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VIJAYAWADA | SUNDAY | 18 APRIL 2021



WORLD | 6

Covid toll crosses 3 million worldwide



SPORTS | 8

Dhoni is the heartbeat of CSK, says Fleming

TABLOID

The 'Supreme' bias



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Let's resolve all water issues: CM to Patnaik

Jagan stresses on building Neradi barrage

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 17

Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy has written to his Odisha counterpart, Naveen Patnaik, seeking to resolve all water-related issues between the two states.

Reddy reminded Patnaik that construction of Neradi barrage across the river Vamsadhara along with necessary ancillary structures is permissible according to Vamsadhara Water Disputes Tribunal (VWDT) order.

The letter states, "I would like to bring to your attention that the Vamsadhara Water Disputes Tribunal (VWDT) pronounced its final order and decision under section 5(2) of ISRW Act, 1956 on 13.09.2017. The Tribunal order explicitly permitted the State of Andhra Pradesh to take up construction of Neradi Barrage across the river Vamsadhara along with necessary ancillary structures. It has also permitted construction of Left Head Sluice on the left side of Neradi Barrage to

● ABOUT 75% of floodwater i.e. nearly 80 TMC is annually going waste into the sea if the Neradi Barrage is not constructed, the CM told his Odisha counterpart

serve the requirements of the State of Odisha also. The construction of Neradi Barrage is imperative and also in the best interest of both the states of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh as it caters to the dire needs of drinking and irrigation water requirements of the people of the backward and drought prone areas of Srikakulam District in the State of Andhra Pradesh and Gajapathi District in the State of Odisha."

"Farmers of both the states in general and farmers of my state in particular are eagerly waiting for completion of the project. Moreover, about 75 per cent of floodwater i.e. nearly 80 TMC is annually going waste into the sea. Water is the most important element for the preservation of life and being a finite commodity,

if not managed properly, will result in shortages in near future," the letter said.

He recalled that Odisha has filed clarification before the VWDT and Special Leave Petition before the Supreme Court wherein it has raised some issues, mostly pertaining to the function of Supervisory Committee. He stated that these issues could be amicably resolved before the commencement of operation of Neradi Barrage. He urged Odisha's cooperation in the construction of the barrage by accepting publication of the VWDT's 13.09.2017 decision in the official Gazette in terms of Section 6 (1) of ISRW Act 1956 for enabling construction of Neradi Barrage in order to relieve the suffering of the denizens of the most backward areas of Srikakulam district in AP and Gajapathi district in Odisha.

Reddy hoped that Patnaik would agree for a meeting between the two in order to resolve the pending issues pertaining to the two states.

Tirupati LS bypoll sees only 64% voter turnout

Fear of Covid spreading keeps many away from poll booths

AVINASH P. SUBRAMANYAM | DC
TIRUPATI, APRIL 17

Barring a few sporadic incidents and opposition parties raising allegations over the bogus voting, the by-election for the Tirupati (SC) parliamentary constituency remained peaceful on Saturday. Polling was spread over seven Assembly constituencies — three in Chittoor and four in Nellore districts — from 7 am to 7 pm.

Despite several messages from the ECI, urging the voters to exercise their franchise, Tirupati city pulled down the voter turnout to an all-time low at 64.29 per cent out of 17.10 lakh voters. In the 2019 elections, the poll percentage was 78.99. The present polling percentage could be revised upwards by Sunday, once the segment-wise figures are available, officials said.

As per data provided by officials, an average of about 64.29% of polling was recorded in all seven Assembly segments. The breakup of polling percentage was Satyavedu (72.68%), Sullurpet (70.93%), Srikalahasti (67.77%), Sarvepalli (66.19%), Gudur (63.81%), Venkatagiri (61.50%) and Tirupati at 50.58 per cent.

In all, out of the 17,10,699 total voters, 10,99,784 exercised their franchise, whereas in 2019, around 12,87,734 votes out of the 16,50,453 electors were polled and the overall poll percentage was recorded as 78.99 per cent. About 7.8% polling percentage was registered by 9 am on Saturday, with around 1,33,411 voters exercising their franchise. This was followed by 17.39% (2,97,457) by 11 am, 36.67% (6,27,331) by 1 pm, 47.42% (8,11,210) by 3 pm, 54.99% (9,40,678) by 5 pm and 64.29% (10,99,784) by 7 pm. Experts say that fear among public due to spike in Covid-19 positive cases in recent weeks might be the main reason for the fall in polling percentage. Chittoor district had recently crossed 1,000 positive cases in a single day and Tirupati urban alone has been contributing 300 cases per day on an average for the past three days.

With the district reporting a huge spike in Covid-19 cases, the district administration made elaborate arrangements for polling, ensuring physical distancing at the polling stations and making masks mandatory for all. Health staff also screened the voters and gave them sanitisers before entering the polling booths. Covid-19 infected voters were allowed to cast their votes



Voters stand in queue at a polling station to cast their vote during the byelection for the Tirupati (SC) Lok Sabha constituency in Tirupati on Saturday.

— DECCAN CHRONICLE

Voters boycott poll over roads

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, APRIL 17

Voters of B. Kothapalem in Chittamur mandal of Gudur Assembly segment in Nellore district boycotted Tirupati Lok Sabha bypoll protesting against lack of proper road facility to their village.

According to villagers, they were demanding that authorities lay a proper road to their village. Despite several representations, the issue has remained pending. Hence the villagers decided to boycott the by-poll.

Though officials made all arrangements for polling and appealed to voters that they exercise

their franchise, none came forward. Following this, higher officials from Gudur revenue division held discussions with the villagers but to no avail.

In Chittoor district too, villagers of Urundur, Kandriga, Narayana Puram, Dommara Palem and Panekaladu under Srikalahasti constituency and other segments also decided not to participate in polling. Speaking to media, they said they are boycotting polling against the state government's decision to merge their villages with nearby municipalities.

■ Page 2: Voters refuse to budge on parties' plea

TEACHER DIES OF HEART ATTACK ON ELECTION DUTY

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, APRIL 17

A teacher on election duty at Arava Palem polling station in Chittamuru mandal in Nellore district died of heart attack late on Friday. The attack came when he was making arrangements for polling in the Tirupati Lok Sabha by-election on Saturday.

He was identified as Yembeti Ravi working at Nukalapalem in Sullurpet mandal. He was deputed on election duty as assistant polling officer (APO). He collected poll material and reached the polling station on Friday.

■ Page 2: Teacher informed aides of congestion

Nagarjunasagar sees 89% voter turnout

L. VENKAT RAM REDDY | DC
HYDERABAD, APRIL 17

The ruling Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS) is upbeat following the record 89 per cent polling, the highest in the past three elections, recorded in the Nagarjunasagar Assembly by-election on Saturday.

TRS leaders said the higher polling percentage

in recent Legislative Council elections had worked in favour of TRS and the same would be repeated in Nagarjunasagar. They were confident of a majority higher than what was recorded in the 2018 December Assembly elections.

In 2018, TRS candidate Nomula Narasimhaiah had won with a majority of 7,726 votes.

Reservoirs dry up, water crisis looms

D. SIVA RAMI REDDI | DC
KURNOOL, APRIL 17

Water shortage seems to be on the horizon as storage levels in major reservoirs of Andhra Pradesh have fallen drastically.

Level of Srisaillam reservoir has touched 808 ft against full reservoir level of 885 ft.

Water availability is just 33.59 TMC, only 15 per cent of total storage capacity. Nagarjunasagar, downstream of Srisaillam, has storage of just 191.05 TMC against 312 TMC capacity. Priyadarshini Jurala and Tungabhadra each have mere 3.98 TMC of water.

Srisaillam superintendent engineer M. Srinivasula Reddy said as of now there is nothing to worry about. But if the level falls below 780 ft, then it will be a problem to discharge water downstream or through Pothired-dypadu head regulator. Krishna water is being drawn into Penna through Ovk and Mylavaram reservoirs and also through Kundu River to take it to Nellore district's Somasila reservoir. But Somasila too has 56.63 TMC feet of water against its storage capacity 78 TMC.

■ Full report on page 3

WEATHER

Max: 36.0°C
Min: 24.0°C
RH: 81%
Rainfall: Nil

Forecast: Clear.
Max/Min temp.
36/24 °C

ASTROGUIDE

Plava: Uttarayana
Tithi: Chaitra Suddha Shashti till 10.31 pm
Star: Arudra till 5 am (Monday)
Varjyam: 11.48 am to 1.33 pm
Durmuhurtam: 4.49 pm to 5.39 pm
Rahukalam: 4.30 pm to 6 pm

HJRI CALENDAR

Ramzan 5,1442 AH
PRAYERS

Fajar: 5.35 am
Zohar: 1.30 pm
Asar: 5.15 pm
Maghrib: 6.25 pm
Isha: 8.15 pm

SUNRISE TOMORROW 5.50 AM

SUNSET TODAY 6.23 PM

MOONRISE TODAY 10.09 PM

MOONSET TOMORROW 00.33 AM

RAMZAN TIMINGS

IFTAR: 6.28 PM (TODAY)
SEHRI: 4.30 AM (TOMORROW)



COUNTER POINT



Let us loot vaccines and oxygen from the hospital!

SHORT TAKES

Deep Sidhu gets bail: RF violence

New Delhi: A Delhi court has granted bail to actor-activist Deep Sidhu, who was arrested in connection with the Red Fort violence on Republic Day. Special Judge Neelofer Abida Perveen granted relief to the accused on Friday on a personal bond of ₹30,000 and two sureties of a like amount.

Lalu gets bail in Dumka case

Ranchi: Jharkhand High Court on Saturday granted bail to RJD president Lalu Prasad in Dumka treasury case of the multi-crore rupees fodder scam, paving way for his release from jail. The bail was allowed to Prasad by Justice Apareesh Kumar Singh. The court directed him neither to leave the country without permission nor change his address and mobile number during the bail period.

WhatsApp weak link discovered

New Delhi: Country's cyber security agency CERT-In has cautioned WhatsApp users about certain vulnerabilities detected in the popular instant messaging app that could lead to breach of sensitive information. A "high" severity rating advisory was issued by the CERT-In, or the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team.

Tamil comedian Vivekh dead

Chennai: Popular Tamil actor Vivekh who won the hearts of millions of people by his sharp wit and noted for his social work and promoting the cause of environmental protection died here on Saturday. The 59-year-old comedian died in the early hours, SIMS Hospital vice president Dr Raju Sivasamy said.

■ Full report on page 5

PANDEMIC | BLUES

University officials promise to comply with all Covid measures

JNTU Kakinada to hold exams

SAMPAT G. SAMRATAN | DC
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 17

Despite the daily surge in Coronavirus infections, and several boards deferring the exams, JNTU-Kakinada is going ahead with its first semester engineering exams in the beginning of May.

Nearly 50,000 students from eight districts — S r i k a k u l a m , V i j a y a w a d a , Visakhapatnam, East Godavari, West Godavari, Krishna, Guntur and Prakasam — are to attend the exams at 241 affiliated

colleges. The exams are to be held from 10 am to 1 pm. The students are also to attend first semester mid-exams from April 26.

University officials said they would be complying with all standard operating procedures (SOPs) recommended by the Centre and the AP government against the Coronavirus.

Only 12 students would be seated in a class room and six-feet distance would be maintained between them.

In addition, all students would have to wear face masks and would be allowed to carry a bottle of

sanitiser and a water bottle into the exam centre. Students showing Covid-19 symptoms or those infected with the virus will be seated separately.

The authorities said that as per UGC norms a student has to appear for the final exam of every year to be permitted to go to the next.

The Supreme Court has upheld the norms, they said.

Asked if the first semester exams could not be held with those for the second semester at a later date, the officials said that they were facing opposition

from students to the plan. However, the university authorities made the students write exams for both the semesters.

The authorities say that as they had conducted all scheduled exams for engineering, business management, pharma and other courses for both UG and PG successfully during the first wave of Covid-19.

Another round of exams was held recently with the exception of first year exams. There were no reports of any student getting infected with the virus.

JNTU-K controller of exams Dr K. Venkata Reddy said, "We are making all arrangements for conduct of mid-exams and the first semester exams for the first year engineering, pharma and architecture students to save the academic year. As it is mandatory to conduct the final exams before promoting the students to the next level, we have no option except to do so."

A good number of students and their parents raised concern over the holding of exams, saying that they may fall victim to the Coronavirus.



IN BRIEF

TEACHER
INFORMED AIDES
OF CONGESTION

FROM PAGE 1

Around 10:45 p.m., Ravi informed his colleagues at the polling station that he felt congestion in his chest. They immediately informed higher officials and shifted him to a nearby hospital, where doctors declared him brought dead.

Another government staffer was in place of Ravi for smooth conduct of polling.

THREE SENIOR
IAS OFFICERS
TRANSFERREDDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 17

The state government has transferred three senior IAS officers here on Saturday. West Godavari collector Mutyalara Revu was transferred and posted as additional secretary to Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy. Special Secretary to government (Resources Mobilisation and Institutional Finance) Kartikeya Misra was transferred and posted as collector, West Godavari. Secretary to government (Finance) N. Gulzar was posted as Managing Director (full additional charge), AP State Finance Corporation.



Mohammed Jani

FORMER MINISTER
PASSES AWAY
IN GUNTURDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 17

Former minister and YSRC senior leader Mohammed Jani passed away in Guntur on Saturday after a prolonged illness. Jani belongs to Guntur city and won as MLA from Guntur several times. He was also elected as MLC and worked as deputy chairman of the AP Legislative Council. Jani worked as a minister in the cabinets of chief ministers Marri Chenna Reddy, N. Janardhan Reddy and Kotla Vijayabhaskar Reddy.

Jani was a staunch supporter of the Congress from the beginning but left the Congress after AP State bifurcation and joined the Telugu Desam. He joined the YSR Congress before the elections in the presence of Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy and continued as a senior leader in the YSRC till his last breath.

Former MP Rayapati Sambasiva Rao and ex-MLC R. Srinivas expressed grief over the sudden demise of Jani and praised his services as an MLA, MLC, deputy chairperson and minister.

HC SERVES NOTICE
TO SREEVANI
AND OTHERSDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 17

The Andhra Pradesh High Court served notices to Deputy Chief Minister P. Pushpa Sreevani and others in a case.

Single judge bench Justice M. Satyanarayana Murthy heard a petition filed by retired teacher K. Mani on Friday, seeking its direction to the Election Commission of India to obtain the opinion of the Governor's secretary to disqualify her as she was elected as an MLA from the ST reserved Kurupam Assembly segment from Vizianagaram district in the last election by submitting the caste certificate issued by the tahsildar of Buttaigudem in West Godavari even though she does not belong to ST community.

The court served notices to Chief Secretary, Secretary to Governor, Secretary General, ECI, collector, West Godavari, and tahsildar, Buttaigudem, and posted the next hearing after a week.

TD harassed voters: Peddireddy

Minister charges TD with launching smear campaign against YSRC for political gains

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, APRIL 17

Panchayat Raj minister Peddireddy Ramachandra Reddy has fumed at Telugu Desam leaders for accusing the ruling YSR Congress of casting bogus votes using fake Electoral Photo Identity Cards (EPICs) in the Tirupati (SC) Lok Sabha byelection.

Speaking to the media here on Saturday, he accused opposition parties, including Telugu Desam and media members supporting it, of going to polling booths and intimidating voters. Ramachandra Reddy said he had already complained to the Election Commission about such harassment of voters.

"They (opposition) not only intimidated voters at polling booths, but intercepted pilgrims and passengers, especially women travelling in buses from far-off places, and terrorised them. The TD leaders have conspired to obstruct the polling process, which had been continuing on a peaceful note," he remarked.

Ramachandra Reddy said Telugu Desam complaining about bogus voters using fake EPIC is just a drama. He said TD is making false allegations against the ruling party, as its defeat in the Tirupati LS bypoll is imminent.

"Lokesh described me in his tweet today as Andhra Veerappan."

In fact, it is TD that joined hands with former chief minister N. Kiran Kumar Reddy in smuggling precious red sanders. Prove me a smuggler and I'll quit politics," the minister said.

He charged Telugu Desam of launching a smear campaign against the ruling YSRC for political gains.

"We will complain to Election Commission about Telugu Desam's conspiracies and irregularities committed during the bypoll," he added.

VOTERS REFUSE
TO BUDGE ON
PARTIES' PLEA

FROM PAGE 1

"We all depend on farming and dairy animals. We are not in a position to pay taxes to municipalities. Despite several appeals, officials did not resolve our issues," villagers said. They questioned why Renigunta, which is a town, has not been merged in Srikalahasti municipality.

Though officials and leaders of various political parties tried to convince villagers into voting, they did not budge.

Meanwhile, there have been reports of electronic voting machines (EVMs) malfunctioning at a few polling stations, which resulted in a brief delay in starting the polling process.



An elderly woman is being escorted to cast her vote at a polling booth during the byelection for the Tirupati (SC) Lok Sabha constituency on Saturday.

Paramilitary forces personnel help an elderly woman at a polling booth during the byelection for the Tirupati (SC) Lok Sabha constituency on Saturday.

— DC

Sajjala says 'bogus voters' claim is Naidu conspiracy

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 17

The YSR Congress alleged that Telugu Desam chief N. Chandrababu Naidu was hatching a conspiracy to disturb the Tirupati Lok Sabha byelection polling through a "baseless drama of bogus voters" on polling day on Saturday.

Government public affairs adviser Sajjala Ramakrishna Reddy refuted the allegations of the TD about the YSRC deploying bogus voters into polling booths and claimed that the ruling party did not need to do anything like that for votes as victory was "inevitable due to people's

support."

He claimed that 80 per cent of voters were supporting Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy. Speaking to the media at the party office here on Saturday, Ramakrishna Reddy said Naidu knew that the TD was losing and was resorting to cheap tactics. The TD chief was "insulting the democratic process" which is being conducted in a free and fair manner, he said.

Ramakrishna Reddy stated that Tirupati is a world famous pilgrimage centre and people come in large numbers in buses and other vehicles. Naidu was dubbing these pilgrims as "bogus voters."

The government adviser

slammed Naidu for writing to the Chief Electoral Officer at midnight mentioning bus numbers and alleging that fake voters were being brought into the constituency.

The YSRC leader asked what the BJP and TD's polling agents were doing in the booths if bogus votes were being cast.

He pointed out that the bypoll was being held by the Central Election Commission and was being monitored by its observers and the process was guarded by Central security forces.

Ramakrishna Reddy said Naidu had prepared his reaction to the poll result, and would blame the defeat of the TD on bogus voting.

YSRC WRITES TO
CEO FOR ACTION
ON NAIDU, AIDESDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 17

The YSR Congress on Saturday lodged a complaint against Telugu Desam president N. Chandrababu Naidu and TD leaders from the the Tirupati parliamentary constituency for allegedly "disturbing the peaceful polling process" during the byelection.

YSRC general secretary Lella Appi Reddy lodged the complaint with the Chief Electoral Officer and sought action against Naidu and other leaders for "creating disturbances in the poll process."

Appi Reddy alleged that under Naidu's directions, former MLA Sugunamma, former Tirupati urban Development Authority G. Narasimha Yadav and other TD leaders attempted to disrupt the polling to mislead voters.

He claimed that a group of devotees who were on the way to Tirumala in private buses had stopped near the PLR convention centre in Tirupati for breakfast. When they were about to leave, a group of persons accompanied by Sugunamma and Narasimha Yadav created a scene by alleging that the devotees were bogus voters.

Appi Reddy alleged that the pro-Telugu Desam TV channels telecast the incident and levelled false allegations and tried to create fear in the minds of the public that the YSRC had brought bogus voters from outside to cast their votes in the byelection. If there was any truth about the TD's allegations, polling agents would have spotted them, the YSRC leaders said.

Appi Reddy sought action against Naidu and TD leaders for stopping the devotees, branding them as bogus voters and creating a ruckus.

● Appi Reddy alleged that the pro-Telugu Desam TV channels telecast the incident and levelled false allegations and tried to create fear in the minds of the public that the YSRC had brought bogus voters from outside to cast their votes in the byelection. If there was any truth about the TD's allegations, polling agents would have spotted them, the YSRC leaders said.

BJP asks EC to conduct
repoll in Tirupati cityDC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, APRIL 17

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) candidate for the Tirupati (SC) Lok Sabha byelection K. Ratna Prabha has demanded the Election Commission to conduct a re-polling in Tirupati city, alleging large-scale of irregularities in Saturday's polling process.

She, along with BJP functionaries, including Samanchi Srinivas, staged a protest in front of the West Division police station here, demanding the police and officials to take action against the violators, who allegedly polled bogus votes with fake voter ID cards and voter slips. She demanded the ECI to cancel the polling process in Tirupati and conduct re-poll.

"Outsiders who were brought from neighbouring places were given bogus voter ID cards and voter slips by the ruling party and they cast fake votes. This has resulted in hundreds of genuine voters, who came to exercise their franchise, to return as their votes were found already polled", she alleged.

"Instead of taking action against the violators caught by BJP activists



K. Ratna Prabha

and booth agents, the police have arrested our activists and filed cases against them. The ruling party leaders have forcibly taken away our booth agents from the polling stations and handed them over to police. Election authorities and police have failed to respond to our complaints and no action was taken to check outsiders coming to the polling booths", she said.

Meanwhile, BJP leader and Rajya Sabha member G.V.L. Narasimha Rao took the issue to Twitter, alleging that the ruling party was resorting to bogus voting in Tirupati, while the state administration and police were mute spectators. "Bogus voting by ruling @YSRCParty reported on a large scale in Tirupati (SC) Lok Sabha bypoll. State administration,

● Speaking to media persons, Srinivasa Rao alleged that YSRC leaders have indulged in rigging by bringing in thousands of outsiders from Kadapa, Kurnool and Chittoor districts.

police are mute spectators to this subversion of democracy. Request @ECISVEEP to order repoll in all such booths," he tweeted.

Alleging irregularities and bogus voting, Left parties staged a protest in front of the Gandhi statue here.

CPI(M) leaders, led by party central committee member V. Srinivasa Rao, raised slogans against the YSRC, accusing them of resorting to large-scale bogus voting.

Speaking to media persons, Srinivasa Rao alleged that YSRC leaders have indulged in rigging by bringing in thousands of outsiders from Kadapa, Kurnool and Chittoor districts.

"The YSRC agents and leaders have threatened other party booth agents in the polling stations and cast bogus votes", he alleged while demanding the Election Commission of India to inquire into the issue.

Class 10 Telugu textbook praises Naidu and Amaravati capital

Amaravati capital still Class 10 lesson

NAGABHUSHAN
HOSKOTE | DC
ANANTAPUR, APRIL 17

While the YSRC bitterly attacks TD president N. Chandrababu Naidu and the state government has embarked on a plan to downsize the Amaravati capital region and include two other capitals at Visakhapatnam and Kurnool, a lesson in the Class 10 Telugu text book still praises the former

chief minister and the Amaravati capital.

The lesson is being continued for the 2021-22 academic year. It traces the history of Amaravati from the time of Lord Buddha and has been in place for two years.

In its current version, the lesson praises the Amaravati capital and the nine hubs for various sectors surrounding the region that had been planned by the former TD

● According to new lesson Amaravati would be a world class capital. It states that PM Modi initiated the project by performing puja and bringing holy water and sand from various rivers for the construction of the capital.

government.

Class 10 lessons are started a month in advance. The appearance of the lesson took teachers and stu-

dents by surprise, given the initiatives of the YSRC government with regard to the capital. "The lesson says N. Chandrababu Naidu as Chief Minister made efforts to develop Amaravati as capital of AP and says that nine locations would be developed for different sectors like health, administration, judiciary and others," said N. Anjali, a student from a private school. She said she had been given assign-

ments to describe the Amaravati capital.

According to the lesson, the new Amaravati would be a world class capital. It states that Prime Minister Narendra Modi initiated the project by performing puja and bringing holy water and sand from various rivers for the construction of the capital. There was no fresh information about the shifting of capital or the creating of two more capitals.

Naidu demands
repoll in Tirupati
Assembly segmentDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 17

The Telugu Desam has demanded cancellation of election process and re-polling in Tirupati Assembly segment of the Tirupati parliamentary constituency due to gross violations of model code of conduct, booth-capturing, rigging and bogus votes.

TD chief N. Chandrababu Naidu on Saturday alleged severe violation of norms in the byelection by the YSRC and inaction against violators by the poll panel. He demanded the Election Commission to immediately cancel the election in Tirupati Assembly segment and order re-polling.

Addressing a press meet here, Naidu recalled that the EC had assured 2,200 central forces, 800 micro-observers but it did not take any action against ruling party violators. He alleged that women from other areas were brought to cast votes illegally and TD had caught hundreds of people red-handed when trying to cast votes fraudulently.

Naidu alleged that checkpoints failed to restrain bogus voters from entering Tirupati and the central observers remained oblivious despite complaints by all political parties. He mentioned that BJP leader Shanta Reddy caught fraudulent voters



N. Chandrababu Naidu

but there was no action from the police and officials.

Naidu said that democratic principles were thrown out of the windows as police, volunteers and the YSRC leaders were colluded and turned the elections into a farce. He stated that police are behaving like henchmen of the ruling party.

Further, Naidu also wrote a letter to the Chief Election Commissioner explaining violations by the YSRC.

TD secretary and MLC Beeda Ravichandra alleged that the ruling party leaders have ridiculed democracy by resorting to rigging in the Tirupati Lok Sabha byelection.

Addressing the media in Nellore on Saturday, the TD MLC accused the ruling party of resorting to irregularities by creating bogus voter ID cards and shifting people from other constituencies to cast bogus votes in the Tirupati Lok Sabha byelection.

YSRC resorted to
bogus voting: TDDC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, APRIL 17

Telugu Desam leaders accused the YSRC of indulging in large-scale rigging in the polling held on Saturday for the Tirupati (SC) Lok Sabha seat. They alleged that a large number of fake votes were cast by outsiders, brought in by the ruling party, in the Tirupati Assembly segment.

The party candidate Panabaka Lakshmi, who visited a polling station in the 74th division in Tirupati, claimed to have caught three persons, who tried to cast votes with fake voter cards. Panabaka Lakshmi said that she had alerted a constable on duty at the polling station and he shifted them to the station for resorting to irregularities.

On the other hand, the TD leaders from Tirupati, including former MLA M. Sugunamma, Tirupati Parliamentary in-charge G. Narasimha Yadav, Sridhar Varma and others, staged protests at different locations in the city. They alleged that the YSRC leaders kept the 'outsiders' at a private convention centre.

Sugunamma and Narasimha Yadav also claimed to have intercepted some buses and cars, which were bringing outsiders into the city. The urban police took Yadav into custody when he staged a protest in front of the convention centre.

Telugu Desam on its official Twitter tweeted: "YSRCP is making a mock-



Panabaka Lakshmi

ery of democracy and elections. Thousands of their Karyakarthis from other regions have come to Tirupati to rig elections with fake votes. These photographs which were shot today morning at PLR Function Hall demonstrate their audacity and disregard of the law and Election Commission. We urge Election Commission to immediately take necessary measures to stop YSRCP's anti-social elements from breaking the law and code of conduct during elections."

Meanwhile, Congress contestant Dr Chinta Mohan along with party activists also intercepted a bus, which allegedly brought outsiders, near the DBR hospital. He complained to the election authorities, alleging that the ruling party has brought nearly 10,000 outsiders from neighbouring places like Punganur, Madanapalle, Thamballapalle in Chittoor district and also from Kadapa district to cast bogus votes.

Special prayers



Tourism minister Muttamsetti Srinivasa Rao offers special prayers at the Kappu Stambam of Simhachalam temple during his visit, in Visakhapatnam on Saturday.

—DC

IN BRIEF

Alumni to develop high school

Vijayawada: The alumni of SVV High School Tadikonda came forward to develop the school into a modern educational institution during platinum jubilee celebrations of the school at Tadikonda in Guntur district on Saturday. Former MLC and SVV High School committee president Rayapati Srinivas said that they had planned to conduct the platinum jubilee celebrations but due to the second wave of Covid-19 disturbed the same hence few former students attended the programme physically and the rest of ex-students virtually. Mr Srinivas said that a get-together with teachers and students was conducted in which alumni announced modernising of SVV High School into a Corporate school with all modern amenities.

CHEMISTS CRUCIAL IN DEVELOPMENT

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 17

Prof. Lakshmi Kantam, Dr B.P. Godrej Distinguished Professor of Green Chemistry, Department of Chemical Engineering, Institute of Chemical Technology, Mumbai, said that chemists have to play a major role in sustainable development and chemists have to bring about awareness among the newer generation of chemists about the importance of sustainable development. She was delivering a lecture on "Catalyst for Sustainable Chemical Industry" and "Design and Development of Homogeneous/Heterogeneous Catalysts for Sustainable Chemical Industry" organised by SRM University AP on Saturday.

Prof. Lakshmi Kantam said, "Global and Indian chemical industry estimate \$5.1 trillion and \$108.4 billion in 2021. Catalysis is a highly demanded technology for a sustainable society and drives innovation in many other fields. Achieving the high catalytic selectivity is the aim of catalysis science in 21st century." She stated that the catalysis of organic reactions by homogeneous and heterogeneous catalysts remains a diversified field of scientific inquiry. She explained that it attracts a large group of scientists with specialities spanning synthetic organic chemistry, inorganic chemistry, surface science, material science, reaction engineering and computational modelling.

Prof. Lakshmi Kantam briefly explained, "Hydroxyapatite (HA) is a hydrated calcium phosphate material, which is an important biomaterial because of its similarity to the mineral component of mammalian bone. We have utilized these materials and their metal exchanged materials as catalysts for C-C."

As reservoirs dry up, water crisis looms

D. SIVA RAMI REDDI | DC
KURNOOL, APRIL 17

Water shortage seems to be on the horizon as storage levels in major reservoirs of Andhra Pradesh have fallen drastically.

Level of Srisailem reservoir has touched 808 ft against full reservoir level of 885 ft. Water availability is just 33.59 TMC, only 15 per cent of total storage capacity. Nagarjun-asagar, downstream of Srisailem, has storage of just 191.05 TMC against 312 TMC capacity. Priyadarshini Jurala and Tungabhadra each have mere 3.98 TMC of water.

Srisailem superintendent engineer M. Srinivasula Reddy said as of now there is nothing to worry about. But if the level falls below 780 ft, then it will be a problem to discharge water downstream or through Pothired-

Drinking water supply schemes, which had been formulated for almost all villages spending crores of rupees, have proved to be a failure

dypadu head regulator. Krishna water is being drawn into Penna through Owk and Mylavaram reservoirs and also through Kundu River to take it to Nellore district's Somasila reservoir. But Somasila too has 56.63 TMC feet of water against its storage capacity 78 TMC.

Dowleswaram circle irrigation superintendent engineer R. Shivarama Krishna said the current storage in barrage is 2.2 TMC against the total capacity of 3 TMC. There is no problem in supplying drinking water to Rajahmundry city as it

requires just 0.22 TMC.

Kurnool Municipal Corporation (KMC) area depends on Sunkesula reservoir for drinking water. Corporation executive engineer Surendra Babu said the reservoir has storage of 1.07 TMC, which will be sufficient till the end of May. He reassured people that water could be tapped from Gajuladinne project too, which is presently having a storage of 2.61 TMC. He said normally rains fall even in April and May months. But if there is a dry spell even in June, then it may lead to water scarcity in the city. But that would be a rare case, he felt.

However, river beds of Tungabhadra, Kundu, and Handri have dried up. In the absence of alternative drinking water sources, villagers are digging up "chali-malu" (water pits) on river beds in search of

water.

For residents of Mantralayam, Yamminaganur and Kodumur Assembly constituencies, River Tungabhadra is the only source of drinking water. Alur, Pathikonda, Nandikotkur, Srisailem and Adoni Assembly constituencies are dependent on KC canal, Handri Neeva and low-level canal, which are not able to supply water regularly. In Kosigi, Aspari, Pedakadubur, Chippagiri, Nandavaram, Tuggali, Belagal, Guduru, and Kothapalli too, water supply has gone down drastically. Tubewells are either not working or giving water that is unfit for human consumption.

Drinking water supply schemes, which had been formulated for almost all villages spending crores of rupees, have proved to be a failure.

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Vizag readies 6,500 Covid beds

DC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, APRIL 17

The district administration, on Saturday, designated 20 private hospitals with 2,023 beds and including government hospitals the total number of beds available would be around 6,500 in Visakhapatnam district.

"As of now we have 4,023 and gradually we are making it 6,500," district collector V. Vinay Chand told DC on Saturday.

The CSR block at King George Hospital is full to the brim and the patients were being sent to Government Chest Hospital and VIMS. Together they have around 1,000 beds. The problem is a shortage of doctors specialised in lung diseases and general medicine, sources said. However, the corporate hospitals have medical professionals to meet the demand, the health officials said.

"Last year's infrastructure made available in the government and private sector is helping now," said a senior official.

He said the price list has been given to corporate and private hospitals and the management should have to adhere to the recommended prices. It is also made mandatory for them to accept health insurance under Arogyasri for eligible patients.

A senior political leader from the industrial city of Gajuwaka said the public sector undertakings and corporate houses are blocking the beds in the corporate hospitals for their staff.

● The problem is a shortage of doctors specialised in lung diseases and general medicine, sources said. The corporate hospitals have medical professionals to meet the demand

● Local people are complaining that the newly elected corporators were not helping them

"This is the reason why the corporate and some private hospitals are not accepting the private patients. Patients from Srikakulam, Vizianagaram and East Godavari are also looking at Visakhapatnam for better treatment but they were being denied admission," the leader said whom the relatives of the patients approached for help.

Local people are complaining that the newly elected corporators were not helping them in getting tests and vaccines. When approached, they have been claiming they were helpless since there was a short supply of testing kits and vaccines. However, an independent corporator from the old town area of Visakhapatnam Sadique Mohammed denied the allegation and said urban health centres in his ward are providing both.

"People have to understand that priority in testing is being given to symptomatic patients and not to those under panic," he said.

Visakhapatnam district registered 470 positive patients on Saturday and the active cases have gone up to 3,804.

AP logs 7,224 Covid cases, 15 deaths: Crisis worsens

Chittoor tops in fresh, cumulative active cases & deaths

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 17

Andhra Pradesh registered 7,224 fresh Covid-19 cases and 15 deaths in the last 24 hours.

The state health authorities reported on Saturday that out of 30,907 samples tested, 7,224 persons were infected with Covid-19. Out of a total number of 1,56,42,070 samples tested so far in the state, 9,55,455 persons were found infected with the virus and of them, 9,07,598 were recovered while 40,469 are still active with the virus.

Out of 13 districts in the state, 12 districts reported 200 or above daily cases while West Godavari recorded 96. Chittoor district was the worst hit with 1,051 followed by 906 in East Godavari, 903 in Guntur, 662 in Srikulam, 624 in Nellore, 588 in Prakasam, 507 in Kurnool, 493 in Krishna, 470 in Visakhapatnam, 420 in Anantapur, 304 in Vizianagaram and 200 in Kadapa. With regard to the cumulative active cases, Chittoor topped the state with 7,155 followed by 4,301 in Guntur, 4,121 in East Godavari, 3,875 in Krishna, 3,804 in Visakhapatnam, 3,661 in Srikulam, 2,890 in Kurnool, 2,820 in Prakasam, 2,594 in Nellore, 1,950 in Anantapur, 1,436 in Kadapa, 1,345 in Vizianagaram and 517 in West Godavari.

Among daily deaths, Chittoor registered four followed by three in Nellore, two each in Kurnool and Visakhapatnam and one each in Guntur, Kadapa and Vizianagaram. The state health authorities discharged 2,332 Covid-19 patients after recovery. AP conducted Covid-19 tests on 2,92,923 samples per one million population and recorded the positive rate of 6.11.

● Chittoor registered four deaths followed by three in Nellore



A "no vaccine" notice affixed at the Urban Health Centre near Red Circle in Vijayawada on Saturday. — C. NARAYAN RAO

57 parks closed due to cases surge

DC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, APRIL 17

With surge in Covid-19 cases, Kakinada Municipal Corporation has closed 57 parks in the city. Even morning or evening walks will not be allowed. The decision has been taken after the city reported more than 200 new cases of Coronavirus.

KMC commissioner Swapnil Dinkar Pundkar appealed to people that they refrain from moving out of their houses. Even if they do, they must compulsorily wear masks and maintain social distancing.

The commissioner inspected on Saturday private hospitals, which have been permitted to treat Covid-19 patients. He instructed managements of hospitals, including Hope, Sunrise, Sanjeevani and Seven Star, to arrange sufficient beds with oxygen and ventilators. He also inspected fire equipment in these hospitals.

KMC additional commissioner Ch. Naga Narasimha Rao too visited hospitals including Sai Sudha, Lakshmi, Siddardha, Trust, Pulse, Safe, Inodaya and others. He said a report will be submitted to the collector on conditions of hospitals treating Coronavirus cases.

CORONA CUTS TIME OF FIRST VMC MEETING

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 17

The surge in Covid-19 cases put a huge impact on the first general body meeting of the Vijayawada Municipal Corporation which was held on Saturday after the VMC elections as it failed to discuss many important subjects due to time constraint. The officials decided to conduct the council meeting for less time due to the Covid-19 cases reported in the city and state.

Rajamahendravaram Municipal Corporation commissioner Abhishikth Kishore said that places where crowds gather, like parks, Sri Venkateswara Anam Kala Kendram and others, will be closed from April 19.

Rajamahendravaram sub-collector Anupama Anjali disclosed that as per government instructions, a fine of ₹500 in villages and ₹1,000 in cities will be imposed if persons are found on roads and streets without masks.

CLOSURE OF SHOPS BY 6 PM OPPOSED

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, APRIL 17

The Muslim United Front (MUF) opposed the unilateral decision of the Guntur Chamber of Commerce about cutting down the timing of shops in Guntur city. MUF president Md. Kaleem at Guntur on Saturday said that the district level Disaster Management Committee with seven higher officials would monitor the situation and would decide about lockdown imposition and restriction of market timings but here the Guntur Chamber of Commerce violating the norms announced restriction.

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DECCAN Chronicle

18 APRIL 2021



Ranjona Banerji
Off the beaten track

Being a sport! The story of my fitness journey

After you reach a certain age and size, in my case at least, your thoughts turn to another age and size, largely imaginary. For instance, when I was little, I was very thin. This is true. I have photographic evidence. I also had no actual talent as an athlete, but I was athletic enough to be made to run various races, jump over sandpits and poles and once, with luckily no major casualties, chuck a javelin. The third leg of the “house” team, if you will, and this carried on over three “houses” in three schools and two cities.

Once I was pushed into a race outside my training or comfort zone — 400 m, because there was no one else to make up the numbers. My preferred race was the 100 m sprint. The school’s sports consultant, of whom we were in awe because he had been to the 1976 Montreal Olympics and wanted Nadia Comaneci in person, said that my hamstring muscles were not long enough for my legs, so I had a funny stride. Not good for longer runs. Anyway, desperation made the house hamstrung. And in I went. After 300 metres, my heart burst out of my 13-year-old chest and I am not ashamed to say that a friend’s sister (in a similar situation for another house) and I, walked the last 100 m together, chatting. Since we finished the race, we were not disqualified. Heads, um, held high!

The one thing I could not do was swim except for an ungainly life-saving dog paddle. Luckily then no one ever threw me into a swimming pool for some greater sporting glory. The swimming coach, whom we called Bumblebee because he had a large yellow and black motorbike and kept bellowing at us in the CCI swimming pool in Bombay (1970s, that was its name then) managed to hammer a mediocre breaststroke into me before we buzzed off to a new school in Calcutta.

School finished and thus finished organised exercise. You may not believe it now but in the 1980s, hardly no one dedicated their lives to treadmills, yoga mats and smoothies. Plus, we were undefeatable. We worked hard and played harder. There was no time for dumbbells.

As it turned out, the dumbbells were us. All that confidence was highly misplaced. And by the time you realized that time and hormones were against you, the tyres on the cars on the roads had nothing on you and your stomach, arms, thighs, hips et cetera. That’s when you wake up at the crack of dawn and walked all over Aarey Milk Colony where the best exercise was running away from laughter clubs. I tried a few gyms. A friend found an excellent place in Ahmedabad where all you had to do was lie on a series of moving tables which exercised different parts of your body. Don’t laugh. It was brilliant and actually worked.

A couple of close friends and I, in our mid to late 40s, signed up for an exercise regime. This was zeal plus hubris. Also, when your vision goes a bit, you can’t really focus on the mirror any more and you miss all those wrinkles. So having scoffed at middle-aged ladies in salwar kameezes and sneakers huffing and puffing in suburban Mumbai’s parks, we joined a gym. Not the treadmill sort. But the calisthenics and exercise sort. Why humans put themselves through this is one of life’s mysteries. Anyway, we mountain-walked and pulled long rubber bands and cross-trained and then hobbled out after an hour with not one part of our bodies working.

The zeal was such that we were horrified when we attended an afternoon “old ladies” class — all the old ladies were at least five years younger than us — and saw that they spent all their time lying on their mats flirting with the young male instructors. We shuddered in self-righteous wrath as we finished all our exercises, and never went to an afternoon class again. Instead, we sacrificed lunch and went straight from yoga to the gym. Plus, we walked all over suburban Mumbai scorning every hopeful passing auto.

At the end of the year, all we had to show for it were collapsed muscles, dodgy knees, sprained ankles and broken toes. The only worthwhile part of this exercise was the yoga.

In between I did walk up and down some hills around my parents’ home, full of self-righteousness.

Now when 60 stares at you in the face and the tyres cannot be dislodged and who the hell wants to carry those dumbbells, and the hills are so pretty to look at, technology comes to the rescue! You install some free fitness app on your phone. You carry your phone everywhere. It counts every useless step you take. From refrigerator to chocolate cake to sofa to put the plate in the sink and at the end of the day, you have walked 5 km, used up 2,500 calories and done 9,622 steps. Or some such nonsense. You are happy. You smile beatifically at the phone. The phone is thrilled at the attention and you reset for the next day. I did away with the “heart points” or whatever because I never collected any.

When my sister and I were younger, teenagers, we used to watch Jane Fonda exercise videos and eat chips.

I am not so callous nor so arrogant now. I don’t eat while I watch those exercise ads on Instagram. I just switch to the food pictures after 10 minutes of fit young people contorting into some rebel poses.

Let my fingers do the walking?

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

Subhani



Second wave gives the lie to Modi’s ‘decisive’ image



Pavan K. Varma

Chanakya’s View

The time has come to call a spade a spade. And, this spade is about the government’s spectacular unpreparedness in anticipating the second wave of the pandemic, and the woeful absence of strategy and planning to cope with it. It is not as if the unexpected happened. Global experience shows that a second wave — more vicious and infectious than the first — was to be expected. A responsible government, not lulled into complacency by its own propaganda of how well it had handled the pandemic, would have — beyond dramatic gestures — diligently prepared for it. The truth is that the government did not.

A key difference between the first and second waves is that now we have vaccines as a significant weapon to fight the onslaught of the virus. The government itself made much of the fact that India is the vaccine capital of the world. What then led to the deplorable condition that when we needed the vaccines the most, they were — and are — in short supply? The government squandered away the natural advantage India had by exporting or gifting millions of vaccines. It did not give the required monetary support in time to indigenous producers like the Serum Institute of India so that they could ramp up vaccine production, even when it had an earmarked budgetary allocation of Rs 30,000 crores to handle the pandemic. And, it unforgivably delayed the introduction of new vaccines like Sputnik and Johnson &

Johnson, by not speeding up or abridging trials and approvals. Where imports were planned there are reports of major mess-ups leading to cancellations of major contracts. What we are now seeing is incoherent and improvised action when the crisis is upon us, rather than a planned anticipation that was the need of the hour.

Contrast this with what other governments like the UK and the USA have done. In America the government not only gave credit liberally to vaccine producers, but guaranteed them an assured buy-back at remunerative prices so that they could pay back the loans extended to them. The result is there to see. One-third of Americans are vaccinated, and the entire country will be vaccinated by the middle of the year. The UK, too, imported vaccines from every source that it could. We, on our part, gave away what we had, and did precious little to boost production at home for which we had the capacity.

There is a shortage, too, of oxygen, ventilators, testing kits and hospital beds. While it is true that the demand has gone up exponentially, a wise

It begs all rational thinking why the EC is not agreeing to club the balance three phases of the Bengal Assembly elections and hold them on one day. Mamata Banerjee endorses this proposal. Why doesn't the PM do so, too?

Shri Krishna in the Bhagwad Gita tells Arjuna to do his duty irrespective of consequences. Our theory of dharma also includes a particular category — aapad dharma — which kicks in times of crisis or emergency...

government would have prepared for the demand in anticipation of the inevitable by increasing production and capacity prior to the second wave hitting us. There is little accountability in this bureaucratic muddling, and total opacity in how the money has been spent thus far in the PM Cares Fund.

The administrative listlessness of the government can be seen in its inability to take stern measures even in the face of the second wave. Why else would have permission have been given to the Kumbh Mela celebrations at Haridwar, where some 40 lakh sadhus and devotees took the plunge in the long-suffering Ganga? All norms of social distancing or masks were thrown to the wind, even as our netas smiled at the devotion of what they assume is their “vote-bank”. Hinduism certainly does not sanction this abdication from duty. Shri Krishna in the Bhagwad Gita tells Arjuna to do his duty irrespective of the consequences. Our theory of dharma also includes a particular category — *aapad dharma* — which kicks in times of crisis or emergency and allows individuals and leaders to take hard decisions for survival. The Modi government likes the label of a “decisive” government, but its actions are quite to the contrary.

The same lackadaisical approach holds true for the government’s defence of political rallies in the

ongoing state assembly elections. Both leaders and the crowds they want so desperately to get seem to believe that Covid does not exist. The Prime Minister lectures to the nation about “*do gaz ki doori*” and “*mask hai zaroori*”, but when it comes to electioneering all such advice is thrown out of the window. There is no point in saying that other political parties do the same. If you are in the hot seat you have to set the benchmark for Covid-appropriate behaviour and uphold it through your actions. It also begs all rational thinking why the Election Commission is not agreeing to club the balance three phases of the Bengal Assembly elections and hold them on one day. Mamata Banerjee endorses this proposal. Why doesn’t the PM do so, too? If he does, I am convinced — for obvious reasons — that the EC will agree.

The second Covid wave has vividly shown the glaring gulf between image and delivery of the Modi Sarkar. This is not politicking over a crisis. This column is written in anguish at a crises that could have been mitigated by better preparation and handling, and anger at the long list of omissions and commissions that account for TV screens exploding with visuals of grieving citizens whose loved ones have died for lack of oxygen or a hospital bed, or who have returned empty handed from vaccination centres. Our health workers deserve our enduring gratitude, but what can we make of a health minister who expostulates that states are indulging in cheap politics when they ask for vaccines which are verifiably in short supply? Beyond a point, bluster does not work. It is time to call a spade a spade.

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

LETTERS

WHY ONLY TEMPLES?

In a pandemic, people of all religions are infected. The AP government must implement protocols on war footing to curb Covid at all religious places (*All temples in AP may bar entry of pilgrims yet again, DC, April 16*).

People are habituated to listen under intimidation and force. If protocols are not followed, we will have nothing but remorse.

Dr Syed Sarmad Kurnool

The government has to have proper plan for paying temple staff as hundi collections will be nil. Apart from temples all other religion prayer houses also to be closed completely to stop spread of virus.

Panchakarla Govardhana Rao Kankipadu, Krishna

POLITICAL TREND

Trying to demolish the entire Opposition may be an achievement for the ruling party in AP but it will be dangerous for democracy as there will be no one to question the ruling party and it would further give good scope to non-regional parties to play politics as we have witnessed in so many states. Political legends in the past were not foolish to suggest respect and protection of dignity of Opposition parties. Leaders and people of AP must understand this.

Paidi Visweswar Rao Srikakulam

COURT STAYS

Ample proof was submitted by the CID (*HC asks CID not act against TD boss for 3 weeks, DC, April 17*). Yet the accused “manages” to obtain stay on further proceedings. This could as well be described as the power of politics. India has become notorious for this delay tactics when the accused are politicians. In this case I wonder why the HC is granting stay after stay. The message is loud and clear. Have connections and enjoy, come what may.

Govardhana Myneedu Vijayawada

EC FAILED

The EC should take extraordinary decisions when a Goliath-like pandemic is unfolding. The WB CM’s suggestion to club the remaining phases of polls was extremely pragmatic to avoid super-spreading. Even parties should go for electioneering. It’s not the time to win elections but save the precious lives of voters. How can Modiji be so hard and immune to loss of lives caused by the second wave? Shouldn’t he appreciate his adversary’s pragmatism and go for it? The editorial is right (*Bengal: EC misses chance to curb Covid during vote, DC, April 17*).

K. Nehru Patnaik Visakhapatnam

50 YEARS AGO IN

DECCAN Chronicle

Bangla Desh becomes Republic

KUSHTIA (BANGLA DESH), APRIL 17

The Sovereign Democratic Republic of Bangla Desh came into formal existence today with a historic proclamation of independence by the new nation’s acting President, Syed Nazrul Islam.

The proclamation was read out by Mr. Islam for the President, Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, at a simple and solemn ceremony under a mango grove at Baidyanathatala in Meherpur sub-division of Kushtia district.

Anita Katyal
Political
Gup-Shup



Modi’s ‘Didi’ jibe offends women; what AAP shares with Owaisi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s war cry “*Didiii O Didiii, Arrey Didiii*” (referring to Mamata Banerjee) at all public rallies in poll-bound West Bengal has predictably angered the Trinamul Congress, more so as it has become a source of inspiration for eve-teasers. Roadside Romeos have apparently been mimicking the Prime Minister, using the same catcall, when they see women on the streets of Kolkata. Many of them have even been arrested by the police on charges of harassment. Five women have filed an FIR at the Amherst Street police station while the Bengal Citizens Forum has lodged a strong protest, saying the catcalls were a penal offence. The Forum also took out a protest march and submitted a complaint to the Election Commission, which is still pending. Women leaders belonging to the TMC have also slammed the Prime Minister, saying this was not just an insult to an elected chief minister but to all women.

Madhya Pradesh chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan was personally reluctant to impose a lockdown but he was liter-

ally pushed into doing so by his bureaucrats who did some plain speaking to him about the need for drastic measures given the alarming spike in Covid-19 cases in the state. Though Mr Chouhan did go by the advice of his officers, informal instructions were conveyed to the lower rung bureaucracy that the lockdown need not be implemented strictly and that people moving out should not be penalised. And the Damoh constituency where a bypoll was held last week, was deliberately exempted from adhering to the lockdown to allow political parties to organise their election rallies. They were helped in this effort by the local election commission officials who went to town with the slogan, “*Corona se nahi darenge, maddan hum zaroor karenge*”, urging voters to come out in large numbers on polling day. Incidentally, while Mr Chouhan was battling the alarming rise in infections, his health minister Narottam Mishra was busy overseeing the Assembly poll in West Bengal. Mr Mishra reached his home state a few days before the bye-election in Damoh which happens to

be his stronghold.

Delhi chief minister and Aam Aadmi Party chief Arvind Kejriwal has a lot in common with AIMIM president Asaduddin Owaisi. Either it is deliberate or inadvertent, but the leaders end up helping the Bharatiya Janata Party by entering an electoral fray resulting in the weakening of the Congress. Mr Owaisi did so in Bihar and Mr Kejriwal in the Gujarat local elections. In fact, there is talk that the two parties even receive covert funding from the BJP. Currently, AAP is focusing on expanding its footprint in Uttarakhand. To that extent, it has initiated a vigorous recruitment drive and is positioning itself as a credible alternative in the hill state. Interestingly, Mr Kejriwal is concentrating on the Kumaon region, which is where the Congress has strong roots, and not on Garhwal which is known to be the BJP’s fiefdom. Given the anti-incumbency against the BJP in Uttarakhand, the Congress has a chance of coming back to power here. But Mr Kejriwal could well

end up playing spoilsport, much to the BJP’s delight.

There appears to be no end to the raging battle in the upper echelons of the prestigious India International Centre even four years after eminent jurist Soli Sorabjee was forced to step down as the Centre’s president though he retains his position as life trustee on the IIC board. Mr Sorabjee’s tenure was cut short in 2017 following a spate of allegations of financial impropriety and bungling in the admission of members. A fresh attempt was made recently at the IIC annual general meeting to debar Mr Sorabjee and Justice Srikrishna from holding any office. It is not clear why this matter was raised after four years. The resolution was, however, not approved as several members pointed out that such a drastic action could not be taken in the absence of the two trustees and without giving them an opportunity to have their say. It must be mentioned that an enquiry committee was set up to probe the charges against Mr Sorabjee but little is

known about its report.

The surprise victory notched up by the Tripura scion Pradyot Kishore Deb Barman’s fledgling party in the recent election to the Tribal Areas Autonomous District Council, proved to be a major embarrassment for the Congress. Not only did the party finish fourth but Mr Barman who had been the Tripura Congress president left following differences with the party’s Northeast in-charge Luizinho Faleiro. Apparently, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi had got in touch with Mr Barman last year when he was in the US and asked him to rejoin the Congress. Mr Barman was willing to do so but was unable to get in touch with Rahul Gandhi as he had changed his phone number on his return from America and his staff was not very helpful in organising a meeting with the Nehru-Gandhi scion. Mr Barman then decided to float his own party.

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist

IN BRIEF

ARMY POSTPONES
COMMANDERS
CONFERENCEDC CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, APRIL 17

Indian Army has postponed its crucial Commanders Conference and cancelled retiring officers conference in April due to rising Covid-19 cases.

Indian Army's bi-annual Commanders Conference, which is attended by its top commanders from all over the country, was scheduled to be held from April 26, has been postponed. The Conference which was to be chaired by Chief of Army Staff Gen MM Naravane would have discussed emerging situation at the line of actual control (LAC) with China in Ladakh and the continued friction at other points in the sector.

It would have also discussed the strategy for summer at LAC with troops from both sides expected to move to forward positions. The ceasefire with Pakistan at Line of Control was also likely to be discussed during the meeting.

Indian Army's apex leadership was expected to discuss issues pertaining to organisational restructuring, logistics, administration and human resource management.

Last year also Indian Army had postponed its Army Commanders' Conference in April and later on it was held in May. This time also the conference could be held in May.

Meanwhile, Army has also cancelled its retiring officers conference in April due to rising Covid-19 cases.

Amid drug shortage, Remdesivir
stolen from MP govt hospital

17 boxes containing 853 Remdesivir vials go missing; police suspect insider's job

RABINDRA NATH
CHOUDHURY | DC
BHOPAL, APR 17

With the cry for Remdesivir getting louder across Madhya Pradesh, unidentified miscreants on Saturday broke into the storeroom of a government hospital here and decamped with boxes containing the life saving drug, leaving the administration as well as police shell-shocked.

The incident came to light when the medical officers of the hospital found the iron gate of the storeroom of the government-run Hamidia hospital here cut open and some boxes containing vials of Remdesivir missing in the morning.

"The matter was immediately reported to the police", hospital superintendent I D Chourasia said.

Preliminary investigation suggested that it might be an "insiders" job. "It has been found that 17 boxes containing 853 Remdesivir vials were missing. But, no other drugs stored in the store-room were touched by the thieves. This gives rise to suspicion that the theft was committed with mischievous intention", a senior police officer said.



A medic collects samples for Covid-19 tests at KSRTC bus stand, as Coronavirus cases surge in Bengaluru. - PTI

Joona Akhara ends
its participation
in Kumbh Mela

Dehradun, Apr 17: The Joona Akhara, one of the largest sects of seers in the country, announced the end of its participation in the Kumbh Mela on Saturday, hours after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's appeal that participation in the ongoing gathering in Haridwar be kept symbolic in view of the surge in coronavirus cases.

The people of India and their survival is our first priority. In view of the outbreak of the Coronavirus pandemic, we have duly immersed in the deities invoked on the occasion of Kumbh.

This is the formal immersion-conclusion of Kumbh on behalf of Joona Akhara, Swami Avadheshanand Giri, the mahamandaleshwar of the Joona Akhara, said in a tweet in Hindi.

An enclosed note signed by Giri, Joona Akhara

patron Hari Giri and secretaries Mahant Mohan Bharti and Mahant Mahesh Puri said the decision to immerse the Kumbh deities had been taken in public interest after consultations with seers of the Akhara.

"Immersing the deities, we also pray to all 'teertha and siddhapeeth' and declare the immersion of Haridwar Kumbh Mela, 2021," it said.

The country on Saturday recorded a frightening single-day spike in Covid cases with over 2.34 lakh fresh infections, crossing the two lakh-mark for the third straight day, as demands for increased supply of oxygen cylinders, vaccine doses and Remdesivir were raised by 11 states and Union Territories, including Delhi, where the pandemic situation was described as "worrisome" by the chief minister.

5 killed as fire
breaks out in
Covid hospitalDC CORRESPONDENT
RAIPUR, APR 17

A major fire broke out in a private Covid hospital here, killing five patients. While one Covid-19 patient succumbed to burn injuries, four others died due to disruption of oxygen supply caused due to the mishap, officials said. The fire broke out due to a short circuit, preliminary police investigation suggested.

Eyewitness accounts said smoke filled the two storied Rajdhani hospital in Pachpadi Naka in Raipur city when the fire broke out, causing suffocation to the Covid-19 patients.

The fire soon engulfed different wards of the hospital forcing the

patients to run helter skelter. Several patients suffered burn injuries as they tried to escape the fire. Relatives of the patients were seen breaking the glass windows to enter the wards to rescue the patients.

Many patients were brought outside the hospital and administered oxygen. Later, all the patients were shifted to different hospitals in the city. Around 30 Covid-19 patients were undergoing treatment in the hospital when the incident took place. This was the first fire incident in a Covid hospital in Chhattisgarh.

"The fire broke out at around 4.30 pm," special superintendent of police of Raipur district Ajay Yadav said.

Colleagues, leaders
mourn TN actor
Vivekh's deathANUPAMA SUBRAMAN-
IAN | DC
CHENNAI, APRIL 17

The untimely death of popular actor and social activist Vivekh at the age of 59 on Saturday after he suffered a massive heart attack left the Tamil film fraternity and fans in deep grief.

Vivekh breathed his last at 4.35 am. He was cremated with police honours.

The actor, a Padma Shri recipient and who has acted in over 200 films with top Tamil heroes, is known for his work on social issues and the environmental protection front. He actively campaigned and involved himself in planting saplings and afforestation.

He also collaborated with the government in disseminating significant social awareness messages to the public on TV including the latest on preventing coronavirus spread.

It was heart-wrenching to note that his tweets, which he had posted to condole Abdul Kalam's death, going viral. The post of Vivekh, which is in Tamil, roughly translates as, "A simple, selfless and clean life too will end someday. However, many die away! But only

few will live on even after death".

An admirer of late president A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, he was actively engaged in planting one crore tree saplings through his Green Kalam initiative.

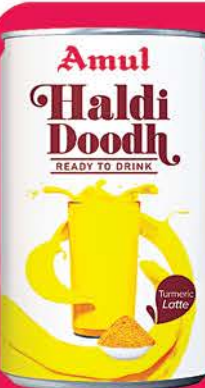
Prime Minister Modi, Chief Minister K. Palaniswami, DMK president M. K. Stalin, actor Rajinikanth, Makkal Needhi Maiam leader Kamal Haasan were among those who expressed shock and grief over his death and conveyed their condolences to the bereaved.

On Friday morning, an unconscious Vivekh was brought to the SIMS hospital in Chennai.

He reportedly suffered a cardiac arrest due to a 100 per cent blockage in the heart vessel.

The hospital said in a statement that the actor was revived and underwent an emergency coronary angiogram followed by angioplasty.

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IN BRIEF

Natanz attack
suspect named

Tehran, April 17: (AP) Iran state television has named a suspect in the attack that damaged centrifuges at its Natanz nuclear site and says he fled the country. The report Saturday named the suspect as Reza Karimi. It showed a passport-style photograph of a man it identified as Karimi. The report also aired what appeared to be an Interpol "red notice" seeking his arrest. The arrest notice was not immediately accessible on Interpol's public-facing database.

Raul Castro
steps down

Havana, April 17: Raul Castro said he is stepping down as Cuban Communist Party leader, leaving without a Castro guiding affairs for the first time in more than six decades and handing control to a younger generation. The 89-year-old Castro made the announcement in a speech Friday at the opening of the eighth congress of the ruling party, the only one allowed on the island. The reins will now pass to 60-year-old Miguel Diaz-Canel, who has already served as Cuba's president since 2018.

Russia detains
Ukrainian consul

Moscow, April 17: Russia detained a Ukrainian diplomat for allegedly receiving classified information from a database of the country's main security agency.

The Federal Security Service, or FSB, said Saturday that Alexander Sosonyuk, Ukraine's consul in St Petersburg, was taken into custody on Friday during a meeting with a Russian in which he received "information of a classified nature contained in the databases of law enforcement agencies and the FSB".

5 workers killed
by B'desh police

Dhaka, April 17: At least five people working at a under construction coal power plant being built by a Chinese firm in Chittagong were killed and 20 others injured in a clash with the police following a protest by the workers over wage and allowances, Bangladeshi media reports said on Saturday.

The incident happened when the protesting workers of the plant clashed with the police, prompting them to open fire in which five workers were killed, the *Dhaka Tribune* reported.

PHILIP LAID TO
REST IN ROYAL
SERVICE

London, April 17: Britain's Queen Elizabeth II led a small group of senior royals at the ceremonial funeral of her husband and consort Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, at Windsor Castle on Saturday.

The funeral incorporated hymns and readings chosen by the late royal himself and focussed on the "unwavering loyalty" of the longest-serving consort in British history to his wife, the monarch, and service to Britain and the Commonwealth.

The ceremony, which began at St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle with a national minute's silence at 1500 local time on Saturday, was a religious one though without any sermons, as planned by the Duke — who passed away aged 99 last week on Friday.

"The Order of Service for the funeral was agreed with the Duke of Edinburgh during his lifetime, and reflects the Duke's military affiliations, and personal elements of His Royal Highness' life," Buckingham Palace said in a statement.

Worldwide Covid death toll
tops a staggering 3 million

True number is higher because of possible government concealment

Rio de Janeiro, April 17: The global death toll from the Coronavirus topped a staggering 3 million people Saturday amid repeated setbacks in the worldwide vaccination campaign and a deepening crisis in places such as Brazil, India and France.

The number of lives lost, as compiled by Johns Hopkins University, is about equal to the population of Kyiv, Ukraine; Caracas, Venezuela; or metropolitan Lisbon, Portugal. It is bigger than Chicago (2.7 million) and equivalent to Philadelphia and Dallas combined. And the true number is believed to be significantly higher because of possible government concealment or the many cases overlooked in the early stages of the outbreak that began 16 months ago in Wuhan, China, at the end of 2019.

Around the world, the trajectory of the virus and the race to bring it under control vary widely from country to country.

Even as the US and Britain see their vaccination drives hit their stride and they begin to contemplate life after the pandemic, other places both rich and poor — France and India among them — are lagging behind in putting shots in arms and have imposed new lockdowns and other restrictions as cases soar.

Worldwide, deaths are running at over 12,000 per day on average and new cases at more than 700,000 a day. The US toll alone is over 560,000, accounting for more than 1 in 6 of the world's Covid-19 deaths, by far the highest reported by any country. The US is followed by Brazil, Mexico, India and Britain.

This month, the US recommended a pause in the use of Johnson & Johnson's Covid-19 vaccine while authorities investigate extremely rare but dangerous blood clots. — PTI

\$1.7B US network to
track virus variants

Washington, April 17: The US is setting up a \$1.7 billion national network to identify and track worrisome Coronavirus mutations whose spread could trigger another pandemic wave, the Biden administration announced Friday.

White House officials unveiled a strategy that features three components: A major funding boost for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and state health departments to ramp up Coronavirus gene-mapping; the creation of six centres of



People take part in a protest in the central Puerta del Sol to protect the national health service during and after the pandemic, in Madrid, on Saturday. — AP

USTR discusses TRIPS
waiver proposal for vax

Washington, April 17: US Trade Representative Katherine Tai, in a virtual meeting with GAVI's CEO Dr. Seth Berkley, discussed, among other things, the proposed waiver of certain provisions of the WTO's agreement on intellectual property rules for the manufacture of coronavirus vaccines.

In the virtual meeting with Berkley on Friday, Tai discussed increasing vaccine production, global health issues and the proposed waiver of certain provisions of the

World Trade Organisation Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) for Covid-19 pandemic, the USTR said in a statement.

The TRIPS Agreement is a minimum standards agreement, which allows members to provide more extensive protection of intellectual property if they so wish.

Tai expressed her appreciation for the important role GAVI has played in securing and distributing vaccines for developing countries through COVAX

and other initiatives, it said. Tai highlighted her commitment to using trade policy to save lives in the pandemic and ensure that the United States, and the world, are better prepared in the future.

She also welcomed Berkley's views on how to accelerate the rollout and distribution of vaccines to developing countries, the USTR said. The virtual meeting comes ahead of a May 5 meeting of the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) General Council. — PTI

Italy health chief
stays off from scam

Rome, April 17: The head of Italy's national health institute distanced himself Friday from a scandal over a spiked World Health Organisation report into Italy's coronavirus response, saying he had no means to interfere with the UN agency and had never censored even inconvenient information from the public.

Dr Silvio Brusaferro was drawn into the scandal after a leaked document from Bergamo prosecutors last

week revealed transcripts of WhatsApp chats between Brusaferro and a WHO official, Dr. Ranieri Guerra, who is under investigation for having allegedly made false claims to prosecutors about the report.

The report, published in May last year as a guide to help countries prepare for Covid-19, sparked a nerve because it revealed that the Italian government hadn't updated its pandemic preparedness plan since 2006. — AP

PIO SCIENTIST
IDENTIFIES GENES
THAT FIGHT VIRUS

Washington, April 17: US researchers led by an Indian-origin scientist have identified a set of human genes that fight SARS-CoV-2, the virus which causes Covid-19, a study that could help in understanding the factors that affect disease severity and suggesting possible therapeutic options.

The study by scientists at Sanford Burnham Prebys Medical Discovery Institute in San Diego, California, was published in the journal *Molecular Cell*. The genes in question are related to interferons, the body's frontline virus fighters.

We wanted to gain a better understanding of the cellular response to SARS-CoV-2, including what drives a strong or weak response to infection, says Sumit K. Chanda, professor and director of the Immunity and Pathogenesis Programme at Sanford Burnham Prebys. — PTI

Afghanistan: US
may up troops
before recall

Washington, April 17: The US will likely increase its troop presence in Afghanistan temporarily over the coming weeks and months in order to fulfill President Joe Biden's order to safely withdraw all forces from the country by Sep. 11, the Pentagon said Friday.

Pentagon chief spokesman John Kirby declined to provide specifics and said details are still being worked out.

But he said it's logical to assume that you may need some logistics help, maybe some engineering help, you may have to add some force protection capabilities again temporarily just to make sure that the drawdown goes in a safe, orderly and effective way. Biden announced Wednesday that the US would pull all of its more than 2,500 troops out of Afghanistan by Sep. 11 the 20th anniversary of the al-Qaida terror attack on the US that had triggered the US-led invasion of Afghanistan.

NATO announced it would follow the same timetable for withdrawing more than 7,000 allied forces. The president's decision defies a May 1 withdrawal deadline that was agreed to by the Trump

administration as part of a peace agreement with the Taliban. Instead, Biden said that the US withdrawal would begin on May 1.

Speaking at a Pentagon press conference on Friday, Kirby had few details on the pace and timing of the drawdown. He said it was not clear how many troops would be out of the country by May 1 as a signal to the Taliban that the US was abiding by its new plan to begin leaving.

The Taliban has warned that it will retaliate if the US does not abide by the Trump administration's agreement. And those threats are a key concern for the Pentagon as it tries to safely move troops and likely millions of dollars in equipment out of the country.

Biden, Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and others have made it clear that the US is keenly aware of the Taliban threats, and that any attacks on US or allied personnel or facilities would face strong US reaction.

Kirby also said it's not clear if any US contractors will remain in the country. He said that the goal is to get all Defence Department personnel out. — AP

Refugee cap to
be lifted in May

Washington, April 17: Facing swift blowback from allies and aid groups, the White House said President Joe Biden plans to lift his predecessor's historically low cap on refugees by next month, after initially moving only to expand the eligibility criteria for resettlements.

In an emergency determination signed by Biden earlier Friday, he stated the admission of up to 15,000 refugees set by former President Donald Trump this year "remains justified by humanitarian concerns and is otherwise in the national interest." But if the cap is reached before the end of the current budget year

and the emergency refugee situation persists, then a presidential determination may be issued to raise the ceiling.

That set off a deluge of criticism from top allies on Capitol Hill such as the second-ranking Senate Democrat, Dick Durbin of Illinois, who called that initial limit "unacceptable." White House press secretary Jen Psaki said later that Biden is expected to increase the refugee cap by May 15, though she didn't say by how much.

Biden has been consulting with his advisers to determine what number of refugees could realistically be admitted to the US between now and Oct. 1. — AP

FedEx shooting:
Police ID killer

Indianapolis, April 17: Police scoured a Fedex facility in Indianapolis and searched the suspected gunman's home Friday looking for a motive for the latest mass shooting to rock the United States, as family members of the eight victims spent agonising hours awaiting word on their loved ones.

The shooter was identified as 19-year-old Brandon Scott Hole of Indiana, two law enforcement officials briefed on the matter informed *The Associated Press*.

The investigators searched a home in Indianapolis associated with Hole and seized evidence, including desktop computers and other electronic media, the officials said.

The officials could not discuss the matter publicly and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity. — AP

23K prisoners let
off in Myanmar

Yangon, April 17: Myanmar's junta on Saturday announced it pardoned and released more than 23,000 prisoners to mark the traditional Thingyan New Year holiday, but it wasn't immediately clear if they included pro-democracy activists who were detained in the wake of the military's seizure of power in Feb.

The releases were announced on state

broadcaster MRTV, which said that junta chief Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing had pardoned 23,047 prisoners, including 137 foreigners who will be deported from Myanmar. He also reduced sentences for others.

The move comes as daily protests against the Feb. 1 ouster of the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi continue. — AP

300 mn-yr-old shark gets formal name

Santa Fe (US), April 17: The 300-million-year-old shark's teeth were the first sign that it might be a distinct species.

The ancient chompers looked less like the spear-like rows of teeth of related species. They were squatter and shorter, less than an inch long, around 2 centimetres.

"Great for grasping and crushing prey rather than piercing prey," said discoverer John-Paul Hodnett, who was a graduate student when he unearthed the first fossils of the shark at a dig

east of Albuquerque in 2013. This week, Hodnett and a slew of other researchers published their findings in a bulletin of the New Mexico Museum of Natural History & Science identifying the shark as a separate species.

He named the 6.7-foot (2 metre) monster *Dracopristis hoffmanorum*, or Hoffman's Dragon Shark, in honour of the New Mexico family that owns the land in the Manzano Mountains where the fossils were found. Hodnett says the area is rife with fossils and

easy to access because of a quarry and other commercial digging operations. The name also harkens to the dragon-like jawline and 2.5-foot (0.75-metre) fin spines that inspired the discoverer's initial nickname, "Godzilla Shark."

The formal naming announcement followed seven years of excavation, preservation and study. The 12 rows of teeth on the shark's lower jaw, for example, were still obscured by layers of sediment after excavation. Hodnett only saw them by

using an angled light technique that illuminates objects below.

Hodnett is now the paleontologist and programme coordinator for the Maryland-National Capital Parks and Planning Commission's Dinosaur Park in Laurel, Maryland. His fellow researchers come from the New Mexico museum, as well as St. Joseph's University in Pennsylvania, Northern Arizona University, and Idaho State University.

The recovered fossil skeleton is considered the most

complete of its evolutionary branch — ctenacanth — that split from modern sharks and rays around 390 million years ago and went extinct around 60 million years later. Back then, eastern New Mexico was covered by a seaway that extended deep into North America.

Hodnett and his colleagues believe that Hoffman's dragon shark most likely lived in the shallows along the coast, stalking prey like crustaceans, fish and other sharks. — AP



OUR CRITIC'S RATING

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

Watch it for Ghaywan and Konkona

Ajeeb Daastaans

CAST: Fatima Sana Shaikh, Jaideep Ahlawat, Armaan Ralhan, Nushratt Bharuccha, Abhishek Banerjee, Konkana Sen Sharma, Aditi Rao Hydari, Shefali Shah, Manav Kaul

DIRECTOR: Shashank Khaitan, Raj Mehta, Neeraj Ghaywan, Kayoze Irani

RATING: ★★★★★

Releases on Netflix

SUPARNA SHARMA

Ajeeb Daastaans, from Karan Johar's little OTT production baby, Dharmatic Entertainment, tells four stories of people impaled in a life they don't want but can't get out of because of their caste, class, family compulsions or lack of choices. They are all similarly unhappy, seething and searching for something better.

As is the track-record of all Bollywood anthologies, Ajeeb Daastaans diligently follows the template. It has four twisted stories of which two are middling, one is good and one truly fabulous.

All the four films by four different directors are bristling with atmosphere and are marked by powerful performances by actors who are cast in compelling roles and placed in a dramatic situation that draws us in immediately. But three of the four are filmy, drawing a lot from their Bollywood predecessors, and only one seems to be informed by life. They are nice, but feel like stories we have seen or heard before. All except Geeli Pucchi.

Directed by Neeraj Ghaywan, Geeli Pucchi, that Ghaywan has written with Sumit Saxena, strips down the capricious innocence of caste privilege to its hard-wired mendacity. It also has a powerful and unsettling performance by Konkona Sen Sharma. If it weren't for this film, Ajeeb Daastaans would have been interesting but meh.

Geeli Pucchi, the title itself dripping with some afternoon obscenity, levitates Ajeeb Daastaans to a higher level.

It tells the story of Bharti (Konkana Sen Sharma), a factory worker, who wants a desk job and has all the qualifications for it. But she is a dalit and carries her anger and hunger for more in her slightly protruding jaw and her body that is at once thrust forward and withdrawn.

Bharti's curly hair is girly but the clothes she wears when she steps out into the world are manly. They are not a statement about her sexuality but an expression of the power she feels she has. Like the strip of cloth she wraps around her wrist to handle heavy equipment, Bharti's clothes too say that she's ready to take on anyone, anytime, anywhere.

But the power that Bharti thinks she has drains out of her body when she sees pretty Priya Sharma (Aditi Rao Hydari), so fragile and dove-eyed, take up the job she so wants. Bharti is at once repulsed by and drawn to the power that comes in a petite size of feminine fragility.

"Ajeeb-ajeeb log hote hain aur bad-boo bhi aati hai," Priya says in a friendly banter to Bharti, inviting her to share her tiffin at her desk and not on the factory floor, thinking Bharti is one of her. Bharti's reaction to Priya's casually racist remarks, prejudices is not visible on her face, but her body registers it as



a hole in her armour.

And then one day, when Bharti suddenly senses that she has some power, she doesn't flinch using it as a gentle but sharp whip that's gripped tightly by her rage.

The film's last shot is so fabulous that I want to watch it again and again on a loop.

Ajeeb Daastaans, which explores women's desire through all its stories and lets them come up for air for a bit before pulling them down again, begins with Majnu, a story about a husband wife trapped in a loveless marriage.

Directed by Shashank Khaitan, it's set in a large mansion in a Hindi-speaking, gun-wielding world where Babloo Bhaiyya (Jaideep Ahlawat) rules. He is married off to Lepakshi (Fatima Sana Shaikh) for financial and political reasons but on the wedding night itself he tells her that he won't be able to love her but expects her to keep khandaan ki izzat.

Lepakshi's frustration coils

around her everyday and she grabs every opportunity to humiliate Babloo and get some jollies for herself.

The threat of violence looms when Babloo Bhaiyya is around, even when Raj (Armaan Ralhan), the dashing, educated son of the driver, arrives to fan all sorts of desires.

Despite a pair of fried testicles, a cutesy twist that revisits masculinity and the film's predictable end, Majnu is blessed by excellent acting by all, including Raj's angry mother. It also has a lovely song — Bagiya mein bhanwara...

Khilauna, directed by Raj Mehta, is a complex story about grey characters that is revealed through a police investigation. But what they are investigating is shared with us later, in a dark, gory, stunning moment.

Meenal (Nushratt Bharuccha) is a young, sexy maid who dotes on her little sister Binny (Inayat Verma). Sushil (Abhishek Banerjee) the istri-walla loves Meenal and Binni but has no power and bristles everytime injustice accosts him. Meenal has a clear worldview — she knows what her place is in

this world organised by caste and class. She knows she has no power except guile and the fact that she is very attractive. She uses both to curry small favours.

Smiling and winking at little Binni as she plays on the emotions of women she works for, bitching out one, pandering to the new officer in town, her circumstances and routine exploitation have brought a hard coldness to her heart that she unknowingly passes on to Binni. And when Binni acts on her own desires and feelings of jealousy, it leaves even Meenal stunned.

The film, also written by Sumit Saxena, is carried by Nushratt Bharuccha's charming but inevitable duplicity.

Ankahi, directed by Kayoze Irani, is the last film in the anthology and tells the story of Natasha (Shefali Shah), a mother who can't cope with husband's disinterest in their daughter who is losing her hearing. And then, a man walks into her life, all sparkles, warmth and sunshine. Though Ankahi is lit by lovely performances by Shefali Shah and Manav Kaul, it felt dull and cliched.

In a special league of dreary, bad films

The Big Bull

CAST: Abhishek Bachchan, Ileana D'Cruz, Sohum Shah, Nikita Dutta, Saurabh Shukla, Samir Soni, Mahesh Manjrekar, Ram Kapoor

DIRECTOR: Kookie Gulati

RATING: ★

Streaming on Disney + Hotstar

SUPARNA SHARMA

Bollywood is a star-driven film industry. What that means and often results in are films like The Big Bull where just the fact that a big star has been engaged is enough, all else be damned. "All else" includes writing — story, screenplay and dialogue, direction, production design, background score.

Star-driven enterprises serve a very significant purpose. Inept writers, directors, production houses remain gainfully engaged by riding on the power of a star.

Abhishek Bachchan is a star who can act. He has just been beset by too many bad choices after a few good ones initially. This time round, however, he signed up with a director and writer who are in a special league of their own when it comes to being bad.

Bollywood has a large, prospering league of bad which ranges from films that are bad in unique, new ways — where it's obvious that some thought, effort went into making it — to woeful, listless films which are bad in ways that many other previous

films have been bad.

The first kind of films can be fun-bad, while the other is dreary.

To illustrate, Ram Gopal Varma's Daud would fall in the fun-bad category, and Department in mournfully bad. Director Vijay Krishna Acharya's Tashan is in the first category, but his Thugs of Hindostan is in the I'd-rather-die-than-watch-this category.

The Big Bull is a pool of mournful stupidity. A life-sucking bad film. The sort that leaves you in need of a cold shower and cold beer to wash it all away.

Leading this turgid enterprise is Kookie Gulati the director. He was set off on this listless path by a story and screenplay that he co-wrote with Arjun Dhawan.

Mr Kookie had earlier directed an atrocity called Prince (2010) that still feels like a fresh scar on my brain. Now I have two scars courtesy Mr Kookie.

Based loosely and irresponsibly on the life and crimes of Harshad Mehra, The Big Bull opens with reporter Meera Rao (played by Ileana D'Cruz) and based on Sucheta Dalal) talking about Hemant Shah (Abhishek Bachchan) to a hall full of millennial MBA students.

Cut to flashback in a chawl where Hemant, in full-sleeve printed shirts, used to live with his brother Viren (Sohum Shah), mother (Supriya Pathak) and angst about not being rich. That feeling was made worse by the father of the girl next door he liked, Priya (Nikita Dutta). Her



daddy wanted a well-settled son-in-law.

We are told two things about Hemant. Three, actually.

1. That Hemant had "the world's best bhai aur dost". We meet the bhai, but see the dost fleetingly.

2. Hemant keeps saying, "Mujhe dheere chalna aata hain hai" — and yet the film he is in an excruciatingly slow crawl.

3. Hemant doesn't drink, but only till he can afford the best daru. Later in life, he drinks.

With these character traits, Mr Kookie & Co. try to stitch together a chronology of the rise and fall of the stock broker, but they remain vague on details and are often incoherent, as if a terrible arts student was suddenly asked to sit for an economics exam.

The film, neither clear nor real-

ly interested in what actually happened, tells us Harshad Mehta's story in the sort of sketchy way that the arts student would try to fill up the answer-sheet — with gibberish, throwing in some "economics sounding" words at random.

Hemant wants to become a stock broker and for this he gets a bank receipt in an underhand manner and starts playing the stock market. The amount of the bank receipts increases, and so does Hemant's game.

He then manipulates the price of a company's share price and uses union leader Rana Sawant (Mahesha Manjrekar) to tip him off about which auto plant will be shut so that he can make more money in shares.

This is insider trading and Mannu Malpani (Saurabh

Shukla), chairman of SEBI, doesn't like it. But he can't do much.

The film conveys all this through dull generalities. To show that Hemant was a master manipulator and the king of the share market, it makes him stand, arms akimbo, staring and smiling at the trading floor often. To show that he is always planning his next move, Hemant has to keep tapping his fingers.

In between there is romance with Priya, which means that several songs arrive at frustratingly predictable moments.

Soon Hemant gets very rich, pays Rs 26 or income tax and the CBI and I-T guys get after him.

Hemant suspects that it is one of his employees and so he invites them all to his house and then asks them to take off their clothes and jump into his pool.

Half-naked office employees covering their man-boobs as Hemant stares down at them with a sulky pout is, perhaps, when the film hits the high note of absurdity. Kookie & Co seem incapable of taking facts and then turning them into a screenplay. If they were capable of doing that they would have just binge-watched Hansal Mehta's Scam 1992. They probably did watch it and decided it was all too much and that they'd rather go with a bullshit story and hero's pointless bluster.

Abhishek Bachchan's twitter handle is @juniorbachchan and so there is no getting away from the comparison. But, he has a personality that is entirely his own.

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