

NEW DELHI SATURDAY 3 APRIL 2021



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DELHI AGE | 11

Alia Bhatt tests Covid-19 positive, to remain under home quarantine



Police personnel block a street near the US Capitol after the incident. — AFP

insurrectionists stormed the Capitol as Congress was voting to certify Joe Biden's presidential win. The Capitol police said that someone "rammed a vehicle into two USCP officers" and that a suspect was taken into custody. At least one of the officers was seriously injured, the officials said.

The law enforcement officials told the AP that the suspect was shot and was being taken to the hospital in critical condition. One of the officers who was injured was taken by police car to the hospital; the other was being transported by emergency medical crews, the officials said.

—AP

US officials had no immediate public comment, but Washington on Thursday welcomed the news that the Europeans would be meeting with the Iranians to try to get talks going again.

SHORT TAKES

CBSE rules out cut in syllabus for Classes 9-12

New Delhi: The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) has decided not to reduce the syllabus for the students of classes 9 to 12 for academic year 2021-22, according to the new curriculum. The CBSE had last year rationalised the syllabus by up to 30 per cent for classes 9 to 12 for academic year 2020-21 to reduce the course load of students amid the Covid-19 crisis. The students who studied the reduced syllabus will appear in exams in May-June. According to the new syllabus released by the CBSE, the chapters and topics that were slashed in the last academic year have been restored in the official curriculum for the upcoming academic session, 2021-22. "The board already announced last year that the rationalisation exercise was a one-time initiative as teaching and learning through online mediums or alternative methods was fairly new then," a CBSE official said. Schools across the country were closed in March last year, ahead of a nationwide lockdown to curb the spread of the coronavirus. The teaching and learning activities majorly moved online during the lockdown. While a few states allowed a partial reopening of the schools in October, several states are again resorting to online classes in the new academic session amid a surge in the number of Covid-19 cases. In its syllabus-rationalisation exercise, the board had dropped the chapters on democracy and diversity, demonetisation, nationalism, secularism, India's relations with its neighbours and growth of local governments in the country, among others. The choice of the chapters dropped from the syllabus drew a backlash from opposition political parties and a section of academicians, who claimed that the move was "ideologically driven", while several school principals welcomed it as a relief to students. Last year, the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE) had also announced a reduction of up to 25 per cent in the syllabus for the classes 10 and 12 board exams in 2021, taking into account the learning disruption due to the closure of schools during the lockdown. The CISCE is yet to announce its syllabus for the new academic session. — PTI

Emission norms: New deadlines set for thermal power plants

New Delhi: The environment ministry has amended rules allowing thermal power plants within 10 kilometres of the National Capital Region (NCR) and in cities with more than 10 lakh population to comply with new emission norms by the end of 2022, according to official notification. A task force will be constituted by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) to "categorise thermal power plants (TPPs) in three categories on the basis of their location", the ministry said in the notification dated April 1. Also, TPP units in "non-attainment cities" and those within 10 kilometres of critically polluted areas are required to meet the emission norms by December 31, 2023. Non-attainment cities are those which have consistently failed to meet the National Ambient Air Quality Standards. The CPCB has identified 124 such cities. Coal-fired power plants in the rest of the areas have to comply with the new standards by December 31, 2024, according to the notification. TPPs declared to retire before December 31, 2025, are "not required to meet the specified norms in case such plants submit an undertaking to the CPCB and the CEA (Central Electricity Authority) for exemption on ground of retirement", the notification said. The environment ministry had revised emission norms for particulate matter (PM), sulphur dioxide and oxides of nitrogen for TPPs in December 2015, requiring them to install emission control systems by December 2017. The deadline was pushed to December 2022 for all power stations in the country in view of implementation issues and challenges. However, power stations in the national capital region were required to comply with the revised norms by December 2019. — PTI

Lockdown not being considered yet: Kejriwal

3,594 Covid cases in Delhi, highest daily count of '21; 14 more deaths take toll to 11,050

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, APRIL 2

Delhi recorded 3,594 fresh Covid-19 cases on Friday, the highest daily count this year, while 14 more people died due to the infection, taking the death toll to 11,050, according to the city health department. The positivity rate also mounted to 4.11 from 3.57 per cent a day before, amid a massive surge in cases in the span of the last few weeks.

Delhi had reported 2,790 cases on Thursday, and 1,819 coronavirus cases on Wednesday with a positivity rate of 2.71 per cent. The number of cumulative cases on Friday stood at 6,68,814. Over 6.45 lakh patients have recovered from the virus.

The city had recorded 992 cases on Tuesday, 1,904 cases on Monday and 1,881 cases on Sunday. It had reported 1,558 cases on Saturday, 1,534 cases on last Friday, 1,515 cases last Thursday, 1,254 cases a day before that and 1,101 cases last Tuesday, when it had crossed the 1,000-mark for the first time since December 24.

Delhi is encountering the



Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal addresses the media via video conferencing in New Delhi on Friday. — PTI

fourth wave of Covid-19 infection but imposition of a lockdown is not being considered yet, chief minister Arvind Kejriwal said on Friday and urged the Centre to allow states to undertake mass vaccination.

If there is a need for a lockdown in the future, a decision will be taken after due public consultation, he said, adding the fourth wave is less serious than the previous ones as there are fewer deaths and hospitalisations this time. The chief minister, however, added: "It's a matter

of concern since Covid-19 cases are rising exponentially. But there is no need to panic. The government is monitoring the situation and taking all necessary steps."

After a high-level meeting, Kejriwal suggested that the Centre should lift the age bar of 45 years for vaccination to pave the way for mass-level inoculation.

If the Centre allowed vaccination at non-health-care facilities like schools, immunisation be undertaken on a war footing to check the spread of the



A health worker collects a nasal sample from a passenger for Covid-19 test in New Delhi on Friday. — PTI

virus, he said.

Kejriwal also appealed to the people to wear face masks, maintain social distancing and regularly wash hands to prevent the spread of the virus.

"Going by the current situation, we are not considering imposing a lockdown. We are closely monitoring the situation and such a decision will be taken only after due public consultation," Kejriwal said in a press briefing.

"India is witnessing a rise in coronavirus cases. Delhi, too, is seeing a surge in Covid-19. On March 16,

there were 425 Covid cases in the city. According to the latest report, it has reached 3,583. This might be the second wave for the country, but Delhi is encountering the fourth peak," he said.

The chief minister said the fourth wave is less serious than the previous one encountered in October last year.

"We saw that in October 3,000 to 4,000 new cases came up daily. At the time, there were around 1,700 patients in ICU. Today it is around 800. The mortality rate was 40 deaths daily,

No 'mulaqat' with family in Delhi prisons from April 5

New Delhi, April 2: Amid a surge in Covid-19 cases, the Delhi Prisons department has decided to suspend the prisoners' meeting with their relative from April 5, authorities said on Friday.

The system of internal 'mulaqat' was resumed on March 20 with a view to normalise the routine of inmates, they said.

However, the jail authorities have again decided to discontinue it amid an increase in coronavirus cases in the national capital, officials said.

Meeting of inmates with their legal counsels, however, will continue with proper Covid precautions, they said, adding that the facility of telephone and 'e-mulaqat' will continue to remain available for the

prisoners.

"In view of the rising trend of Covid-19 cases once again, it has been decided to suspend physical 'mulaqat' of Delhi Prison inmates with family and friends with effect from Monday till further orders. The situation will be reviewed again in 15 days," said Sandeep Goel, Director General (Delhi Prisons).

According to the latest data shared by Delhi Prisons department, as on April 2, out of the 130 inmates who tested positive for Covid-19, 118 have recovered, two have died and there are presently 10 active cases.

All the 293 prison staff who were found Covid positive have also recovered, it stated. — PTI

now it is around 10-12. This new wave is less serious," he said.

Kejriwal said provisions such as ambulance, hospital, ventilator, oxygen, and

ICU beds were all discussed in the meeting attended by health minister Satyendar Jain and top officials of different departments.

CM to represent Delhi, India at World Cities Cultural Forum

New Delhi, April 2: Chief minister Arvind Kejriwal will be representing Delhi and India at the World Cities Cultural Forum (WCCF), according to a statement issued by the city government on Friday.

He has been invited by Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, to participate in the forum comprising 40 world cities — including London, Tokyo, and New York — that recognise the impact and importance of culture and creativity and seek to inculcate these values in public policy and city planning.

The annual summit, attended by deputy mayors for culture and heads of culture from the member cities, is at the heart of the forum's activity.

"Proud that Delhi will be a part of the forum's annual summit. Our goal is to transform Delhi into a world leader in the field of culture and an artist-friendly city. Culture will be the key to finding long term sustainable solutions for the city," Mr Kejriwal said.

Delhi will also be a part of the World Cities Culture Report, the most comprehensive global data set on culture in cities, the statement added.

Talking about this year's theme, "The Future of Culture," for the annual summit, Mr Kejriwal said it was a "topic of relevance" and would help reimagine the culture of Delhi, "especially in the wake of several devastating challenges and the Covid-19 crisis faced by people in the last one year."

"As people around the world struggled in isolation, it has been art and music that helped us stay connected and cope with the crisis at hand. Creativity and sharing provided hope and strength to respond to Covid-19 with resilience," the chief minister said. — PTI



People offer prayer outside the Sacredheart church in New Delhi on Good Friday as the church remained closed for public due to Covid-19 restrictions. — G.N. Jha

Man held for posting morphed nude pics of minor on social media

New Delhi, April 2: A 25-year-old man has been arrested for allegedly creating fake profiles of a class 8 student, sending her obscene messages and posting her morphed nude photographs on social media, police said on Friday.

The accused wanted to take revenge from the class 8 girl after being rebuked by her for allegedly harassing her friend, whom he had met on social media, in a similar manner. The accused, Bharat Khatar, did his graduation in B.com Honours from Delhi University via correspondence and had been working with an event management company for the last two years, they said.

The accused had targeted six girls so far. One of the six lodged a complaint against him in Faridabad, police said. An investigation was initiated on the complaint of the minor girl's mother who alleged that her daughter's fake Instagram profile was created by the accused, police said. She told the police that the accused had been sending her daughter obscene posts, messages and photographs from the fake profile and stalking her, a senior police officer said.

A case was registered at K M Pur police station under section 354 D (stalking), 509 (word, gesture or act intended to insult the modesty of a woman), 354 A (sexual harassment and punishment for sexual harassment) and other relevant section of the POCSO Act, according to police.

Deputy Commissioner of Police (South) Atul Kumar Thakur said as part of investigation, letters were sent to Facebook, seeking details about the fake Instagram account. According to technical inputs, the investigating team analysed the IPs and zeroed in on the suspect, he said. After due verification, the accused was apprehended from his residence at NIT colony in Faridabad on Thursday, he said.

Investigations revealed that at first the accused targeted the victim's friend after contacting her through social media, police said. He sent her obscene messages, following which she had heated arguments with him via Whatsapp calls. She then narrated the entire incident to the Class 8 girl who rebuked the accused and warned him about not indulging in such acts, the officer said. — PTI

70 new corona cases push Noida's active caseload to 434

Noida, April 2: Uttar Pradesh's Gautam Buddh Nagar recorded 70 new cases of Covid-19 on Friday pushing the district's infection tally to 26,255, official data showed.

The active cases in the district continued its upward trend and reached 434 from 399 the previous day, according to the data released by the UP Health Department for a 24-hour period.

Also, 27 patients got discharged during the last 24 hours in Gautam Buddh Nagar with the overall recoveries reaching 25,730 in the district, the fifth highest in the state, the data showed.

Gautam Buddh Nagar has a death toll of 91 with a mortality rate of 0.34 per cent. The recovery rate of patients reached 98 per cent on Friday, the statistics showed.

Meanwhile, the number of active Covid-19 cases in UP reached 14,073 from 11,918 on Thursday while the overall recoveries reached 5,99,827 and the death toll reached 8,836 on Friday, the data showed. — PTI

Man's body found with face burnt in vacant Narela flat

New Delhi, April 2: The body of a 36-year-old man with his face burnt was found inside a vacant flat in north Delhi's Narela area, police said on Friday.

The deceased has been identified as Karan Kumar, a resident of Mahavir Vihar colony in Kanagawa, they said.

After receiving information about the incident on Thursday, the police reached the DSIIDC flats in Bhorgarh and found the body on the second floor of the building, they said.

There were injury marks on the Kumar's neck and hands and his face was burnt to hide his identity, the officer said.

Kumar's relatives found the body and informed the police. A missing person report had also been lodged earlier at the Kanjhawal police station, police said.

"Statement of Vicky (21), nephew of the victim, was recorded where he stated that his uncle left the house on Wednesday to meet his brother-in-law Panna Ram who resides in Narela," Deputy Commissioner of Police (outer north) Rajeev Ranjan Singh said.

However, when Kumar did not come back, his relatives asked Panna whether he had met his brother-in-law to which he refused, police said.

Panna also had an injury mark in his leg and when his relatives persisted, he told them to search for Kumar at the DSIIDC Flats, police said.

On Friday, the relatives of victim came to DSIIDC flats and found his body, the officer said.

In another case, a 26-year-old woman was found dead on Friday inside her rented accommodation in northwest Delhi's Mangolpuri area, police said. The deceased has been identified as Jyoti, they said.

Police reached the spot where the deceased was found lying with injury marks on her head and right side of the face, the officer said.

Jyoti had shifted to the rented place a few days ago. She was separated from her husband for the last few years and shifted here with her live-in partner Shiva Sharma, who works as a carpenter, police further said.

Efforts are being made to arrest the accused person who is absconding, police said. — PTI

Constable's wife found hanging at home

New Delhi, April 2: A Delhi Police constable's wife allegedly hanged herself at her house in southwest Delhi's Ghitorni village, officials said on Friday.

According to the police, a caller informed them on Thursday evening that his wife and two sons were at home but no one was answering the door. "Police reached the spot at Ghitorni village and the door of the house was found latched from inside. Later, police broke the door down and found Rajesh, wife of Constable Sushil, hanging from ceiling fan inside the house," Deputy Commissioner of Police (southwest) Ingit Pratap Singh said.

The couple's two sons were found unconscious in the bathroom and were rushed to the Fortis Hospital in Vasant Kunj where they are undergoing treatment, the police said.

The elder son is stable but the condition of the younger child is still critical, they said, adding that appropriate legal action will be taken after a complaint is received.

The couple got married in 2014, they said. — PTI

Fake call centre busted, 25 held

New Delhi, April 2: Twenty-five employees of a fake call centre here have been apprehended for allegedly duping US nationals, Delhi Police officials said on Friday.

The call centre was in Saidullajab in south Delhi's Mehrauli area, they said. Its employees used to dupe US nationals by asking them to pay membership fees on the pretext of providing them US government grants for unemployed persons and handicapped persons, police said.

So far, 25 employees, including their boss Kamal Dass, have been apprehended. They were

detained following a raid, they said.

Employees used fake names and called their potential targets in the US through spoofing calls via internet. During inquiry, Dass disclosed that they used get details of potential targets from their sources and accordingly, briefed employees about their strategy to dupe them, police said.

"The employees at the call centre called up US citizens by impersonating themselves as officials and asked them to pay membership fees on the pretext of providing US government grants for unemployed persons and

handicapped persons. Once the victim paid the amount, they stopped attending their calls," Deputy Commissioner of Police (South) Atul Kumar Thakur said.

To pay the fees, the victims were asked to purchase Google Play Cards, Ebay gift cards and Amazon gift cards, he said.

Then they were asked to share the coupon code to encash the cards. The employees sent these coupon codes to their "sources" and received money through bank transfers and cash payments, Thakur said. — PTI

HC grants bail to doctor facing rape allegation

New Delhi, April 2: The Delhi high court has granted bail to a doctor of Safdarjung Hospital, accused of raping a woman on the promise of marriage, on the ground that it was "not a case of forceful sexual assault" and he would not be in a position to terrorise the victim or tamper with evidence.

Justice Subramonium Prasad said there is nothing on record to indicate that the man had promised marriage to the prosecutrix and whether the woman's physical relationship was based on her free consent or not will be

decided only during the trial.

The court noted that the evidence has been collected and the mobile phone of the man was with the police.

"In view of the above, this court finds it just and expedient to grant bail to the petitioner (doctor) in the event of arrest in the case registered at Hauz Khas police station for offences punishable under Sections 376 (punishment for rape) and 328 (causing hurt by means of poison with and intent to commit an offence) of the IPC," the high court said.

The court granted bail to

the doctor on furnishing of a personal bond of ₹50,000 with a surety by his relative of the like amount.

It directed him to give all his mobile numbers and address to the investigating officer and that he shall report to the concerned police station every Monday.

According to the woman, her father had suffered a heart attack in January 2019 and she took him to Safdarjung Hospital, where the accused was the doctor on duty.

During the course of treatment, he visited the woman's residence and gave his profile for the purpose of marriage and asked for her profile as well, she said.

The woman alleged that later on, he called her to meet him to know each other. Once she was called by him at his friend's house where she was given a soft drink owing to which she lost consciousness. Upon regaining consciousness she realised she had been raped.

When she confronted the man, she was threatened that a video had been made by him and would be made viral, the woman alleged, adding that later on she was called at some hotels and raped again.

An FIR was lodged at Hauz Khas police station on January 28, 2021, on the woman's rape complaint.

Seeking bail, the doctor's counsel submitted that the FIR was registered on the allegation that the petitioner took the woman to his friend's flat on June 9, 2019 where she was raped.

"However, this story has been completely given a go-by and now the allegation is that the man promised marriage and established physical relationship with her," he argued, adding that no useful purpose would be served by arresting the doctor. — PTI



Farmers block traffic at Ghazipur border after Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) leader Rakesh Tikait's convoy was allegedly attacked in Rajasthan's Alwar during their ongoing agitation against three farm laws in New Delhi on Friday. — PTI

SHORT TAKES

Bengal registers over 86% polling

Kolkata: West Bengal has recorded a voter turnout of 86.11 per cent in the second phase of polling held in 30 assembly constituencies spread across four districts, chief electoral officer Aariz Aftab said on Friday. After the second phase of polling was over on Thursday, the CEO's office had said that 80.43 per cent of 75.94 lakh voters exercised their franchise. An updated figure was released on Friday. The Nandigram constituency, where Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has been locked in a fight with protege-turned-adversary Suwendu Adhikari of the BJP, polled 88.01 per cent votes, the CEO said. Among the four districts, the highest voter turnout of 87.42 per cent was registered in Purba Medinipur, followed by Bankura (86.98 per cent), South 24 Parganas (86.74 per cent), and Paschim Medinipur (83.84 per cent). — *PTI*

Bengal guv lauds Central forces

Kolkata: Amid allegations levelled by the ruling TMC of central police forces acting as per orders of Union Home minister Amit Shah, West Bengal governor Jagdeep Dhankhar on Friday commended the central forces and the state police for their "excellent job" in the second phase of the Assembly polls. Polling was held for 30 seats, including the high-profile Nandigram constituency where chief minister and TMC chief Mamata Banerjee was pitted against her former lieutenant Suwendu Adhikari who has crossed over to the BJP, in the second phase of state elections on Thursday. Accusing the BJP of indulging in "malpractices" in the Nandigram seat, Ms Banerjee had claimed that "Central forces and Election Commission were working as per instructions of Amit Shah". — *PTI*

BJP, TMC supporters clash at Nandigram

Nandigram: A day after the polling, stray clashes took place between workers of the Trinamool Congress and the BJP on Friday in some parts of the Nandigram seat, where Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has been locked in a fight with protege-turned-adversary Suwendu Adhikari of the saffron party, police said. A woman, stated to be a BJP activist, was injured in one such incident at Bhekutia area in the constituency and she was admitted to Nandigram block primary health centre. The area is peaceful now, police said. Clashes between workers of the two parties were also reported from villages such as Osmanchak, Dhanakhala, Rajaramchak, Khadambari in the constituency. — *PTI*

BJP'S HIMANTA BANNED FROM CAMPAIGNING

MANOJ ANAND
GUWAHATI, APRIL 2

In what may be a major setback for the BJP, its chief campaigner and Assam minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has been banned from campaigning for the next 48-hours ahead of the third and final phase of Assembly elections, which are due on Tuesday. The EC issued its order late Friday night, after it upheld a complaint by the Congress which said that Mr Sarma had openly threatened to send Hagrama Mohilary — whose BPF (Bodolal People's Front) is a member of the opposition alliance — to jail by misusing the NIA. The ban comes into effect from Friday night, effectively implying that Mr Sarma — who is the BJP's main poll strategist and has been listed as a 'star campaigner' — can no longer campaign in this election. On Thursday the EC had issued a show-cause notice to Mr Sarma, to which he replied earlier. The EC deemed his explanation as not satisfactory. "...the EC hereby strongly condemns the impugned statements made by Mr Himanta Biswa Sarma, BJP leader and star campaigner... bars him from holding any public meetings, processions, rallies, roadshows, interviews and public utterances in media (electronic, print, social media, etc.) in connection with the ongoing elections for 48 hours from immediate effect," the EC stated in its Friday night order.

LDF tried to 'destabilise' sacred places: PM

Says BJP would take steps to protect Sabarimala tradition & customs

AGE CORRESPONDENT
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM,
APRIL 2

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on Friday, hit out at the CPM-led LDF government in Kerala for what he called beating and harassing Ayyappa devotees during the Sabarimala agitation. The Prime Minister, who began the last leg of his campaign for the forthcoming Assembly elections in Kerala, addressed a public meeting in Konni constituency in Pathanamthitta district. He began his speech by chanting "Swamiye Saranam Ayyappa" a couple of times.

The Prime Minister said he was happy to be in the land blessed by Lord Ayyappa.

"The devotees who come to the hill shrine observe 41 days of penance which makes this place more blessed," he said. Mr Modi attacked the LDF government accusing it of attempting to destroy the culture. "They carried out mischief against the devotees. Instead of welcoming them with flowers, the devotees were welcomed with lathis as if they were criminals. For decades, the Left government is portraying Indian culture in poor light," he said.

The Prime Minister recalled Dr B. R. Ambedkar's statement that there was no role for Communism in a democracy. He said Ambedkar went on to say that "communism is like forest fire, it destroys itself and everything."

Mr Modi said that the ideology which had been rejected internationally would not be allowed to trample the country's culture. He said the BJP would take steps to protect the Sabarimala tradition and customs.

He came down heavily on the ruling LDF and opposition UDF in Kerala stating that the people are fed up with the two fronts and wanted BJP's development agenda. He claimed that the entry of highly respected professionals like Metroman E. Sreedharan was a game changer in Kerala politics.



Supporters during BJP president J.P. Nadda's election campaign in support of party candidate from East Guwahati constituency Siddhartha Bhattacharya in Guwahati ahead of the third phase of Assam Assembly elections on Friday.

— *PTI*

Says home minister indulges in goondaism

Control Shah first, then try to control us: Didi dares PM

AGE CORRESPONDENT
KOLKATA, APRIL 2

West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee on Friday dared PM Narendra Modi not to suggest her fighting from another seat in the ongoing Assembly Election in the state. Exuding her confidence once again of winning from Nandigram, the TMC supremo also threatened to blacken his face while asking him to exercise his "control" on Union home minister Amit Shah alleging his provocation behind the unrest.

Addressing a campaign rally, Ms Banerjee said, "Want to tell PM, control your home minister first, then try to control us."

"I do not belong to your party that you can control me and give a suggestion of fighting from another seat in the polls. When I have contested from Nandigram, I will indeed win there and blacken your face. I do not agree to work on your advice. I work on people's advice," Ms Banerjee said at a TMC rally in Dinhata of North



Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee addresses an election campaign rally for the state Assembly polls at Dinhata in Cooch Behar district on Friday.

— *PTI*

Bengal. She was replying to Mr Modi's jibe on Thursday about whether she had plans to fight from another seat in fear of losing in Nandigram to her nemesis Suwendu Adhikari of the BJP.

Training her guns on the union home minister, who was also in North Bengal during her campaign during the day, Ms Banerjee also argued, "How can Mr Shah be a saviour? He first needs to decide the place where he will stay. He is someone who neither runs the country nor the union

home ministry. He only indulges in goondaism and kills people by orchestrating riots. I ask the PM: You first control your home minister before coming to control us."

Countering Mr Shah's latest claim of BJP victory in at least 50 out of 60 seats in the first two-phase polls, the TMC chief said, "We have been able to turn those areas which were minus earlier into a plus. We also made sure how to turn the opposition minus into those areas where we are in plus."

BJP will win over 50 of 60 seats in Bengal: Shah

RAJIB CHOWDHURI
KOLKATA, APRIL 2

Continuing his trick to demoralise West Bengal's ruling Trinamul Congress and garner votes for the BJP with his exit poll-style assessment, Union home minister Amit Shah, on Friday, put more than 50 seats including Nandigram, out of 60 which went to the first two phases of the Assembly election in the state, in the saffron party's winning tally.

He made the startling claim at two back-to-back BJP rallies in North Bengal where he set a target before his party of bagging another 50 seats.

At Sitalkuchi in Cooch Behar, Mr Shah said, "All have seen the first two phases of the polls. What happened there? Kamal Khila Hai (lotus has bloomed). Mark my words. The BJP has already won more than 50 out of 60 seats."

On May 28, Mr Shah made a similar forecast, apparently based on the feedback from his party



Union home minister Amit Shah during a roadshow in support of BJP candidates at Baraipur Paschim in South 24 Parganas.

— *PTI*

and internal security agencies from New Delhi, predicting the BJP's victory in 26 seats out of 30.

Though he did not reveal this time exactly how many seats the BJP won out of another 30, a straight arithmetic calculation hints at the figure to be at least 24 seats in the second phase of the polls held on Thursday, which matches his assessment of

his party's win in 50 plus seats so far.

Triggering a speculation like Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Mr Shah also asserted that two-time chief minister Mamata Banerjee, who contested at Nandigram against her nemesis Suwendu Adhikari of the BJP, suffered defeat and mocked the TMC chief for allegedly refusing to contest from any seat in North Bengal.

In a veiled reference to the separate statehood demand of Gorkhaland, the Union home minister tried to woo the Gorkhas to get back their votebank with a promise to work for a "permanent political solution" in the hills. He talked of sops for Nepali films and introduction of a Nepali radio channel.

Mr Shah alleged that North Bengal, which is 700 km away from Kolkata, is 7,000 km from Ms Banerjee's "heart" as her party stands on three Ts—Tolabaji, Tanashahi, and Tustikaran—while the BJP means three Vs—Vikash, Vishwas, and Vyapar.

In TN, Modi calls Cong high-handed

Kanyakumari, April 2:

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday slammed the Congress as high-handed without an understanding of local sensibilities and asserted that his government does not see peoples caste or faith before serving them.

In Tamil Nadu, the situation was such that senior DMK leaders who worked shoulder to shoulder with late party patriarch Kalaingar (M. Karunanidhi) were feeling suffocated due to the newly minted crown prince of the party (DMK youth wing secretary Udhayanidhi Stalin), he said, addressing a poll meeting here, adding politics does not work this way.

"Today the mood of the

nation is clearly against the politics of nepotism and entitlement."

The opposition loved calling people anti-democratic, but they should see the nearest mirror, he said.

Congress invoked Article 356 several times and both DMK and AIADMK governments in Tamil Nadu have been dismissed by that party in the past, he said.

Having Congress, hence, in any coalition meant having a high handed ally who does not understand local sensibilities, he alleged.

"Our ideology is sab ka saath, sab ka vikaas and sab ka viswas," and at the root of this mantra lay the spirit of compassion towards everyone, he said.

— *PTI*

'If EC doesn't wake up, it'll be fatal'

Cong questions EC after a BJP candidate's vehicle was found transporting a EVM

New Delhi, April 2: The Congress on Friday questioned the Election Commission after a BJP candidate's vehicle was found transporting a polled EVM in Assam's Karimganj district and said if the poll body does not wake up now and remains "complicit" it will be fatal for democracy.

Violence broke out in Karimganj district on Thursday night after a mob spotted a BJP candidate's vehicle being used to transport a polled EVM to the strong room, forcing the police to fire in the air to bring the situation under control. The EC suspended four poll officials and ordered a repoll at the

booth as a video went viral on social media.

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi took a swipe at the Election Commission, tweeting in Hindi that the "EC's car has broken down, the BJP's intentions are bad and the condition of democracy has worsened".

Congress general secretary and chief spokesperson Randeep Surjewala said that the "EVM fraud" was for everyone to see and asked whether the EC needed the BJP's help to carry EVMs.

"EVM fraud is for everyone to see. EVMs found in the car of BJP MLA candidate Krishnedru Paul after the second phase of polling in Assam. Does the ECI

EC's car has broken down, the BJP's intentions are bad and the condition of democracy has worsened

— **Rahul Gandhi,**
Cong leader

need the BJP to carry the EVMs.

"If the ECI doesn't wake up even now and remains mute or complicit, it is fatal for democracy," he said on Twitter.

Mr Surjewala alleged that the BJP was staring at a decisive defeat in the Assam Assembly elections

and it had "panicked immeasurably".

"The last desperate measure is always EVM theft. Will the ECI reply - Why were EVM recovered from BJP candidate Krishnedru Paul's car? Why were EVM found in the boot of a luxury car near Hatipura polling station in Diphu in Assam," he asked.

He posed several questions to the ECI, asking why were the officials carrying the EVM in Jamunukh without any security official accompanying them, in violation of the ECI mandate, and whether the voters in Kalaigaon complained of EVM disappearing from the booth. — *PTI*

Stones pelted at farmer leader Tikait's convoy in Rajasthan

Jaipur, April 2: Stones were allegedly pelted at the convoy of farmer leader Rakesh Tikait in Rajasthan's Alwar district, damaging the rear windshield of his car.

Police have detained a student leader, who the Bhartiya Kisan Union claimed, belonged to ABVP, the student wing of the BJP, and accused the party of being behind the attack.

Tikait, however, was not in his car when the stones were allegedly pelted, Bhiwadi superintendent of police Ram Murti Joshi said, adding no one was injured in the incident.

The incident took place when Tikait's convoy reached Tatarpur chauraha on its way to his second rally venue, the superintendent of police said, adding the farmer leader addressed two rallies in the district on Friday.

He said Kuldeep Rai, a student leader of Alwar-based Matsya University, along with his supporters showed black flags when the cavalcade was passing.

"At this, some of the cars stopped and their occupants in the vehicles argued with them over the issue. Amid all this, the windshield of one car was damaged apparently in stone pelting, the superintendent of police said. — *PTI*

Bengal contributes highest to small savings schemes

New Delhi, April 2: West Bengal, which is the midst of a high-pitched Assembly election, accounts for the highest collection of about ₹90,000 crore from small savings schemes such as NSC and PPF among the states and union territories, which is about 15 per cent of the total corpus.

It is followed by Uttar Pradesh, the largest state in terms of population, with gross collection of ₹69,660.70 crore out of the ₹5.96 lakh crore garnered during 2017-18 (last updated), as per data collated by the National Savings Institute under the finance ministry.

The government on Thursday revoked a steep interest rate cut on small savings schemes announced the previous night. The ministry's office memorandum to roll back cut in rates on small savings scheme came hours after the finance minister termed Wednesday's notification as an "oversight".

While the government routinely announces

interest rates for small savings schemes at the end of every quarter, Wednesday's decision to cut interest rates by up to 1.1 per cent across various small savings schemes, including Public Provident Fund (PPF) and National Certificate Savings (NSC), had come a day before the second phase of polling in West Bengal and Assam.

The rate of interest on various small savings schemes for the first quarter of 2021-22 starting from April 1 and ending on June 30, 2021 would remain unchanged from those notified for the fourth quarter (January 1 to March 31, 2021) of 2020-21, the finance ministry said in the office memorandum in suppression of its previous order.

As per the National Savings Institute data, West Bengal has been leader in collections for the small savings schemes and the collection hovered around 12-15 per cent in the last few years. — *PTI*

BJP workers allege assault by BJD 'goons'

AKSHAYA KUMAR
SAHOO
BHUBANESWAR, APRIL 2

A group of workers of Odisha's ruling BJD on Friday allegedly attacked a section of BJP workers at Raigiriput during campaigning for the forthcoming bypoll in Pipili assembly constituency.

According to reports, the incident occurred when BJP workers were campaigning for their candidate Ashrit Pattanayak. At Raigiriput village, the BJD party workers allegedly made an ambush and smashed the bikes of the BJP party workers. Tension gripped the area following the violence. A few BJP workers who sustained minor injuries were rushed to the local primary health centre.

SHORT TAKES

India, France, Oz to hold trilateral talks

New Delhi: The foreign ministers of India, France and Australia are expected to hold a trilateral meeting on April 13 with a focus on boosting cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, people familiar with the development said. The meeting is set to focus on exploring practical cooperation in other crucial areas such as dealing with the adverse impact of the coronavirus pandemic, they added.

Australian foreign minister Marise Payne and her French counterpart Jean-Yves Le Drian are scheduled to visit India around April 12 to attend the Raisina Dialogue. India and Australia are part of the Quad, which is aimed at ensuring a free and inclusive Indo-Pacific region. The other two members are Japan and the US. The India-France-Australia trilateral will also discuss a range of areas for practical cooperation. — *PTI*

Model Diksha to fight UP rural polls

Jaunpur, UP: Miss India 2015 contestant and model Diksha Singh is all set to take the political plunge by contesting the upcoming panchayat elections from Jaunpur. Diksha Singh, a native of Chittori village in the Baksha area of the district, told reporters at a hotel on Friday said that she studied till Class III at the village after which she moved to Mumbai and then to Goa with her father. Diksha Singh has procured a form to contest the elections for a zila panchayat member from Ward No.26 (Baksha). I have been participating in competitions and political debates since college days and have been coming to the village from time to time. On coming here, I saw that even today, Jaunpur district is far away from development. So, I have come for the panchayat elections, thinking of some change, she said. — *PTI*

Tiger kills farmer in MP village

Bhopal: A farmer in a Madhya Pradesh village was on Friday killed by a tiger. The incident took place in the village of Agari under Kureli block in Seoni district, police said. According to the police, Ghasiram Verma (65) was attacked by a tiger when he was tilling his land at around six in the morning. The big cat caught him by his neck and dragged him to the nearby forest. However, his screams alerted the passersby who chased the tiger forcing it to leave Ghasiram and flee to the forest. Ghasiram died on the spot. Later, the villagers staged protests demanding provision of security in the area by the forest department. The irate villagers also pelted stones at the forest staff who visited the site.

HC TO DECIDE ON PARAM BIR'S PLEA MONDAY

Mumbai: The Bombay high court on April 5 will pronounce its order on whether a PIL filed by former Mumbai police commissioner Param Bir Singh seeking CBI probe against Maharashtra home minister Anil Deshmukh should be heard further. Mr Singh's plea alleged that Mr Deshmukh had asked police officers, including suspended assistant police inspector Sachin Waze who has been arrested in the case of bomb scare near Mukesh Ambani's residence here, to collect ₹100 crore each month from bars and restaurants. The PIL also alleged corruption in police transfers and postings and political interference in probes. A division bench of Chief Justice Dipankar Datta and Justice G.S. Kulkarni had on March 31 reserved its order on the issue of maintainability of the PIL (whether it should be taken up for final hearing or dismissed at the preliminary stage). The Maharashtra government's lawyer argued that the petition was not maintainable as Mr Singh had vested interests and the plea was a result of his transfer from the post of police commissioner to the low-key home guards. The court will also give its ruling in three other petitions filed by lawyers Jayshri Patil and Ghanshyam Upadhyay and professor Mohan Bhide seeking independent probe into Mr Singh's allegations against Mr Deshmukh. — *PTI*

UP dalit youth held captive, tortured

Accused suspected of having affair with girl of their family

Lakhimpur Kheri (UP), April 2: A 22-year-old dalit man was allegedly held captive and tortured by four people here on the suspicion that he was having an affair with a girl of their family, police said on Friday.

The man's family members had claimed that an iron rod was also inserted in his rectum, but circle officer Pradeep Kumar Verma, who is investigating the case, denied the charge, saying the medical examination and probe so far indicate this is not true.

The accused have been arrested and the victim is under treatment at the district hospital. His condition has been stated to be serious, police said.

On Wednesday night, the Dalit man was mercilessly beaten up by the accused, causing injuries to his private parts, according to police.

Tikonia Station House Officer Gyan Prakash Tiwari said, "On the complaint by the victim's brother, an FIR was registered against four persons."

They have been charged

Girl returning home from tuition gangraped in Meerut, ends life

Meerut, April 2: A Class 10 student committed suicide after she was allegedly abducted and gangraped while on her way back from a tuition class, police said on Friday.

The girl belonging to a village under the Sardhana Kotwali area consumed poison after returning home on Thursday evening, said police adding she died in the hospital during the treatment.

Meerut's rural superintendent of police Keshav Kumar said four youths

were involved in abducting and raping the girl and the police, on the basis of a suicide note left by the girl, have arrested two of the accused and have launched a manhunt to nab two others.

In her suicide note, the girl had named four men, including Lakhnan and Vikas from a neighbouring village, besides two others.

Lakhnan and Vikas have been arrested while the police are on the lookout for two others, the SP said. — *PTI*

"All the four accused, Bramhadeen and his three sons Bharat, Gajraj and Raju, have been arrested," he said, adding a probe into the matter is on.

Circle officer Verma said that the claim that an iron rod was inserted in the man's rectum was not found true. — *PTI*

Tirupathi temple board gets 62 acres of land in Jammu

YUSUF JAMEEL
SRINAGAR, APRIL 2

The J&K government has agreed to allot 496 kanals and 17 marlas (62 acres) of land to Andhra Pradesh-based Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD) for building a temple and allied infrastructures in winter capital Jammu.

In August 2019, the Centre had stripped J&K of its special status by repealing Articles 370 and 35A of the Constitution and also split it up into two Union Territories of J&K and Ladakh.

Article 35A empowered J&K Assembly to define a J&K resident and guaranteed special rights and privileges to them and

thereby prohibiting non-permanent residents from permanent settlement and from acquiring immovable properties, government jobs and scholarships in the state. However, those willing to supplement the erstwhile state's development and economic growth would be provided with land and other immovable possessions on a temporary or lease basis under strict regulations.

The official sources said that the UT's administrative council, which met in Jammu Thursday under the chairmanship of lieutenant-governor Manoj Sinha, approved the proposal submitted by the TTD. The planned temple

complex will also have a pilgrim amenities enclosure, vedapatasala, spiritual and meditation centre, administrative office, residential quarters and parking facility.

The land is being allotted to the TTD on a lease basis for a period of 40 years, the sources said. The temple campus will in future also have medical and educational facilities.

"TTD, a board established by the government under the TTD Act, 1932 is a charitable organisation of international repute with a proven track record of activities in the spiritual, cultural, social and educational sphere," a statement issued by the J&K administration said.

Partial lockdown in 4 MP districts

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY
BHOPAL, APRIL 2

The Madhya Pradesh government on Friday imposed partial lockdown in four districts in the state amid surge in Covid-19 cases.

Lockdown has been imposed in urban areas in the districts of Ratlam, Chhindwara, Betul and Khargone. The lockdown will be in force from 10 pm on Friday till six am on April 5.

Collectors of these districts have issued notifications in this regard.

Thirty two cities in the state have recorded more than 20 coronavirus positive cases.

Meanwhile, three cities of Ratlam (85), Betul (66) and Chhindwara (66) have witnessed sudden spurt in coronavirus positive cases in the last 24 hours.

"We have sent expert teams to Ratlam, Betul and Chhindwara to bring the pandemic situation under control", chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan said.

The state on Friday reported 2,777 positive cases.

Chhattisgarh has also witnessed sudden spurt in coronavirus positive cases in the past two weeks.

The state has reported 4,617 positive cases and 25 deaths in the last 24 hours.

J&K police to step up security of politicians

YUSUF JAMEEL
SRINAGAR, APRIL 2

As separatist militants have stepped up attacks on mainstream political workers particularly those belonging to BJP in Kashmir, the authorities have asked for revamping their security. Also, security cover to VIPs is being strengthened further; not only in the Valley but also in the Jammu region of the Union Territory (UT).

Senior police officers, including inspector-general (IG), Vijay Kumar, have over the past two days visited the homes and offices of several mainstream political activists and other vulnerable persons in and around summer capital Srinagar for an on-the-spot review of security provided to them.

Acknowledging there will be a massive revamp in the security cover of politicians in view of the threat they face, IGP Kumar said on Friday that a fresh advisory is being issued to them whereas the policemen in their security details would receive additional training as warranted. He said that the issue has been deliberated threadbare over the past few days and as was decided "our men deployed for the protection of VIPs and various other politicians will get fresh training sessions and also new SOPs (standard operating procedures) and advisories are being issued."

He said that the quantum of security cover and categorisation are determined by threat perception but he admitted that the BJP workers and leaders have lately become the prime target of militants and were more vulnerable among all pro-India politicians. He, however, assured that the uniformed men protecting mainstream political workers and other VIPs would be trained and equipped in such fashion that they would be capable of "neutralising" the assailants instantly.

NIA detains woman 'seen with Waze' at Mumbai hotel

SHAHAB ANSARI
MUMBAI, APRIL 2

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) has detained a "mystery woman" who was seen in the CCTV camera of a five star hotel with Mumbai police officer Sachin Waze.

The "mystery woman" angle had emerged in the case on March 25, when CCTV footage of a five-star hotel showed her closely trailing Waze out of the hotel, where he had stayed for at least five days in mid-February.

Mr Waze allegedly entered the hotel in an Innova on February 16 and left on February 20 in a Land Cruiser — both vehicles were later seized

Kerry, Russian minister will visit India next week

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, APRIL 2

Important American and Russian dignitaries will visit India next week at the same time, even as New Delhi balances its ties with both the US and Russia. The MEA confirmed that both US special presidential envoy on climate change John Kerry and Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov will be visiting New Delhi on visits starting Monday. Mr Kerry will make a four-day visit starting Monday while Mr Lavrov will make a two-day visit, also starting Monday. Asked about the Russian Foreign Minister's reported plans to visit Pakistan after India, the MEA said it could only comment on his visit to India.

MEA spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said, "At the invitation of External Affairs Minister (EAM S. Jaishankar), Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov will be paying an official bilateral visit to

'There should be proper understanding': MEA on US report on human rights

New Delhi: In response to a US state department report that listed several human rights violations in India, New Delhi said it "expects that there should be proper understanding of developments in India".

Various issues, including the situation in Kashmir and Delhi riots, found mention in the US

report. "We are aware of this report that has come out. This is clearly an internal exercise of the US government. We are not party to it. Nevertheless, as a general approach, we expect that there should be proper understanding of developments in India," MEA spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said.

India on April 5 and 6. The visit will be a unique opportunity to discuss important aspects of our bilateral ties and also to review preparations for the next India-Russia annual summit and also to perhaps discuss regional and international issues of mutual interest."

On Mr Kerry's visit, the MEA spokesperson said, "President (Joe) Biden of the US invited our Prime Minister (Narendra Modi) to attend the Climate lead-

ers summit that will be held virtually on April 22 and 23. US special presidential envoy on climate change John Kerry will be visiting Delhi from April 5 to 8. The purpose of the visit would be to discuss the forthcoming climate leaders' summit as well as climate issues in general in the context of the 26th conference of parties of the UN framework convention on climate change which is to be held later this year."

New Delhi condemns violence in Myanmar

New Delhi, April 2: As Myanmar's military continued crackdown on civilians protesting against the February 1 coup, India on Friday condemned any use of violence and said it stood for the restoration of democracy in the country.

MEA spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said India has urged for the release of political prisoners and supported any attempts to resolve the current situation, including through the efforts of 10-nation Asean. "Let me be very clear. We condemn any use of violence. We believe that the rule of law should prevail. We stand for the restoration of democracy in Myanmar," he said.

To a question on whether India will allow people from Myanmar to cross over to the Indian side along the Indo-Myanmar border, Bagchi said it is being dealt with as per law as well as on humanitarian considera-

tions. "As far as border crossings are concerned, we are dealing with it as per our laws and humanitarian considerations," Mr Bagchi said.

Myanmar has been rocked by massive protests since the military seized power in the coup on February 1.

According to reports, hundreds of people, including children, were killed in the crackdown by Myanmar authorities. Leader of National League for Democracy Aung San Suu Kyi is among the key people detained by the military following the coup.

"We have urged the release of political prisoners and supported any attempts at resolving the current situation, including through the efforts of Asean," Mr Bagchi said.

"We remain engaged on this issue with our international interlocutors and at the UN Security Council in an effort to play a balanced and constructive role," he said. — *PTI*

India avoids queries on Pak flip-flop

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, APRIL 2

India on Friday sidestepped queries on its response to the Pakistani U-turn and flip-flop after Islamabad "deferred" its move to import cotton and sugar from India and linked it to the condition that India should first restore Article 370 on Jammu and Kashmir that was abrogated two years ago. MEA Spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said India was not the right party to whom this question should be directed, hinting therefore that it was upto Pakistan to explain its flip-flop.

In response to another question, he said he was "not aware" of any meeting between the Indian and Pakistani delegations (led by external affairs minister S. Jaishankar and his Pakistani counterpart Shah Mahmood Qureshi respectively) earlier this week on the sidelines of the ninth Ministerial Conference of the Heart of Asia — Istanbul Process on Afghanistan at Dushanbe, Tajikistan.

We are against extremism: MEA

New Delhi: Asked about the incidents of violence in Bangladesh during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent visit, India said it had always been "against fundamentalism and extremism", adding that it was "confident that the government of Bangladesh would address this challenge".

According to reports, four supporters of hard-line Islamist group Hefazat-e-Islam were shot dead after violence erupted at Hathazari, a rural town in Bangladesh.

2 militants killed

■ **Continued from Page 1** hours killed three militants. Two of them were involved in Thursday's attack.

Mr Kumar said that the slain were associated with proscribed Lashkar-e-Tayyaba (LeT) and Al-Badr Mujahideen outfits. He said that a private car used in the attack and which belonged to the person in whose house the encounter took place has been seized. He said that the SLR the militants had snatched from the police guard after injuring him critically at the entrance to the BJP activist's home too has been recovered from the encounter site, "which confirms the involvement of this group in yesterday's attack".

They have also recovered one AK assault rifle and a pistol.

The IGP claimed that the operation took longer than the predictable maximum time because four civilians were being held

hostage inside the premises. The house was eventually razed in the security forces' final assault against the holed up militants who, the police claimed, had earlier made repeated attempts to break the security dragnet and flee.

As a large number of residents relocated to the encounter site chanting pro-freedom slogans and reportedly also pelted stones at security forces, the latter fired live ammunition to quell the mob.

A 25-year-old woman received a bullet injury in her thigh and another civilian, a male, was injured in pellet firing. The witnesses and hospital sources said that at least 11 people were injured in security forces' action.

However, the IGP claimed that the woman was caught in crossfire during the gunfight and two to three other residents were injured in stone pelting.

THE ASIAN AGE

3 APRIL 2021

South India is different: Hopes rest on Left, DMK

Situated as they are in the peninsula, the southernmost states of India — Tamil Nadu and Kerala — go to the polls on Tuesday (April 6) to face another litmus test of their political insularity that has been instrumental in keeping national parties out or largely marginalised their roles in alliances dominated by powerful regional forces. While the Congress, facing an existential threat, is hoping to be a force to be reckoned with in Kerala while leading the LDF against the UDF, the BJP is piggybacking on the remnants of Jayalalithaa's AIADMK with the hope of gaining a foothold in the deep south.

The smaller Union territory of Puducherry, till recently ruled by Congress before it was displaced by defections engineered from the national capital, might still be the exception to the formidable image of a southern bulwark against the national ruling party since BJP has aligned with N. Rangasamy's AINRC and AIADMK.

Puducherry, till recently ruled by Congress, might still be the exception to the formidable image of a southern bulwark against the national ruling party since BJP has aligned with N. Rangasamy's AINRC and AIADMK

The other Dravidian major DMK has similarly reduced the seats for the Congress in its alliance of Tamil forces aiming to recapture Fort St George. An assertion of a Tamil identity might see red over the income tax raids, conducted mostly against the Opposition parties and suggesting the misuse of central agencies in a battle for votes. A preference to place M.K. Stalin, who had stayed in his father M. Karunanidhi's shadow for decades on end, on the seat of power seemed well-indicated in popularity polls till A. Raja's indiscretion changed things somewhat.

A campaign that was running smoothly enough on promises to keep the State out of NEET, fight CAA imposition as it is symbolic of a law being thrust by the Union against people's wishes and such issues may have been marginally affected by Mr Raja's references to the CM's late mother. The CM milked it for sympathy dramatically as any seasoned politician would. The larger theme of this being another prestige fight between two Dravidian majors who have given Tamil Nadu a unique outlier status in national politics was still dominant.

The Congress' fight to stay relevant in the South might hinge on a good performance from DMK+ as the prospects of the LDF benefiting from Kerala historical plumping for the alternative in five-year cycles may be denied by the impressive record of CM Pinarayi Vijayan who has steered the government with a focus on the people's welfare. The fickle nature of voters' behaviour at the EVM notwithstanding, it does appear the South India is ready to show once again that it is a different world.

Right honour, wrong timing

There is no doubt that actor Rajinikanth deserves the Dadasaheb Phalke award for his rich repertoire of celluloid marvels. He is one actor in India whose fan following is so phenomenal that even now he is an artiste much sought after in the industry. Besides, his has been a spectacular journey of 45 years in filmidom. Starting as an anti-hero, he moved up the ladder step by step to touch the pinnacle of stardom with absolute grace.

Yet if the award gave rise to some doubts, it was in the timing of the announcement. And in no way can one blame Rajinikanth for the scepticism that descended on the state. The time chosen by the BJP government to announce a momentous decision like this was monumentally flawed. You do not proclaim an admiration for an artiste's greatness out of the blue when the state is in the throes of a bitterly fought election. And that when the superstar had distanced himself from the humdrum of the same election quite consciously. So many saw a crass political motive behind the BJP government's apparent recognition of Rajinikanth's cinematic talents and contribution.

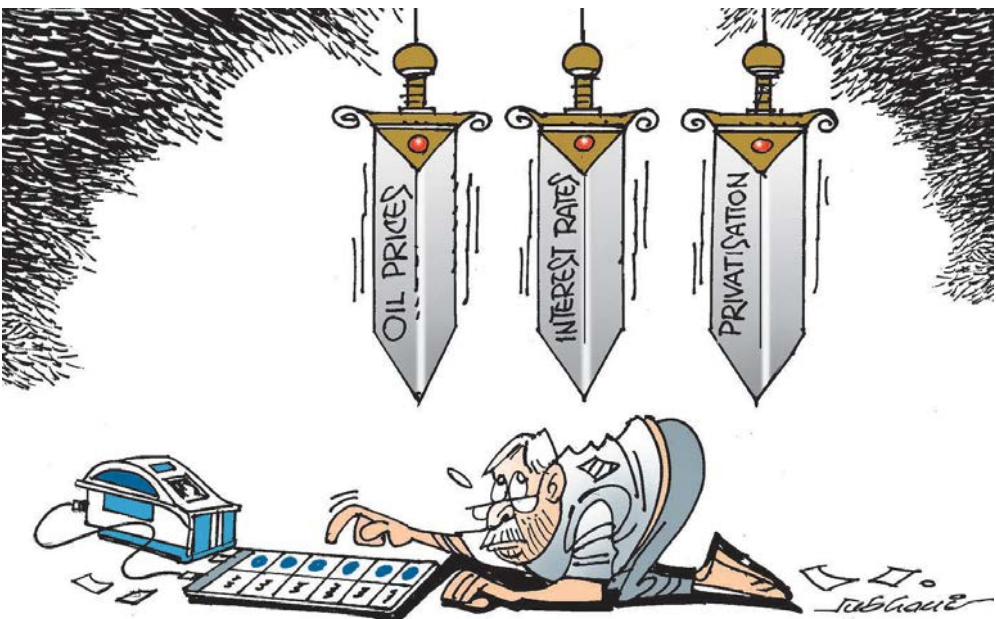
Was it all aimed at influencing the voters of Tamil Nadu, particularly those who love Rajinikanth and his films, in favour of the ruling dispensation? Did the poor crowds that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and other upcountry BJP honchos drew during their campaign prompt the ruling party at the Centre to come up with an idea as brilliant as handing over a prestigious award lying in their kitty to Rajinikanth? Or did it suddenly dawn on them that there is an actor in Tamil hinterland waiting to be honoured? Whatever it was, people in Tamil Nadu congratulated their superstar from the depth of their hearts before moving on to vote for the party and leader of their own choice.

THE ASIAN AGE

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Subhani



Will Didi's 'dadagiri' or BJP's 'dhanda' win Bong hearts?



Shobhaa De

As I key this in on April Fool's Day, I find I have completely run out of jokes! Even those crude Covid ones. There's nothing "hahaha ... HOHOHO" out there, and even our smartest, wittiest stand-up comics are struggling to come up with quips that make us laugh about the absurdity of it all. Black humour? I'll take it! Black, purple or polka dotted — who cares? I'm up for a giggle — I mean, watching the West Bengal polls, would have been amusing had it not been this ugly. I am sick to death of Didi's *dadagiri* — and the shabby tactics adopted by the BJP to counter her! At the moment Didi is winning the Big Bully race! This is a bit too rich, given that Amit Shah is India's biggest Dada... but cracking West Bengal is not all that easy, *Amitbhai*. Analysts can trot out all the numbers, charts and graphs at their disposal. Foreign observers of Indian origin can roll into the various districts to get a feel of what they believe is the ground level reality. Most of these experts are wealthy, well-meaning public intellectuals doing their job and filling detailed reports that nobody understands. But West Bengal operates with a logic all its own that defies standard deconstruction. Only one thing can be said with a level of certainty — Bongs are for Bongs. Simple!

For a true blue Bengali, it is only other 100 per cent Bengalis who make the cut — everybody else falls into the "outsiders" classification. Being born Bengali is the biggest binder — no matter where the Bengali lives. Even those Bengalis who have been away

from West Bengal most of their adult lives, identify passionately and exclusively with the Bengalis of their home state. They live Bong. Eat Bong. Think Bong.

At the moment, opinions on the outcome of the polls vastly vary, depending on which Bengali television channel is being watched. It is commonly agreed that the "elite" English channels are not giving the polls in West Bengal sufficient importance. Meaning, they are stupid enough to believe there is life beyond Bengal, and actually flash world news. The Suez Canal crisis over Hooghly hooliganism... It goes without saying, Bengalis do not watch Hindi channels, since Hindi is as good as a foreign language. This makes it a little difficult for those not blessed by Ma Kali to be born to Bengali parents (please understand — both parents have to be Bengali... we do not accept a concept called "half Bengali") to figure out the hyper sensitivities of voters. What are the actual dynamics dictating this fiery poll? It is not the economy — that's for sure. For most Bengalis, the crucial issue is a matter of their Bong identity. Is it intact or getting eroded? You can promise the Bengali just about anything — food, jobs, security, pros-

As the Next Gen figured ages ago, these old stodgy families who go on and on about 'class' — may have their comical version of 'class', but no money! They're broke! Most of them ran out of dosh two generations ago.

When Didi needs funds, she doesn't waste a moment on these fine people — she goes straight to those who have the requisite lolly — the Marwaris of Kolkata. They are a pretty canny lot, and far from 'emotional'...

perity, rice and fish for life, sandesh on a daily basis — it still won't impress the Bong voter. Had all these basics mattered, West Bengal would not be where it is today — in such a monumental mess.

One has to understand the emotional quotient of the Bengali to figure out why self-punishment seems to hold such an appeal! There is no such creature as an "unemotional" Bengali! Anything can trigger off a dramatic and exaggerated outburst. Mamata Banerjee is the queen of histrionics — she knows exactly which buttons to press and when. Her timing is unbeatable and when she throws one of her infamous, mother of all public fits — wow! Playing to the galleries comes naturally to Didi — she revels in high decibel acts during which she attacks opponents using offensive, crass street language — the kind lapped up by her loyal constituency. Didi cares a flying eff for what the *bhadralok* intellectuals make of her low-level barbs. They can sniff and snort derisively for all she cares — she knows those lofty men and women are not her core supporters. She probably consoles herself at such rare moments of self-doubt, with the thought that they could not be Amit Shah/BJP fans either! Which may be about right!

The club "*kaalture*" in Kolkata is unique and specific — the members are mainly antiquated boxwallahs desperately hanging on to vestiges of the Raj, while sipping gimlets on the well-tend-

ed lawns. They have zero idea about the "other" reality. Till the shoe pinches, of course. So far, their pedicured toes have been spared. The reason being simple — these relics really don't matter to any political party! For all their inflated egos and self-importance, even Didi knows she doesn't need to court this lot.

Besides, as the Next Gen figured ages ago, these old stodgy families who go on and on about "class" — may have their comical version of "class", but no money! They're broke! Most of them ran out of dosh two generations ago. When Didi needs funds, she doesn't waste a moment on these fine people — she goes straight to those who have the requisite lolly — the Marwaris of Kolkata. They are a pretty canny lot, and far from "emotional", not being fully Bong-Bong. They are willing to play footsie with whichever *neta* can further their business interests. They had no problems getting into bed with the Commies — and flourishing. So it will be in this election as well. God knows what Amit Shah has promised the fat cats. This is how it works in Gujaland — and perhaps traditional Bongs don't quite get it. *Maar-peeet*, murders and threats, playing the communal card — all this is so passe. Didi can appease, appease, appease all she wants and say *namaz* in public five times a day to win over a large and influential Muslim votebank. But it is really the clandestine money deals, that have already been brokered (according to those who claim to be in the know!), which will be the significant game changers in this bloody battle. It's all about "bijness" and "dhanda" — something the *bhadralok* Bong-Bongs have still to master. Till the results in May — just keep watching the *khela*!

Readers can send feedback to www.shobhaade.blogspot.com

LETTERS

SET KASHMIRIS FREE

Post abrogation of Article 370,the District Development Council 2020 elections had brought out the inner ethos of the Jammu and Kashmir region which is seen to be no different from other states. What is as significant is that competing regional interests had learnt to look at a larger picture beyond their insular and narrow perceptions. The Centre hitherto seen as an occupier has now been promoted to a political contender and, more importantly, the region was learning to gel together under a democratic grid-work. And yet the Centre is loath to go beyond its juvenile measures of curbing movement of state leaders. The Centre ought to recognise the larger purpose of a true integration of Kashmir with the Indian mainstream.

R. Narayanan
Navi Mumbai

SINISTER BILL

BY PASSING A Bill to amend the "Dharma Swatantrya" (Freedom of Religion) Act, 2003, which aims to combat forcible religious conversion, better known as "Love Jihad" on Thursday, the Gujarat government has trespassed on an inalienable right guaranteed by the Constitution. Contrary to the government's claim, it is amply clear that the Bill aims to criminalise interfaith marriages and, in turn, Muslim men who dare fall in love with Hindu women.

Sankar Paul
Chakdaha, West Bengal

DESPERATE MEASURE

It is heartening that the Centre has kept open both public and private Covid-19 Vaccination Centres (CVCs) on all days in April, including gazetted holidays. The move came on a day when the Covid-19 immunisation for all people above 45 began. The decision seeks to arrest a steep decline in vaccine coverage against the backdrop of a sharp rise in cases amid the onset of the second wave.

N.J. Ravi Chandar
Bengaluru

Farrukh Dhondy
Cabbages & Kings



*"All things vile and murderous
Bacteria great and small
Sent to plague and burden us,
The Lord God made them all.*

*The Covid 19 Virus
The mutant RNA
Sent to kill or mire us
The Lord God at his play?"*

— From **The Waist Band** by Bachchoo

Signs of hope in UK's Batley, as teacher triggers extremist calls

Living in Britain all these decades, I hadn't heard of the West Yorkshire town of Batley. It's now very much in the news and in the public eye because in its grammar school a teacher brought cartoons of the Prophet Muhammed, first published in the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, and displayed them to his pupils in a lesson about free speech. Without referring to Google or an atlas, I can confidently say that Batley sounds to me what one may call a mill-and-mosque town.

This definition arises from the fact that after the Second World War, the textile mills of the north of England suffered a shortage of indigenous labour and imported immigrants, in

very large number from Mirpur in "Pakistani" Kashmir and from what later became Bangladesh, to man the night shifts and settle in these towns. Thence the mosques and religion in these communities as a central, motivating and governing dimension.

Then came the government of "Iron Lady" Margaret Thatcher, which, in its thrust towards capitalistic globalisation, allowed international competition to shut down the British textile industry and devastate the coal mining sector. Bradford, Huddersfield and of course Batley suffered mass unemployment. But despite that disastrous setback four decades ago, this week's news about the protests outside the school have made public two facts which I find curious, if not encouraging.

But first, gentle reader, the story as it happened. A teacher in his late twenties, teaching religious studies to the 690 pupils of the school, warned a class that he was going to pose a moral question. He would show them a cartoon which some people would certainly find offensive. He would then tell them that because of that cartoon several people associated with the drawing of it and publishing it in a French magazine were murdered. The question

the pupils had to address was the moral rights and wrongs, the religious taboo on drawing pictures of the Prophet and the contrasting morality of murdering people who had perpetrated the cartoon.

This teacher was aware of the fact that Batley, just outside Bradford, had witnessed large-scale protests and book burnings in support of the Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses*. Some of the 13- and 14-year-old pupils told their parents about the lesson. An irate Muslim parent expressed his objections on the phone to the teacher. Soon there was a demonstration of 50 or so people outside the school.

The headmaster immediately suspended the teacher involved. Reports said the teacher felt threatened, apologised for showing the cartoon and went into hiding to avoid being confronted or even killed.

One of the leaders of the protests, a "preacher" named Mohammed Amin Pandor, called for the dismissal of the teacher from the school and the profession. This gentleman, Pandor, is a publicity seeker. He is a graduate engineer from Dewsbury and recently issued a fatwa against the Covid-19 vaccine. He said there

were "uncertain substances in the vaccines" and that "Allah has given a definite remedy for safety from every form of harm and disease". He urged his followers to shun the vaccine and recite a certain prayer three times. In 2017, Pandor accused Ephraim Mervis, the UK's chief rabbi, of telling Jews that it was permissible to turn Christians and Muslims into sex slaves! This year he was forced to apologise to Mervis for that offensive falsehood.

Pandor has made it known in television interviews that he opposes gay marriage and even demands that the popular TV programme *Strictly Come Dancing* be banned. He signed a letter to the newspapers attacking an article by a Muslim police commander which was headlined "We must reclaim Islam from the extremists" and declared himself in favour of this extremism.

While the protesters insist that they will continue to picket the school until the offending teacher is permanently dismissed and even barred from the profession, over 60,000 signatures have been collected in Batley for his immediate reinstatement.

I have no way of knowing who these signatories are, their location

or their religion. Are they all non-Muslims? Or are some of them Muslims who want to reclaim Islam from the extremists?

The encouraging, if curious, fact is that of the 690 pupils of Batley Grammar, 420 or so of them are "of ethnic origin". This means that the children and mostly grandchildren of the original, mostly Muslim, immigrants to Batley and Bradford have achieved the academic qualifications to gain competitive entry into this grammar school, that was founded in 1612. It implies that they are on their way to university and are guaranteed status in Britain's meritocracy.

Now 600 of the school's pupils have signed a petition in support of reinstating the offending teacher. Even if all the "non-ethnic or non-Muslim" third of the school's pupils have all signed, it still means that 330 of the "ethnic" pupils, certainly at least 300 of them from Muslim households, have taken a "liberal" attitude to the incident and the supposed offence.

Can we conclude that this generation of Batley Muslims are moving away from the extremism that their parents or grandparents clung to?

Pandor Saheb, the tide of tolerance threatens.

SHORT TAKES

DOCS COMPLETE
HEART SURGERY
DURING HOSP FIRE

Moscow: A team of doctors successfully completed open heart surgery inside a Russian hospital that caught fire on Friday as firefighters battled the flames from the outside, regional emergency services said.

The wooden roofed building in the far eastern city of Blagoveshchensk caught fire and 60 patients were evacuated as it filled with smoke.

But a team of eight doctors performing the operation on the ground floor carried on.

“We had to save this person and we did everything,” Valentin Filatov, head of the cardio surgery unit, said in an interview with state television.

JIHADIST SUSPECT
BLOWS UP SELF,
CHILD IN TUNISIA

Tunis: A suspected foreign jihadist blew herself and her little girl up with an explosives belt as security forces closed in in mountains of central Tunisia, the interior ministry said on Friday.

It said the child she was carrying died on the spot and another small girl was wounded Thursday as the woman detonated the belt in the remote Mount Selloum area of Kasserine near the Algerian border, a known jihadist hide-out. It said the woman's husband was also killed in the operation.

National guard and army units the same day “eliminated” Hamdi Dhouib, a senior member of the outlawed Jund al-Khalifa, which is linked to the Islamic State (IS) group, in Mount Mghila, also in Kasserine, the ministry said in a statement.

COURT ORDERS
TO HALT ‘SATAN
SHOE’ SALES

New York: The makers of the “Satan Shoe”, a collaboration with rapper Lil Nas X, have been ordered to stop selling them after Nike filed a lawsuit, according to court documents.

The sportswear giant sued MSCHF Product Studio after they released 666 pairs of black Nike Air Max 97s customized to feature a bronze pentagram, a Bible verse referring to Satan's fall, and a drop of human blood mixed with red ink in the midsole.

On Thursday, a US federal judge granted Nike's motion for a temporary restraining order, banning the Brooklyn-based art collective from fulfilling orders for the shoes and from further using Nike's trademarks.

The judge said Nike had demonstrated MSCHF's actions were “likely to confuse, and likely are confusing, consumers about the origin, sponsorship, or approval” of the shoes, and that they would “dilute and tarnish” Nike's brand, causing “irreparable harm” without the restraining order.

MSCHF has insisted the shoes are art and that their production falls under freedom of expression.

PARAMEDIC SAYS
FLOYD ‘DECEASED’
WHEN HE ARRIVED

Minneapolis: A paramedic testified that George Floyd was already dead when he arrived at the scene and Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, who is being tried for murder, still had his knee on the neck of the 46-year-old Black man.

“When I showed up he was deceased and I dropped him off at the hospital and he was still in cardiac arrest,” paramedic Derek Smith said on the fourth day of Chauvin's trial on murder and manslaughter charges.

Chauvin, 45, was captured on video kneeling on the neck of a handcuffed Floyd for more than nine minutes during Floyd's May 25, 2020 arrest for passing a counterfeit \$20 bill.

The video of Chauvin, who is white, restraining Floyd went viral and sparked protests against racial injustice and police brutality around the world. Prosecutors are seeking to prove that Chauvin's actions led to Floyd's death while the ex-officer's attorney claims that he died due to illegal drug use and underlying medical conditions.

Smith said Chauvin and other police officers were still on top of Floyd when he and fellow paramedic Seth Bravinder arrived on the scene in an ambulance.

Holy week



Archbishop of Paris Michel Aupetit carries the holy cross at the Way of the Cross ceremony during the Good Friday as part of the Holy Week celebrations, from the Sacre Coeur Basilica in Paris on Friday. — AFP

Russia massing troops, says Ukraine

Kiev, April 2: President Volodymyr Zelensky accused Moscow of building up troops on Ukraine's border and his top ministers discussed the escalating security situation with Western allies.

He spoke after Ukrainian and US officials this week reported Russian troop movement in annexed Crimea and on the Russian-Ukrainian border, near territories controlled by Moscow-backed separatists.

“Muscle-flexing in the

form of military exercises and possible provocations along the border are traditional Russian games,” Zelensky said in a statement.

He accused Moscow of seeking to create “a threatening atmosphere” as Kiev hopes to resume a ceasefire brokered last year. This week, Moscow and Kiev blamed each other for a rise in violence between government forces and Kremlin-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine, which has

undermined the ceasefire. Zelensky said 20 Ukrainian servicemen had been killed and 57 wounded since the start of the year.

The military announced Thursday that a Ukrainian soldier was wounded in an attack it blamed on separatists.

On Thursday, US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin called his Ukrainian counterpart Andriy Taran, the Ukrainian ministry said, adding that Washington said it would “not leave

Ukraine alone in the event of escalating Russian aggression”.

And Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba discussed the “aggravation by the Russian Federation of the security situation” on the frontline with his Canadian counterpart Marc Garneau.

Ukraine's military intelligence accused Russia of preparing to “expand its military presence” in separatist-controlled eastern Donetsk and Lugansk regions. — AFP



Boris Johnson

UK MPs SLAM
‘DIVISIVE’ VIRUS
PASSPORTS

London, April 2: A group of British lawmakers on Friday warned ministers against introducing “divisive and discriminatory” vaccine passports after Prime Minister Boris Johnson backed the scheme.

The group of more than 70 MPs—including former leaders of both the main parties—warned that vaccine passports could be used to “deny individuals access to general services, businesses or jobs”.

They spoke out after the prime minister on Thursday said the documents would be “useful” adding that “there's definitely going to be a world in which international travel will use vaccine passports”.

The *Daily Telegraph* reported on Friday that virus passports could be trialled at events including the FA Cup Final football match in May and the World Snooker Championship starting this month. Earlier this week, Keir Starmer, leader of the opposition Labour party, said if virus deaths and hospital admissions fall very low, “the British instinct... will be against vaccine passports”. — AFP

South America
intensifies virus
travel limitations

Santiago, April 2: South American nations severely tightened Coronavirus travel curbs including shutting their borders with Brazil, where infections are spiralling, as the WHO slammed Europe's “unacceptably slow” vaccine rollout.

Many European Union nations are reeling from dramatic spikes in cases that have forced the reimposition of unpopular restrictions, including in Belgium where police used water cannon to disperse thousands who had gathered in violation of Covid-19 rules.

Spikes in South America have reached alarming levels, fuelled by a more contagious variant first detected in Brazil, as Chile closed all borders, Bolivia sealed its frontier with Brazil, and Peru went into a lockdown over Easter.

“We are in a very critical moment of the pandemic,” Chilean government spokesman Jaime Bellolio said on Thursday, as the nation announced a border closure starting Monday. Intensive care units in Chile are close to capacity, and authorities are trying to speed up vaccinations in a bid to stem the spread of Covid-19.

Neighboring Peru started a four-day national lockdown for the Easter weekend as it recorded its highest number of new cases since the start of the pandemic.

● **UK SAID** it would add four countries to its so-called red list banning incoming travel to England from next week, citing coronavirus “variants of concern”.

● **THE DEPARTMENT** for Transport said the ban on visitors from Kenya, Bangladesh, the Philippines and Pakistan would enter force at 0300 GMT on April 9.

The country has a ban in place on all flights from Brazil, Britain and South Africa until April 15 to try and keep out the variants first detected there. Ecuador's president also announced fresh curbs against an outbreak he described as a “public calamity”.

Brazil is the epicentre of the Coronavirus wave sweeping South America, reporting a staggering 66,500 Covid-19 deaths in March alone.

At a field hospital in the suburbs of Sao Paulo, one doctor said she was alarmed at the spread of the virus—and frustrated to see many of her compatriots ignore face masks, shun social distancing guidelines and even flood to underground parties.

“I see no difference in people's behaviour. People don't seem to understand the magnitude of this,” said 53-year-old surgeon Marise Gomes. — AFP



Rescue workers at the site where a train derailed inside a tunnel in the mountains of Hualien, eastern Taiwan on Friday. — AFP

51 killed as train derails
inside a tunnel in Taiwan

Hualien, Taiwan, April 2: At least 51 people were killed in Taiwan on Friday when a packed train collided with a vehicle on the tracks and then derailed inside a tunnel, in the island's worst railway accident in decades.

Officials said the devastating collision was caused by a railway maintenance vehicle which slipped down an embankment above the tracks near the eastern coastal city of Hualien.

“(The driver) was suspected of not pulling the parking brake tight enough so the vehicle slid 20 meters... onto the train

line,” Feng Hui-sheng, deputy director of Taiwan Railways Authority, told reporters.

Local media images from the scene showed the back of a yellow flatbed truck on its side next to the train just a few metres from the tunnel entrance.

The eight-carriage train was packed with some 480 people heading down the east coast for the annual Tomb Sweeping Festival, a four-day public holiday.

The Taiwan Railways Agency said 146 passengers were sent to hospital in addition to the 51 confirmed dead.

A French national was

among those killed while two Japanese and one Macau resident were injured.

One unnamed female survivor told TVBS news channel of trapped passengers—some crying out for help, others unconscious.

“There were many people pressed under the seats and others on top of those seats too,” she said.

President Tsai Ing-wen visited an emergency response centre in the capital Taipei, and said investigators would get to the bottom of how such a deadly crash could have occurred. — AFP

Israel deal will be
helpful: Saudi FMNormalisation move with Israel depends
on progress of peace process, says minister

Riyadh, April 2: Normalisation with Israel would bring “tremendous benefit” to the region, the Saudi foreign minister has said, but such an accord with the kingdom would depend on progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Under the “Abraham Accords” brokered by former US president Donald Trump last year, four Arab countries—the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan—agreed to normalise ties with the Jewish state.

But Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan said on Thursday that any deal with Saudi Arabia was “very much dependent on progress with the peace process”.

“I think normalising Israel's status within the region would bring tremendous benefit to the region as a whole,” he said during an interview.

“It would be extremely helpful both economically but also socially and from a security perspective.” Gulf powerhouse Saudi Arabia has repeatedly affirmed its decades-old policy of not establishing formal ties with Israel until a deal is reached to resolve the conflict with the Palestinians.

But mutual concern over Iran has gradually brought Israel and Gulf countries closer, and Riyadh has quietly been

● **Gulf powerhouse Saudi Arabia has repeatedly affirmed its decades-old policy of not establishing formal ties with Israel until a deal is reached to resolve the conflict with the Palestinians.**

● **Israel has long rejected engaging with the Arab Initiative. Last year, the scheme was essentially killed off completely by close Saudi ally the United Arab Emirates normalising ties with Israel, with the assistance of the Trump administration.**

● **The two countries have no official diplomatic ties.**

building relations with the Jewish state for several years.

Reports in November that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu held secret talks in Saudi Arabia fuelled speculation that a normalisation accord with the Gulf's top power could be in the making.

Riyadh, however, denied the meeting had taken place.

The Arab Initiative was proposed during the Arab League summit in Beirut

in 2002, at the peak of the Second Intifada. It demands Israel withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which it occupied in 1967, and allow for the establishment of a Palestinian state in return for normalisation deals with Arab states.

Israel has long rejected engaging with the Arab Initiative. Last year, the scheme was essentially killed off completely by close Saudi ally the United Arab Emirates normalising ties with Israel, with the assistance of the Trump administration.

Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco all followed suit, in deals that failed to address the Palestinian issue or Israel's military occupation of the West Bank and its settlement expansion. The UAE claimed Israel had promised to suspend its plans to annex parts of the West Bank, though annexation had already been shelved due to international pressure and a lack of US support.

Like other Arab countries around the Gulf, Saudi Arabia has forged strong clandestine ties with Israel in recent years. The two countries have no official diplomatic ties, yet Saudi de facto leader Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman reportedly met Netanyahu in secret last November.

— AFP/Agencies

MYANMAR CUTS
WIRELESS NET
AMID PROTESTS

Yangon, April 2: Myanmar's wireless broadband internet services were shut down on Friday by order of the military, local providers said, as protesters continued to defy the threat of lethal violence to oppose the junta's takeover.

A directive from the Ministry of Transport and Communications on Thursday instructed that “all wireless broadband data services be temporarily suspended until further notice,” according to a statement posted online by local provider Ooredoo. After weeks of overnight cut-offs of internet access, the military on Friday shut all links apart from those using fiberoptic cable, which was working at drastically reduced speeds.

Access to mobile networks and all wireless—the less costly options used by most people in the developing country—was blocked. The Norwegian telecoms company Telenor, one of the biggest carriers in Myanmar, confirmed it could no longer offer wireless services. It was offering fiberoptic service of up to 40 megabits per second in its packages as of Friday, well below high-speed access, which is a minimum of 100 Mbps. — AP

NIGER'S BAZOUM
SWORN-IN AS
NEW PRESIDENT

Nigeria, April 2: Niger's Mohamed Bazoum was sworn in as president Friday, marking the country's first peaceful transfer of power in a democratic watershed that was overshadowed by an alleged coup attempt earlier this week underscoring instability fears in the West African nation.

Bazoum's inauguration marked Niger's first-ever transition between elected presidents since the country gained independence from France in 1960. But the milestone achievement was overshadowed by an alleged coup attempt early Wednesday, which was thwarted by several arrests, according to security sources. — AFP



Retired South Korean professor Han Min-hong posing next to his 21-year-old self-driving car in front of his office in Yongin, south of Seoul. — AFP

TECH | GENIUS

Han successfully tested his self-driving car on the roads of Seoul in 1993

S. Korean prof's car never took to road

Yongin, South Korea, April 2: Decades before the race to build a self-driving car became a multi-billion-dollar contest between tech giants such as Tesla and Google, a South Korean professor built an autonomous vehicle and test-drove it across the country—only for his research to be consigned to the scrapheap.

Han Min-hong, now 79, successfully tested his self-driving car on the roads of Seoul in 1993—a decade before Elon Musk even founded Tesla.

Two years later, it drove 300 kilometres (185 miles) from the capital to the southern port of Busan, on the most heavily-travelled expressway in South Korea.

Footage from the period shows the car barreling down a highway, with no one behind the wheel. A 386-chip-powered desktop computer, complete with monitor and keyboard, is placed on the passenger seat. Han is sitting in the back, waving at the camera.

“It felt extraordinary,” said the affable inventor. “The workload was very heavy,” but he and his team “had an enormous passion as it was something others hadn't done yet, something that hadn't come out in the world yet”.

At the time, South Korea was more focused on heavy industry, such as steel and shipbuilding, with the average Korean not yet familiar with cell-phones.

The country was yet to become the tech powerhouse it is today, and was still pursuing imitation

rather than innovation. On one occasion, Han was told: “Why develop a new technology when you can always pay for it?” Han's projects were seen as dangerous.

He was once asked how much he was paying for his life insurance, he said, and whether his wife was aware of “these crazy activities of yours?” But Han was so convinced of his cars' safety that he rarely wore a seat belt—and has never had life insurance. — AFP

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	50,029.83	1.05
Nifty 50	14,867.40	1.20
S&P 500*	4,019.87	1.18
Dollar (₹)	73.11	0.01
Pound Sterling (₹)	101.03	-0.26
Euro (₹)	85.99	-0.25
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	44,701.881	1.97
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	64.00	2.01
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.177	0.00
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	1.679	-0.067

* As of 8:30 PM/Thursday

IndiGo launches door-to-door baggage service

IndiGo said it has launched a door-to-door baggage transfer service in Delhi and Hyderabad in which customer luggage gets securely picked and transported from the first to the last destination. The airline said it will later launch the facility called '6EBagport', in partnership with CarterPorter, in Mumbai and Bengaluru. The facility includes a service insurance of Rs 5,000 per baggage item for the contents and container.

Suzuki Motor Gujarat's 3rd plant starts production



Suzuki Motor Gujarat Pvt Ltd (SMG), a 100 per cent subsidiary of Japan's Suzuki Motor Corporation, has commenced production from third unit at its Ahmedabad-based manufacturing facility. SMG has started production from April 2021. Maruti Suzuki India said in a filing. With production starting at the Plant C, which has an annual production ability of 2.5 lakh units, the total ability of SMG will be 7.5 lakh units, it added.

Construction of highways at record 37 km/day

Union minister Nitin Gadkari has said the pace of highways construction has touched a record 37 km per day in 2020-21. The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways has constructed 13,394 km of highways in 2020-21. Gadkari said these "achievements are unprecedented and have no parallel in any other country in the world". He said over the past seven years, the length of NH has gone up by 50 per cent.

ANG Lifesciences India acquires Mansa Print

ANG Lifesciences India Ltd said it has acquired Mansa Print & Publishers Ltd, which has undergone corporate insolvency resolution plan, as part of its strategic backward integration. Located at Baddi in HP, Mansa is engaged in printing and packaging business covering packaging products like cartons, corrugated boxes and aluminium foil. "The packaging cost in formulation segment is almost 15-20 per cent of the cost," it said.

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Q4 imports jump 159% to 321 tonne Gold imports hit record in March

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, APRIL 2

Gold imports in March touched a record 160 tonnes, surging 471 per cent compared to the same month last year. Imports in the March quarter were up by 159 per cent, as demand for the metal went up with the correction in prices.

Lower gold prices saw increased stocking up as well as retail buying, leading to imports going up to 160 tonnes last month, a Reuters report said. Value-wise, March imports grew multi-fold to \$8.4 billion from \$1.23 billion a year ago.

Even during pre-pandemic times, usual monthly imports range between 60 and 80 tonnes. According to Somasundaram P.R., managing director, World Gold Council India, imports closer to 160 tonnes were recorded in 2016. "These are gross export numbers. We will have to see how much of this goes for export purposes and how



much of it is done," he said.

According to him, price correction from the all-time high levels in August and stability in prices for some time helped gold buying. Gold prices have dropped more than 15 per cent from their highs. Further, stocking up for Akshaya Tritiya has been happening at the Jeweller level. Investment demand has been already high during the March quarter.

The March quarter too saw a record import of 321 tonne, which was 159 per cent higher than 124 tonnes imported in the same quarter last year.

Gold imports were 72 per cent higher in volume and 154 per cent in value during January and imports were 124 per cent up in value terms in February as well.

In February, the government had slashed import duty on gold to 10.75 per cent from 12.5 per cent. This also supported gold buying. Gold was trading at a premium in March, indicating higher demand in the market.

However, post Akshaya Tritiya, the demand in the retail market is likely to be lower and this could bring down the imports in April.

MURTHY'S CATAMARAN IN TALKS TO INVEST IN UDAAN

New Delhi, April 2: Catamaran Ventures, the private investment firm of Infosys' co-founder N. R. Narayana Murthy, is in talks to invest in B2B e-commerce platform Udaan, sources said.

Catamaran is looking at investing about Rs 80-100

crore in Udaan, and the transaction will be made through a secondary route by purchasing employees' stocks, the sources close to the development said.

In January, Udaan raised \$280 million (about Rs 2,048 crore) in funding from investors, including

Lightspeed Venture Partners, Tencent, DST Global, GGV Capital, Altimeter Capital, Octahedron Capital and Moonstone Capital. The company, which has raised \$1.15 billion in total till date, was valued at over \$3 billion post transaction.

—PTI

W. Bengal has highest share of small savings schemes

New Delhi, April 2: West Bengal, which is in the midst of a high-pitched assembly election, has the highest collection of about Rs 90,000 crore in small savings schemes, accounting for about 15 per cent of the total corpus.

It is followed by Uttar Pradesh, the largest state in terms of population, with gross collection of Rs 69,660.70 crore out of the Rs 5.96 lakh crore garnered during 2017-18 (last updated), as per data collated by the National Savings Institute under the finance ministry.

The government on Thursday revoked a steep interest rate cut on small savings schemes announced the previous night.

While the government routinely announces interest rates for small savings schemes at the end of every quarter, Wednesday's decision to cut interest rates by up to 1.1 per cent across various small savings schemes, including Public Provident Fund (PPF) and National Savings Certificate (NSC), had



come a day before the second phase of polling in West Bengal and Assam.

As per the National Savings Institute data, West Bengal has been leader in collections, with around 12-15 per cent share of the total in the last few years.

Other poll-bound states like Assam garnered Rs 9,446.37 crore, Kerala Rs 14,763.01 crore, Puducherry Rs 1,082.40 crore and Tamil Nadu Rs 28,598.18 crore during 2017-18.

Voting for the five assembly elections commenced on March 27, with Assam going to polls first and West Bengal concluding the poll season with its eighth phase of voting on

April 29.

Assembly elections in Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry will be held in a single phase on April 6.

Opposition leaders have expressed apprehension that the rate cut would be imposed once the assembly elections are over.

Taking a dig at finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman after she announced that the government will withdraw orders to cut interest rate on small savings schemes, the Congress on Thursday said one can imagine the functioning of the economy when such a duly approved order affecting crores of people can be issued by an "oversight".

Senior Congress leader P. Chidambaram said when inflation is at about 6 per cent and expected to rise, the BJP government is offering interest rates below 6 per cent, hitting the savers and the middle class below the belt.

The Trinamool Congress also mocked the Centre. Derek O'Brien and Mahua Moitra called it an April's Fool joke.

—PTI

Oil price: Govt escalates stand-off with Saudi

NIDHI VERMA NEW DELHI, APRIL 2

Indian state refiners are planning to cut oil imports from Saudi Arabia by about a quarter in May, in an escalating stand-off with Riyadh following Opec's decision to ignore calls from New Delhi to help the global economy with higher supply.

Two sources familiar with the discussions said the move was part of the government's drive to cut dependence on crude from the Middle East.

Indian Oil Corp, Bharat Petroleum Corp, Hindustan Petroleum Corp and Mangalore Refinery and Petrochemicals Ltd are preparing to lift about 10.8 million barrels in May, the sources said on condition of anonymity.

State refiners, which control about 60 per cent of India's 5 million barrels per day (bpd) refining capacity, together import an average 14.7-14.8 million barrels of Saudi oil in a month, the sources said.

India imports more than 80 per cent of its oil needs and relies heavily on the Middle East.

Indian refiners could not cut April oil imports from Saudi Arabia as nominations were placed before the Opec+ decision in early March, the sources said, adding that plans for May were preliminary and final May nominations would be known in early April.

—Reuters

ITR forms notified; option to choose new tax regime

New Delhi, April 2: The Income Tax Department has notified forms for filing I-T returns for the 2020-21 fiscal.

"Keeping in view the ongoing crisis due to Covid pandemic and to facilitate the taxpayers, no significant change has been made to the ITR Forms in comparison to the last year's ITR Forms.

"Only the bare minimum changes necessitated due to amendments in the Income-tax Act, 1961 have been made," the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) said in a statement on Thursday.

The Income Tax returns (ITR) forms ask taxpayers if they are opting for a new tax regime.

"There is no change in the manner of filing of ITR Forms as compared to last year," the CBDT said.

The ITR-1 Form, however, specifies that it cannot be used by an individual for whom income tax is deferred on ESOPs. Also, taxpayers will now have to mention quarterly dividend income, for the purpose of claiming relief on payment of advance tax.

ITR Form 1 (Sahaj) and

MFs turn equity buyers after nine-month gap

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, APRIL 2

After nine months of profit-taking, mutual funds have turned net investors in the equity market in March.

Mutual funds were net buyers of equities by Rs 2,476.45 crore last month, according to data from the Securities and Exchange Board of India.

This trend reversal augurs well for the equity market, now largely supported by foreign portfolio investors and other domestic institutions like insurance, pension funds and banks.

MFs were net sellers by a humble amount of Rs 501.50 crore in equities in June 2020, but as redemptions from equity-oriented funds picked up pace from the second half of the year over the sharp market rally, they began



to offload equity assets worth above Rs 9,000 crore every month from July onwards.

Barring September (Rs 4,134.37 crore), redemptions began to rise month by month—October (Rs 14,491 crore), November (Rs 30,760.07 crore) and December (Rs 26,427.83 crore)—as market benchmarks Sensex and Nifty-50 began to make new highs almost every day.

But redemptions eased from January onwards to Rs 13,031.78 crore in January and Rs 16,306.03 crore in February, as inflows started in select mutual fund schemes.

On the fixed income side May 2020 (Rs 10,699 crore) onwards, mutual funds are investing in debt instruments, as investors, after booking profit in equity mutual funds, seemed to have reinvested the money in safer debt mutual funds.

From June onwards Mutual funds were investing upwards of Rs 20,000 crore in debt instruments—June (Rs 41,364.71 crore), July (Rs 31,897.85 crore), August (Rs 25,780.28 crore), September (Rs 17,004.97 crore), October (Rs 31,975.11 crore), November (Rs 20,349.35 crore), December (Rs 23,368.42 crore).

Debt investments by MFs moderated in January (Rs 11,831.74 crore) and February (Rs 8161.78 crore).

E-way bills touch new high in March

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, APRIL 2

Around 7.12 crore e-way bills were issued in March, the highest monthly generation since its introduction in 2018.

The monthly issuance of 7.12 crore was 75 per cent higher than 4.06 crore issued in the same month last year and 11.5 per cent higher than 6.38 crore in February 2021. On March 24, 2021 alone, 27.86 lakh e-way bills were generated, which was the highest in a day in the last three years.

E-way bills had seen their lowest generation in May 2020 at 2.51 lakh. Even in April, only 84.53 lakh bills were issued. However, by June e-way bills had moved up above one crore.

Data on movement of goods on National Highways, as indicated by the FASTag and E-way bill volumes, recovered to pre-pandemic levels in September 2020. Since then, the bills have remained higher than the year-ago months.

In 2020-21, a total of 61.7

crore of bills were generated, which had come closer to 62.9 crore in FY20 despite the pandemic impact. A total of 180.34 crore e-way bills have been generated in the last three years.

E-way bills have to be generated for the movement of goods of value more than Rs 50,000, from one place to another, including multiple states. The E-way bill has helped in reducing the transport time in movement of the goods. It was launched on April 1, 2018.

No plans to exit India biz: Franklin Templeton



New Delhi, April 2: Franklin Templeton Mutual Fund on Friday said its commitment to India remains 'steadfast' and the fund house has no plans to exit its operations in the country.

This comes following media reports suggesting intervention by the fund house's US-headquartered parent seeking the diplomatic route for a "just and fair" hearing by market regulator Sebi in the investigation pertaining to six wound-up debt schemes.

The reports said Franklin Templeton had threatened to exit India if it was not given a fair hearing.

In a letter to investors, Franklin Templeton Asset Management (India) Pvt Ltd president Sanjay Sapre said, "we have no plans to exit our India business. Any speculation suggesting otherwise, or any rumours around sale of business in India are incorrect and simply that-rumours".

He reiterated that Franklin Templeton's commitment to India remains steadfast.

The fund house had closed six of its debt funds in April 2020, citing redemption pressures and lack of liquidity in the bond markets.

These schemes together had an estimated amount of over Rs 25,000 crore assets under management.

In a statement, the fund house on Friday said its six shut schemes have received Rs 15,776 crore from maturities, pre-payments and coupon payments since closing down in April 2020.

"The six schemes have received total cash flows of Rs 15,776 crore till March 31, 2021 from maturities, coupons and prepayments since winding up," the fund house.

—PTI

MAKING | AMENDS

Firm concerned about lack of diversity in Sr. ranks

Goldman elevates a flurry of female partners

ELIZABETH MARSHALL APRIL 2

Goldman Sachs Group Inc on Thursday promoted four female partners to senior leadership roles at the firm, according to memos seen by Reuters.

Among them, Goldman's head of investor relations, Heather Kennedy Miner, was given the No. 2 job in the bank's asset management business, and Jacqueline Arthur was named deputy chief of staff for the executive office.

Goldman has set some of the most aggressive and specific goals among big US banks for increasing the presence of Black, Latino and female professionals at all job levels.

Thursday's promotions reflect what chief executive David Solomon has said was a lack of diversity in the bank's senior ranks.

Solomon said at a virtual event last year hosted by the Economic Club of New York that he was "not pleased" with the levels of diversity among the bank's senior leaders.

Goldman has four women on its board of directors and will have a fifth if shareholders approve the nomination of Royal Dutch Shell plc chief financial officer Jessica Uhl later this month, read more But Solomon has urged the bank to increase diversity in the top ranks more quickly.



A recent analysis of the companies included in the Russell 3000 Index, which includes Goldman, shows women held just 12 per cent of the "named executive officer" positions, up from 9 per cent in 2015.

In the memos, Miner was named chief operat-

ing officer for Goldman's asset management division. She previously led investor relations for the bank since 2017.

The head of Goldman Sachs's bank unit and deputy treasurer, Carey Halio, was appointed to replace Miner as head of investor relations.

Arthur will serve as deputy chief of staff and secretary to the management committee, reporting to John Rogers.

Lisa Donnelly was given an expanded role as head of core operations responsible for coordinating common practices, standards and protocols for the bank's global divisions. She succeeds Phil Armstrong, who is retiring.

—Reuters

SHORT TAKES

Ronaldo armband sold for \$75,000

Belgrade: The captain's armband that Cristiano Ronaldo angrily threw to the ground during Portugal's World Cup qualifier in Belgrade last week has been sold to an unidentified bidder for 64,000 euros (\$75,000) at a charity auction, Serbian state TV reported on Friday. A Serbian humanitarian group put the blue armband up for online bidding to raise money for medical treatment for a 6-month-old boy suffering with spinal muscular atrophy. The auction didn't pass without controversy as some participants tried to disrupt the process by putting up unrealistically huge sums. The fake bidding triggered public outrage with authorities pledging to find and punish the culprits. Moments before last Saturday's match with Serbia ended in a 2-2 draw, Ronaldo walked off the field. While heading to the dressing room before the final whistle, Ronaldo angrily threw down his armband near the touchline. After the match, it was picked up by a firefighter on duty and given to the charity group. — AP

Aggrieved Lucas to play for Boca

Buenos Aires: Arsenal's Uruguay international midfielder Lucas Torreira, who is on loan at Atletico Madrid, says he wants to leave Europe and play for Boca Juniors. Torreira said he came to the decision after his mother died of Covid-19 earlier this week. "The night my mother died, I told my representative that I don't want to play in Europe any more and I want to come to Boca," Torreira told *ESPN*. "It's not a violent emotion, it's not a crazy decision because of my mother. I've always said I want to play for Boca. I'm dying to play for Boca and I will always say that," he added. Torreira returned to Uruguay last weekend to be with his ill mother, who died in the early hours of Tuesday. "We have to stop the myth, it's not all about Europe. I want to be close to my home, to my family," he said. — AFP

New hearing date for banned Yang

Paris: The Court of Arbitration for Sport said Thursday that a new hearing for Sun Yang, the Chinese swimming star who had an eight-year ban for doping overturned last year, will be held in May. "A new hearing will take place during the week of 24-28 May 2021," CAS said in a statement. Switzerland's federal supreme court overturned the ban on Yang, who was accused of destroying a blood vial with a hammer when collectors visited his home in September 2018, over alleged bias towards the triple Olympic champion. The new hearing takes place just two months before the rescheduled Tokyo Olympics are held. However, the Swiss federal court agreed with the swimmer's lawyers who argued that the president of the CAS panel, Italian Franco Frattini, had previously made anti-Chinese tweets. They claimed the Twitter statements were racist in nature. — AFP

Brooklyn's Green stings Hornets

Los Angeles: Jeff Green scored a team-high 21 points as the Brooklyn Nets became the first Eastern Conference team to win 20 home games this season with a 111-89 rout of the Charlotte Hornets on Thursday. Kyrie Irving tallied 15 points and 11 rebounds and Landry Shamet and Tyler Johnson scored 17 and 15 points respectively off the bench for the Nets, who won despite missing all-star James Harden. Harden suffered a hamstring injury Wednesday and sat out the fourth quarter in the team's come from behind win over the Houston Rockets. But the Nets didn't need Harden, or injured Kevin Durant for that matter, as they stormed to a 32-11 lead after the first quarter. — AFP

Live on TV

FOOTBALL

English Premier League: Chelsea vs West Brom from 5 pm; Leeds United vs Sheffield from 7:30 pm; Leicester City vs Manchester City from 10 pm; Arsenal vs Liverpool from 12:30 am (Sunday) on Star Sports Select 1, Star Sports Select 1

Italian League: AC Milan vs Sampdoria from 4 pm; Atalanta vs Udinese from 6:30 pm on Sony Ten 2; Napoli vs Crotone from 6:30 pm on Sony Six; Torino vs Juventus from 9:30 pm; Bologna vs Inter Milan from 12:15 am (Sunday) on Sony Ten 2

KNIGHTS GEAR UP

KKR desperate to turn fortunes post tough transition

Kolkata, April 2: Two-time IPL champions Kolkata Knight Riders will be striving for consistency in their bid to recreate old magic which has been lost during a difficult phase of rebuilding after Gautam Gambhir's departure.

Be it the opening combination, middle-order or finding a finisher, KKR struggled for stability in the last edition in the UAE, while a change of captaincy at the halfway stage did not help them either.

Here's is a SWOT analysis of the side that will take on Sunrisers Hyderabad in their season-opener in Chennai on April 11.

STRENGTHS

In Eoin Morgan, his first stint as full-time KKR captain, the Purple Brigade have got one of the most astute brains of the white-ball format.

The English World Cup-winning skipper was one of the brightspots for the team in 2020.

KKR have made some smart additions to their squad in the mini-auction, apart from retaining their core of the side — 17 players — despite a disappointing season.

By bringing back Shakib-Al-Hasan and Ben Cutting, they have got the much-needed back-ups for the Windies duo of Narine and Russell, who failed to fire last season.

KKR will also be buoyed by the smash-hit international debut of Prasidh Krishna, who took 4/54 in the first ODI against England in the recently-concluded series. This would also mean KKR would have a settled pace attack spearheaded by Pat Cummins with Lockie Ferguson as back-up.

WEAKNESSES

Once their strength, KKR of late has struggled in the spin department. Kuldeep Yadav is a shadow of his past and returned with just one wicket in five matches, of which he



Dinesh Karthik of Kolkata Knight Riders plays a shot during a net practice session on Thursday ahead of the upcoming edition of Indian Premier League.

— Twitter

was not given the ball in one. One of the architects of their twin triumphs in 2012 and 2014 under Gambhir, Sunil Narine is also floundering. It was another mystery spinner, Varun Chakravarthy, a Tamil Naud architect-turned-cricketer who took up the responsibility in Narine's absence but his fitness has come under the scanner time and again as it remains to be seen how he shapes up for

the IPL.

OPPORTUNITIES

Having decided to step away from being captain to "focus on his batting", Dinesh Karthik too will look to make amends in 2021. Then there are the seasoned duo of Shakib-Al-Hasan and Harbhajan Singh who too will look to make most of the limited opportunities that come their way on slow tracks on offer in Delhi and Chennai. KKR have two

interesting uncapped new signings in Venkatesh Iyer and Vaibhav Arora, who too will look to grab opportunities.

THREATS

KKR would need good start from opener Shubman Gill to give better starts this year in the Powerplay overs. Gill consumed a lot of deliveries upfront in most games which did create pressure on middle-order. — PTI

Shreyas to go under the knife on April 8

Mumbai, April 2: India batsman Shreyas Iyer is set to undergo a surgery on April 8 for his shoulder injury which had ruled him out of the last two ODIs against England and the entire IPL.

The 26-year old Iyer had suffered the injury during the first ODI against England in Pune on March 23 when he dived on a drive hit by Jonny Bairstow off pacer Shardul Thakur.

He looked in tremendous pain as he left the field clutching his shoulder.

"Shreyas will get operated on April 8 for his shoulder injury," a source said.

Iyer is likely to be out of action for a minimum of four months. He had signed up with Lancashire but now is unlikely to play for the English county side in their one-day tournament starting on



Shreyas Iyer

July 23. "You know what they say, the greater the setback, the stronger the comeback. I shall be back soon," Iyer had tweeted.

"I've been reading your messages and have been overwhelmed by all the outpouring of love and support. Thank you from the bottom of my heart to everyone," he added.

Iyer was replaced by Rishabh Pant as skipper for the upcoming edition beginning on April 9. — PTI

PRESSURE BRINGS THE BEST OUT OF ME: UMPIRE NITIN

New Delhi, April 2: Nitin Menon, who showed remarkable accuracy in his debut series as an ICC 'Elite Panel' umpire, feels pressure situations bring the best out of him and like cricketers, he too wants to make most of this purple patch.

"I believe umpiring is all about mental toughness. More the pressure better is the focus. If we can give our best performances when we are under pressure, that is the true reflection of how strong we are mentally.

"It's not new for me to officiate in back-to-back matches, thanks to the amount of domestic cricket organised in India. On an average, we do eight four-day first-class games on the trot in Ranji Trophy, with travel in between from one venue to another. — PTI

Sachin hospitalised as a precautionary measure

Mumbai, April 2: Former India captain and batting icon Sachin Tendulkar has been hospitalised as a precautionary measure, six days after he tested positive for Covid-19.

The 47-year-old took to Twitter to announce the development on Friday.

"Thank you for your wishes and prayers. As a matter of abundant precaution under medical advice, I have been hospitalised. I hope to be back home in a few days. Take care and stay safe everyone," Tendulkar wrote.

Tendulkar had tested positive for the dreaded infection on March 27 and was in home isolation ever since.

"He is doing fine and has been admitted for normal (course of) treatment," a source close to Tendulkar said. The batting great,



Thank you for your wishes and prayers. As a matter of abundant precaution under medical advice, I have been hospitalised. I hope to be back home in a few days. Take care and stay safe everyone.

— SACHIN TENDULKAR cricket legend

who was part of India's historic World Cup win in 2011, also wished his teammates on the 10th anniversary of the victory.

"Wishing all Indians & my teammates on the 10th anniversary of our World Cup win," he tweeted.

Besides Tendulkar, former India all-rounder Irfan Pathan, his elder brother Yusuf and S

Badrinath — all of whom had recently participated at the Road Safety World Series Challenge — have so far announced that they have tested positive for Covid-19.

Tendulkar had led the Indian team to victory in the veteran's tournament in Raipur where crowds were allowed inside the stadiums. — PTI

BABAR BELTS TON AS PAKISTAN NICK PAST SA IN 1ST ODI

Centurion (South Africa), April 2: A century by Babar Azam set up a three-wicket, last-ball win for Pakistan in the first ODI against South Africa at SuperSport Park on Friday.

The Pakistan captain hit a stroke-filled 103 off 104 balls but his dismissal started a collapse in which fast bowler Anrich Nortje took four wickets in four overs.

Rassie van der Dussen hit 123 not out, his maiden international century. But South Africa's total of 273 for 6 did not seem enough as Babar and Imam-ul-Haq (70) put on 177 for Pakistan's second wicket. — AFP

BRIEF SCORES

South Africa 273/6 in 50 overs (Rassie van der Dussen 123 n.o., D. Miller 50) **lost to Pakistan 274/7** in 50 overs (B. Azam 103, Imam-ul-Haq 70, A. Nortje 4/51).

Barty on a roll, in Miami final

Miami, April 2: World No.1 Ashleigh Barty bucked the upset trend at the Miami Open on Thursday, rolling into the women's final as men's second seed Stefanos Tsitsipas was toppled by Hurbert Hurkacz.

Australia's Barty fired 27 winners in a 6-3, 6-3 victory over fifth-seeded Ukrainian Elina Svitolina to return to the title match of a tournament she won when it was last held in 2019.

Barty will face Canada's Bianca Andreescu, who reached her first final since winning the 2019 US Open title by beating Greece's Maria Sakkari in three sets, 7-6 (9/7), 3-6, 7-6 (7/4).

Barty has gone from strength to strength since saving a match point in her opening victory over Slovakian qualifier Kristina Kucova.

"Every single match I felt like I've done something a little bit better, and that's all you can ask," said Barty.

But Greece's Tsitsipas was left trying to explain a "self-explosion" after he squandered a commanding lead in a 2-6, 6-3, 6-4 quarter-final loss to 26th seed Hurkacz of Poland — the latest in a string of upsets

that saw men's top seed Daniil Medvedev and No. 3 Alexander Zverev bow out along with women's No. 2 Naomi Osaka.

Tsitsipas admitted it was a crushing outcome in a tournament where the absences of superstars Novak Djokovic, Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer and his own recent solid form seemed to offer him a chance to shine.

Tsitsipas exited the tournament after a tense encounter that saw the 22-year-old Greek given a time violation after the second set for taking too long to change his shirt and headband.

The World No.5 was also reportedly involved in a tense exchange with officials before the match after refusing to share a golf cart with Hurkacz used to ferry players to the court.

There was no sign that incident had unsettled Tsitsipas early on, however, as he dominated a one-sided first set to win 6-2.

Tsitsipas then quickly broke Hurkacz at the start of the second on the way to a 2-0 lead. But just when it appeared the match was heading for a brisk conclusion, Hurkacz finally found his range. — AFP



Ashleigh Barty of Australia returns to Elina Svitolina of Ukraine during the women's singles semifinal of the Miami Open tennis tournament in Miami Gardens, Florida, on Thursday. Barty won 6-3, 6-3. — AP

Battle for top four heats up in EPL

London, April 2: Manchester City already have one hand on the Premier League trophy but the battle for the top four is likely to go down to the wire as a clutch of clubs seek to join Europe's elite next season.

Manchester City, Manchester United, Leicester and Chelsea currently occupy the top four places in the English top-flight.

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's United are eight points clear of fifth-placed West Ham and are on track to finish in the top two for only the second time since they were last champions in 2013. United's run-in does not appear too tricky, although they still have to travel to Tottenham and host Liverpool. They also play top-four rivals Leicester at Old Trafford.

Leicester came agonisingly close to qualifying for the Champions League for only the second time in their history last season but missed out on the final day, beaten by United.

Brendan Rodgers' side, who last month beat United in the FA Cup quarter-finals, look more robust this year and are just one point behind the Red Devils.

Leicester face Manchester City this week-end before a run of kinder fixtures, but they will be keen to maintain a buffer, with a difficult set of matches to end the season — against United, Chelsea and Spurs. Chelsea, still unbeaten in all competitions since Thomas Tuchel took over from Frank Lampard in January, are in fourth spot but have less margin for error. — AFP

HAALAND'S AGENT, DAD HOLD BARCELONA TALKS

Barcelona, April 2: The agent and father of Borussia Dortmund striker Erling Braut Haaland visited Barcelona on Thursday to meet with the Spanish club's newly elected president Joan Laporta, local media reported.

"Barca's interest in the player has been confirmed in this meeting and they will enter the bidding," wrote Catalan daily *Sport*, alongside pictures of Haaland's agent Mino Raiola and his father Alf-Inge Haaland arriving in the city.

According to the paper Raiola, who is also the agent of Paul Pogba and Zlatan Ibrahimovic, and Haaland senior held discussions with Laporta and Barca's director of football Mateu Alemany.

"Both Raiola and the father have seemed open to signing for Barca although all will depend on the final price Borussia Dortmund put on the Norwegian," *Sport* added. — AFP