

SHORT TAKES

GNCTD Bill reflects BJP's insecurities, says SisodiaAGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 25

Slamming the unconstitutional Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi Bill passed in both the houses of Parliament, Deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia on Thursday said, "The GNCTD Bill passed by the Narendra Modi Government reflects the deep insecurities of PM Modi and the BJP. We know that at present, the nation and the world is speaking of the Arvind Kejriwal model of governance and its diverse schemes. People have begun to rely on the Arvind Kejriwal model of governance and feel that they have a choice to vote for someone who actually works for them. This is exactly what is making the BJP-led Central Government insecure." Mr Sisodia said, "In the last 6 years, the Delhi Government has provided its people with excellent, easy-to-access schemes. We have overhauled our education system, our students now get excellent results; our affordable and accessible healthcare has seen initiatives like Mohalla Clinics, we've built world-class hospitals with the latest facilities. To ensure citizens get basic amenities, we continue to give round-the-clock and free electricity. We've made sincere efforts to provide better water conditions, have eliminated the tanker mafia, and have done tremendous work towards roads and infrastructure. Our work has yielded positive results, the impact can be seen, which has led to the entire nation lauding the Arvind Kejriwal government." He said, "Today, citizens of other states are also imploring their governments to provide basic facilities like free and 24x7 electricity. People want free and excellent education, they want hospitals with proper facilities. The entire nation is talking about the Arvind Kejriwal model of governance. Nobody in this country has anything good to say about PM Narendra Modi or BJP's style of governance. If we ask people today what the BJP has done to ensure the development of quality schools or accessible healthcare or even free electricity, nothing will come to mind."

Cloudy skies bring mercury down

New Delhi: Partly cloudy skies over Delhi on Thursday brought the maximum temperature down to 29.6 degrees Celsius, a notch below normal, the India Meteorological Department said. The minimum temperature settled at 17.5 degrees Celsius, normal for this time of the year, it said. The mercury is predicted to rise to 38 degrees Celsius by Monday amid clear skies. Delhi had recorded a maximum of 34.2 degrees Celsius on Wednesday, 29.6 degrees Celsius on Tuesday, 33.6 degrees Celsius on Monday and 35.2 degrees Celsius on Sunday. The air quality in the national capital improved further in the "moderate" category due to favourable wind speed. The 24-hour average air quality index (AQI) was 148, according to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) data. It was 175 on Wednesday. An AQI between 201 and 300 is considered poor, 301-400 very poor and 401-500 severe, while an AQI above 500 falls in the severe plus category. — PTI

Dreaded criminal flees amid gunfight at GTB Hospital

Gangster was taken to hospital for treatment, cops nab one of the 6 assailants

New Delhi, March 25: A fierce gunfight broke out at a government hospital in Delhi in broad daylight on Thursday when a police team escorting a notorious criminal came face-to-face with those who came to aid his escape, leaving one assailant dead and triggering a chaos with patients and their relatives running for cover, officials said.

While the prisoner managed to flee, the police nabbed one of his six associates who was injured in the gunfight at the GTB hospital here, they said.

In a high-voltage drama, the assailants first threw chilli powder at the police team and then started firing at them to which the security personnel retaliated with 12 rounds of fire, killing one of them on the spot and injuring another, officials said.

The shootout took place around 12.30 pm when the third battalion of the Delhi Police was taking

gangster Kuldeep alias Fajia, who is a member of the Gogi gang, to the hospital for treatment, a senior police officer said.

"Five to six men came in a Scorpio car and a motorcycle from the rear entrance of the hospital building and fired at the third battalion of the police in an attempt to help the accused escape from custody," he said.

During the encounter, one assailant died on the spot and another got injured who was nabbed. The remaining accused, including Kuldeep, managed to escape, the police said.

The accused who died during the incident has been identified as Ravi, while the injured man was identified as Ankesh, police said, adding that both are aged between 25 to 28 years.

"Kuldeep was lodged at the Mandoli Jail and was brought to the OPD of the GTB Hospital for check up by the third battalion of

IN A high-voltage drama, the assailants first threw chilli powder at the police team and then started firing at them to which the security personnel retaliated with 12 rounds of fire, killing one of them on the spot and injuring another

the Delhi Police.

"After his check up was done by the doctors, the security personnel were taking him back to the police vehicle when the assailants started firing," Joint Commissioner of Police (east) Alok Kumar said.

Kumar said Kuldeep took the advantage of the chaos and managed to escape from the spot along with his associates.

"One of the assailants was killed during the cross fire and other was injured. Police fired 12 rounds in retaliation," the officer said.

Police said the assailants left the car on the spot while escaping.

The accused used multiple gates to escape from the spot. They also snatched a bike from a person outside the hospital and to escape, police said, adding there was chaos at the hospital as people started running to take cover during the shooting.

Chilli powder was seen strewn at the spot and the police also marked the area where empty bullet cartridges were found, officials said.

According to the police, Ankesh, who was injured, is out of danger.

Kuldeep is a member of the Gogi gang. The members of the gang were involved in extortion, collecting ransom and protection money as well as committing car-jacking among others. Kuldeep was arrested by the Special Cell of the Delhi Police in March last year from Gurgaon, they said. — PTI

Battery-swapping station for EVs inaugurated at Azadpur

New Delhi, March 25: Dialogue and Development Commission vice-chairperson Jasmine Shah on Thursday inaugurated a battery-swapping station at the Azadpur Grid substation here, a first in a network of such stations to be set up across North and North-West Delhi.

In a statement, Shah said Delhi's electric vehicles (EV) policy gave an equal footing to battery swapping as well as traditional EV charging.

"It is heartening to see that Delhi EV policy has generated a lot of enthusiasm among entrepreneurs and fleet operators who are transitioning to EVs. Hence, it is all the more encouraging to see a battery swapping technology has taken off in Delhi," he said.

The Azadpur facility, set up by SUN Mobility in collaboration with Tata Power-DDL, has two quick interchange stations and can provide 336 swaps in a day.

The Delhi government has floated a tender to build 100 public charging stations with 500 charging points at prominent locations. It aims to make these points operational by December 2021 and will add to the existing 72 stations already operational.

"We are committed to a clean and pollution-free Delhi and believe we can power the Switch Delhi campaign in a big way in order to establish Delhi as the EV capital of India. Together, we will accelerate the pace of EV adoption across vehicle segments, in this megapolis with one of the highest vehicle densities in the country, especially in the mass category of cars, two-wheelers, public/shared transport vehicles and good carriers," Ganesh Srinivasan, CEO of Tata Power-DDL, said in the statement. — PTI

Highest number of cases since December 2020 Covid-19: Over 1,500 cases, 5 deaths in Delhi in 24 hrs

New Delhi, March 25: Delhi reported 1,515 coronavirus cases on Thursday, highest in over three months, while five more people succumbed to the disease, the health department said. This is the highest number of cases since December 16 when 1,547 people tested positive for the virus, according to official data.

The city had recorded 1,254 cases on Wednesday and 1,101 cases on Tuesday — the first time since December 24 that the number of cases crossed the 1,000-mark.

The active cases rose to 5,497 on Thursday from 4,890 a day ago. The positivity rate rose to 1.69 per cent from 1.52 per cent on Wednesday, the health bulletin said.

The positivity rate was 1.31 per cent on Tuesday, 1.32 per cent on Monday and 1.03 per cent on Sunday.

The new infections pushed the tally to 6,52,742, while over 6.36 lakh patients have recovered from the virus.

There were 888 cases on Monday, 823 on Sunday, 813 on Saturday, 716 on Friday, 607 on Thursday, and 536 on Wednesday last week, according to official data.

Five more people died from the pathogen on Thursday, taking the number of fatalities to 10,978.

A total of 89,836 tests, including 58,303 RT-PCR tests, were conducted a day ago, the bulletin said.

The number of people under home isolation rose to 2,871 from 2,560 from a day ago. The containment zones rose to 1,076 from 976 on Wednesday, it said.

The caseload in Delhi on January 1 had stood at



Passengers wearing face masks arrive at the New Delhi railway station on Thursday.

— AFP

over 6.25 lakh and the total fatalities were 10,557.

The number of daily cases had started to come down in February. On February 26, the month's highest daily count of 256 cases was recorded.

However, the number of daily cases begun to rise again in March and has been steadily increasing over the last few days.

Health experts and doctors have attributed this "sudden rise" in cases to people turning complacent, not following Covid-appropriate behaviour and "assuming all is well now".

The next two-three months could be challenging, they said, adding the situation can be kept under control if vaccination is opened up for more people and Covid-19 protocols are strictly adhered to.

Amid a rise in coronavirus cases, the Delhi Disaster Management Authority had on Tuesday ordered that there will be no public celebrations in the national capital during upcoming festivals such as Holi and Navaratri. — PTI

Metro intensifies drive to ensure Covid guidelines

New Delhi, March 25: In view of the recent surge in Covid-19 cases, the Delhi Metro has decided to intensify its drive to ensure commuters maintain social distancing and wear masks inside trains and on station premises, the transporter said on Thursday.

The Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) took to Twitter to inform people about it, and said over 300 commuters were issued challans on Wednesday for violating Covid-19 norms.

"To ensure our travel guidelines are being followed, Delhi Metro's Flying Squads penalised 318 commuters on 24 March 2021 for not wearing a face mask properly & following social distancing. Let us all follow the protocols & politely counsel others to do the same," it tweeted. — PTI

SC quashes FIR filed against Patricia Mukhim over FB post

Free speech can't be stifled by criminal cases, says the top court

New Delhi, March 25: "Free speech of the citizens of this country cannot be stifled by implicating them in criminal cases," the Supreme Court said on Thursday and quashed the FIR lodged against veteran journalist Patricia Mukhim for allegedly creating communal disharmony through her Facebook post.

A bench of Justices L. Nageswara Rao and S. Ravindra Bhat said the fervent plea made by Ms Mukhim in her social media post for the protection of non-tribals living in Meghalaya and for their equality cannot, by any stretch of imagination, be categorised as hate speech.

"Disapprobation of governmental inaction cannot be branded as an attempt to promote hatred between different communities. Free speech of the citizens of this country cannot be stifled by implicating them in criminal cases, unless such speech has the tendency to affect public order," the bench said.

It said India is a plural and multicultural society and the promise of liberty, enunciated in the Preamble, manifests itself in various provisions which outline each



Patricia Mukhim

citizen's rights including right to free speech, to travel freely, and settle throughout the length and breadth of India.

Justice Rao, who wrote the verdict on behalf of the bench, said: "At times, when in the legitimate exercise of such a right, individuals travel, settle down, or carry on a vocation in a place where they find conditions conducive, there may be resentments, especially if such citizens prosper, leading to hostility or possibly violence."

"In such instances, if the victims voice their discontent and speak out, especially if the state authorities turn a blind eye, or drag their feet, such voicing of discontent is really a cry for anguish, for justice denied or delayed. This is exactly what appears to have happened in this case."

The top court said that a

close scrutiny of the Facebook post would indicate that the agony of Ms Mukhim was directed against the apathy shown by the chief minister of Meghalaya, the director general of police, and the Dorbar Shnong of the area in not taking any action against the culprits who attacked the non-tribal youngsters.

"For the aforementioned reasons, the appeal is allowed and the judgment of the high court is set aside. FIR dated July 6, 2020, registered at the Laban police station is quashed," the bench said.

Dealing with the post written by Ms Mukhim, it said, "The appellant referred to the attacks on non-tribals in 1979. At the most, the Facebook post can be understood to highlight the discrimination against non-tribals in the state of Meghalaya."

Ms Mukhim made it clear in her post that criminal elements have no community and immediate action has to be taken against persons who indulged in the brutal attack on non-tribal youngsters playing basketball and the Facebook post, read in its entirety, pleads for equality of non-tribals in Meghalaya, the top court said. — PTI

SC notice to Punjab, Haryana on supply of Yamuna water to Delhi

New Delhi, March 25: The Supreme Court on Thursday directed governments of Punjab, Haryana, and others to maintain status quo on supply of Yamuna water to Delhi till Friday.

The apex court was hearing an application filed by the Delhi Jal Board (DJB), which has sought directions to the Haryana government to cease the discharge of untreated pollutants into the Yamuna and release sufficient water to the national capital.

A bench headed by Chief Justice S. A. Bobde issued notices to Haryana, Punjab, and Bhakra Beas Management Board (BBMB)

and asked them to file their responses on the application by Friday.

Senior advocate A. M. Singhvi, appearing for DJB, said that the water level has fallen in the national capital.

Senior lawyer Shyam Divan, appearing for Haryana, said that full level of water supply has been made. Senior advocate Vikas Singh, who also appeared in the matter, said that a court commissioner should be appointed to verify the water level.

Mr Divan said no application has been filed for the appointment of the court commissioner in the matter.

In its fresh application filed in the top court, the DJB has said that direction be issued to Haryana government to release the water to avert a potential severe crisis in the national capital.

It has claimed that the Haryana government has reduced the supply of water to Delhi, resulting in shortage of water supply in the national capital.

DJB chairman Raghav Chadha said in a statement earlier this month that regular fall in the level of the Yamuna, especially during summers, along with the discharge of pollutants that cause rise in ammonia lev-

els, is a matter of grave concern.

The DJB had said that Delhi is facing potential severe water crisis due to high ammonia levels in the Yamuna and the continuous depletion of water level at Wazirabad barrage, which supplies drinking water to the Wazirabad, Okhla, and Chandrawal water treatment plants.

Haryana supplies water to Delhi through the carrier lined channel (CLC), Delhi Sub-Branch (DSB), and the Yamuna. The CLC and DSB supply water from Hathni Kund via Munak canal and Bhakra Beas Management Board. — PTI

City BJP seeks stay on new excise policy, submits memorandum to L-G

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 25

A Delhi BJP delegation on Thursday met the Lt Governor to protest over amendments to the new liquor excise policy and demanded that it be stayed.

The delegation led by Delhi BJP president Adesh Gupta handed over a memorandum to the LG. The party alleged in the memorandum that the closing of 500 government vends and offering those liquor licenses to private traders "smacks of corruption".

According to a statement, the Delhi BJP said

the opening of three liquor shops in each ward was "not in public interest".

"...in one go 500 liquor shops licenses are being offered to private liquor traders smacks of a possible nefarious deal between Delhi Government and Liquor Lobby and this needs to be stalled & inquired," it said.

"The memorandum says the Delhi Government's decision to open three liquor shops in every ward is not in public interest and is likely to disturb peace & law and order of many residential colonies," the BJP state-



Delhi BJP president Adesh Gupta and other senior leaders after meeting L-G Anil Bajjal in New Delhi on Thursday.

— PTI

ment added. The BJP leaders also alleged that "instead of

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TMC supporter killed in crude bomb blast

Asansol (WB): A 40-year-old man, known to be a TMC supporter, was killed in a crude bomb blast in Paschim Bardhaman district of poll-bound West Bengal, police said on Thursday. Several others were also injured in the explosion that happened in Jamdabad Bendi in Andal police station limits late on Wednesday, triggering tension in the area days ahead of the elections amid a political slugfest over the law and order situation. According to local sources, TMC supporter Sarban Chowdhury along with a few others was making crude bombs at a house in the village when the “accidental explosion” happened. He was taken to a private hospital in Raniganj where he died while undergoing treatment on Thursday morning. Those injured could not be identified and their whereabouts were not immediately known, police said. — PTI

Nitish orders ops against liquor mafia

Patna: Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar on Thursday asked officials to launch special operation to nab liquor mafias and act tough against them irrespective of whether they are rich or influential. Mr Kumar, while chairing a high level meeting to review the law and order situation and prohibition in the state, asked officials to take special care in maintaining law and order and cases related to liquor law in view of the approaching Holi festival. “There is a need to take special care in view of Holi festival. Keep a tab especially on people who consume liquor and offer it to others. Launch special drives to nab the liquor mafias of big towns. Do not let anyone go out of clutches of law, irrespective of whether a person is rich or influential. Take stern action against such elements,” Mr Kumar said. — PTI

Verdict in Tata and Mistry case on Fri.

New Delhi: The Supreme Court is scheduled to pronounce on Friday its judgement on the cross appeals filed by Tata Sons Pvt Ltd and Cyrus Investments Pvt Ltd against the NCLAT order which had restored Cyrus Mistry as the executive chairman of the over \$100 billion salt-to-software Tata conglomerate. As per the Friday’s cause list uploaded on the apex court website, a bench headed by Chief Justice S.A. Bobde would pronounce the verdict. The bench, also comprising Justices A.S. Bopanna and V. Ramasubramanian, had on December 17 last year reserved the verdict in the matter. Tata Group had vehemently opposed the allegations. — PTI

ALIA, GANGUBAI FILM PRODUCERS GET SUMMONS

Mumbai: A metropolitan court here has issued summons to the producers of the film *Gangubai Kathiawadi* as well as actor Alia Bhatt in connection with a criminal defamation complaint. The summons was issued last week by Metropolitan Magistrate, Mazgaon, but the detailed order was made available on Wednesday. The film is based on a novel by S. Hussain Zaidi and Jane Borges, and is being produced by Bhansali Productions. The summons was issued to Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Bhansali Productions, the authors and Bhatt. A defamation case was filed by Babuji Shah through lawyer Narendra Dubey. Shah, the adopted son of Gangubai Kathiawadi, said chapters in the novel on his mother were defamatory, tarnished her reputation and infringed upon the right to privacy and self-respect. Shah, in his complaint, said Kathiawadi was a social worker who fought for the rights of sex workers, and lived her life with dignity and respect. The court, after hearing the submissions, said, “Even if it is considered that she was prostitute, that does not mean that anybody has permission to write to show or mention her as a prostitute in public.” It further said no consent was obtained from Shah prior to the publishing of the novel or release of the promotional trailer. — PTI

Shah: Didi gave rights of tribals to infiltrators

Baghmundi/ Jhargram/ Mecheda, March 25: In an outreach to tribals and the Kurmi community of the state, Union home minister Amit Shah on Thursday promised a development board, free education and jobs for them. Mr Shah also assailed the ruling TMC for handing over their rights and lands to infiltrators to serve vote-bank politics.

Continuing his tirade against the “politics of appeasement” of the TMC government, Mr Shah claimed Banerjee wants Urdu to be the teaching medium in the state instead of Bengali to appease a specific community. Slamming chief minister Mamata Banerjee for failing to generate employment in the state and for chasing away the automobile industry, Shah asked people to vote for BJP if they want pro-people schemes. Taking a dig at the TMC Supremo, Shah said despite promising to be a “Didi” to everyone, after a decade in power “*Didi sirf apne Bhatija ka bua ban ke rah gayi (Didi has remained an aunt only to her nephew)*”.

Mr Shah also accused Banerjee of trying to terrorise the masses by using the slogan “Khela hobe” and asserted that “this time there will be no Khela (game), everyone will be able to cast their vote Fairly and freely.”

The BJP leader who is on a whirlwind tour of the state, especially in the poll-bound — Bankura, Purulia, West Midnapore, Jhargram districts — said the time has come to bid “goodbye” to the misrule of the TMC and Mamata Banerjee.

“The TMC government has done nothing for Adivasis and the other backward communities of the state. If voted to power, we will bring in a new era of development. Every family of the Kurmi community and Adivasi community will have one member who will be provided with employment. We will come up with Junglemahal development board for the overall development of the area,” he said. — PTI

SC: Centre should act upon collegium names within reasonable time

New Delhi, March 25: The Supreme Court Thursday said the Centre should respond to its collegium recommendations within a reasonable time frame and favoured appointment of ad-hoc judges in the high courts to reduce the pendency of cases in the judiciary. A bench of Chief Justice Bobde and Justices Sanjay Kishan Kaul and Surya Kant took note of delay on part of the central government in acting on the collegium’s recommendations.

It said that on each stage there is certain thought process and therefore there should be reasonable time frame within which the Union ministry of law and justice should act. After collegium recommends they need to reply in specific time frame. The bench said there are certain recommendations which are pending before the government for past six months. It asked attor-

Additional forces for WB counting

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 25

After a record deployment of nearly one lakh troops for elections in West Bengal, home ministry sources claim that more than 50,000 central security personnel will be deployed at more than 30,000 counting centres across Bengal on May 2. This massive deployment on May 2 counting day would be in addition to the one made by the local State Police.

Top home ministry sources claimed that apart from violence during the elections violence was also expected on the counting particularly in closely contested seats. Hence a detailed blueprint for security of counting centres has been prepared by the Election Commission in consultation with the home ministry. Bengal is witnessing an unprecedented eight phase polling in Assembly elections this time which starts on March 27 and the last phase of polling will be on April 29. Counting will be held across all five states on May 2.

Election Commission has deployed the highest number of central security forces this time with over a lakh para-military personnel to be on election duty this time around in Bengal. However, both home min-

istry and election Commission admit that not just the elections but even counting in the “extremely sensitive State” was also extremely critical this time. Even elaborate security arrangements are being made for the protection of EVMS that will be kept at different strong rooms across the State.

Securing EVMS is also a challenge for the Election Commission and security forces since the first phase of polling will be held on March 27 while the last and eight phase of polling will be held almost a month later on April 29. Campaigning for first phase of polling in Bengal on Thursday evening, “We have made a foolproof arrangements for polling, counting and securing EVMS also now that less than 48 hours of polling are left. All last minute checks have been done and we hope the entire process would be completed peacefully,” a senior home ministry official said.

TMC govt, like Left Front, hasn’t done any development ‘Didi taking WB to 19th century’

Joypur (WB), March 25: Accusing chief minister Mamata Banerjee of “taking back Bengal to the 19th century, with no development work undertaken in the past 10 years”, defence minister Rajnath Singh on Thursday said that the TMC dispensation, just like its predecessor, the Left Front, has wronged the people of the state.

Mr Singh, during his public meeting here in Purulia district, took a dig at the TMC’s ‘khela hobe’ (game will be played) slogan, and said Bengal, now on, will witness only work and development.

Alleging that the TMC supremo delivers speeches encouraging acts of violence and aggression,



Young artists take part in a rally ahead of the Holi celebration in Kolkata on Thursday.

— PTITAM BANDYOPADHYAY

the union minister wondered if the chief minister “seeks to divide the country” by repeatedly terming people who have come from other states as outsiders.

He also sought to know if people from Bengal are

treated as outsiders elsewhere.

Stressing that the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, which later became the BJP, was established by Syama Prasad Mookerjee — a son of Bengal — Singh said, “Will any

brother from this state be considered an outsider in Uttar Pradesh? All people born on the soil of India are brothers to each other.”

Claiming that the TMC dispensation has done nothing for the people of Bengal, Singh said, “How is it possible that those belonging to one party (BJP) are outsiders, while you, having ruined Bengal, are an insider? The CM, instead of undertaking development work, makes thoughtless remarks.”

“Neither ‘Maa nor mati or manush’ (mother, motherland, and people) feel safe in the state.” “Maa, Mati, manush” is another slogan that was coined by the TMC during 2009 general election. — PTI

Raids at DMK leader’s premises cause flutter

G. BABU JAYAKUMAR
AND D. SEKAR
CHENNAI, MARCH 25

Income-Tax sleuths stormed into 18 premises of DMK senior leader E.V. Velu, including the guest house of Arunai Engineering College in Thiruvannamalai where party president M.K. Stalin had stayed overnight and left for campaign just then, on Thursday, evoking strong political reactions, suggesting that the fear of loss in the elections has gripped the BJP and AIADMK.

That the I-T officials even searched the room in which Mr Stalin was staying earned the wrath of DMK leaders. General secretary of the party, Duraimurugan, called the media to say that the raids were politically motivated and the AIADMK was instigating the BJP to unleash I-T officials to intimidate the DMK leaders.



E.V. Velu

Duraimurugan even said that he suspected the Election Commission of India to have a role in the raids. However, Chief Electoral Officer, Sathyabrata Sahoo, when asked about it, told the media that the ECI has nothing to do with it. I-T officials raid premises based only on prior information, he said.

The various premises that were raided included the college properties of Velu, his offices in Chennai and Karur; his home and homes and offices of his friends and relatives. Since Velu, the DMK district secretary of Thiruvannamalai, is

also contesting from the same constituency, Stalin was there to campaign for him.

The raids also created a flutter among the local people in Thiruvannamalai, where Velu is a popular politician, having won the constituency in 2011 and 2016 and running the engineering college since 1993.

Reacting to the searches, TNCC president K.S. Alagiri said that it was an attempt to paralyse Velu’s campaign. Calling it a witch hunt, Alagiri said that the rise in popular support to the Secular Progressive Alliance had prompted the BJP to unleash I-T officials on candidates.

Calling it a murder of democracy, Alagiri said the BJP, having control over the I-T, ED and CBI, had misused the agencies in a bid to put down the Secular Progressive Alliance but would not succeed in its attempts.

Aasu asks people to reject ‘communal’ BJP in Assam

CAA threatens existence of Assamese people: Student body

MANOJ ANAND
GUWAHATI, MARCH 25

A day before the electioneering for the first phase of Assembly polls comes to an end, the All Assam Students’ Union (Aasu) has asked the people of Assam to “reject the BJP that seeks to divide the people on communal lines and impose the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which threatens the existence of the Assamese people”.

In fact the Congress-led grand alliance and regional forces Asom Jatiya Parishad and Rajgor Dal have been defining the ongoing Assembly polls as a referendum on controversial CAA, whereas the ruling BJP has chosen to remain silent on the issue in its election campaign and decided to counter the Opposition with its development plank.

The implementation of the controversial law, which the BJP says it’s committed to, is not part of the 10 promises it gave to the people of Assam in its election manifesto.

If the BJP leaders are confident and claims to have gained the ground that the party had lost during the



BJP candidate Suman Haripriya during a door-to-door campaign ahead of the Assam Assembly polls at Hajo in Kamrup district on Thursday.

— PTI

anti-CAA movement in Upper Assam, going to poll in first phase of polling on March 27, the opposition Congress led grand alliance and two regional outfits are also equally hopeful and leaving no stone unturned to refresh and remind the anger that people had expressed during the anti-CAA movement that started in December 2019 and turned violent in Assam. The Congress has promised a rollback of the CAA through a state legislation in Assam, if voted to power.

The voice of the opposition was boost up further as hitting out at the BJP lead-

ers for their statements on the implementation of CAA, the Aasu said that the people of Assam would respond to the injustice and humiliation caused to them. “It’s time to make progressive regionalism our guiding spirit to protect Assam and the Assamese,” the Aasu, two days before the polling for the first phase, said.

The student activists also staged protest demonstrations at prominent locations of the state, district and sub-divisional headquarters asserting that the CAA would never be accepted by the people of Assam.

Baghel accuses BJP of double standard on CAA

Guwahati, March 25: Accusing the BJP of adopting “double standard” on the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), senior Congress leader Bhupesh Baghel on Thursday said the top brass of the saffron party, which had been talking of implementing the contentious law in Bengal, is scared of raising the issue in Assam.

Addressing a press conference here, the Chhattisgarh chief minister alleged the BJP had been avoiding answers on bigger issues of concern such as unemployment, inflation, devastating floods, the plight of tea plantation workers and the thriving syndicate of smugglers. “In Assam, BJP leaders are completely silent on the issue of CAA. Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal is silent, minister Himanta Biswa Sarma is silent. The Prime Minister (Narendra Modi) and home minister (Amit Shah) also avoid the issue during their addresses,” he said. — PTI

BJP interfering in EC’s work: Mamata

Danton (WB), March 25: TMC Supremo Mamata Banerjee on Thursday charged the BJP with interfering in the functioning of Election Commission.

The chief minister expressed strong reservations over the large-scale transfer of senior government officials by the EC in last few days.

“The way BJP is interfering in the functioning of EC, it appears to be a BJP commission,” Banerjee said at a public meeting at Danton. She said she learnt of the transfers while riding a helicopter from Sagar island to Danton.

“I am telling you (EC) transfer all (officials). That will not prevent our victory because people are with us,” she said.

The chief minister said while she has “great respect for EC,” she would like to question the poll panel “why police forces are under the control of Centre during Lok Sabha and Assembly polls. Why not under EC?” Alleging the EC is taking a step motherly attitude to her government, the firebrand TMC supremo dared the commission to “showcause” her. “You can send 10 letters to me. I am not bothered.”

Bengal tops in FB political ad spend

Kolkata: Among the four states and one union territory that are going to polls from March 27, West Bengal emerged as the topper in spending for political advertisements on Facebook this year, according to data available with the social media platform. Besides West Bengal, assembly elections will be held in three other states Assam, Kerala and Tamil Nadu and in the union territory of Puducherry. The Facebook ad spend of the TMC exceeds that of the BJP, the main rival of it in 90 days till March 22. — PTI

Asking why “every instruction of BJP has to be obeyed,” Ms Banerjee wanted to know why the EC immediately complies when BJP seeks an officials’ removal. She said the EC was “not doing the right thing.” “We are a regional party. There are many other regional parties. If you think the regional parties like us will be finished in this fashion, you are mistaken,” she said. — PTI

Priya

SEARCH FOR MISSING GIRL

General public is hereby informed that one girl namely **Priya D/o Chander Dev R/o H.No. B-666, 3rd Floor, GD Colony, Mayur Vihar Phase-III, Gazipur, Delhi.** Age 20 year, Height 5'1", Complexion fair, Built medium, Face round wearing Green colour long top and Blue colour jeans has been missing/ kidnapped since 11.03.2021 from her house. Sincere efforts have been made by local police to trace out this girl, but no clue has come to light so far. In this regard a DD No. 76-A dated 11.03.2021 has been lodged at PS Gazipur, Delhi.

Any person having any information or clue about this missing/ kidnapped girl may kindly inform to the undersigned at the address or telephone nos. given below.

Website: <http://cbi.nic.in>
Email: cic@cbi.gov.in
Fax: 011-23011334
Ph: 011-23014046, 23015218
DP/435/ED/2021

SHO
PS Gazipur, Delhi
Ph. 011-22610068, 22610100

Asmaa

SEARCH FOR MISSING

General public is hereby informed that this girl (depicted in the photo) namely: **Asmaa D/o Said Ahmad R/o Jhuggi No. 250, Kalandra Colony, Bhalswa Dairy Delhi** has been missing/kidnapped from the area of PS Bhalswa Dairy, Delhi since 05.03.2021. In this regard FIR No. 107/21 dated 05.03.2021, U/s 363 IPC has been registered at PS. Bhalswa Dairy, Delhi. Sincere efforts have been made by local police to trace out the girl but no clue has come to light so far.

Her physical description is as under:-
Sex: Female, **Age:** 15 years, **Height:** about 5' ft., **Complexion:** Shallow, **Built:** Thin, **Face:** Oval, **Wearing:** Black colour Suit and Sleeper in feet.

Any person is having information or clue about this missing/ kidnapped girl may kindly inform to the following:-

Website: <http://cbi.nic.in>
E-mail: cic@cbi.gov.in
Tel. No.: 011-24368638/24368641
Fax No.: 011-24368639

SHO
P.S. Bhalswa Dairy, Delhi
Ph. No.: 011-27811933
Mob. No. 7065036328
DP/877/ON/2021

SHORT TAKES

NCP leader Supriya Sule meets Sonia

New Delhi: NCP leader Supriya Sule met interim Congress president Sonia Gandhi on Wednesday amid the ongoing turmoil in Maharashtra following corruption allegations levelled against the state home minister. In the wake of the crisis, the BJP has been demanding president's rule in the state. In a tweet, Sule said, "Thank you so much Hon. Mrs. Sonia Gandhi Ji for your valuable guidance. It's always such pleasure interacting with you". The meeting assumes significance as the Mahavikas Agahdi government in Maharashtra led by Shiv Sena, NCP and the Congress is facing a turmoil after former Mumbai police commissioner Param Bir Singh alleged that the state's Home minister gave a target to cops for collect ₹100 crore every month. On Wednesday, a delegation led by Devendra Fadnavis, Leader of Opposition in the state assembly, met Governor Bhagat Singh Koshyari and urged him to seek a "status report" from the state chief secretary on the law and order situation. — PTI

3 Armymen killed, 5 injured in R'sthan

Jaipur: Three soldiers were killed and another five injured on Thursday when the Army vehicle they were travelling in overturned and caught fire in Rajasthan's Ganganagar district, police said. They were on a night training task as part of a military exercise when the vehicle met with the accident, defence sources said. Police said the incident occurred in Rajiyasar area in the early hours of Thursday. "The Gypsy overturned and caught fire. Five injured soldiers managed to come out of the vehicle but three were trapped inside it and died," Station House Officer (SHO) Vikram Tiwari said. The injured are being treated at the military hospital in Suratgarh. Chief minister Ashok Gehlot, former deputy CM Sachin Pilot, BJP state president Satish Poonia and others expressed grief over the incident. — PTI

CBI to quiz Armymen in recruitment scam

March 25: Days after registering a corruption case against six lieutenant colonel-ranked officers for the alleged corrupt practices in the recruitment of Army officers through Service Selection Board (SSB) centers, the CBI is all set to send summons for questioning to the accused persons. Sources in the central probe agency said, "Interrogation of the accused persons, including six lieutenant colonel-ranked officers, will start next week. All accused will be issued summons for questioning in a day or two". Another central investigation agency, the ED, is also preparing to initiate a separate money laundering probe into the matter, sources said.

INDIA DEFENDS MOVE ON LANKA AT UNHRC

New Delhi: Two days after it abstained from voting on a resolution at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) against Sri Lanka's human rights record, India on Thursday said that "at the UNHRC, India stressed its abiding commitment to aspirations of the Tamils of Sri Lanka for equality, justice, peace and dignity". On Thursday, the Union government informed Parliament, "At the UNHRC, India stressed its abiding commitment to aspirations of the Tamils of Sri Lanka for equality, justice, peace and dignity. It was reiterated that respecting the rights of the Tamil community, including through meaningful devolution, contributes to the unity and integrity of Sri Lanka. Therefore, India believes that delivering on the legitimate aspirations of the Tamil community is in the best interests of Sri Lanka." It may be recalled that in a setback to Sri Lanka earlier this week, the UNHRC in Geneva had on Tuesday adopted a resolution titled "Promotion of Reconciliation, Accountability and Human Rights in Sri Lanka" against the country's human rights record with 22 out of the 47 countries supporting the resolution and 11 opposing it, with 14 countries including India abstaining from the voting.

Mehbooba quizzed by ED for 5 hrs

Political dissent has become crime in this country, says PDP chief after date with ED

YUSUF JAMEEL
SRINAGAR, MARCH 25

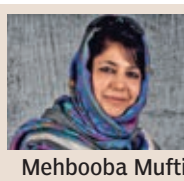
Former Jammu and Kashmir chief minister and president of opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP), Mehbooba Mufti, was Thursday questioned for about five hours by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in an alleged money laundering case.

On emerging from ED's regional office in Srinagar, she told reporters, "Whoever speaks up, ED, CBI and NIA are used against him/her. The nation is running not according to the Constitution of India but the agenda of a particular party".

Meanwhile, the J&K

police is reported to have opposed the issuing of a fresh passport to Ms Mufti saying its Criminal Investigation Department (CID) has filed "an adverse report" against her. The PDP leader had applied for renewal of her passport in December last year after the ten-year validity of the previous one ended on May 31, but her application has not been cleared by the Regional Passport office here till date in the absence of mandatory police verification report. She moved J&K court against the delay earlier this month.

Likening her questioning by ED with "criminalizing of dissent by the government," the former



Mehbooba Mufti

It needs no rocket science to understand that dissent has been criminalised in this country. This country is now being ruled (through) ED, CBI and NIA.

— Mehbooba Mufti, PDP chief

chief minister alleged that the BJP government at the Centre is working against the opposition and everyone else who does not agree with it through ED, CBI or NIA. "There were two issues and one of these was about selling of the ancestral property in our name in Bijbehara (Anantnag district) with questions revolving around as to who purchased it, against what amount it was purchased

as well as about funds meant for engagement of youths and others," she said. She added, "It needs no rocket science to understand that dissent has been criminalised in this country. This country is now being ruled (through) ED, CBI and NIA."

She said those who speak up are booked under sedition law or accused of being involved in money laundering. "The country at present

is being run not under the Constitution of India but as per the agenda of a particular party wherein, one can't talk or is allowed to open mouth. These things will keep going," she said.

She claimed, "I've nothing to hide and am there with clean hands. This, perhaps, is the reason that it took them two years to find out something and now they question about the land for the graveyard of my father and secret funds meant for widows and who were the beneficiaries." She added, "I myself and my party the PDP will continue to work on our agenda and will continue to seek resolution of the Kashmir issue."

Defence minister of South Korea to arrive in India today

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 25

In a strategically significant step, South Korea's minister of national defence Suh Wook is on a visit to India from 25 to 27 March 2021.

This comes on the heels of US secretary of defence Lloyd James Austin III's visit to India last week.

India and Korea will discuss Indo-Pacific, Quad, and cooperation in defence manufacturing during the visit.

Mr Wook will interact with a number of senior Indian dignitaries over the course of his visit and discuss issues of strategic nature, said the defence ministry.

Mr Wook will pay his respects at the National War Memorial on Friday, which will be followed by his inauguration of the Indo-Korean Bilateral Friendship Park in Delhi Cantonment.

The park commemorates the contribution of Indian peacekeepers during the Korean War and is a testament to the strong relations between the two countries.



Suh Wook

The minister will be accorded a Tri-Services Guard of Honour at Sushma Swaraj Bhawan followed by interaction with defence minister Rajnath Singh.

Mr Wook will proceed to Agra on Saturday and witness the operational capabilities of the Parachute Brigade. He will also visit and interact with the personnel of 60 Para Field Hospital, which was actively involved in providing medical aid to United Nations and South Korean personnel during the Korean War.

The actions of these 'Maroon Angels' cemented Indo-Korean friendship further.

Mr Wook is scheduled to return later in the evening.

At LAC, threat to India abated, not gone away, says Naravane

PAWAN BALI
NEW DELHI, MARCH 25

The Indian Army chief, General M. M. Naravane, said on Thursday that a threat at the LAC with China has "only abated" and "not gone away altogether." He said that ceasefire with Pakistan at LoC has held in March barring one odd incident and he was optimistic since the Pak Army is "on board" on the ceasefire. The Army chief said that it was for the first time in about 5-6 years that the LoC has been silent and this bodes well for the future.

Gen. Naravane said that unless the elements, which China had brought for-



M. M. Naravane

ward at LAC, go back, "we will not really be able to say that things are back to normal." Gen. Naravane said that after several rounds of talks, both sides agreed on disengagement of the troops which were face to face with each other.

On ceasefire with

Pakistan, Gen. Naravane said that in the whole month of March "we had not a single shot being fired at LoC barring an odd incident."

But, he said that terror infrastructure across the LoC remains intact, launch pads still exist, and terrorists are still there. Gen. Naravane said one will have to wait and watch till the snow melts and the passes open to see if the ceasefire holds. However, he said he was optimistic on ceasefire due to the comments which have been made from Pakistan and also because this agreement is between the DG of military operations of both sides.

SHAHAB ANSARI
MUMBAI, MARCH 25

A special court on Thursday extended NIA custody of suspended API Sachin Waze till April 3. The NIA had arrested Waze in connection with the recovery of an explosives-laden SUV near industrialist Mukesh Ambani's residence 'Antilia' in South Mumbai and now the murder of Mansukh Hire, which is also connected to bomb scare case has been transferred to the central probe agency.

The NIA produced Waze before the court, as his police custody expired on Thursday.

The NIA has invoked provisions of stringent UAPA against Waze. He was arrested on March 13.

The agency told the court that now UAPA has been invoked on the case and hence they can avail custody of the accused up to 30 days and hence seeking 15 days more custody. Waze's lawyer, Aabad Ponda, contended that UAPA could not be attracted in this case. It is merely

PARAM BIR MOVES HC FOR CBI PROBE AGAINST DESHMUKH

AGE CORRESPONDENT
MUMBAI, MARCH 25

Mumbai police commissioner Param Bir Singh on Thursday moved the Bombay High Court seeking CBI inquiry into the alleged corrupt malpractices of Maharashtra home minister Anil Deshmukh.

Mr Singh had first approached the Supreme Court but the judges in the Apex Court had asked

him to go before the high court first. The court had also asked him as to why state home minister Anil Deshmukh, the person against whom he has made serious allegations, hasn't even been impleaded as a party.

The bench had also stated that the high court is competent to deal with this issue and had allowed Singh to withdraw his petition with a liberty to approach the HC.

He further said, "I was the investigating officer of the case for one and a half days, and did whatever I could in that capacity. But there was a sudden change in some plan somewhere. I went to the NIA office on my own and was arrested."

He also claimed before the court that he had not confessed to anything.

After hearing arguments the judge extended Waze's custody for 10 days.

YUSUF JAMEEL
SRINAGAR MARCH 25

As Spring has set in the picturesque Valley, Asia's largest Tulip Garden situated on the banks of famed Dal Lake here was thrown open for public on Thursday, a day after Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, asked the countrymen to visit Jammu and Kashmir to witness the scenic tulip festival and enjoy the warm hospitality of its people.

Though not many of one and a half million flowers have bloomed yet, the garden named after former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi began attracting nature lovers including



People visit Asia's Largest Tulip Garden on its opening day in Srinagar on Thursday. — PTI

domestic and foreign tourists to enjoy the view of plant life on the first day of the opening for the

brief season. Spreading over an area of about 15 hectares, the garden on the foothills

PM to visit ancient Kali temple during Bangladesh visit

SRIDHAR KUMARASWAMI
NEW DELHI, MARCH 25

On the eve of his two-day visit to Bangladesh, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday said he will hold "substantive discussions" with his Bangladeshi counterpart Sheikh Hasina during his two-day visit to Bangladesh, as he expressed happiness that his first foreign tour after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic would be to a friendly neighbouring country with which India shares deep ties.

PM Modi said he will be visiting Bangladesh on March 26-27 at the invitation of Prime Minister Hasina, and looks forward to his participation at the Bangladesh National Day celebrations on Friday.

In his departure statement, he said, "I am happy that my first foreign visit after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic will be to our friendly neighbouring country, with which India shares deep cultural, linguistic and people-to-people ties."

Mr Modi said he looked forward there to "offering prayers to Goddess Kali at the ancient Jashoreswari Kali Temple, one of the 51 Shaktipeeths in the



Narendra Modi

Puranic tradition" at Satkhira in western Bangladesh. He also looks forward to "interaction with representatives of the Matua community at Orakandi" in the eastern part of the country where 19th century Vaishnava seer Sri Harichandra Thakur "disseminated his pious message".

Incidentally, the Hindu Matua community is also reportedly present in considerable numbers in West Bengal that goes to the polls shortly. PM Modi also said he looked forward to his participation at the Bangladesh National Day celebrations in Dhaka on Friday and described the founder of Bangladesh "Bangabandhu" Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as "one of the tallest leaders of the last century, whose life and ideas continue to inspire millions". He added that he also looked forward to visiting "Bangabandhu's Samadhi in Tungipara to pay my respects to his memory".

BANK FRAUD: CBI RAIDS OVER 100 PLACES IN 11 STATES AND UTs

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI MARCH 25

The CBI on Thursday conducted searches at over 100 places in 11 states and Union Territories, in connection with more than 30 cases of bank fraud amounting to over ₹3,700 crore. Sources said, "These searches were a part of a special drive to book the fraudsters on the complaints received from different nationalised banks in India. The complainant

banks include Indian Overseas Bank, Union Bank of India, Bank of Baroda, Punjab National Bank, State Bank of India, IDBI, Canara Bank, Indian Bank and Central Bank of India."

The CBI has been receiving many complaints from various banks alleging cheating, diversion of funds, submission of forged documents by different defaulting firms while obtaining loans credit facilities, sources said.

■ 1.5M tulips of 70 varieties will be in full bloom early next month

Tulip garden opens for tourists

of Zabarwan range will soon have tulips of nearly seventy varieties in full bloom adding colour to the landscape at 5,600 feet altitude, said the officials.

The Prime Minister had on Wednesday asked people to visit J&K to witness the Tulip festival and also experience the warm hospitality of the people. "Whenever you get the opportunity, do visit Jammu and Kashmir and witness the scenic Tulip festival. In addition to the tulips, you will experience the warm hospitality of the people of Jammu and Kashmir", he said in a tweet, adding pictures of the Tulip Garden.

Raut: Pawar must lead 'paralysed' UPA

■ Continued from Page 1 statement seriously... Mr Raut should not forget that the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government could be formed because the Congress extended its support. He should not say something like this and stoke a controversy."

Insiders say that since Sonia Gandhi, the UPA chairperson, is not keeping well, there needs to be

change in the top leadership of the UPA to fight the BJP effectively. Mr Pawar is actively steering the alliance in Maharashtra and is also actively campaigning in poll bound states.

The results of the upcoming Assembly elections hold the key for the Congress. If it does not do well, the demand to change the UPA chief will be raised once again.

Mr Patole said the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government in Maharashtra would last five years. "There will be no problem. Ye Fevicol ka mazboot jod hai (the alliance is very strong). The BJP may level as many false allegations as they want, it won't affect the government. They are trying to malign Maharashtra, but people of the state won't forgive them," he said.

Army criteria for PC to women officers is 'discriminatory': SC

■ Continued from Page 1 the true spirit of the Constitution and attempts to make equality only symbolic," the two-judge bench said in its verdict on a batch of pleas filed by 86 petitioners questioning the manner in which last year's verdict has been implemented.

"Based on the above analysis, we are of the view that the evaluation criteria set by the Army constituted systemic discrimination against the petitioners. The

pattern of evaluation deployed by the Army to implement the decision in Babita Punia (last year verdict) disproportionately affects women," the bench said.

It said this disproportionate impact is attributable to the structural discrimination against women, by dint of which the facially neutral criteria of selective ACR evaluation and fulfilling the medical criteria to be in SHAPE-1 at a belated

stage, to secure PC disproportionately impacts them vis-a-vis their male counterparts.

It said the pattern of evaluation, by excluding subsequent achievements of the petitioners and failing to account for the inherent patterns of discrimination that were produced as a consequence of casual grading and skewed incentive structures, has resulted in indirect and systemic discrimination. — PTI

Campaign ends for 1st phase of poll in Bengal

■ Continued from Page 1 The BJP leaders attacked Mamata Banerjee's party for the multi-crore rupee Saradha scam, the Narada tapes scandal, the alleged siphoning of money meant for Amphan relief and the TMC government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The saffron party leaders virulently attacked Ms Banerjee's government for not allowing the implementation of Central schemes like the Ayushman Bharat, PM Kisan Samman Nidhi and 80 others aimed at helping the poor, dalits, tribals and people from the marginalised sections. The BJP leaders claimed that corruption and anarchy are prevalent in TMC-ruled West Bengal and that the party will put an end to this after coming to power in the state. — PTI

THE ASIAN AGE

26 MARCH 2021

Calling the cops on Opp.? Bihar ruckus probe must

Legislators are not above the law, but legislatures — the place where laws are made — a House of Parliament or a state Assembly or Legislative Council chamber — are privileged sites, where the law and order machinery of the State, as embodied in the police force, may not intervene — and interfere with proceedings. The legislature, therefore, has marshals who obey the Speaker or Chairman and have been known to deal with unruly situations with firmness.

The logic is if elected representatives of the people were to be interfered with in the performance of their constitutionally mandated duties, then why bother having elections? A despotic executive may then do as it pleases.

In a democracy, these are matters that lie in the realm of first principles. If this were not the case, the majority party which runs the government will be at liberty to send the police in to silence opponents though force, pass unhindered any laws it likes and in the manner it likes, without fear of criticism. Then law-making may be conducted with the peace of the graveyard reigning.

If the Speaker called in the police, did he act on his own or did he act on advice? The circumstances are murky, to say the least.

Such a state of affairs will produce order and harmony of a kind that behoves a police state even if it masquerades as a democracy. Such examples are not unknown in the world. In India, however, we have been proud to run a noisy democracy. This has given us prestige even among autocracies which may sometimes denounce us but also envy us.

In light of this, what was witnessed in the Bihar Assembly last Tuesday can only fill every Indian with shame. MLAs of Opposition parties, men and women, were dragged on the ground by the police who had been called in. The scene that was telecast was one of brutality. Legislative decorum was being

given a severe beating.

Chief minister Nitish Kumar appeared later to justify the police action, referring only to the bedlam his party's opponents were creating. Does he remain his own master, or is he dancing to the tune of his alliance partners who now appear to direct his every action and place him in the position of a puppet? On a subsequent day, standing up to speak in the Legislative Council, the CM, according to one report, "quivered" with anger as he continued to denounce the conduct of the Opposition. Not one word about the rights and wrongs of the police entering the legislative chamber.

The Opposition MLAs, led by RJD, had indeed been unruly in mounting their criticism of the Bihar Special Armed Police Bill, 2021, at the introduction stage. This is to be a state paramilitary force apparently on the lines of CISF, with the difference that it will have the power to arrest. In India, only civil police in a state have been given this power. Such a Bill is weighted against citizens. Some reports suggest Opposition parties tried to prevent the Speaker from coming out of his chambers. This is crossing the line. In such situations, marshals are known to be resourceful and vigorous, and are trained to deal with legislators.

If the Speaker called in the police, did he act on his own or did he act on advice? The circumstances are murky, to say the least, and deserve to be enquired into without delay. The CM, for his part, should be contrite, not brazen.

Welcome Justice Ramana

India welcomes the initiation of the process by which Justice N.V. Ramana will be formally declared the next Chief Justice of India, with the current CJI Justice Sharad A. Bobde recommending the name of the senior-most judge after him, to the post. The elevation of Justice Ramana, when he takes office as the 48th CJI, after the incumbent leaves office on April 23, is yet another example of the maturity and independence of the Indian judiciary. After an illustrious career as a judge in more than one high court, and then as a judge of the Supreme Court, Justice Ramana deserves his rise to the highest chair in the Indian judiciary by the dint of his wisdom, brilliance, objectivity and hard work.

In clearing the way for the elevation of Justice Ramana, an in-house procedure of the Supreme Court has also wisely rejected a complaint by chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, against him in a case relating to the Amaravati land scam. It was extremely crucial not to set any precedent, which would have enabled an easy hijack of the chair in future by any self-interested party or group. However, the procedure adopted by the Hon'ble Supreme Court in handling the complaint of chief minister Jagan Mohan Reddy, was kept "strictly confidential" and declared "not liable, in nature, to be made public".

As several wise judges of the Supreme Court have pronounced, the procedure adopted in arriving at a decision is often of far greater significance to the ethos of instructions than the decisions themselves, and wise right decisions must still stand the test of transparency and fairness test of procedure.

The halo of the Supreme Court could have risen further if the procedure by which the way was paved for the next CJI considered taking into confidence the ordinary citizen crucial enough to be made a yardstick.

The mature decision of naming Justice Ramana as the next CJI, which was so apt, given an unimpeachable candidature as his, should not have taken the risk of leaving room for even an iota of doubt over the procedure adopted in bringing in the only second Telugu speaking CJI into office.

The honourable body would have done greater justice to the Justice if they had considered making the proceeding as transparent as an example the apex court expects from other institutions and lesser mortals.

THE ASIAN AGE

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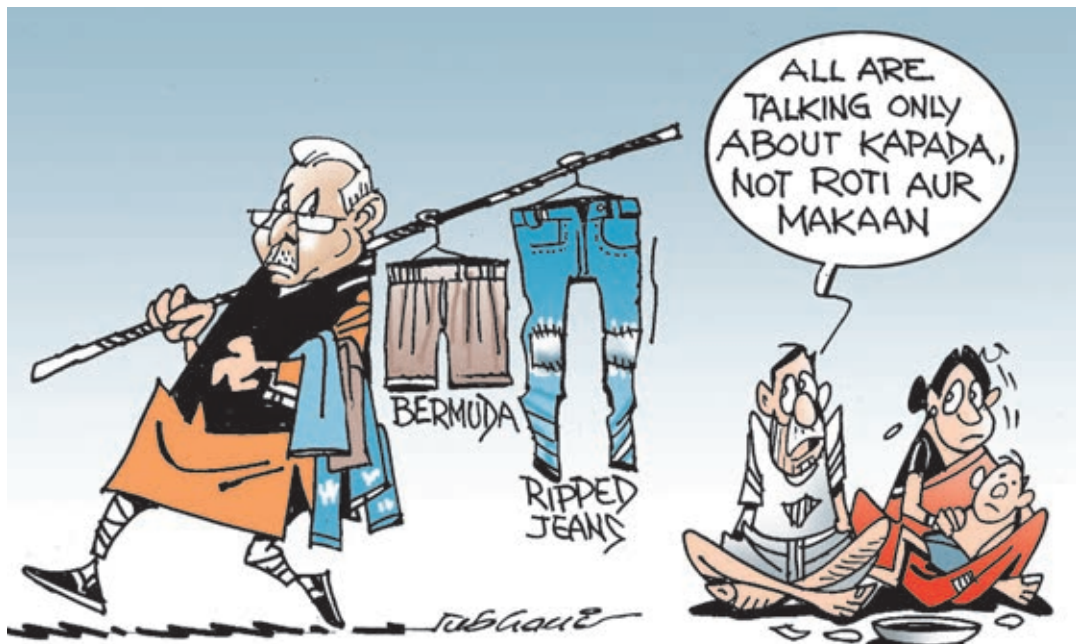
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Subhani



Bengal to trigger domino effect in Indian politics?

Shikha Mukerjee

The 2021 West Bengal Assembly elections is more than just a contest between a regional party, the Trinamul Congress, and the challenger, which is a national party, the BJP. It is a battle that may well trigger a limited, yet crucial, domino effect in Indian politics.

The battle for West Bengal which begins on March 27, the first day of the eight-phase election, will be a test like no other. This contest is not a verdict on the performance of the Trinamul Congress government led by Mamata Banerjee over the past 10 years or the prospects of the state under a new untested regime of the BJP. It is a confrontation between two ideological positions that are fundamental to the future form of India's polity.

If the Trinamul Congress manages to retain power, then the war for federalism, multi-party democracy and secular politics will get a shot in the arm against the BJP's vision of a one-nation, one-identity, one nation-one party model or, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi explains it at every one of the many public meetings he has addressed in West Bengal as another unit of the "double engine sarkar" model. The conquest of this border state for the BJP would significantly strengthen its ideological and popular appeal as the defender of the Hindu majority and its legitimacy to discriminate on the basis of religious identity against the Muslim minority through a process that cancels the status of Muslims as citizens by deploying the Citizenship Amendment Act as an instrument of exclusion.

It will not be an easy election for any of the three blocs that are competing for the voters' hearts and minds. Because elections are about choosing a party for running a government, ideology and policy matter in equal measure. It boils down to weighing two things — first, which party will do more or give more to the voter; second, which party can be trusted to keep its election promises. Every voter will decide based on his or her priorities, which is a complex mix of basic needs, aspirations and sentiments.

And then there is the Samyukta Morcha, a combination of the CPI(M)-led Left Front, the Congress and the newly hatched Indian Secular Front headed by a Muslim cleric, Abbasuddin Siddiqui. Put together as a survival and restoration strategy for the Left parties and the Congress, on its performance will depend the fate of the BJP and to an extent the Trinamul Congress.

The first and second phases, on March 27 and April 1, will set the stage as the 60 seats cover constituencies in East and West Midnapore, Jhargram, Purulia, Bankura, West Burdwan and South 24 Parganas districts where the BJP has pinned its hopes of beating the Trinamul Congress. Nandigram, in East Midnapore, is the crucial constituency; Mamata Banerjee is contesting against Suwendu Adhikari, once her blue-eyed boy now with the BJP, and it will be the key to this election. It defines the nature of the contest between the dominant Trinamul Congress and its leader, and the BJP led by Narendra Modi and defectors from the Trinamul Congress.

It will be definitive in

another sense; it will give a clue of how the Samyukta Morcha's appeal, especially that of the CPI(M) and the ISF's appeal works. Will the CPI(M) cut into the BJP's vote share by taking back the support it lost in 2019? Will the ISF cut into Trinamul Congress' Muslim vote share? Any reduction in the BJP's vote share will make its position, as the main challenger, precarious.

The options for the voter boils down to this — the Trinamul Congress, which as the party of the incumbent government has a lot to live down, but has a leader who remains the most popular choice as chief minister; the BJP, that does not have a chief ministerial candidate and is banking on the Narendra Modi mystique to hoist it to power and then install a face to lead the government, should it succeed in winning; or, the newly formed Samyukta Morcha, which is in the running as the alternative, if not to the party in power then as the alternative to the party in the Opposition.

This is also a fight between Mamata Banerjee and the rest. Can she be dislodged from her position of dominating the political landscape of West Bengal? Her campaign slogan "Bangla nijer meyeke chai", that is, Bengal wants it own daughter, underlines the centrality of Mamata Banerjee.

The BJP's campaign has swung between "Ashol Poriborton", or real change, which is a makeover of the Trinamul Congress' 2011 slogan calling for "poriborton", "Sonar Bangla", that is restoration of Bengal to an

imaginary unspecified golden age, and "Aar Noy Anyay", that is "no more oppression, wrongdoing, abuse, violation and a host of grievances", as it tests the public response and calibrates its appeal. By projecting itself as the only party in West Bengal which does not have legacy issues, since it was a nonentity till the 2016 Assembly elections and zoomed to principal challenger position after the 2019 Lok Sabha elections winning 18 seats out of the state's 42, the BJP has crafted a narrative of being a newly minted choice. For the BJP, West Bengal is like the final frontier; it has positioned itself as defending the nation from being overrun by Muslims crossing over as illegal immigrants, of bringing the periphery into the centre by imprinting Hindutva trademarks on the wayward margin through adoption of "Jai Shri Ram" as a unifier and the Ganga Arti as a sacred practice.

The CPI(M)'s campaign does not have a single defining slogan; instead it has updated its appeal by delivering its messages in the language of urban young adult voters, selling itself through reusing a mix of advertising slogans in Hindi, flash mobs and songs that are a takeoff on popular lyrics.

Inserting itself in between the spaces separating the parties in the fray, a platform has emerged that has one unequivocal message — "No Vote to BJP". It is an appeal for tactical choices in every constituency to keep the saffron tide at bay. It's also a call to Bengali voters to use their choice to shut out the "principal enemy", even if it means voting to bring back the Trinamul Congress for a third term.

West Bengal has to decide to be its whimsical wayward self or join the gang.

Shikha Mukerjee is a senior journalist in Kolkata

If the Trinamul Congress manages to retain power, then the war for federalism, multi-party democracy and secular politics will get a shot in the arm

LETTERS

RAMANA'S JOURNEY

The decks have been cleared for Justice N.V. Ramana to take up the baton as Chief Justice of India (CJI) from S A Bobde. The latter, who retires on April 23, recommended the former's name, besides clearing all charges of corruption levelled against Justice Ramana's kith and kin by Andhra Pradesh chief minister Jagan Mohan Reddy. It has been an incredible journey for Justice Ramana, from a journalist to taking over as the 48th CJI. The question, has there been an understanding prior to his appointment regarding the ambit of his jurisprudence?

N.J. Ravi Chander
Bengaluru

VIGILANTE IMPUNITY

EMBOLDENED BY the political support they enjoy, vigilante Hindutva groups will not think twice before attacking anybody who in their imagination is guilty of proselytisation. The ordeal of the nuns made to disembark from a train abandoning their journey is a sad reminder. In view of the forthcoming Assembly elections in Kerala, where the Christians have a significant presence, Amit Shah has been forced to pay lip service and promise action. But had these groups been as vigilant against criminals and sexual abusers, instead of giving moral support to them, India would have been a safer place.

Anthony Henriques
Mumbai

INCONSISTENT BJP

AN IDEOLOGY that feels peeved at "outsiders" should first answer how Mamata Banerjee can turn "outsider" in Nandigram; but leaders from Gujarat and New Delhi are full-fledged "insiders". Conversely, where does the rhetoric of "One Nation" and "India First" vanish when the BJP desires to reserve 75 per cent private sector jobs for "insiders" in Haryana? These are the inner contradictions that will one day rive this party apart. The citizens of liberal West Bengal where not a single special privilege is granted to children of the soil are simply not ready to accept sermons about "nationalism" from the saffronites!

Kajal Chatterjee
Kolkata

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

Mahir Ali



Remembering the bloodbath 50 yrs ago which broke Pakistan into two

It would be tricky to designate the starting point of the sub-continent's second partition. The seeds, it could be argued, were sown during the late 1940s and fertilised through much of the succeeding two decades. There can be little question, though, that the point of no return was reached around midnight on March 25-26 half a century ago.

That was the night the massacres began in what was then East Pakistan and is today Bangladesh. The initial targets stretched from Awami League stalwarts and strongholds to the intelligentsia more generally — among them university students, professors, writers, journalists, doctors and engineers. All too many of an incipient nation's best minds were obliterated before its birth.

That could be described as Pakistan's parting blow in the aftermath of the nation's first properly democratic exercise the preceding December. The elections had been postponed from October after floods wreaked havoc in East Pakistan. They were followed in

November by a cyclone and tidal wave remembered as one of the deadliest natural catastrophes anywhere in the world.

The estimated death toll hovered around a million. Pakistan's military ruler, Gen. Yahya Khan, stopped over in Dhaka on his way home from a state visit to China, witnessed the devastation during a helicopter ride, then promptly resumed his journey home to Islamabad.

He returned in due course, purportedly to oversee the relief effort, but by then the eastern wing was already fluttering in the wind, poised to take solo flight. Much of the assistance in its hour of dire need had come from foreign countries. This inevitably reinforced the impression among the Bengalis that their "brethren" in West Pakistan couldn't care less about their trials and tribulations.

This sense undoubtedly fed into the December elections — the first to be based on universal adult franchise, 23 years after independence. The nationalist Awami League, with its six-point agenda for

provincial autonomy, won 160 of the 162 directly elected seats in East Pakistan — an absolute majority in any putative national parliament.

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party surpassed expectations in Punjab and Sindh, but its total seats were barely half that of the Awami League — and, much to Bhutto's consternation, Yahya effectively designated Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as the next Prime Minister of Pakistan.

Within less than four months, though, Mujib was designated a traitor (not for the first time) and taken into custody, the Awami League was banned, and voters in East Pakistan faced a bloodbath. The ferocity of the military action was all but unprecedented in the postwar decades.

Through the remainder of 1971, the denizens of West Pakistan were kept uninformed by the local media, official as well as "independent". With the start of the military action on March 26, complete censorship was imposed, and only official versions of the events were

allowed. The "trouble" in the eastern wing, Pakistanis were relentlessly told, was an Indian plot. Sure, there were some "traitors" and a lot more "miscreants", but they were all being adequately dealt with by our fearless "jawans". The implication was that in due course all would be well, the "patriotic" Bengalis were anyhow in a majority, and the necessarily harsh treatment would bring the rest to their senses.

In the 50 years since then, this kind of nonsense has never entirely been superseded by a more objective narrative. The recent cancellation of a seminar on the topic reinforces the impression that the sources of power in what was once deemed the rump state still can't handle the bitter truth.

Perhaps Pakistanis don't wish to be reminded of the fact that for all its foibles, follies and inherited flaws, Bangladesh is doing much better than Pakistan on a number of economic indicators. Or, for that matter, to recognise that the pattern began to be repeated, soon after the bifurcation, in

Balochistan.

By then the military chief in Pakistan was Gen. Tikka Khan, a former military governor of East Pakistan. It was under his aegis that the Army had claimed in March 1971 that it could "restore order" within 72 hours or so. That particular delusion came a cropper some nine months later, albeit only after India had openly pitched in.

The lessons of history are difficult, if not impossible, to learn without acknowledging the facts. All too many nations, including Pakistan and India, are often shy of facing up to their past. Not long ago, Poland made it a crime for anyone to suggest that some Poles had collaborated with the Nazis in perpetrating genocide against Jews. And so it goes...

As far as Pakistan is concerned, it may now be too late to atone for what had happened half a century ago, but remembering it accurately might suffice as a warning against repeating the experience.

By arrangement with Dawn

SHORT TAKES

MYANMAR
PROTESTS AGAIN
MET WITH FORCE

Yangon, March 25: Protesters against last month's military takeover in Myanmar returned to the streets in large numbers on Thursday, a day after staging a silence strike in which people were urged to stay home and businesses to close for the day.

Security forces sought to break up protests by force. Social media accounts and local news outlets reported attacks on demonstrators in Hpa-an, the capital of Karen state, as well as the eastern Shan state's capital Taunggyi and Mon state's capital of Mawlamyine.

BALLISTIC
MISSILES FIRED
BY N. KOREA

Seoul, March 25: North Korea test-fired its first ballistic missiles since President Joe Biden took office on Thursday, as it expands its military capabilities and increases pressure on Washington while nuclear negotiations remain stalled.

Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said the launches threaten peace and safety in Japan and the region, and that Tokyo will closely coordinate with Washington and Seoul on the North's testing activities.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said the missiles were fired at around 7:06 a.m. and 7:25 a.m. from an area on the North's eastern coast and flew 450 kilometres on an apogee of 60 kilometres before landing in the sea.

ISRAELI POLL:
ARAB LEADER IS
KINGMAKER

Jerusalem, March 25: Mansour Abbas, an Arab leader in Israel seems to have emerged as the unusual "kingmaker" whose possible support has split open differences not only in the ruling Likud party, but also in its right-wing coalition, making the road to the government formation even more bumpy for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu's Likud party has emerged as the largest party, with all votes counted in Israel's unprecedented fourth election in less than two years. It still does not have a clear path to a 61-seat majority needed to form a coalition in the 120 member Knesset. The anti-Netanyahu bloc, comprising left, right and centrist factions, is also short of a majority in a highly-divided Israeli political spectrum.

CHINA RIFT: MORE
SHIPS DEPLOYED
BY PHILIPPINES

Manila, March 25: The Philippine military has ordered more navy ships to be deployed for sovereignty patrols in the South China Sea, where a Chinese flotilla has swarmed around a disputed reef and ignored Manila's demand to leave the area.

Philippine Defence Secretary Delfin Lorenzana has asked about 200 Chinese vessels he described as militia boats to immediately leave Whitsun Reef, a shallow coral region about 175 nautical miles (324 kilometers) west of Bataraza town in the western Philippine province of Palawan. China ignored the call, insisting it owns the offshore territory and that the vessels were sheltering from rough seas.

Military chief Gen. Cirilito Sobejana ordered the deployment of additional navy ships to beef up the country's maritime sovereignty patrols in the disputed waters, the military said Thursday.

NAVALNY HEALTH
WORSENS
IN PRISON

Moscow, March 25: Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny has suffered back pains and leg problems in prison, his lawyer said Thursday.

The lawyer, Olga Volkova, said Navalny's condition has notably deteriorated in recent days. "He's suffering strong pains in his back and his right leg. He's feeling numbness in his right lower leg," Volkova said outside the prison in remarks carried by independent *Dozhd* TV. "His right leg is in terrible shape." The 44-year-old Navalny, who is President Vladimir Putin's most outspoken opponent, was arrested on Jan. 17 upon his return from Germany, where he spent five months recovering from a nerve-agent poisoning.

Unifying United Kingdom



Union flags flutter as police officers pass the Palace of Westminster in central London on Thursday. Under new guidance from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Union flag is to be flown on UK government buildings every day in a bid to unite the nation. — AFP

Suez Canal suspends traffic

Facing 'extreme difficulty' refloating stuck vessel: Owners

Cairo, March 25: The owners of a giant container vessel blocking the Suez Canal said Thursday they were facing "extreme difficulty" refloating it, prompting Egypt to suspend navigation through one of the world's busiest shipping lanes.

Shipping analysts warned the suspension could last days or even weeks, forcing businesses to consider diverting their cargoes to the much longer route round the tip of Africa in a blow to global supply networks. The Suez Canal Authority (SCA) said it was doing all it could to refloat the Panama-flagged MV Ever Given, a 400-metre (1,300-foot) long vessel which veered off course and ran aground in a sandstorm on Tuesday.

Satellite pictures released by Planet Labs Inc show the 59-metre wide container ship wedged diagonally across the canal. Japanese ship-leasing firm Shoei Kisen Kaisha said it owned the giant vessel and was facing "extreme difficulty" trying to refloat it. "In co-operation with local authorities and Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement, a vessel management company, we are trying to refloat (the ship), but we are facing extreme difficulty," Shoei Kisen Kaisha said in a statement on its website.

"We sincerely apologise for causing a great deal of worry to ships in the Suez Canal and those planning to go through the canal," — AFP

400 mtr -long MV Ever Given, from the class of so-called "megaships", veers off course in the canal as duststorm hits Egypt's Sinai Desert, Middle East.

59 mtr wide Taiwan-run, Panama-flagged vessel is stuck at about 0540 GMT near southern end of the canal, blocks the man-made waterway.

25 crew unhurt, hull and cargo undamaged, and there is no oil leak, say the vessel's managers, Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement.

100 vessels are forced to wait at either end of the canal or midway, at Egypt's Great Bitter Lake, as a result of the accident, says canal service provider Leth Agencies.

1869 Suez Canal was opened. It has been widened since and is a crucial shortcut between Asia and Europe that saves ships from having to navigate around Africa.

Entire ship crew is Indian

Cairo, March 25: The entire crew of Ever Given, the container ship that is stuck in the Suez Canal since Tuesday blocking traffic in one of the world's busiest waterways, is Indian and is safe, said the company managing the container.

In a report, news agency *The Associated Press* said Bernhard Schulte Shipmanagement, the company that manages the Ever Given, said the ship's 25-member crew is safe and accounted for.

Apart from the Indian crew, the ship had two pilots from Egypt's canal authority aboard the vessel to guide it when the grounding happened around 7:45 am on Tuesday.

Shoei Kisen Kaisha, the company's owner, said, "All the crew came from India", adding that it is safe and the company is "trying to resolve the situation as soon as possible, but it proving to be extremely difficult".

On Tuesday, the 400 metre-long Ever Given got stuck

diagonally across the Suez Canal, reportedly due to a major dust storm and strong winds.

According to a report in the BBC, at least 150 ships are currently waiting to pass through the Suez Canal. The significance of the Suez Canal for international trade can be understood from the fact that nearly 12 per cent of global trade passes through this narrow canal connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea. — AP

AstraZeneca confirms strong vax protection

Virus origin: Four theories

Geneva, March 25: A team of international and Chinese scientists is poised to report on its joint search for the origins of the Coronavirus that sparked a pandemic after it was first detected in China over a year ago with four theories being considered, and one the clear frontrunner, according to experts.

The lengthy report is being published after months of wrangling, notably

between US and Chinese governments, over how the outbreak emerged, while scientists try to keep their focus on a so-far fruitless search for the origin of a microbe that has killed over 2.7 million people and stifled economies worldwide.

It wasn't immediately clear when the report will be released after its publication was delayed earlier this month. By many accounts, the report could offer few concrete answers, and may raise further questions.

It will offer a first glance in writing from 10 international epidemiologists, data scientists, veterinary, lab and food safety experts who visited China and the city of Wuhan where a market was seen as the initial epicentre earlier this year to work with Chinese counterparts. — AP

VAX SUPPLY ROW:
UK, EU WORKING
FOR SOLUTION

London, March 25: The UK and European Union (EU) have issued a conciliatory joint statement, pledging to find a "win-win" solution to a row over the supply of Covid-19 vaccines. The EU has been struggling to meet its member-countries requirements. — PTI

dataset," said Julian Tang, a virologist at the University of Leicester who was not connected to the research. He said the updated details didn't look substan-

tially different from what was published earlier this week.

Data disputes during ongoing studies typically remain confidential but in an unusual step, the National Institutes of Health publicly called on AstraZeneca to fix the discrepancy. AstraZeneca had been counting on findings from a predominantly US study of 32,000 people to help rebuild confidence in a vaccine that, despite being widely used in Britain, Europe and other countries, has had a troubled rollout.

Previous studies have turned up inconsistent data about its effectiveness, and then last week a scare about blood clots had some countries temporarily pausing inoculations. — AP

INDIA HAS TIES
WITH RUSSIA:
U.S. ADMIRAL

Washington, March 25: India has had a long-standing relationship with Russia for security cooperation and for armaments and the Biden administration should encourage New Delhi to move away from Moscow rather than take the route of sanctions for the purchase of major defence equipment like the S-400 missile system, a top US admiral has told lawmakers.

Admiral John Aquilino, during his confirmation hearing on Tuesday to be the next commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command or INDOPACOM, was responding to a question from Senator Jeanne Shaheen. — PTI

Biden keen to fix
immigration rule

Prez already sent in a law: White House

Washington, March 25: President Joe Biden is keen that the US Congress should quickly fix America's "broken" immigration system, for which he has already sent in a legislation, the White House has said. In February, the Biden administration introduced an ambitious immigration bill in Congress which among other things proposes to eliminate the per-country cap for employment-based green cards.

The US Citizenship Act of 2021 proposes a pathway to citizenship to 11 million undocumented workers, elimination of per country quota for employment-based green cards and work authorisation for dependents of H-1B foreign workers.

"The president...believes that there should be faster processing, that our immigration system is broken at many levels and of the system and that he is eager for Congress to move forward with action there," White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters on Wednesday at her daily news conference.

She was responding to a question on the recent protest by Indian-American doctors who are seeking the elimination of the existing per country quota for Green Card, as a result of which the backlog for Indians now runs into several decades.

A Green Card, known officially as a Permanent Resident Card, is a document issued to immigrants to the US as evidence that the bearer has been granted the privilege of residing permanently. The bicameral immigra-



THE PRESIDENT ...believes that there should be faster processing, that our immigration system is broken at many levels and of the system and that he is eager for Congress to move forward with action there

JEN PSAKI, White House Press Secretary

KAMALA TO LEAD
RESPONSE TO
BORDER ISSUES

Washington, March 25: US President Joe Biden has entrusted his Vice President Kamala Harris with the task of leading the diplomatic effort and working with neighbouring Mexico and Northern Triangle nations of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to stem the flow of immigrants to the southern border.

Biden said nobody is better qualified than Harris, who ran the second-largest attorney general's office in America, for this. "This new surge (of migrants) we are dealing with now started with the last administration but it is our responsibility to deal with it humanely. — PTI

tion bill, if passed by both the chambers of the Congress House of Representatives and the Senate and signed into law by President Joe Biden, would bring citizenship to millions of foreign nationals, including undocumented workers and those who came to the country legally.

The legislation would also benefit hundreds and thousands of Indian IT professionals and their families. Responding to another question on the inordinate delay in the issuance of employment authorisation card to H4 and L2 visa holders, a significant number of whom are Indian women, Psaki said that part of the reason the administration went to push

for action on immigration on the Hill is to move forward with expediting the processing and doing that on several levels, including a number of the visas.

"So, that's part of the reason why we think that's such an important piece to move forward," Psaki said.

An H-4 visa is issued by the US Citizenship and Immigration Services to immediate family members (spouse and children under 21 years of age) of the H-1B visa holders, most of whom are Indian IT professionals. The Biden administration has taken several steps to address the problems related to legal immigrants. — PTI

Amid challenges, Biden
to hold first press meet

Washington, March 25: President Joe Biden held off on holding his first news conference so he could use it to celebrate passage of a defining legislative achievement, his giant Covid-19 relief package. But he's sure to be pressed at Thursday's question-and-answer session about all sorts of other challenges that have cropped up along the way.

A pair of mass shootings, rising international tensions, early signs of intraparty divisions and increasing numbers of migrants crossing the southern border are all confronting a West Wing known for its message discipline. Biden is the first chief executive in four decades to reach this point in his term without holding a formal question-and-answer session.

He'll meet with reporters for the nationally televised afternoon event in the East Room of the White House. "It's an opportunity for him to speak to the American people, obviously directly through the coverage, directly through all of you," White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters aboard Air Force One on Tuesday. — AP

Yurok tribe traditionally considers species a sacred animal

GIANT | VULTURES

Calif. condor can return to northwest

San Francisco, March 25: The endangered California condor could return to the Pacific Northwest for the first time in 100 years. The US Fish and Wildlife Service plans to allow the release of captive-bred giant vultures into Redwood National Park as early as this fall to create a nonessential experimental population for California's far north, Oregon and northwestern Nevada, the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported Wednesday.

The project will be headed by the Yurok tribe, which traditionally has consi-

dered the California condor a sacred animal and has been working for years to return the species to the tribe's ancestral territory. Certainly within a year we hope to have birds in the sky, Tiana Williams-Claussen, director of the wildlife department of the Yurok tribe, said.

Not having him here for 100 years now, we as a people are wounded without having that spirit flying in our skies, she said.

The California condor is the largest native North American bird, with a wingspan of nearly 10 feet

● **THE US Fish and Wildlife Service plans to allow the release of captive-bred giant vultures into Redwood National Park as early as this fall to create a nonessential experimental population for California's far north, Oregon and northwestern Nevada.**

(3 metres).

The scavenger was once widespread but had virtually disappeared by the 1970s because of poaching, lead poisoning from eating

animals killed by hunters and destruction of its habitat.

In the early 1980s, all 22 condors remaining in the wild were trapped and brought into a captive-breeding programme that began releasing the giant vultures into Southern California's Los Padres National Forest in 1992.

That flock has been expanding its range while other condors now occupy parts of California's Central Coast, Arizona, Utah and Baja California, Mexico. The total wild population now numbers

more than 300 birds.

A dozen adults and two chicks died last summer when a wildfire ravaged their territory in Big Sur, along California's Central Coast. The new initiative calls for releasing four or six juvenile condors each year for 20 years throughout Redwood National Park, which is about an hour's drive from the Oregon border.

Condors can live for 60 years and fly vast distances, which is why their range could extend into several states. — AP

Lanka Navy arrests
54 Indian fishermen

Colombo, March 25: The Sri Lankan Navy has arrested at least 54 Indian fishermen and seized five trawlers for allegedly poaching in the country's territorial waters, an official statement said.

The Navy arrested the fishermen on Wednesday off the coast of northern and northeastern areas.

Having considered the impact of foreign fishermen poaching in Sri Lankan waters on the local fishing community and the sustainability of fishery resources of Sri Lanka, the Navy is conducting regular patrols to curb

illegal fishing activities in Sri Lankan waters, the Navy said. The Navy nabbed a large Indian fishing vessel with 14 personnel on board, about 3 nautical miles off the coast of Kovilan in Jaffna.

Two more Indian fishing vessels with 20 personnel for engaging in trawling were arrested about 7 nautical miles off Pesalai, Mannar and 5 nautical miles off the Iranativu Island. Two more Indian fishing vessels with 20 personnel were arrested about 7.5 and 8.5 nautical miles off Mullaitivu. — PTI

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	48,440.12	-1.51
Nifty 50	14,324.90	-1.54
\$&P 500*	3,894.83	0.15
Dollar (₹)	72.62	-0.06
Pound Sterling (₹)	99.39	0.24
Euro (₹)	85.74	0.12
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	44,347.44	0.09
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	62.12	-3.56
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.131	0.00
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	1.598	-0.016

* As of 8:30 PM IST

Automakers say production plunged in 2020

Global production of automobiles tumbled by 16% last year to a level last seen in 2010. With less than 78 million units sold, the auto sector faced "its worst crisis ever," said Fu Bingfeng, president, International Organization of Motor Vehicle Manufacturers. A breakdown of the organisation's data showed that in Europe, the drop in output was 21%, while in North America it fell by 20% and in South America by 30%.

67 coal blocks offered in second tranche of auction



The government offered 67 coal mines for sale, launching the second tranche of commercial coal mining auction. The blocks on offer are a mix of mines with small and large reserves, coking and non-coking mines and fully and partially explored blocks spread across six states—Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, MP, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. This is the highest ever number of mines on offer in a tranche.

Khatabook takes over Biz Analyst for \$10 million

Bengaluru-based fintech start-up Khatabook acquired Biz Analyst, a SaaS business management application, for \$10 million in a cash-and-equity deal. With this acquisition, Khatabook seeks to enter the next phase of growth and offer its over 10 million active merchants clientele premium value-added services. Biz Analyst provides solutions to SMEs using Tally accounting software to automate operations.

BMW launches motorcycle M1000 RR at ₹42 L

German luxury vehicle maker BMW Group launched its premium performance motorcycle model, BMW M1000 RR, in India with price tag starting at Rs 42 lakh, ex-showroom. Available as completely built-up units, the first 'M model' from BMW Motorrad in India can be booked now. The motorcycle is available in two variants—BMW M 1000 RR priced at Rs 42 lakh and BMW M 1000 RR Competition priced at Rs 45 lakh.

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■ Policy mandatory for top 1,000 firms Dividend policy scope extended

FC BUREAU MUMBAI, MARCH 25

In a move to further strengthen corporate governance practices and disclosure requirements, markets regulator Sebi on Thursday decided that the top 1,000 listed companies should put in place a dividend distribution policy.

"Requirement for formulation of dividend distribution policy by the existing top 500 listed entities has been extended to the top 1,000 listed entities on the basis of market capitalisation," the Securities and Exchange Board of India said in a statement after its board meeting.

In case companies hold their board meetings for more than one day, the financial results should be disclosed by them within 30 minutes of end of the board meeting for the day on which such results are considered, the Sebi said.

Also, the regulator has decided to do away with the requirement to seek stock exchange's approval for change of name of a listed entity.

Further, the requirement to publish newspaper advertisements for the notice for board meetings where financial results are to be discussed and for quarterly statement on deviation or variation in use of funds, has been dispensed with.

The timelines for submission of periodic reports—statement of investor complaints, corporate governance report and shareholding pattern—will be



ANALYST CALL RECORDINGS TO BE MADE PUBLIC IN 24 HOURS

New Delhi, March 25: In order to address information asymmetry among shareholders, the Sebi on Thursday decided that listed firms should make available audio and video recordings of analyst and investor meet on their websites as well as stock exchanges within 24

hours or before the next trading day.

It also decided that written transcripts of post-earnings conference calls should be made available on websites of listed companies and respective stock exchanges within five working days after such calls. —PTI

harmonised to 21 days from the end of each quarter, Sebi said.

Frequency of submission of compliance certificates relating to share transfer facility and issuance of share certificates within 30 days of lodgement for transfer, sub-division, among others, have been revised from half-year period to one year.

The Sebi board has also cleared amendments to LODR (Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements) Regulations.

"These amendments are

aimed at ensuring gender neutrality and maintaining consistency within the LODR Regulations, harmonising certain provisions of the LODR Regulations with Companies Act, in addition to strengthening the corporate governance practices and disclosure requirements and easing the compliance burden on listed entities," it said.

The provisions of LODR norms, based on the market capitalisation criteria, should continue to apply even if such entities fall below the thresholds.

SOLAR PANELS TO COME UP ALONG NATIONAL HIGHWAYS

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, MARCH 25

In a move that will support India's electric charging infrastructure, the government has proposed to install solar panels along the national highways.

"The ministry has decided to explore solar energy generation potential on National Highways and it is proposed to install solar panels in available places that are not earmarked to be used for any transport/highway related services/ plantation and meets the requirements for installation of solar panels," minister of road transport and highways Nitin Gadkari informed the Lok Sabha.

Further, solar panels have been installed on roof tops of toll plazas in the projects of Pune-Solapur NH, Nagpur bypass, Wainganga Bridge to Chattisgarh Border and Solapur-Yedishi highway.

As per data from the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, grid connected rooftop solar PV systems have been installed in 82,487 residential houses totalling 358 MW capacity as on November 18, 2019. An aggregate capacity of 477.2 MW of rooftop solar plants has been installed at 7448 government buildings as on March 15, 2021. With an average generation of 1.5 million units per year per MW, about 715.8 million units per year are being generated from these plants.

Urban women employment remains static in February

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, MARCH 25

Urban female employment rate has remained static at 5.4 per cent last month, the same as in February 2020. Only 7.3 per cent of urban women of 15 years or more were employed in fiscal 2019-20, says a survey.

According to CMIE's Consumer Pyramids Household Survey, urban female employment rate was at 8.4 per cent in 2019-20.

In an earlier report, the Asian Development Bank had found that the pandemic had shrunk the women labour force in India by 10.5 per cent against 2 per cent shrinkage in case of men between October 2019 and October 2020. Participation of women



in the labour market itself remains very low. According to the official Periodic Labour Force Survey in 2018-19, while 73.7 per cent of urban men participated in the labour markets, only 20.4 per cent of urban women did so. The situation prevails despite the fact that 50 per cent of all fresh graduates were women between 2011-12 and 2015-16. In 2018-19, 53 per cent of all fresh graduates were women.

"Indian women work a lot. But, their work is predominantly at home... Their participation in the labour markets outside their houses in urban India is very low in spite of their superior education," said Mahesh Vyas, CEO of CMIE.

"There are only three cases under which this can happen. Either Indian women are not willing to go out to work or they are not allowed to go out to work or people are not willing to give them work in spite of their education," he said.

According to a paper presented at the World Economic Forum earlier, increasing participation of women in labour force to the same level as men can boost India's GDP by 27 per cent.

MARKET BLEEDS ON FRESH LOCKDOWN FEARS

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, MARCH 25

The steep rise in fresh daily Covid-19 cases, which recorded the biggest single day jump in five months at 53,476 and thus raising the possibility of fresh lockdowns, led to continued heavy selling in the stock market in consumer-focused sectors like Auto, FMCG and Realty for the second day.

The local market underperformed Asian peers by a big margin, losing more than 1.5 per cent as major Asian markets closed mixed. Weak European markets experiencing a third wave of Covid infections also added to selling

pressure, as that may drag down global growth.

The Sensex closed 740 points, or 1.51 per cent, down at 48,440 while the Nifty-50 shed 224.50 points, or 1.54 per cent, closing at 14,324.90; both indices are at two-month low levels.

As a government spokesperson talked about the presence of new mutant variants of Covid-19 virus, daily cases in Maharashtra surged to 31,855 while daily cases in other states also were rising, forcing local authorities to announce fresh restrictions.

The broader market took a bigger hit, with the BSE Mid-cap Index down 2.22 per cent and the BSE

Small-cap Index down by 1.85 per cent.

Consumer focused stocks were the worst impacted by the fresh lockdown fears. The top losers among the sectoral indices included BSE Auto (-2.80 per cent), Realty (-2.55 per cent), Power (-2.83 per cent) and Consumer Durables (-2.28 per cent).

Investors suffered a notional loss of close to Rs 3 lakh crore as the BSE market capitalisation dropped below the Rs 200-lakh crore mark to Rs 198.75 lakh crore.

FPIs were net sellers to the tune of Rs 3,383.60 crore while DIIs were net buyers by Rs 2,267.69 crore.

Inflation goal worked well, says Subbarao

New Delhi, March 25: Inflation targeting has worked well and the government must stay with it, and it is going to work well in the period ahead also, former RBI governor D. Subbarao said on Thursday. He also said low inflation contributes to sustainable growth.

Addressing a media event virtually, Subbarao further said the government's proposal to privatise some public sector undertakings (PSUs) is not akin to selling family silver but it is a route for putting India on a sustainable growth path.

"There is indeed no tension between growth and inflation in the medium term. A low inflation contributes to sustainable growth as it allows consumers and investors to make informed decisions."

"...So, I believe inflation targeting has worked well and we must stay with it and it is going to work well in the period ahead," he said.

Under the current dispensation, the Reserve Bank of India has been mandated by the government to maintain retail



D. Subbarao

inflation at 4 per cent, with a margin of 2 per cent on either side. The monetary policy committee decides on policy rates keeping this target in mind.

The current medium-term inflation target, notified in August 2016, ends on March 31, and the inflation target for the next five years starting April is likely to be notified this month.

Commenting on the government's privatisation and asset monetisation programme, Subbarao said at the time of independence, there was a logic to invest in the public sector units because there was no private capital. Now, when there is no dearth of private capital, the government should focus its energies on investing in education, health and other people-centric areas. —PTI

India will have a four-tiered banking sector in a decade

Mumbai, March 25: The Reserve Bank foresees a "competitive, efficient and heterogeneous" banking sector with four distinct sets of banks dominating the landscape over the next decade, its governor Shaktikanta Das said on Thursday.

There will be large banks having presence across the country and the world; mid-size banks present across the economy; small finance banks/regional rural banks/cooperatives to take care of the small borrowers; and digital players, he said.

The comments come days after the RBI appointed a panel headed by former deputy governor Shyamala Gopinath on bank licences to evaluate applications for universal banks and small finance banks. An internal panel had recently recommended allowing deep-pocketed corporates into the banking fray, something the RBI had been averse to for long. A final view on the controversial proposal is yet to be taken.

"The Reserve Bank is striving towards a more



Shaktikanta Das

LOCKDOWNS UNLIKELY: DAS

Mumbai, March 25: The rising Covid-19 cases are a matter of concern, but it may not impact the ongoing economic revival as one does not foresee lockdowns, RBI governor Shaktikanta Das said.

The economic revival will continue "unabated", Das said. "We have 'insurance' to protect economic revival like a fast-paced vaccination drive, greater ability among people to follow Covid protocols", and one does not see lockdowns as well. —PTI

competitive, efficient and heterogeneous banking structure. The licensing policies for universal banks, small finance

banks (SFBs) and payments banks are a step in this direction," Das said at an event.

He said at present, there are ten small finance banks and six payments banks which are operational. "I foresee four distinct sets of banking landscapes emerging in the current decade. The first set will be dominated by a few large Indian banks with domestic and international presence," Das said.

The second will be mid-sized banks with economy-wide presence, while the third set would encompass smaller private sector banks, SFBs, regional rural banks and co-operative banks, which may specifically cater to the credit requirements of small borrowers.

The fourth segment would consist of digital players who may act as service providers directly to customers or through banks as their agents or associates, he said, stressing that such players would increasingly emerge as "critical pieces" across all segments. —PTI

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, MARCH 25

E-commerce companies expressed divergent views on FDI policy for the sector at a meeting with the Ministry of Commerce and Industry on Thursday. While the FDI-funded e-commerce entities sought policy stability, some of the other players wanted changes and more clarity in the policy.

The ministry had called the meeting with the e-commerce players to understand if there was a need for clarity on the foreign direct investment policy in e-commerce.

FDI-funded e-commerce companies, including PepperFry, Swiggy, Amazon, Grofers and Flipkart asserted they did not need further changes in the FDI policy. Instead they needed stability in the policy.

On the other hand, players like Reliance Retail, Jio, Snapdeal, Tata Cliq and Nykaa wanted changes to be made in the policy. They sought clarification on the changes already made in the policy and its implementation.

The ministry asked the

players to file their recommendations within a week for a decision on the issue.

Earlier, minister of commerce and industry Piyush Goyal had informed Parliament that he had received complaints about the operations of some of the e-commerce companies.

The Confederation of All India Traders had complained to the ministry that some of the FDI-funded e-commerce companies have been flouting the FDI norms. It wanted the government to ensure that the current e-commerce norms provide a level-playing field for all stakeholders. It also asked the government to take corrective actions to ensure that no e-commerce company, big or small, Indian or foreign-funded, should violate the law under any circumstances and treat India as a dumping yard.

However, the Retailers Association of India, representing the organised retailers, wanted the FDI rules applicable to retail to be the same across channels and formats. Also, the rules for products should be the same for all channels with no special rules.

Mega infra DFI NaBFID gets House nod

New Delhi, March 25: Parliament on Thursday passed a bill to set up the National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development (NaBFID) to fund infrastructure projects in the country, with finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman asserting that its audited accounts will be placed before both the Houses every year and they will have "oversight" of the institution.

The Rajya Sabha passed the National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development (NaBFID) Bill, 2021 by a voice vote on Thursday. The bill was passed in the Lok Sabha on Tuesday.

Later, financial services secretary Debashish Panda said at an event that the development finance institution (DFI) should be

operational in the next four-five months.

Participating in a debate on the bill in the Upper House, some members raised the issue of lack of parliamentary oversight of the institution and demanded that the proposed legislation be sent to a select committee for scrutiny.

Replying to the debate, Sitharaman explained, "Every year audited accounts (of this bank) will come to each House of Parliament... so Parliament oversight (of the institution) is in-built in the bill."

Section 26 of the bill provides, "The Institution shall furnish to the Central Government and the Reserve Bank within four months from the date on which its accounts are closed and balanced, a

copy of its balance-sheet and accounts together with a copy of the auditor's report and a report of the working of the Institution during the relevant year; and the Central Government shall, as soon as may be after they are received by it, cause the same to be laid before each House of Parliament."

Thus, the NaBFID will be answerable to Parliament. The bank will support the development of long-term non-recourse infrastructure financing in India, including development of the bonds and derivatives markets necessary for infrastructure financing.

Sitharaman said a five-year tax break is provided to private development finance institutions to ensure enhanced flow of funds. —PTI

SHORT TAKES

Saina reaches Orleans quarters

Paris: London Olympics bronze medallist Saina Nehwal advanced to the quarterfinals of the Orleans Masters badminton tournament after prevailing over France's Marie Batomene in the women's singles second round here on Thursday. Running against time to make it to her fourth Olympics, Saina recovered from the opening game reversal to see off world no. 65 Marie 18-21, 21-15, 21-10 in a 51-minute clash in the Super 100 event, which is part of BWF's revised Olympic qualification period.

The fourth seeded Indian, who had pulled out of last week's All England Championships due to a thigh injury, will face either France's Yaelle Honyaux or Malaysia's Iris Hway next. Ira Sharma, ranked 162, also made it to the quarterfinals after beating Bulgaria's world no. 71 Mariya Mitsova in straight games at 21-18, 21-13 in 32 minutes. — PTI

Pospisil sorry for rant after exit

Miami: Vasek Pospisil's anger boiled over in a foul-mouthed rant referencing ATP Tour chairman Andrea Gaudenzi Wednesday as the Canadian went down in three sets in the first round of the Miami Open. American qualifier Mackenzie McDonald advanced with a 6-3, 4-6, 6-3 victory over Pospisil, who swatted a ball out of court, smashed a racket and incurred a verbal abuse point penalty on set point of the opening set — a display that had him later offering an apology on Twitter. Asked during a changeover by umpire Arnaud Gabas what the problem was, 67th-ranked Pospisil unleashed a tirade focused on Gaudenzi. "I want to sincerely apologize for my behaviour on the court in Miami earlier today," Pospisil later tweeted. "I disrespected the game I love and for that I am truly sorry." — AFP

Brown says Hami to retire after win

Manama: Lewis Hamilton is set to claim an unprecedented eighth drivers' world title — and then leave Mercedes and retire from Formula One, predicted rival team boss Zak Brown of McLaren. Brown, the architect of McLaren's resurgence after a spell in the doldrums, told the *Daily Mail* he believed Max Verstappen of Red Bull and George Russell of Williams will be recruited by Mercedes in an all-new line-up for 2022. He added that he would not be keen to offer Hamilton a return to McLaren next year because he was building the team for the future with Lando Norris and Daniel Ricciardo. Speaking ahead of the season-opening Bahrain Grand Prix, Brown explained that it would be "bad timing" if Hamilton wanted to find a seat next year. Hamilton's decision to sign only a one-year contract with Mercedes has made his future the subject of intense speculation. — AFP

Lanka set Windies 375-run target

North Sound: Pathum Nissanka's hundred on debut and Niroshan Dickwella's pug-nacious 96 solidified Sri Lanka's outstanding second innings rearguard with a total of 476 that left the West Indies with the challenging victory target of 375 on the fourth day of the first Test on Wednesday. West Indies captain Kraigg Brathwaite will resume in partnership with Nkrumah Bonner after Vishwa Fernando prised out John Campbell via a catch to wicketkeeper Dickwella.

Brief scores: Sri Lanka 169 & 476 (Nissanka 103, Dickwella 96) vs West Indies 271 & 34/1.

Live on TV

CRICKET

India vs England: Second ODI from 1.30 pm on Star Sports 1, HD

SHOOTING

World Cup: 25m Rapid Fire Pistol Men Final from 1.30 pm; Trap Women Final from 3.45 pm; Trap Men Final from 5 pm on Sony Six

FORMULA ONE

Bahrain Grand Prix: First Practice from 4.55 pm; Second Practice from 8.25 pm on Star Sports Select 2

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TIGERS ON PROWL

Kohli's men aim to seal series in 2nd ODI against England

Pune, March 25: The immensely talented Suryakumar Yadav is likely to get a chance to showcase his '360 degree' hitting skills when a rampaging Indian team takes on a rather clueless England, aiming to seal another series victory in the second ODI here on Friday.

Shreyas Iyer's dislocated shoulder has once again brought Yadav in focus and his ODI debut, after a blockbuster T20 first outing, looks imminent after an all-round show by the hosts ensured an easy victory in the first game.

Iyer has been one of India's most prolific 50-over batsman before the Covid-19 enforced lockdown but such is the team's strength that a debutant looks more formidable for a world champion opposition, who are no less menacing but seem utterly confused at this point.

Being spoilt for choices is always a good headache to have for the think-tank and skipper Virat Kohli will be more pleased than anyone else.

Kohli has not had Ravindra Jadeja's services for close to three



Suryakumar Yadav (left) and India captain Virat Kohli in this file pic.

months but neither Axar Patel in Tests, and now Krunal Pandya in the ODIs, have let the team miss their maverick from Rajkot.

Prasidh Krishna, already a household name due to IPL, looked completely at home on his ODI debut, hurrying batsmen for pace in the absence of

Jasprit Bumrah and Mohammed Shami. Meanwhile, England will look to level the series and stay alive in the contest.

England have a lot to ponder on and injuries to skipper Eoin Morgan and batsman Sam Billings, while fielding, in the lung-opener have only added to

their woes. Morgan has been ruled out of the remaining matches while Billings will miss Friday's game.

All-rounder Ben Stokes was firm in his belief that England do not have too many reasons to worry despite the continuing disappointments.

— PTI

NUMBERS GAME

INDIA HAVE WON THREE OUT OF FIVE ODIS AT PUNE:

● India have won three and lost two in five one day internationals at Maharashtra Cricket Association Stadium, Pune where the second match of the series will be played on Friday (March 26).

● England, on the other hand, have lost both one day internationals played here. They lost to India by three wickets with 11 balls remaining in the first encounter between the two sides on January 15, 2017. In the first one day international match of the current series, hosts defeated England by 66 runs on Tuesday.

● Virat Kohli's 122 off 105 balls with eight fours and five sixes against England on January 15, 2017 is the highest individual score at this ground.

● Jasprit Bumrah took four wickets for 35 runs against West Indies on October 27, 2018 is the best bowling performance at this ground. Prasidh Krishna's four for 54 on debut in the first match of the series is the second best bowling here. In five previous matches, the team batting first have won three times while two victories were achieved on chasing the target.

— S. PERVEZ QAISAR

Olympic torch relay finally sees light

Iwaki (Japan), March 25: The Tokyo Olympics torch relay got underway on Thursday after a year's coronavirus delay, with officials hoping it will be a "ray of light" after the problems caused by the pandemic.

Spectators were barred from the departure ceremony and first leg over ongoing fears about the coronavirus, which forced the 2020 Games' historic postponement a year ago.

But they will line the rest of the route during the 121-day relay, which will criss-cross Japan and involve 10,000 runners before the torch lights the Olympic cauldron on July 23.

Organisers are hoping the relay will dispel doubts about holding the Games during a pandemic, and Tokyo 2020 chief Seiko Hashimoto called the flame "a ray of light at the end of the darkness".

"This little flame never lost hope and it waited for this day like a cherry blossom bud just about to bloom," she told the ceremony at Fukushima's J-Village sports complex, which was a base for responding to the 2011 nuclear disaster.

Azusa Iwashimizu, one of Japan's 2011 World Cup-winning women's footballers, was the first to carry the rose-gold, cherry blossom-shaped torch, accompanied by former teammates.

She passed the flame to Fukushima high school student Asato Owada, who like all the runners were an official white tracksuit with a red diagonal stripe.

A handful of fans, wearing their compulsory masks, watched the relay from its second section. But with cheering and large crowds banned for virus safety, the loudest sound came from clicking cameras. "I think it somewhat lacks excitement because there are rules," Tetsuya Ozawa said in the town of Naraha.

"I think more people would have come and there would have been more excitement if there wasn't coronavirus." — AFP



Above: The torch is lit by a member of Japan's women national soccer team "Nadeshiko Japan" during the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Torch Relay grand start in Naraha, Fukushima, on Thursday. The torch relay began its 121-day journey across Japan on Thursday and is headed toward the opening ceremony in Tokyo on July 23.

Below: Members of the Spa Resort Hawaiians Dancing Team perform on the first day of the torch relay. — AP



INJURED IYER VOWS TO COME BACK STRONGER

Pune, March 25: Injured India batsman Shreyas Iyer has left the bio-secure bubble here after he was ruled out of the ongoing ODI series against England as well as the entire IPL starting next month even as he vowed to come back even stronger.

Iyer dislocated his left shoulder while fielding during the first ODI against England on Tuesday and he is set to undergo surgery, which will rule him out of action for a minimum four months.

"Shreyas Iyer has exited the bio-bubble," the BCCI said on Thursday ahead of the second ODI here.

Earlier in the day, Iyer vowed to come back from the injury even stronger. "You know what they say, the greater the setback, the stronger the comeback. I shall be back soon," Iyer tweeted. — PTI

Yuki Bhambri to lead Delhi Binny's Brigade in Tennis Premier League

New Delhi, March 25: Delhi boy Yuki Bhambri will lead the challenge of Delhi Binny's Brigade in the Tennis Premier League 3.0, which will be played in Mumbai later this year.

Yuki was picked for ₹4.20 lakh at the auction here on Tuesday and also finding a place in the team was Manish Suresh Kumar, while the women's slot was filled by Thailand's Peangtarn

Plipuech, ranked 294 in the world.

TPL 3.0 will have participation from five international women players, including Samantha Murray Sharan from Great Britain, Diana Marcinkevica of Latvia, Sabina Sharipova of Uzbekistan, Valeriya Strakhova of Ukraine and Sofia Shapatava of Georgia, besides Peangtarn.

The highest bid of the day was in favour of Rankumar Ramanathan, who was picked for ₹4.5 lakh by the Mumbai Leon Army, co-owned by Leander Paes.

India's top ranked men's player Prajnesh Gunneswaran was picked by Rajasthan Tigers for ₹3.70 lakh.

Ankita Raina garnered the highest price for women's players, picked by Hyderabad Strikers for ₹4.10 lakh.



Manu Bhaker (from left), Rahi Sarnobat and Chinki Yadav pose with their gold medals after winning the 25m pistol team event at the World Cup in New Delhi on Thursday.

Golden girls top pistol team event

New Delhi, March 25: The Indian juggernaut remained unstoppable at the ISSF shooting World Cup with the country's women shooters grabbing the spotlight by clinching the 25m pistol team gold medal following a silver in the 50m rifle 3 positions team event here on Thursday.

The seventh competition of the day was marred by the Hungarian team's pull-out from the men's rifle 3 position final — against India — after a dispute with its seasoned shooter Peter Sidi over a bipod that was attached to his rifle, leading to a postponement of the event to Friday.

The host nation's team will take on third-placed USA in the final.

There was positive news for India after that unprecedented act, as the triumvirate of Chinky Yadav, Manu Bhaker and Rahi Sarnobat shot a total of 17 to beat Poland's Joanna Iwona Wawrzonowska, Julita Borek and Agnieszka Korejwo, who managed to score 7.

"In individual competitions if we make mistakes, we are losing the points, nobody else. But here, we feel a little more responsible. It is very different from qualification, it is hit or miss here, but, in qualification, every shot counts in a different way," Sarnobat said.

● The gold medal contest between India and Hungary in the 50m rifle 3 positions men's team event was postponed after the visiting team pulled out following an internal dispute with its star marksman Peter Sidi.

Bhaker added, "I take everything as practice for my main match. It's not like a test event or anything, it's just that we have to perform so we have to be at our best. I consider it the same thing, just the name has been changed."

The team gold came only a day after Yadav, Bhaker and Sarnobat swept the individual final by winning all the medals on offer on Wednesday.

The victory in this event consolidated India's position at the top of the pecking order with 21 medals, including 10 gold, six silver and five bronze.

Earlier in the day, India's Anjum Moudgil, Shreya Saksena and Gaayathri Nithyanadam claimed the silver medal in the 50m rifle 3 positions team event.

The Indian rifle team shot 43 in the gold medal showdown to finish behind the Polish team, which scored 47 to grab the top prize. — PTI

Burak's hat-trick nails Netherlands

Paris, March 25: The Netherlands slumped to a dramatic 4-2 defeat by Turkey in their opening 2022 World Cup qualifier on Wednesday, while reigning champions France were held by Ukraine despite a brilliant Antoine Griezmann goal and Belgium came from behind to beat Wales.

European champions Portugal battled to a 1-0 victory over Azerbaijan, but 2018 World Cup runners-up Croatia lost 1-0 in Slovenia as they started their bid to reach the finals in Qatar.

In Istanbul, Turkey led 3-0 shortly after half-time through two Burak Yilmaz goals and a Hakan Calhanoglu strike, but substitutes Davy Klaassen and Luuk de Jong gave Frank de Boer's Dutchmen hope.

Yilmaz's wonderful free-kick sealed him a hat-trick and Turkey a crucial win, though, in a match between the two favourites to qualify for Group G.

"Very disappointing result, and also the way that result came about," De Boer told NOS TV.

The defeat was a dreadful start to the campaign for the Netherlands, who failed to qualify for either

Euro 2016 or the 2018 World Cup, but are one of the fancied sides ahead of the delayed Euro 2020 finals this year.

France kicked off their title defence with a 1-1 draw against Ukraine at the Stade de France.

Griezmann curled a fine finish from outside the box into the top corner in the 19th minute to draw level with David Trezeguet in fourth place on France's all-time goalscoring list, with 34.

But Presnel Kimpembe put through his own net before the hour mark to draw Ukraine level.

The Paris Saint-Germain defender had a late chance to make amends, but headed too close to away goalkeeper Georgiy Bushchan.

"We need more accuracy and movement against these opponents," France coach Didier Deschamps told TF1.

"Qualifying is a long haul and not a long, quiet river, it never has been."

The other game in Group D saw Finland and Bosnia and Herzegovina draw 2-2, with Teemu Pukki netting twice for the Finns in Helsinki. "It left a bad taste in my mouth," said Pukki. — AFP

SELECTED RESULTS

Portugal (Medvedev 36-og)	1	Latvia (Kauņnieks 40)	1
Azerbaijan	0	Montenegro (Jovetic 41, 83)	2
France (Griezmann 19)	1	Gibraltar	0
Ukraine (Kimpembe 57-og)	1	Norway (Sorloth 43, Thorsvedt 45, Svensson 57)	3
Belgium (De Bruyne 22, T. Hazard 28, Lukaku 73-pen)	3	Malta (Mbon 56)	1
Wales (Wilson 10)	1	Russia (Dzyuba 23, Fernandes 35, Sobolev 90)	3
Turkey (Burak Yilmaz 15, 34-pen, 81, Calhanoglu 46)	4	Serbia (Vlahovic 40, Mitrovic 69, 75)	3
Netherlands (Klaassen 75, L. De Jong 76)	2	Republic of Ireland (Browne 18, Collins 86)	2