

BATSMEN	M	Inns	Runs	HS	Avg.	SR	50s/100s
Sanju Samson	79	75	1907	102 n.o.	28.04	136.21	10/1
Jos Buttler	34	33	1187	95 n.o.	42.39	151.21	10/0
Riyam Parag	19	13	246	50	20.50	121.18	1/0
ALL-ROUNDERS	M	Runs	HS	50s/100s	Wkts.	BBI	4W
Ben Stokes	30	604 (30 inns)	107 n.o.	1/1	16 (24 inns)	3/15	0
Rahul Tewatia	18	271 (12)	53	1/0	13 (18)	3/25	0
Chris Morris*	11	76 (7)	34 n.o.	0/0	13 (11)	4/23	1
BOWLERS	M	Inns	Wkts.	BBI	Avg.	Econ.	4W
Jofra Archer	35	35	46	3/15	21.32	7.13	0
Shreyas Gopal	39	38	41	4/16	24.63	7.82	1
Jaydev Unadkat	33	33	25	3/46	44.48	10.04	0

ROYALS' 2021 FIXTURES

April 12	vs. PBKS	7.30 p.m.	Mumbai	May 5	vs. CSK	7.30 p.m.	Delhi
April 15	vs. DC	7.30 p.m.	Mumbai	May 8	vs. MI	7.30 p.m.	Delhi
April 19	vs. CSK	7.30 p.m.	Mumbai	May 11	vs. DC	7.30 p.m.	Kolkata
April 22	vs. RCB	7.30 p.m.	Mumbai	May 13	vs. SRH	7.30 p.m.	Kolkata
April 24	vs. KKR	7.30 p.m.	Mumbai	May 16	vs. RCB	3.30 p.m.	Kolkata
April 29	vs. MI	3.30 p.m.	Delhi	May 18	vs. KKR	7.30 p.m.	Bengaluru
May 2	vs. SRH	3.30 p.m.	Delhi	May 22	vs. PBKS	7.30 p.m.	Bengaluru

* Morris' record when he played for Royals in the 2015 season

year, Jaydev Unadkat, Mustafizur Rahman and Andrew Tye.

All-rounders Ben Stokes and Dube could also chip in with a few overs of pace. Leg-spinning all-rounders Rahul Tewatia, a revelation last year, and Shreyas Gopal could have important roles to play.

Royals will need big shots to fly off the blades of Jos Buttler, Samson – it will be interesting to see how captaincy impacts his batting – and Stokes. There is quality in the support cast of Yashasvi Jaiswal, Riyam Parag, David Miller, Livingstone, Mahipal Lomror and Manan Vohra, too.

If the Royals need inspiration or words of wisdom, they have Sangakkara to turn to. If the man can offer so much in his commentary stints, imagine what he could do in team meetings! Could Samson and Sangakkara turn Royals' fortunes around? We will find out in a few weeks.



THE SQUAD

BATSMEN:
Sanju Samson (wk), Anuj Rawat (wk), David Miller, Jos Buttler (wk), Manan Vohra, Riyam Parag, Yashasvi Jaiswal

ALL-ROUNDERS: Ben Stokes, Chris Morris, Liam Livingstone, Mahipal Lomror, Rahul Tewatia, Shreyas Gopal
BOWLERS: Akash Singh, Andrew Tye, Chetan Sakaria, Jaydev Unadkat, Jofra Archer, Kartik Tyagi, K.C. Cariappa, Kuldeep Yadav, Mayank Markande, Mustafizur Rahman, Shreyas Gopal

SOURCE: ESPNCRICINFO | COMPILED BY G. PRASAD | GRAPHIC: A. GANESAN

X-Factor

Ben Stokes: All-rounders have always been a precious commodity in cricket. None is more precious today than Stokes. He can bowl quick, block and blast with the bat, and take stunning catches in the slips and on the boundary. And yes, he can win Ashes Tests and World Cup finals single-handedly. Surely he will want to leave his imprint on the world's most glamorous cricket league too.

Archer set to miss first four matches

England's Jofra Archer will begin two weeks of rehabilitation after undergoing surgery on his finger, and is set to miss Rajasthan Royals' first four matches in IPL 2021, according to ESPNcricinfo.

There were earlier doubts about his availability for the 14th edition of the tournament. Sanju Samson's team meets Punjab Kings in its opening match on April 12. Royals' next three games

are against Delhi Capitals (April 15), Chennai Super Kings (April 19) and Royal Challengers Bangalore (April 22).

On Monday, the 25-year-old had surgery to remove a fragment of glass from the middle finger on his right hand.

"A consultant will review him before he returns to training," the English and Wales Cricket Board (ECB) said in a statement on Wednesday.

'You need to perform no matter the price tag'

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
MUMBAI

The IPL's most expensive buy, Chris Morris, says leading the Rajasthan Royals' pace attack in the absence of the injured Jofra Archer will be an added responsibility but doesn't change his role in the team.

"In every single team that I have played in the IPL, my role has been with the new ball and at the death. That doesn't really change. I have always had fast bowlers in the team and I've been their supporting act," said Morris.

About the pressure that comes with an expensive price tag, Morris said: "I'd be lying to you if I said there wasn't any pressure but fortunately enough in the past, I have been coming in with quite a big price tag on my head. At the end of the day, you need to perform no



matter what the price tag is."

Morris feels his role in the team is different to that of all-rounder Ben Stokes who, he feels, possess the "magic touch in cricket". "I think we have got different roles. Stokes opens the batting. He is one of the best in the world if not the best. My role is to finish off games with the bat which I hope I can do more of this year."

QUICK SINGLES



player Dawid Malan feels 2021 might be the year where fortune changes and Punjab Kings finally win the IPL. "A message for all the fans and whoever watches the game, we are grateful to your support and hopefully this year is the year that the luck changes for us and we can put in some good match-winning performances, make the playoffs and hopefully win that trophy in the end," Malan said in a video posted on Punjab Kings' Twitter handle.



Expo Dubai is Royals' principal sponsor
Rajasthan Royals announced Expo 2020 Dubai as the principal sponsor for this edition of the IPL. As part of the association, Expo 2020 Dubai will appear on the front of the Royals' jersey.

Moeen looks forward to playing under Dhoni

Chennai Super Kings all-rounder Moeen Ali on Wednesday vouched for M.S. Dhoni's captaincy and said most cricketers look forward to playing under him. "I've spoken to players who have played under MS and they tell me how he improves their game. I believe a great captain does that," Moeen was quoted as saying by the CSK website.

"I think it's something on every player's wish list to play under MS. I think it's the confidence and the clarity he gives to people. It's very important to have a strong leader who stays calm, who takes the pressure off the players."

Bright and beaming



Looking dapper: M.S. Dhoni, Dwayne Bravo, Deepak Chahar and Sam Curran strike a pose in their redesigned Chennai Super Kings team outfit. • SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Jason Roy comes in for Marsh in SRH squad

Aussie pulls out citing personal reasons

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT HYDERABAD

England's Jason Roy has signed up with Sunrisers Hyderabad as a replacement for Mitchell Marsh for the forthcoming edition of the IPL, according to a media release.

Marsh, who has played 21 IPL games since his debut in 2010, made himself unavailable for the entire season owing to personal reasons.

Roy made his IPL debut in 2017 for Gujarat Lions and later featured for Delhi Daredevils (now Delhi Capitals) in the 2018 edition. He has played a total of eight matches and scored 179 runs with one half-century.

Sunrisers Hyderabad has acquired Roy at his base price of ₹2 crore.



Jason Roy. • FILE PHOTO

■ Sunrisers Hyderabad has acquired Roy at his base price of ₹2 crore

■ England opener has played eight matches, scored 179 runs with one half-century

Sri Lanka wobbles

LANKA IN WI

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE
NORTH SOUND ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA

Rain interrupted play in the afternoon session with Sri Lanka 217 for seven in reply to West Indies' 354 on the third day of the second and final Test on Wednesday.

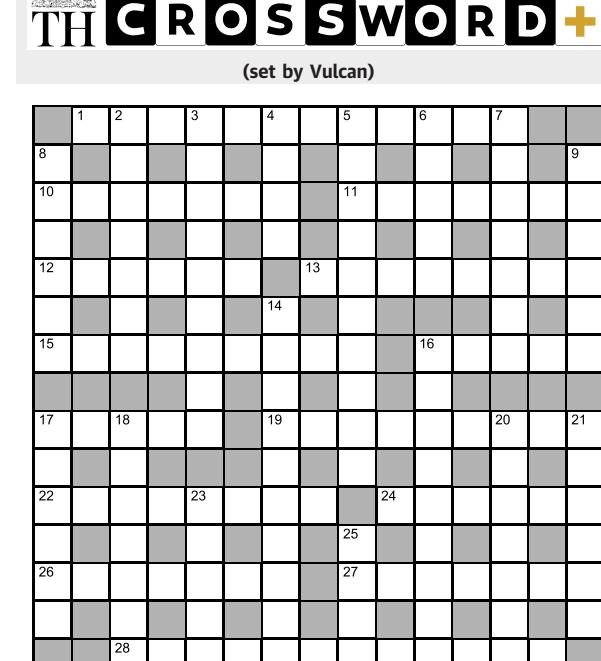
The tourists, who started the day on 136 for three, lost two wickets in the opening session and two more after lunch before the rain arrived.

Pathum Nissanka, who scored a century on debut in the first Test, was unbeaten on 23. Lahiru Thirimanne (55) and Dinesh Chandimal (44) were the major contributors.

The scores: West Indies 354 vs Sri Lanka 217-7 in 91.3 overs (Lahiru Thirimanne 55, Dinesh Chandimal 44).

TH CROSSWORD + 13210

(set by Vulcan)



- 16 Dark horse, say (5)
- 17 Son's delighted – heading off, full of energy (5)
- 19 Metal pane, perhaps one attached to a door (9)
- 22 Freed/ let out again (8)
- 24 Emotionally affected without end – you got me (6)
- 26 State evacuated one thousand people – basically huge (7)
- 27 Partnering with a left leader that's two-faced (7)
- 28 Misuse of the semantics draws criticism (12)
- DOWN
- 2 In another resort is where we are (2,5)
- 3 It's all men do (4,5)
- 4 Be in shock and look upset (4)
- 5 Notwithstanding an absence of diversity (3,3,4)
- 6 Old section with abstract style (2,3)
- 7 Christmas cake you will reportedly book (4,3)
- 8 New map covering a North American country (6)
- 9 Missing the first biggest show (6)
- 14 No matter what happens in New York, a contest goes about (2,3,5)
- 16 Don't worry about it – easy peasy (2,7)
- 17 Mark runs through injury (6)
- 18 Controversial European on microphone (7)
- 20 Sale of university in process (7)
-

Riya Bhatia
bows out

INDIANS ABROAD

SPORTS BUREAU
DUBAI

Qualifier Riya Bhatia was beaten 6-2, 6-4 by Anastasia Zakhrova of Russia in the pre-quarterfinals of the \$25,000 ITF women's tennis tournament here on Wednesday.

In doubles, Ankita Raina, seeded No.1 with Valeria Savinykh of Russia, missed a match point and lost 12-10 in the super tie-break of the pre-quarterfinals to Sarah Beth Grey and Elitsa Kostova.

In the \$15,000 women's event in Tunisia, Karman Kaur Thandi beat Andrea Renee Villareal of Mexico 4-6, 6-3, 7-5.

The results:
\$25,000 ITF women, Dubai: Pre-quarterfinals: Anastasia Zakhrova (Rus) bt Riya Bhatia 6-2, 6-4. Doubles (pre-quarterfinals): Sarah Beth Grey (GBR) & Elitsa Kostova (Bul) bt Valeria Savinykh (Rus) & Ankita Raina 4-6, 6-4, [12-10].

Berfu Cengiz & Ipek Oz (Tur) bt Miriam Bianca Bulgaru (Rou) & Riya Bhatia 6-2, 6-1; Anna Danilina (Kaz) & Sofya Lansere (Rus) bt Humera Bahamur & Preerna Bhambri 6-1, 6-1.

\$15,000 ITF women, Monastir, Tunisia: First round: Karman Kaur Thandi bt Andrea Renee Villareal (Mex) 4-6, 6-3, 7-5.

10 boxers test positive at Patiala camp

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
KOLKATA

Ten boxers tested positive for COVID-19 at the National camp in Patiala.

Abhishek Yadav, Ankit Kumar, Sanjeet, Naveen Boora, Sachin Kumar, Naveen Kumar, Deepak Kumar, Manjeet Singh, Narendar and head coach C.A. Kuttappa have returned positive tests, as per the isolation list accessed by *The Hindu*.

Deepak, Manjeet and Narendar have been hospitalised after showing symptoms, according to a source.

Neither team doctor Karanjeet Singh nor any Boxing Federation of India (BFI) official could be reached for further details.

Without naming any athlete, a Sports Authority of India (SAI) release on Wednesday said that 26 of 313 had returned positive results at the NIS Patiala campus.

Four of 428 tested at the National Centre for Excellence in Bengaluru were positive.

All the Olympic-bound athletes tested negative, added the statement.

Jr. women's Natl. hockey postponed

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
NEW DELHI

The 11th junior women's hockey National has been postponed until further notice due to a surge in COVID-19 cases. The tournament was scheduled from April 3 to 12 at Simdega, Jharkhand.

Following instructions and protocols from the district commissioner, Simdega and state authorities, the decision to postpone the championship was taken by Hockey India (HI).

"In light of the rising number of COVID-19 cases and after advice from the local state authorities, Hockey India in consultation with the host Hockey Jharkhand arrived at the decision to postpone the 11th Hockey India Junior Women National Championship 2021," HI president Gyanendra Ningombam said.

Belgium and the Netherlands go on a scoring spree

Portugal fights back for a win against Luxembourg

WC QUALIFYING

ASSOCIATED PRESS
MADRID

Belgium and the Netherlands scored 15 goals combined in big routs in World Cup qualifying early in the second half in Portugal's victory at Luxembourg.

Two goal heroes

Hans Vanaken and Leandro Trossard both scored a pair of goals as Belgium trounced Belarus with four goals in each half.

The home victory left Belgium three points ahead of the Czech Republic, which lost 1-0 to Wales thanks to a late Daniel James goal after an assist by Gareth Bale.

Second half collapse

Gibraltar, ranked 195th in the world, kept the Netherlands largely at bay before the break but collapsed in the second half on the artificial turf of Victoria Stadium.

The visitors added to their 1-0 halftime lead with four

goals by the 64th, then got two more closer to the end.

Turkey missed a chance to earn its third straight win after squandering a 2-0 lead in a 3-3 draw with Latvia.

The results: Group A: Luxembourg 1 (Rodrigues 30) lost to Portugal 3 (Jota 45+2, Ronaldo 51, Joao Palhinha 80); Azerbaijan 1 (Makhmudov 59+pen) lost to Serbia 2 (A. Mitrovic 16, 81).

Group E: Wales 1 (James 82) bt Czech Republic 0; Belgium 8 (Batshuayi 14, Vanaken 17, 89, Trossard 38, 76, Doku 42, Praet 49, Bentke 70) bt Belarus 0.

Group G: Gibraltar 0 lost to the Netherlands 7 (Berghuis 42, L. de Jong 55, Depay 61, 88, Wijnaldum 62, Malen 64, Van de Beek 85); Turkey 3 (Kenan Karman 2, Hakan Calhanoglu 33, Burak Yilmaz 52) drew with Latvia 3 (Savatlneks 35, Uldrikis 58, D. Ikaunaiks 79); Montenegro 0 lost to Norway 1 (Sorloth 35).

Group H: Croatia 3 (Perisic 62, Modric 76+pen, Brekalo 90) bt Malta 0; Slovakia 2 (Skriniar 38, Mak 74) bt Russia 1 (Fernandes 71); Cyprus 1 (Pittas 42) bt Slovenia 0.



Goal glut: Hans Vanaken slams in Belgium's second past a hapless Alyaksandr Hutar of Belarus. ■ GETTY IMAGES

ATKMB keeps faith in Habas

ISL

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
KOLKATA

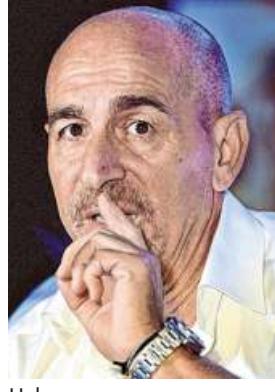
Indian Super League runner-up ATK Mohun Bagan has decided to retain Spanish head coach Antonio Lopez Habas for one more season, it announced on Wednesday.

Habas, the most successful coach in the ISL, will enter his sixth season with an Indian club. He won two ISL titles (2014 and 2019-20) with ATK before its merger with Mohun Bagan last year.

The new agreement will mark Habas' association with a Kolkata club for five seasons.

The 63-year-old Spaniard had spent one season with the now-defunct FC Pune City (2016-2017).

"I am happy that the officials have kept faith in me and our technical staff. It



Habas. ■ FILE PHOTO: PTI

will inspire us all a lot before the AFC Cup and boost our moral strength. Our goal now is to bring success to the club at the international level," reacted Habas from his home in Madrid. "We are committed to upholding the trust of the members, supporters and officials."

ATKMB's next target will be to do well in the AFC Cup 2022 qualifiers.

Malak stuns top seed Sunayna

Tanvi makes the semifinals with a facile win over Aparajitha

SQUASH

K. KEERTHIVASAN
CHENNAI

Malak Kamal of Egypt upset the calculations of Sunayna Kuruvilla, the top seed, 13-11, 11-4, 9-11, 15-17, 11-8 to enter the women's semifinals of the PSA Challenger Tour squash tournament here on Wednesday.

Malak will next take on countrymate Rana Ismail for a place in the final.

Tanvi Khanna of India also reached the last four with a facile 11-8, 11-9, 11-6 win over Aparajitha Balamurukan.

Tanvi will lock horns with Hana Moataz of Egypt, who put it across India's Sanika Choudhari 11-3, 12-10, 11-3 in just 14 minutes.

Going all out

Trailing by a game, Sunayna went all out in the fourth game against Malak.

The top seed finally closed out the game on her sixth game point while Malak couldn't convert two match points.

Malak went 5-2 and 9-5 up in the decider. And a back-



Big scalp: Malak Kamal during her win over top seed Sunayna Kuruvilla. ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

hand drive from the deep to the tin saw the end of Sunayna.

The results (quarterfinals):

Men: Abhay Singh bt Yahya El-nawasany (Egy) 11-6, 11-2, 6-11, 7-11, 7-12; Karim El Hammamy (Egy) bt Moustafa El Sirty (Egy) 15-13, 11-4, 7-11, 13-11; Toddy Harrity (USA) bt Aly Hussein (Egy) 11-9, 11-8, 12-10; Mahesh

Mangaonkar bt Mazen Gamal (Egy) 11-6, 11-5, 11-8.

Women: Rana Ismail (Egy) bt Sachika Balvani 11-9, 11-4, 12-10; Tanvi Khanna bt Aparajitha Balamurukan 11-8, 11-9, 11-6.

Hana Moataz (Egy) bt Sanika Choudhari 11-3, 12-10, 11-3; Malak Kamal (Egy) bt Sunayna Kuruvilla 13-11, 11-4, 9-11, 15-17, 11-8.

Kohli stays on top

Bumrah slips in ODI rankings

CRICKET

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
DUBAI

India captain Virat Kohli retained his top spot in the ICC rankings for ODI batsmen, while pacer Jasprit Bumrah slipped a place to fourth position in the bowler's list released on Wednesday.

Kohli, who had scores of 56 and 66 in the first and second ODIs against England, has 870 points in his kitty.

Bumrah, who was rested from white-ball series against England, slipped a place to the fourth spot among bowlers and has 690 points.

India limited overs vice-captain Rohit Sharma is ranked third, behind Pakistan's Babar Azam, while K.L. Rahul has moved up from 31st to 27th spot.

All-rounder Hardik Pandya has achieved a career-best 42nd position among batsmen after scores of 35 and 64, and Rishabh Pant has entered the top 100.

In the T20 batting list, both Rahul and Kohli have



Virat Kohli. ■ REUTERS

dropped a rung and are now placed fifth and sixth respectively. No other Indian featured in the top-10 among bowlers and all-rounders in the latest T20I rankings.

In the Test rankings, spinner Ravichandran Ashwin retained his second spot behind Australia's Pat Cummins.

Good day in office for Arjun

TENNIS

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

National champion Arjun Khade had a fruitful day, beating Dominik Palan of the Czech Republic 6-3, 6-4 in singles and making the doubles quarterfinals with Saketh Myneni in the \$15,000 ITF men's tennis tournament here on Wednesday.

Arjun had perspired to beat the Czech in three sets last week in Pune.

Big serves

This time around, serving big and stroking with intensity, Arjun was able to assert

his strong game against the Czech.

Top seed Sidharth Rawat started well but allowed Filip Bergevi of Sweden to prevail over him in a three-set tussle.

Bergevi meets Poonacha

Bergevi will next challenge the former national champion Niki Poonacha.

The results:

Singles (first round): Filip Bergevi (Swe) bt Sidharth Rawat 4-6, 6-4, 6-1; Luca Castelnovo (Sui) bt S.D. Prajwal Dev 4-6, 6-3; Aman Mchugh (GBR) bt Henry Pattren (GBR) 7-6(5), 6-4.

Nitin Kumar Sinha bt Abhinav Sanjeev Shammugam 6-2, 6-0; Dalibor Sircina (Cze) bt Rohan Mehra 6-3, 6-2.

Jonathan Mridha (Swe) bt Suraj Prabodh 6-3, 6-3; Arjun Kadhe bt Dominik Palan (Cze) 6-3, 6-4.

Alexander Kotzen (US) bt Chirag Duhan 6-3, 6-0; Oliver Crawford (US) bt Ishaque Ebdal 6-7(1), 6-1, 6-3; Manish Sureshkumar bt Preston Brown (US) 6-3, 6-3; Zsombor Velcz (Hung) bt Muthu Aadhiytha Senthilkumar 6-4, 6-1.

Marco Brugnerotto (Ita) bt Siddharth Vishwakarma 6-4, 5-7, 6-4; Simon Carr (Irl) bt Aryan Goves 6-0, 6-1.

Doubles (pre-quarterfinals): Arjun Kadhe & Saketh Myneni bt Dev Javia & Adil Kalyanpur 6-2, 6-3; Anirudh Chandrasekar & Niki Poonacha bt Lorenzo Bocchi (Ita) & Chandril Sood 6-2, 6-3.

Jonathan Mridha (Swe) bt Suraj Prabodh 6-3, 6-3; Arjun Kadhe bt Dominik Palan (Cze) 6-3, 6-4.

Arjun Kadhe advanced in both singles and doubles. ■ KAMESH SRINIVASAN



Well begun: Arjun Kadhe advanced in both singles and doubles. ■ KAMESH SRINIVASAN

Rushil Khosla upsets Denim Yadav

Madhurima gets the better of Sai Rajesh

SPORTS BUREAU
INDORE

Rushil Khosla beat fifth seed Denim Yadav 6-2, 6-4; Parv Nage bt Sarthak Gandhi 3-6, 7-5, 6-4; Rishi Jalota bt Prasad Ingale 7-6(3), 6-3; Aayush Bhat bt A.S. Shyamsundar 6-1, 6-0; Adhirit Awal bt Abhay Chhabra 7-5, 6-4; Sandesh Kurale 6-3, 6-2; Vishesh Patel 6-3, 6-2; Aditya Nandal bt Nisha Ravi 6-3, 6-1; Torus Rawat bt Yugraj Singh 6-3, 6-1; Daksh Palakar 6-3, 6-2; Bangari 6-2, 6-7(4), 6-1; Manas Dhamme bt Lokesh Pun 6-0, 6-3; Nithilan Eric bt Debasish Sahoo 3-6, 6-1, 6-4; Rushil Khosla bt Denim Yadav 6-2, 6-4; Deep Munim bt Prajwal Tewari 2-6, 6-4, 6-2; Skandha Rao bt Bharat Phulwaria 7-6(4), 6-3; Karan Singh bt Yashvardhan Singh 6-3, 6-2.

Girls: Reshma Maruri bt Debasish Sahoo 6-3, 6-1; Nithilan Eric bt Debasish Sahoo 6-3, 6-1; Skandha Rao bt Bharat Phulwaria 7-6(4), 6-3; Karan Singh bt Yashvardhan Singh 6-3, 6-2.