

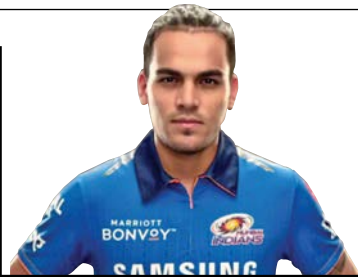
THE ASIAN AGE

NEW DELHI SUNDAY 18 APRIL 2021



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Popular Tamil actor and social activist Vivekh dies, fans, fraternity in grief



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Chahar of Mumbai grabs 3 wickets to help team win by 13 runs against Hyderabad



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Actor Sonu Sood, who is known for his Covid relief work, tests +ve for virus

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WINDOWS



French actress Isabelle Huppert poses during the photocall of the film *La Daronne* (Mama Weed) in the BCN Film Festival on in Barcelona on Saturday.

— AFP

LAC: Army puts off commanders' meet with China

New Delhi: Indian Army has postponed its crucial Commanders Conference and cancelled retiring officers conference in April due to rising Covid-19 cases. Indian Army's bi-annual Commanders Conference, which is attended by it top commanders from all over the country, was scheduled to be held from April 26 has been postponed. It would have discussed emerging situation at the line of actual control with China in Ladakh.

■ More on Page 4

EU panel flags poor human rights in India

New Delhi: In a shocker for India just days after a bilateral human rights dialogue with the European Union (EU), the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament by an overwhelming majority vote of 61 out of 71, "expressed concern over the deteriorating human rights situation in India".

■ More on Page 3

WH: Biden will lift refugee cap in May

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

COUNTERPOINT



Let us loot vaccines and oxygen from the hospital!

WEATHER

Max: 36°C
Min: 22°C
RH: 24%
Rain: 0%

Forecast: Sunny

ASTROGUIDE

Plava: Uttarayana
Tithi: Chaitra Sijuddha Shashti till 10.31 pm
Star: Arudra till 5 am (Monday)
Variyam: 11.48 am to 1.33 pm
Durmuhurtam: 4.49 pm to 5.39 pm
Rahukalam: 4.30 pm to 6 pm
SUNSET TODAY 6.48 PM
SUNRISE TOMORROW 5.51 AM
MOONRISE TOMORROW 12.24 PM
MOONSET TODAY 9.55 AM

RECORD STATS India sees highest 1-day deaths at 1,341 and 2,34,692 fresh cases

MODI APPEAL PM urges to keep Kumbh participation symbolic amid Covid crisis

States complain of oxygen, medicine & beds shortage

New Delhi, April 17: With hospitals bursting at the seams, oxygen supplies dwindling and ICU beds in short supply, the Centre on Saturday assured adequate availability of everything to states. The assurance came on a day when India recorded the highest single-day deaths at 1,341 and 2,34,692 fresh cases, pushing its Covid-19 tally to 1,45,26,609 and the death toll due to the viral disease to 1,75,649.

Registering a steady increase for the 38th day in a row, the tally of active Covid-19 cases has climbed to 16,79,740 in the country, accounting for 11.56 per cent of its total caseload, while the national Covid-19 recovery rate has dropped to 87.23 per cent.

The mounting crisis is being made worse by shortage of oxygen cylinders, ventilators, Remdesivir and vaccines in hospitals, 11 states and Union Territories said at a meeting convened by the Centre on Saturday amid the worrying spurt in coronavirus cases.

The high-level meeting was chaired by Union



Connaught Place wears a deserted look during weekend lockdown in New Delhi on Saturday.

— PTI

health minister Harsh Vardhan with the health ministers of 11 states and UTs to review measures taken by them for prevention, containment and management of the recent surge in Covid-19 cases.

The states, including Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, West Bengal, Delhi, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh, have been reporting an unprecedented surge in new Covid cases.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who also

held a high-level review on the emerging Covid-19 situation in the country, which is blowing over with every passing day, said on Saturday the ongoing Kumbh in Haridwar should now have symbolic participation due to the Covid-19 crisis. He, however, did not order that it be called off.

Mr Modi tweeted that he spoke to Swami Avdheshanand Giri of Juna Akhara over telephone and enquired about the health of saints, many of whom have contracted

■ More on Page 4

Uddhav calls PM over oxygen, told Modi on W. Bengal tour

BHAGWAN PARAB
MUMBAI, APRIL 17

Union health minister Harsh Vardhan has assured Maharashtra of an adequate and uninterrupted supply of medical oxygen and other resources during the coronavirus pandemic.

The assurance came after Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray's claim that he had contacted the Prime Minister's Office to inform about the acute shortage of medical oxygen and Ramdesivir, but was told that the PM is in Bengal for the election campaign. Meanwhile, Union minister Piyush Goyal asked Mr Thackeray to "stop his daily dose of shameless politics."

■ More on Page 4

5 dead in Covid hospital fire in Chhattisgarh

AGE CORRESPONDENT
RAIPUR, APRIL 17

A major fire broke out in a private Covid hospital here, killing five patients.

While one Covid-19 patient succumbed to burn injuries, four others died due to disruption of oxygen supply caused due to the mishap, officials said.

The fire broke out due to a short circuit, preliminary police investigation suggested.

■ More on Page 4

Delhi under lockdown, still registers record 24K cases

SUNIL THAPLIYAL and BHASKAR HARI SHARMA
NEW DELHI, APRIL 17

Roads, markets, buses and Metro trains remained largely empty on Saturday as the national capital, grappling with soaring Covid-19 cases, observed weekend curfew, with chief minister Arvind Kejriwal sending both an SOS and a warning.

The Covid-19 situation in Delhi has become "very serious and worrisome",

and hospital beds, oxygen, remdesivir and tocilizumab for patients are in short supply, Mr Kejriwal said on Saturday.

The number of Covid-19 cases are rising rapidly with 24,000 fresh cases reported in the last 24 hours.

The chief minister said he spoke with Union health minister Harsh Vardhan and requested him for oxygen, Ramdesivir and tocilizumab.

The positivity rate in

Delhi has reached 24 per cent -- one in four of all people being tested are positive, he said.

"The situation is very serious and worrisome," Mr Kejriwal said. "Cases have gone up really fast. That is why we are facing shortages even though everything seemed under control until a few days ago. But the speed at which this corona is growing, no one knows where its peak will be," he added.

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Lalu gets bail in graft case, may walk free Mon.

RJD supremo will be released after 39 months and 25 days of incarceration

NAYYAR AZAD
PATNA, APRIL 17

The Jharkhand high court on Saturday granted bail to RJD president Lalu Prasad in the Dumka treasury case of the multi-crore rupees fodder scam on completion of half the sentence period, paving way for his release from jail. The case was registered in 1990 when Mr Yadav was the chief minister of the state.

According to reports, Mr Yadav is likely to be freed from incarceration on Monday. Reports however suggested that Mr Yadav may not return to Patna and would follow the advice of his doctors who have been treating him at AIIMS in New Delhi.

The 73-year-old RJD supremo was airlifted to AIIMS New Delhi on January 24 last in view of his bad health.

He was granted bail by the single bench of Justice Ajaith Kumar Singh on grounds that he has served more than half of his jail term in the Dumka case. He was awarded the five-year jail



Lalu Yadav

term in the case.

According to his lawyers, he has been instructed to furnish a bail bond of Rs. 1 Lakh and a fine of Rs. 10 Lakh. He has also been asked not to leave the country without the permission of the court.

"The court granted him bail on grounds that he has served over half of his jail term in the Dumka treasury case," Lalu Yadav's lawyer Prabhakar Kumar said.

He was earlier granted bail in Chaibasa and Deoghar treasury cases on similar grounds.

He has been languishing in jail since December 2017.

Prince Philip laid to rest in Royal Vault



Queen Elizabeth watches as pallbearers carry the coffin of the Duke of Edinburgh during his funeral at St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle, Windsor, England, on Saturday. Prince Philip died on April 9 at the age of 99 after 73 years of marriage to Britain's Queen Elizabeth II.

— PTI

4 Sikhs among eight killed in mass shooting at FedEx facility in US

Washington, April 17: Four Sikhs, including three women, were among eight people who were killed in a mass shooting at a FedEx facility in the US state of Indiana staffed by a large number of Indian-American employees, shocking the community leaders who appealed to President Joe Biden to tackle the growing hate crimes and gun violence in the country.

The gunman, identified as 19-year-old Brandon Scott Hole, was a former employee. He allegedly died by suicide after the shooting on late Thursday night at the FedEx facility in Indianapolis. He was last employed by FedEx in 2020.

Hole was interviewed by FBI agents last year, after his mother called police to say that her son might commit suicide by cop", the bureau said on Friday.

This is the worst Sikh massacre in the US after the Oak Creek Gurdwara

mass shooting in Wisconsin on August 5, 2012, where seven members of the community were killed.

About 90 per cent of the workers at the FedEx delivery service facility are said to be Indian-Americans, mostly from the Sikh community.

"This is very heart-breaking. The Sikh community is devastated by this tragic incident," community leader Gurinder Singh Khalsa said.

— PTI

Didi, to what extent will you go to for votebank? Fact is that she thought to get siyasi faida out of the deaths (of people in Cooch Behar). Playing politics over dead bodies is an old habit of Didi.

— Narendra Modi, PM

BJP has no issue to talk about, forget development. It is now tapping the conversation I am having with someone. That means all of your phones are also tapped.

— Mamata Banerjee, Bengal CM

she described as "a great scam."

The PM alleged at a BJP rally in Anasol of Burdwan West, "You must have heard Friday's audio tape about what happened in Coochbehar. What kind of politics Didi is playing

over the five (Ms Banerjee allegedly mentions four in the clip) painful deaths, has come to light and is now clear to all. In the audio, a TMC leader in Coochbehar is asked to take out a rally with the

■ Turn to Page 4

Modi, Mamata battle over audio, Didi orders probe

Mamata Banerjee playing politics on dead bodies: Modi

RAJIB CHOWDHURI
KOLKATA, APRIL 17

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday accused West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee of trying to reap "siyasi faida" (political dividends) from people's deaths, a day after the release of a fresh audio clip of the Trinamul Congress supremo's instructions in a phone call to her party candidate, Partha Pratim Roy, to keep the bodies of the four victims of Shitalkuchi firing in Coochbehar, ready for a rally.

Responding to Mr Modi immediately, Ms Banerjee accused him of tapping her phone and sought his apology and resignation as the PM. She also ordered a CID probe and vowed not to spare Mr Modi for what



A newly-married couple show their fingers after casting their vote in Nadia district on Saturday.

— PTI

SANJAY BASAK
NEW DELHI, APRIL 17

Even as West Bengal recorded the highest single-day spike of nearly 7,000 Covid cases on the eve of polling day, one witnessed complete disregard of Covid protocol as people queued up to vote on Saturday. While the majority of voters in polling booths could be seen wearing masks, there were plenty without them. Not only were social distancing norms completely ignored, there seemed to be no provision for sanitisers and other such facilities in polling booths.

At least 78.36 per cent voter turnout was registered till 5 pm on Saturday across 45 assembly constituencies of West Bengal where voting was held for the fifth phase, Chief Electoral Officer Aariz Aftab said.

Jalpaiguri witnessed the highest polling percentage

(81.73), followed by Purba Bardhaman (81.72), Nadia (81.57), North 24 Parganas (74.83), Darjeeling (74.31) and Kalimpong (69.56), he said. "By and large polling has been peaceful in Bengal today apart from a few incidents of violence," Mr Aftab said.

The gross violation of

Covid protocols continues even as a report published in the journal The Lancet, "dismissed the predominant scientific view that SARS-CoV-2, the coronavirus that causes Covid-19, is not an airborne pathogen." The authors of the report have listed 10

■ Turn to Page 4

MP bypoll: 62% voting in fight for Nath prestige

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY
BHOPAL, APRIL 17

The by-elections to Damoh Assembly constituency in Madhya Pradesh held on Saturday, witnessed turnout of 62 per cent voters.

The polling was held with strict enforcement of guidelines set by the Election Commission under which a voter was required to wear a hand glove and mask while pressing a button in the electronic voting machine to cast his vote.

"The polling in the by-election passed off peacefully", the chief electoral officer's office here said. "The by-election recorded 62 per cent polling. But, the polling percentage may rise further since people were still standing in line in a few booths to cast their votes", the office said.

BJP's Rahul Singh Lodhi, who had switched over to the saffron party from Congress around six months ago leading to the by-elections in the seat, is locked in a keen contest with Congress' Ajay Tondon in the constituency.

The bypoll hold significance for former chief minister Kamal Nath.

■ More on Page 3

Assam Cong rules out split, horse-trading in Opp. alliance

MANOJ ANAND
GUWAHATI, APRIL 17

Assam Congress on Saturday ruled out the possibility of any split or horse-trading in the grand alliance of Opposition which is confident to form the next government in Assam.

Clarifying that agenda of a meeting of Congress candidates here on Saturday was to prepare them for counting of votes, former leader of opposition in Assam assembly Debabrata Saikia told this newspaper that it was ruling BJP which is spreading news in the media about possible horse-trading in Congress led grand alliance. "We had a meeting of all the party candidates with AICC in-charge Jitendra Singh. The meeting reviewed its action plan for counting of votes. The candidates were told to select agents for the counting station and train them about the counting procedure."

Admitting that ruling BJP which is not going to get requisite seats to form the government may resort to horse-trading or any other

■ Turn to Page 4

SHORT TAKES

Jamia defers PhD entrance exams for rise in Covid cases

New Delhi: Jamia Millia Islamia (JMI) on Saturday announced it would postpone the PhD entrance tests in view of an unprecedented surge in coronavirus cases in the national capital. On Friday, Delhi recorded its highest-ever single-day Covid-19 figures as 19,486 cases and 141 deaths were reported, prompting chief minister Arvind Kejriwal to order setting up more coronavirus facilities and increase the strength of oxygen beds. On Thursday and Friday, the city had recorded 16,699 and 17,282 cases, respectively. According to a notice from JMI, the tests that were scheduled to be held on April 20, 22, 24, and April 26 will be held at a later date. "The Competent Authority, keeping in view of Covid-19 surge in Delhi and weekend Curfew imposed by Government of NCT of Delhi, has postponed the Ph.D. Entrance Tests which were earlier announced to be held on 20, 22, 24 and 26 of April 2021 till further orders," it said. On Wednesday, the university had announced it will postpone the exams for Classes 10 and 12 exams at JMI schools scheduled to be held from April 15 following the Central Board of Secondary Education's (CBSE) decision on Wednesday to cancel Class 10 exams and postpone Class 12 exams. — PTI

164 arrested for violations of curfew in Delhi

New Delhi: More than 360 cases have been registered and 164 people arrested for violations of the ongoing weekend curfew imposed by the Delhi government amid a surge in coronavirus cases, police said on Saturday. "On Saturday from 8 am to 8 pm, a total of 363 FIRs have been registered and 164 people were arrested," Delhi Police PRO Chinmoy Biswal said. Police said that 2,432 challans were issued to people for violations of the curfew. Over 1,900 people were booked for allegedly violating the night curfew. According to data shared by the police, 72 cases were registered from 10 pm on Friday to 5 am on Saturday. The police issued 283 challans to people for violating Covid-19 norms and 20 cases were registered under Epidemic Act or other laws. The order for night curfew will be in force till April 30. People engaged in certain professions have been exempted from the curfew. — PTI

Kejriwal gov't's plasma bank has failed: Congress

New Delhi: Delhi Pradesh Congress Committee (DPCC) president Anil Chaudhary on Saturday alleged that the plasma bank started by the Delhi government has "completely failed" in times of need. According to a statement released by the DPCC, Chaudhary said Delhi and central governments are proving to be "completely unsuccessful" in controlling the coronavirus. "Covid patients are not getting any help in this disaster. Today, when patients in Delhi are in need of plasma, they have to run from pillar to post," Chaudhary was quoted as saying. — PTI

Mercury dips after rain, maximum temperature 35°C

New Delhi: Delhi registered a significant drop in minimum and maximum temperatures on Saturday, a day after it received light rainfall, according to the India Meteorological Department (IMD). The maximum temperature dropped to 35 degrees Celsius from 40 degrees Celsius a day ago. It was two notches below the normal. The minimum temperature settled at 18.2 degrees Celsius, four degrees Celsius below the normal. The IMD said Delhi recorded 2.4 mm rainfall between 8:30 am on Friday and 8:30 am on Saturday. A strong dust storm had hit the national capital on Friday, affecting visibility and air quality. The mercury is predicted to remain below 40 degrees Celsius in the next five to six days, the IMD said. — PTI

■ Around 24,000 cases reported in Delhi ■ Situation 'very serious', shortage of oxygen, remdesivir: Kejriwal

Weekend curfew: Roads empty, markets shut

SUNIL THAPLIYAL & BHASKAR HARI SHARMA
NEW DELHI, APRIL 17

Roads, markets, buses and Metro trains remained largely empty on Saturday as the national capital, grappling with soaring Covid-19 cases, observed weekend curfew, with chief minister Arvind Kejriwal sending both an SOS and a warning.

The Covid-19 situation in Delhi has become "very serious and worrisome", and hospital beds, oxygen, remdesivir and tocilizumab for patients are in short supply, Mr Kejriwal said on Saturday.

The number of Covid-19 cases are rising rapidly with 24,000 fresh cases reported in the last 24 hours.

The chief minister said he spoke with Union health minister Harsh Vardhan and requested him for oxygen, remdesivir and tocilizumab.

The positivity rate in Delhi has reached 24 per cent — one in four of all people being tested are positive, he said.

"The situation is very serious and worrisome," Mr Kejriwal said. "Cases have gone up really fast. That is why we are facing shortages even though everything seemed under control until a few days ago. But the speed at which this corona is growing, no one knows where its peak will be," he added.

"Any health infrastructure has limitations. The government is trying its best to increase the number of beds. I hope that we will be able to add 6,000 more beds in the next two to four days," he said.

Delhi led major cities across India into a weekend lockdown Saturday as the country confronts a fierce new coronavirus wave, with more than 2.3 lakh fresh daily cases that has left many states struggling for drugs and hospital beds.

The country added another record 2.34 lakh cases on Saturday to pass 1.45 crore overall and 1,341 deaths took its pandemic total to 175,649 deaths.

■ MAJOR MARKETS, including Sadar Bazar, Chandni Chowk, Connaught Place, Khari Baoli, and Karol Bagh and industrial areas like Bawana, Narela, and Okhla, wore a deserted look during the day. However, there was exception near facilities like the LNJP Hospital, GTB Hospital, AIIMS, and ISBTs — Kashmere Gate, Anand Vihar, and Sarai Kale Khan — where people were seen taking the public transport.

Earlier Delhi Govt had announced to tie up of hospitals with hotels, so more beds become available.

Meanwhile the national capital came to a halt as the city grappling with soaring Covid-19 cases observed weekend curfew to break the chain of spiralling coronavirus infections. It clamped at 10 pm on Friday and will continue till 5 am on Monday. Roads, markets and buses across Delhi were largely empty from Saturday morning. Apart from essential service providers working in pharmacies, grocery shops, hospitals, some restaurants, police stations, and banks, majority of Delhi's residents appeared to have stayed at home.

Police Commissioner said, police are strictly enforcing weekend curfew. People who are out of their house unnecessarily are being prosecuted & cases being registered against them. "I appeal to people to respect weekend curfew and stay at home and not face any trouble," he said.

Major markets, including Sadar Bazar, Chandni Chowk, Connaught Place, Khari Baoli and Karol Bagh, and industrial areas like Bawana, Narela, Okhla, wore a deserted look during the day.

However, there was exception near facilities like the LNJP Hospital, GTB Hospital, AIIMS and ISBTs — Kashmiri Gate, Anand Vihar and Sarai



Connaught Place wears a deserted look during weekend curfew in New Delhi on Saturday. — G.N. Jha

Govt deputes babus in pvt Covid hospitals for better management

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, APRIL 17

Seeking better Covid-19 management, the Delhi government has deputed bureaucrats in private hospitals too in view of the raging pandemic in the city, officials said on Saturday. A total of 10 IAS officers have already been appointed nodal officers at various Covid hospitals of the Delhi government.

"About 15 DANICS officers have been posted in private hospitals across Delhi to handhold the management and oversee

adherence of all Covid measures," the health department said in a statement.

Also, 24 DANICS (Delhi, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Lakshadweep, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu Civil Service) probationers have been deployed in state government hospitals to assist the nodal IAS officers in overall general superintendence, it said.

The national capital has left financial capital Mumbai far behind in the daily tally of Covid-19 cases, with an exponential rise in numbers.

"To ensure better patient management and quick decision making, 10 IAS officers have been appointed as nodal officers for Delhi govt Covid Hospitals. Each officer shall be stationed at their respective hospital and ensure robust and effective public grievances system also," deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia tweeted on Friday.

The government hospitals include, LNJP Hospital, GTB Hospital, DDH Hospital, BSA Hospital, and SGM Hospital, according to the order.

Kale Khan, where people were seen taking the public transport.

Those going to inter-state bus terminals, airports and railway stations, have been exempted from the weekend curfew if they show valid tickets.

On Saturday, shops providing essential services, including pharmacies, grocery stores, food outlets and banks, remained open.

Food delivery service agents were also seen on the roads as the Delhi Disaster Management Authority has given permission to restaurants for home delivery services.

Chinmoy Biswal, Delhi Police PRO, said all the district deputy commissioners of police were on the ground to ensure the implementation of weekend curfew.

"The movement of essen-

tial goods and services is being facilitated. We have placed banners on pickets and outside the gates of the colonies to tell people about the curfew and asked them not to come outside their houses unnecessarily.

"We are also monitoring the Covid helpline and assisting people who are facing difficulty in getting movement pass," Biswal said.

Vaccines don't stop infection, but help in reducing severity: Health economist

New Delhi, April 17: Covid-19 vaccines do not stop one from getting infected but instead help in curing the disease faster and reducing its severity, said health and development economist Professor Anup Malani. He also said that reinfection can be one of the reasons behind the recent surge in cases in the country.

Malani, a professor at the University of Chicago Law School and the university's Pritzker School of Medicine, has been leading a series of Covid-19 serosurveys in cities and states across India with economic development-focused think-tank IDFC.

In an interview with PTI,

■ ANUP MALANI, a professor at the University of Chicago Law School and the university's Pritzker School of Medicine, has been leading a series of Covid-19 serosurveys in cities and states across India with economic development-focused think-tank IDFC

Malani said: "I fear this is the biggest misunderstanding around India and even in other countries today. Previous infection and vaccines do not stop you from being infected. That was never how immunity worked. Instead, natural and vaccine-acquired

immunity is helpful because it helps you clear the infection faster once you are infected." This has two benefits it helps you avoid death or other serious health harm from the infection, and it helps reduce the probability you will infect someone else. So it is possible to be reinfected, but the harms of the infection will be lower, he said.

The level of reinfection in the population depends on the prevalence of the infection and the prevalence of immunity, natural or vaccine acquired, Malani said. "The level of reinfection is driven up by more activity (like large gatherings), and

down by immunity rates. What may be going on in India is that activity recently increased at a faster rate than immunity. This is the most optimistic interpretation of the surge, he said.

Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) director general Balram Bhargava earlier this month had said that reinfection of cases are around one per cent.

Malani said there can be two possibilities behind the recent surge in cases, one is people are not wearing masks and gathering, and the other is emergence of new strains of the coronavirus. — PTI

Water supply to be affected for a week: DJB

New Delhi, April 17: The Delhi Jal Board (DJB) on Saturday said water supply in parts of the capital is likely to remain affected for a week due to "reduced availability" of raw water from the Upper Ganga Canal.

The water utility said the "production" capacity at Sonia Vihar and Bhagirathi water treatment plants was reduced by 25 per cent to 30 per cent.

"Water supply in areas of

East Delhi, Northeast Delhi, South Delhi and NDMC will remain affected in the evening... The situation may remain so for a week until the situation improves," it said.

Delhi gets 250 million gallons of raw water a day through the Upper Ganga Canal, officials said, adding around 200 million gallons a day (MGD) is being received at present.

On Wednesday, high ammonia concentration in the Yamuna and less

water in the river had affected the "production" capacity at Chandrawal and Wazirabad water treatment plants — which supply around 228 MGD drinking water to people in Delhi.

At present, ammonia concentration at the Wazirabad barrage is 3 parts per million (PPM), a DJB official said.

The Wazirabad and Chandrawal water treatment plants are supplying 184 MGD of drinking

water currently.

DJB vice chairman Raghav Chadha had on Wednesday written to the Haryana chief minister requesting him to address the issue of "short supply of raw water" and discharge of pollutants in the river from Haryana.

Industrial waste discharged into the drains in Haryana reaches Wazirabad barrage and pollutes the Yamuna downstream, he had said in the letter. — PTI

60 years of Russian space exploration celebrated

SRIDHAR KUMARASWAMI
NEW DELHI, APRIL 17

An event that took place 60 years ago still fires the imagination of the world as a milestone for humanity and is much celebrated globally by Russia at home and in foreign capitals, including New Delhi.

In April 1961, the erstwhile Soviet Union sent the first man into space in the first manned flight. The astronaut, Yuri Gagarin, became a global household name for posterity. The event had also

then highlighted the already-close ties between the Soviet Union and India, with Gagarin making a famous trip to India in November that year, meeting India's then prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru at a civic reception hosted in his honour at the Red Fort.

Even though the Soviet Union collapsed three decades ago, its successor state Russia continues to celebrate the momentous achievement. In India, a function was hosted earlier this week at the Russian Centre of Science and

Culture (RCSC) in New Delhi by RCSC director Fyodor A. Rozovsky to mark the milestone.

On April 12, 1961, Gagarin spent about 89 minutes in the five-ton satellite about 188 miles from earth. It also marked a triumph for the Soviet Union over its Cold War rival, the United States.

Ironically, even six decades later and much after the end of the Cold War, ties between the US and Russia still remain sour.

The Russian embassy's deputy chief of mission (DCM) in New Delhi,

Roman Babushkin, said that Gagarin's flight in 1961 was also the starting point of the Russian-Indian cooperation in a sphere of space exploration, which includes joint flights and joint work on navigation systems.

"Russia and India are closely cooperating in multilateral formats, primarily in the framework of the UN Committee on Outer Space, where we promote responsible behaviour to prevent arms race in outer space. This is also part of our agenda in BRICS, where we also work on the

initiative of remote satellite constellation," the Russian DCM added.

The Indian government had informed the Parliament earlier this year that as per India's Gaganyaan space project, the first unmanned mission is planned in December 2021 while the second unmanned flight is planned in 2022-23 followed by a human spaceflight demonstration.

The government said the chosen crew members are currently undergoing generic space flight training in Russia.

Red Fort case: After his bail, Deep Sidhu arrested again

New Delhi, April 17: The Delhi Police's Crime Branch arrested actor-activist Deep Sidhu on Saturday in connection with an FIR lodged by the Archaeological Survey of India for allegedly damaging public property during the farmers' tractor parade violence on Republic Day at Red Fort, officials said.

The arrest came after a Delhi court granted bail to the actor-activist, arrested on February 9 in connection with the Red Fort violence. Special Judge Neelefer Abida Perveen granted relief to the accused on Friday on a personal bond of ₹30,000 and two sureties of a like amount.

The court noted that the accused was in custody since February 9, 2021, with 14 days of remand in police custody. It said that a police plea for further incarceration for the sole purpose of voice sampling was not justifiable. — PTI



Deep Sidhu

SHORT TAKES

C'garh: Naxals kill panchayat secretary

Raipur: Suspected Maoists on Saturday brutally killed a local panchayat secretary in Chhattisgarh's south Bastar district of Narayanpur, police said. The body of Harak Choudhury, secretary of Pochwada gram panchayat under Orchha block in Narayanpur district was spotted near the culvert in the village of Rohtad by the local villagers. A Maoist pamphlet in which Naxals owned the responsibility of killing the panchayat secretary was found stuck in the body, police said. According to the police, the slain tribal had gone to Rohtad village under the gram panchayat in connection with some official works and was attacked by a group of Naxals armed with sharp weapons and sticks while he was returning to Pochwada in the morning. Maoists later threw the body near the culvert in the village of Rohtad.

'Won't end protest against farm laws'

Ghaziabad: Farmers can sacrifice their lives but will not end the protest against the farm laws, said BKU national president Naresh Tikait while accusing the Centre of extending a step-motherly treatment to them. Addressing a monthly mahapanchayat at the Delhi's Ghazipur border here, the BKU leader alleged that even after five months of protest by them, the government is not paying any heed to their demands. The government has thrown the matter in abeyance after saying that it is a phone call away, said the leader. The BJP-led Centre is working for capitalists, that is why it is extending a step-motherly treatment to the protesting farmers, he said, adding that the government should fulfil their demand of scrapping the three laws and give a written assurance on the MSP for crops. — PTI

Dog tied to scooter, dragged in Kerala

Malappuram: In yet another act of cruelty against canines in Kerala, a pet dog was tied to a two-wheeler and dragged along a road at Edakkara in Malappuram district on Saturday. Police have registered a case. A video of the incident has gone viral. The animal's agony came to an end after some people forcibly stopped the scooter in which two people were riding. The dog had some injuries on its legs, police said. The incident comes four months after a pet dog was tied to a car and dragged along the road in Kochi in December last year. The video of the incident, taken by an eyewitness, had gone viral following which police had arrested a man, who had driven the vehicle. — PTI

CBI TO APPROACH INTERPOL FOR RCN AGAINST MISHRA

New Delhi: The CBI is all set to approach the Interpol to get a 'Red Corner Notice' (RCN) issued against Bijay Mishra, brother of TMC leader Binay Mishra who is a close confidant of party MP Abhishek Banerjee, in a cattle smuggling case. Sources said, "The agency is expected to approach Interpol in this regard on Tuesday. The issue was recently discussed by the senior officials of the CBI at the agency headquarters here." A lookout notice has already been issued against absconding Mishra by the CBI. The agency has already questioned several senior officers of the Bengal police. "If required, the agency may question two more senior officials of state police. Besides, the role of three more state-level politicians is also under the scanner of the agency", sources said. The CBI named Binay Mishra as a co-accused in its supplementary chargesheet filed in the cattle-smuggling case in the month of February. Binay Mishra is believed to be very close to Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee's nephew, Abhishek Banerjee. In its chargesheet filed before a special CBI court in Bengal's Asansol, the agency had shown Binay Mishra as absconding. On February 18, the CBI filed a chargesheet in the case against Border Security Force (BSF) Commandant Satish Kumar and six others for their alleged involvement in a cattle-smuggling racket operating at the India-Bangladesh border.

■ Sporadic incidents of clashes between TMC and BJP supporters were reported from some parts of state

Bengal polls: Over 78% voter turnout in 5th phase

RAJIB CHOWDHURI
KOLKATA, APRIL 17

The fifth phase of the Assembly Election covering 45 seats in six districts of West Bengal recorded 78.36% voters turnout on Saturday amid sporadic incidents of violence during which a Trinamul Congress worker was shot at in an attack allegedly by the BJP activists in Nadia.

Till the reports last came till 5 pm, while Jalpaiguri, Kalimpong and Darjeeling of North Bengal reported 81.73%, 69.56% and 74.31% polling respectively, Nadia, North 24 Parganas and Burdwan East in South Bengal clocked 81.57%, 74.83% and 81.72% polling serially. A revised figure is expected from the Election Commission on Sunday.

In North 24 Parganas, 16 seats that went to the polls included Dum Dum, Bidhannagar (Salt Lake), Kamarhati and Rajarhat New Town. Though the EC described the fifth phase as "peaceful," incidents of attacks and counter-attacks between the ruling TMC and BJP workers took place at various places in the three South Bengal districts.

At Santipur in Nadia, a TMC worker, Santu Baul, was shot at when he was returning home after casting his vote. He suffered bullet injuries on his left hand. The ruling party

blamed the BJP for the shooting. Its workers however clashed with the BJP workers at Gayeshpur, hurled bombs and attacked their homes. Chaitanya Acharya, a BJP worker, was injured.

At Kamarhati where former TMC minister Madan Mitra contested, his rival candidate Raju Banerjee of the BJP claimed that his car was attacked by TMC workers in Belghoria. Mr Mitra however fell ill after supervising the polls amid heat in the constituency throughout the day. In the morning allegations surfaced against the central paramilitary forces of opening

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Women shows their Voter ID card as they stand in a queue to cast their vote at a polling station during 5th phase of state Assembly election at Salt Lake in Kolkata on Saturday. — PTI

Didi blames EC of scuttling her Assembly poll campaign

AGE CORRESPONDENT
KOLKATA, APRIL 17

West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee, on Saturday, blamed the Election Commission (EC) of scuttling her Assembly poll campaign, at the behest of the BJP, by curtailing the daily campaign time from 7.00 pm to 10.00 am and extending the silence period from 48 hours to 72 hours for the remaining three phases in the wake of a massive spike in Covid-19 cases in its fresh wave in the state.

The TMC supreme told the EC at a party rally in Galsi of Burdwan East, "You are working according to the wishes of the BJP. If anything big happens, you will be responsible. Already two candidates have died at two seats in Murshidabad where we won earlier. Though they belonged to two different parties, I feel sad for them because I do not want any death." "You deliberately curtailed the campaign period, at a time when Prime Minister Narendra Modi



West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee during an election campaign rally at Galsi in Purba Bardhaman district on Saturday. — ASIAN AGE

and Union home minister Amit Shah did not have their rallies, to stop me," she added.

Tearing into the Central poll panel, she also claimed, "As the remaining phases include urban areas like Kolkata, we will not be able to campaign because the door-to-door campaign is held in the day time while rallies are held in the evening there."

Ms Banerjee alleged, "We wanted the remain-

ing poll phases to be clubbed so that people do not get infected. But it was not done. Instead, the time for campaign has been curtailed. Why? When the areas under the control of BJP—though they will not win there this time—went to polls, eight-to-ten days were given to them. But now the silence period has also been increased in all the remaining phases. We lost four days of our campaign in total."

EU pulls up India on rights abuses

'CAA is discriminatory in nature against Muslims & dangerously divisive'

SRIDHAR KUMARASWAMI
NEW DELHI, APRIL 17

In a shocker for India just days after a bilateral human rights dialogue with the European Union (EU), the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament, by an overwhelming majority vote of 61 out of 71, "expressed concern over the deteriorating human rights situation in India" including reports that "human rights defenders and journalists in the country lack a safe working environment" and "concerns about the difficult situation faced by Indian women and minority groups and caste-based discrimination."

The committee's recom-

mendations also mentioned reports that "voice alarm regarding India's CAA" and "expressed concern over the deteriorating relationship between India and China, and the role of China's expansive policy and substantial military build-up in the area."

These were part of a "set of recommendations for the European Union on improving its bilateral partnership with India in view of the upcoming EU-India Leaders' meeting" in Portugal on May 8, which is expected to be attended by the PM Modi.

The EU Committee "highlighted India's rising regional and

geopolitical influence, as the country has strengthened its position as an economic and military power and rapidly grown as an important trading partner for the EU." It called for "improving and deepening the EU's relationship with India as a strategic partner." It "also expressed concern at the deteriorating relationship between India and China, and the role of China's expansive policy and substantial military build-up in the area."

These were part of a "set of recommendations for the European Union on improving its bilateral partnership with India in view of the upcoming EU-India Leaders' meeting" in Portugal on May 8, which is expected to be attended by the PM Modi.

The text "was approved by 61 votes in favour, 6 votes against, with 4 abstentions," a statement put up on the EU website said. The "report will now be submitted to a vote in the European Parliament as a whole in plenary."

This comes after India and the EU held their ninth bilateral human rights dialogue earlier this week on April 12 in the national capital during which both sides had "exchanged views on strengthening human rights, including in social, economic, and cultural spheres" and "discussed civil and political rights, freedom of religion or belief, women empowerment, children's rights, rights of minorities and vulnerable groups."

35-year-old man held for passing sensitive info

New Delhi, April 17: The Delhi Police has arrested a 35-year-old man for allegedly passing sensitive information about Army deployment to a foreign intelligence agency, officials said on Saturday. The accused has been identified as Harpal Singh, a resident of Tarn Taran in Punjab, they said. "A highly motivated and radicalised man was arrested for passing sensitive information to foreign intelligence agency. He conveyed details related to Indian Army personnel, Army movements, location of Army and BSF posts and bunkers on the outskirts of India at India-Pakistan border," a senior police officer said. — PTI

Bypolls held for 2 Lok Sabha, 12 Assembly seats

New Delhi, April 17: Bypolls were held for two parliamentary constituencies in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka and 12 Assembly seats spread across 10 states on Saturday.

The by-election in Pipili Assembly seat in Odisha was adjourned following the death of Congress candidate Ajit Mangaraj due to Covid on Wednesday. In Nagaland, only one candidate H. Chuba Chang of the Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) had filed nomination for the bypoll to the Noksen assembly constituency and was elected unopposed, the Election Commission said.

In Andhra Pradesh, about 60-64 per cent turnout was recorded in the bypoll to the Tirupati(SC) Lok Sabha constituency. Opposition Telugu Desam, BJP and Congress demanded that the bypoll be cancelled forthwith, alleging that the ruling YSR Congress instigated bogus voting on a large scale, particularly in the temple town Tirupati.

SHORT TAKES

ASSAM DIST WITH 100 CASES CAN SHUT SCHOOLS

MANOJ ANAND
GUWAHATI, APRIL 17

Assam minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on Saturday said that they have authorised the district administration to suspend the elementary class education in the schools in respective districts where more than 100 Covid positive cases are reported. Informing that district administration would be taking the decision independently, Mr Sarma also appealed to all eligible people to get themselves vaccinated as the state has a vaccine stock of over five lakh doses and another one lakh is expected to arrive soon. Pointing out that the state health department had to rationalise the vaccination programme after stocks started dwindling in the absence of arrival of more vaccine doses, the minister said that they have also decided to go for vaccination in all the schools so that teachers and employees eligible for vaccine could be vaccinated. Assam has vaccinated 15,55,461 people so far out of which 2,77,594 have had their second dose while 12,77,867 have been given their first dose.

Assam Cong rules out split

■ **Continued from Page 1**
tactics to muster majority after the counting of votes, Mr Saikia said, "Assam Congress does not have any 'horse' now which could be traded. All the tradeable 'hoarse' sold themselves out to BJP long back."

Mr Saikia, who is the son of former Assam chief minister Hiteswar Saikia and also instrumental in the signing of the Assam Accord, said that his party would do well as in the first phase of polling which was crucial, the BJP's communal agenda did not work. "The BJP's divide and rule policy did not work. The last time we had performed very badly in Upper Assam because of the BJP's divisive agenda. But it has failed this time since the people of Assam want to live in harmony. The trick of polarising the voters on communal lines did not work so we are confident to march ahead to form the next government," said Mr Saikia who is also one of the frontrunners for the top post of chief minister in case the Congress comes to power.

Outright rejecting the chances of any split in the Congress-led grand alliance in a post-counting scenario, Mr Saikia said that the grand alliance came into existence to become the voice of anti-BJP sentiments. "The leaders of all the constituents of the grand alliance have read the mood of the voters at the grassroots. In case of any elected leader going against the people's sentiment would cost them dearly," said Mr Saikia, who also clarified that he was not aware of his party booking rooms in star hotels or resort at Tezpur to keep the candidates of northern Assam in confinement beside defending them from any possible horse-trading.

States complain

■ **Continued from Page 1**
the infection, and also conveyed his appreciation for their cooperation with the local administration. "I prayed that two 'shahi snan' have taken place and Kumbh (participation) should now be kept symbolic. This will boost the fight against this crisis," the Prime Minister tweeted in Hindi.

Responding to Mr Modi's call, Avdheshanand urged people to not come to the Kumbh mela for bathing in large numbers due to the Covid-19 situation and to follow the rules.

The ongoing Kumbh, which has seen people from different parts of the country attending in large numbers, has drawn flak from various quarters as the number of Covid-19 cases have zoomed at a rapid pace in the past few weeks. The event has also reported the coronavirus cases in large numbers.

On Saturday evening, Mr Modi reviewed the availability and supply of ventilators, oxygen and medicines to fight the pandemic and called for utilising the entire national capacity across private and public sectors to produce vaccines, amid concerns in various states about lack of these essentials.

At the meeting to review the status of preparedness to handle the Covid-19 situation, Mr Modi said local administrations needed to be proactive and sen-

Maha, Centre trade barbs over oxygen, Remdesivir

Uddhav needs to stop his daily dose of shameless politics: Goyal

BHAGWAN PARAB
MUMBAI, APRIL 17

Union health minister Harsh Vardhan has assured Maharashtra of an adequate and uninterrupted supply of medical oxygen and other resources during the pandemic. The assurance came after Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray's claim that he had contacted the Prime Minister's Office to inform about the acute shortage of oxygen and Remdesivir, but was told that the PM is in Bengal for the election campaign. Union minister Piyush Goyal hit out against the Maharashtra CM and said he should "stop his daily dose of shameless politics and take responsibility".

"Spoke to #Maharashtra CM Sh Uddhav Thackeray Ji. Reassured



BKC Covid-19 vaccination centre was closed due shortage of vaccine in Mumbai on Saturday. — PTI

@OfficeofUT of adequate & uninterrupted supply of medical oxygen & all possible support w.r.t health-care infra, medicines & therapeutics. Additional 1,121 ventilators are also being rushed to them given the surge in cases," the health minister said. Dr Vardhan added that

he held discussions with Mr Thackeray's office to discuss stringent action to be taken for containment, surveillance and treatment of Covid-19 cases in the state.

Maharashtra has been the worst coronavirus-affected state in the country with Saturday record-

ing 67,123 cases and 419 deaths due to Covid-19. The state has recorded 37.70 lakh coronavirus cases and 59,970 deaths so far.

Earlier, state's minority affairs minister Nawab Malik had accused PM Modi of being busy in elections while "people are dying." He claimed that Mr Thackeray tried the PM over the shortage of oxygen and Remdesivir, a drug for Covid-19 treatment, but was told he was on a visit to West Bengal.

However, Mr Goyal refuted the allegations saying Maharashtra has received the highest quantity of oxygen in the country. "Saddened to see @OfficeOfUT's gimmicks on oxygen. GoI, with all stakeholders, is ensuring maximum oxygen production in India..." Mr Goyal tweeted.

Remdesivir stolen from MP hospital

AGE CORRESPONDENT
BHOPAL, APRIL 17

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

The incident came to light when the medical officers found the iron gate of the storeroom of the government-run Hamidia hospital here cut open and some boxes containing vials of Remdesivir missing in the morning. "The matter was immediately reported to the police", hospital superintendent I.D. Chourasia said.

Incidentally, this was the first incident of theft of life saving drugs.

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, APRIL 17

The Congress Working Committee (CWC) lashed out at the Central government over the handling of the Covid-19 fallout. In an online meeting on Saturday, the apex body accused the Centre of "colossal mismanagement" in the war against the Covid pandemic and cautioned of an "unprecedented catastrophe" unless urgent corrective measures are taken.

Congress president Sonia Gandhi said India has "regrettably been caught off guard again despite a year to prepare". She accused the Modi government of "gross unpreparedness" and "ad hocism" in managing the crisis and suggested reducing the immunisation age to 25 years and providing income support to people. She targeted the government over the shortage of vaccines, medicines, hospital beds and medical oxy-



Sonia Gandhi

gen. "It is deeply concerning to read news reports of acute shortages of medical equipment and hospital beds. Reports from across the country speak of the scarcity of Covid-19 vaccine as also of life-saving drugs, including Remdesivir," she said.

Lashing out at Prime Minister Narendra Modi she added, "I have written to the Prime Minister after meeting with Congress CMs. Our CMs have spoken to the him and written to the concerned minister from time to time pleading for relief. Some of them were left with only a few days of

vaccine, no oxygen or ventilators. But there has been thundering silence on the part of the government. On the contrary, some other states have received preferential treatment or relief."

Attacking the vaccine Maitri programme she said that considering the highest infection rate in our country vaccine export should have been held back for our citizens. She added that the government instead of listening to constructive suggestions by the Opposition is ridiculing them. This was in reference to opening up the permissions for foreign vaccines.

Mrs Gandhi said that the Congress has extended hands of cooperation since February-March last year. "We cannot, however, lose sight of the fact that the second wave of the pandemic has hit the country with fury. Despite a year to prepare, we have, regrettably, been caught off guard again," she said.

5 dead as fire breaks out in Covid hospital

RABINDRA NATH
CHOUDHURY
RAIPUR, APRIL 17

Fire broke out in an intensive care unit of a private Covid hospital here, killing five patients. While one Covid patient succumbed to burn injuries, the other three died when the mishap rendered the oxygen supply system dysfunctional.

The fire was caused by a short-circuit, preliminary probe suggested.

Relatives of the patients were seen breaking the glass win-

dows to enter the wards to rescue the patients.

Many patients were brought outside the hospital and administered oxygen. Later, they were shifted to different hospitals in the city.

Chhattisgarh chief minister Bhupesh Baghel expressed shock and grief over the tragic incident and announced financial assistance of ₹4 lakh each to the next kin of the deceased.

Around 30 Covid-19 patients were undergoing treatment in the hospital when the incident took place, police said.

Withdraw ads inviting people to Kumbh: PIL

PARNOD KUMAR
NEW DELHI, APRIL 17

The Supreme Court has been moved seeking direction to the Centre and the Uttarakhand government to withdraw advertisements inviting people to Haridwar for Kumbh as a large gathering in the wake of the surge in Covid cases is inconsistent with the Covid guidelines and regulations.

A PIL by advocate Sanjay Kumar Pathak has also sought direction to the Election Commission to strictly enforce the Covid guidelines against the candidates, campaigners and public in West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Puducherry, and Assam currently in the midst of assembly elections. It has sought action against the violators of guidelines.

The PIL has sought direction to the Centre and the Uttarakhand government to immediately withdraw all the advertisements inviting people to Haridwar for Kumbh and to clear the existing mass gathering from Haridwar city as soon as possible.

It has also sought to put in place safety protocol for the people returning to their homes from Kumbh. It has sought direction to the EC to identify the violators of Covid 19 guidelines during the electioneering and to take action against them.

US decision to withdraw troops a 'big step': Jaishankar
India will stand with Afghan: MEA

New Delhi, April 17: External affairs minister S. Jaishankar on Saturday conveyed to his Afghan counterpart Mohammad Hanif Atmar that India will always stand with the people of Afghanistan.

Mr Jaishankar said the role of neighbours in the Afghan peace process figured in his conversation with Mr Atmar.

In the telephonic talk, the two foreign ministers discussed the evolving situation in Afghanistan following the announcement by the US to withdraw its forces from the conflict-ridden country by September 11.

In a tweet, Mr Jaishankar described his conversation with Atmar as "good".



Jaishankar

■ **INDIA HAS** been a major stakeholder in the peace and stability in Afghanistan. It has already invested \$2bn in aid and reconstruction activities.

■ **THE US HAS** lost more than 2,000 personnel since 2001 in the war that was triggered by the terror attacks carried out by al-Qaeda

"Good conversation with FM @MHaneefAtmar of Afghanistan on recent developments. Discussed the role of neighbours in the Afghan peace process. As always, India will stand with the people of Afghanistan," he said.

In an address at the Raisina Dialogue on Friday, Mr Jaishankar described the US decision as a "big step" and said it is going to take

Afghanistan in a certain direction and that it would be important for the stakeholders to work together to ensure that the direction is the right one.

In a significant announcement, US President Joe Biden on Wednesday said American troops will leave Afghanistan by September 11 that would coincide with the 20th anniversary of the 9/11

terror attacks on the US in 2001.

The US has lost more than 2,000 personnel since 2001 in the war that was triggered by the terror attacks carried out by al-Qaeda. There have been renewed global efforts to bring lasting peace to Afghanistan.

Russia recently organised a conference in Moscow where all major stakeholders were invited to brainstorm over ways to move forward in the peace process.

India has been a major stakeholder in the peace and stability in Afghanistan. It has already invested \$2 billion in aid and reconstruction activities in the country.

— PTI

Modi, Mamata battle..

■ **Continued from Page 1**

victims' bodies. Didi, to what extent will you go to votebank? Fact is that she thought to get 'siyasi faida' out of the deaths. Playing politics over dead bodies is an old habit of Didi."

His attack on the CM came after a BJP delegation lodged a complaint with West Bengal Chief Electoral Officer, Ariz Aftab, against the TMC chief on the audio tape on Saturday morning.

Slamming Mr Modi, Ms Banerjee told him from her rally at Katwa in Burdwan East, "When the PM says people have understood everything after hearing the audio tape on Friday, it means he is giving encouragement. He mentioned that. Then it means you, as the PM, intercepted my phone. Don't you feel ashamed of intercepting a CM's phone? You resign as the PM before showing your face to the people again."

She also alleged, "If you have not done it, how could you give it a clean chit? Privacy cannot be invaded, according to a Supreme Court verdict. I have already entrusted the CID to probe who did it. I had said nothing wrong. So many youths were killed. How could I visit an area on the day of its polling? I would have been an outsider who is not allowed since I am not a voter of Coochbehar though I can visit elsewhere. So I asked for the bodies to be kept. This is true."

Ms Banerjee claimed, "Later I

planned to visit Shitalkuchi. All arrangements were done. But the Election Commission imposed a 72-hour ban on visit there. Isn't it true? I want to know from you. If you have any shame, you will apologise after replying. You will also not be spared from facing the probe. You have to explain. Don't forget that. We honour the PM chair irrespective of our dislike about you. You are insulting the chair."

Earlier the TMC chief told another rally in Galsi of the same district, "BJP has no issue to talk about, forget development. It is now tapping the conversation I am having with someone. That means all of your phones are also tapped. Do you understand it? The central government is even tapping your phones to know what you are cooking at home. It is a great scam."

She added, "I feel that truth should be out after the CID inquiry. I want to know who tapped my phone. I will not spare anyone. Many FIRs have been lodged. The BJP publicised it unitedly which means a guilty mind is always suspicious. BJP has done it with the help of the central paramilitary forces and your brokers. I will certainly find it out. I have already come to know who all are involved in this game. Do you think I will spare you?"

The PM and the CM also traded charges about the prosecution in the cases of violence against women and attacks on SC/ST in the state among other issues.

78.36% turnout amid rising cases

■ **Continued from Page 1**

reasons for their claim that "SARS-CoV-2 is transmitted primarily by the airborne route." However, this particular claim by researchers is yet to be endorsed by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Experts maintained that the impact of this gross violation and disregard of Covid protocol would be felt across the state after the election results on May 2.

Doctors' appeal to put "people before power" seems to have fallen on deaf ears as the big guns of the BJP, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home minister Amit Shah, continue holding public rallies.

On Saturday, Mr Modi urged people to turn up in large numbers, especially first-time voters, to exercise their franchise for the fifth phase of Bengal polls. "Urging all those voting in today's fifth phase of the West Bengal election to vote in large numbers. First-time voters, in particular, should exercise their franchise," Mr Modi tweeted.

It may be recalled that the Election Commission has refused to club the remaining phases of Bengal elections and hold polling for them all together.

Reports from the state indicate that Congress candidate

from Samserganj, Rezau Haque, died after he tested Covid positive and RSP candidate from Jangipur, Pradip Nandi, TMC candidate from Galpokhar, Golam Rabbani have tested positive.

Regardless of the deaths and spikes, there's complete apathy among leaders cutting across party lines. Be it Sanyukta Morcha, TMC or BJP, politics over dead bodies is reigning supreme.

An on the spot review of rallies carried out by an English daily in Bengal showed that people attending rallies were not wearing masks. Even leaders on the stage could be seen without masks and there was no social distancing either on the stage or on the ground.

Political leaders, be it Mamata Banerjee, Rahul Gandhi, BJP heavyweights - none have even bothered to make any arrangements to ensure Covid protocols are followed at the rallies.

On Tuesday at Jamui in East Burdwan, BJP supporters were quoted as saying, "The coronavirus has gone. There has not been a single case in these areas since last year."

Speaking to a TV channel, a BJP leader, Shubra Chatterjee, when asked about

clubbing remaining election phases, said, "Threat of violence in Bengal is as great as Covid cases."

Leaders keep hemming and hawing when asked about rallies, road-shows amidst raging Covid cases.

BJP's Chandra Kumar Bose said, "It is difficult to conduct rallies where you can follow social distancing." He then assures, "But most of us wear masks."

Ananya Chakraborty of TMC avoids the question and attacks the Prime Minister instead. "Before the elections, the chief minister (Mamata Banerjee) asked for an adequate number of vaccines, so that all those above 18 years of age could get vaccinated. The Centre paid no heed to our request."

Ms Banerjee on the other hand linked the spike of the covid cases to "BJP people coming to Bengal from worst-hit states like Gujarat." In fact, she's trying to make Covid surge as her election plan. "Do not spread coronavirus in Bengal Narendra Modi!... Your party is bringing in people from Gujarat and Rajasthan for erecting stages and doing other works for BJP rallies. These outsiders are spreading Covid in Bengal," she said at a public rally on Thursday.

THE ASIAN AGE

18 APRIL 2021



Ranjona Banerji
Off the beaten track

Being a sport! The story of my fitness journey

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Let my fingers do the walking?

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

Subhani



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



Pavan K. Varma
Chanakya’s View

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LETTERS

MEA MUST STEP IN

It is reported that 57 per cent of India is under curbs due to the second wave of Covid-19 with the number of deaths soaring by the day. The government plans to step up vaccine output to 10 times by September but by then it may be too late. The Serum Institute of India CEO, Adar Poonawalla has urged US President Joe Biden to lift the embargo on export of raw materials needed to ramp up production of the Covid-19 vaccines Covishield and Bharat Biotech’s Covaxin. The ministry of external affairs must step in and make a fresh diplomatic effort to obtain a positive response to his request.

M.C. Joshi
Lucknow

GLASS HOUSES

WHEN THE HOME MINISTER observes that the poor people of Bangladesh come to India as they don’t have enough to eat in their own country, then it must be equally credible that India has neither good institutions for higher studies nor research, with Indians in their thousands flocking the United States. Or that while we create babus and not administrators here, Indians occupy top posts in the Joe Biden administration. At the lower end, our economy creates no jobs even when millions of our skilled artisans are welcomed abroad. That said, introspection and a measured tongue is alien to our politicians.

R. Narayanan
Navi Mumbai

TIME ON NIRAV SIDE

THOUGH THE extradition of Nirav Modi has been sanctioned by the UK government, it does not mean that the fugitive diamondaire will be brought to India soon. As a last ditch effort to delay the inevitable, he may appeal to the Lord Chancellor, or, petition the Crown itself for mercy, or for grant of political asylum in Britain; citing maltreatment of economic offenders in India and so-called sub-human conditions in Indian jails. Even if he is brought to India to stand trial in a fast track court, the entire process is bound to start from the square one. Hearings are going to consume many years and by the time the final verdict is delivered, he will have enjoyed a long respite.

Arun Malankar
Mumbai

RIP, VIVEKH

THE PASSING AWAY of Tamil actor and comedian, Padma Shri awardee, Vivekh (59) today (April 17) at a private hospital in Chennai due to massive cardiac arrest is shocking. After taking the first dose of the Covid-19 vaccine the previous day, he met the media and urged everyone eligible to get vaccinated soon. He was an admirer of Swami Vivekananda and APJ Abdul Kalam. Based on Kalam’s advice, Vivekh had planted 30 lakh trees so far in Tamil Nadu. He is best remembered for his role in Balachander’s *Pudhu Pudhu Arthangal* (1989), wherein he played the hero’s manager, *Kadhal Mannan* (1998) and *Anniyan* (2005). He was 59. RIP.

Sankar Paul
Chakdaha, West Bengal

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

Anita Katyal
Political
Gup-Shup



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

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

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

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

be his stronghold.

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

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

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

known about its report.

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

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist

OUR CRITIC'S RATING

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

Watch it for Ghaywan and Konkona

Ajeeb Daastaans

CAST: Fatima Sana Shaikh, Jaideep Ahlawat, Armaan Ralham, Nushratt Bharuccha, Abhishek Banerjee, Konkana Sen Sharma, Aditi Rao Hydari, Shefali Shah, Manav Kaul**DIRECTOR:** Shashank Khaitan, Raj Mehta, Neeraj Ghaywan, Kayoze Irani**RATING:** ★★★

Releases on Netflix

SUPARNA SHARMA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"*Ajeeb-ajeeb log hote hain aur bad-boo bhi aati hai*," Priya says in a friendly banter to



Bharti, inviting her to share her tiffin at her desk and not on the factory floor, thinking Bharti is one of her. Bharti's reaction to Priya's casually racist remarks, prejudices is not visible on her face, but her body registers it as a hole in her armour.

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

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

Ajeeb *Daastaans*, which explores women's desire through all its stories and lets them come up for air for a bit before

pulling them down again, begins with *Majnu*, a story about a husband wife

trapped in a loveless marriage.

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

Lepakshi's frustration coils around her everyday and she grabs every opportunity to humiliate Babloo and get some jollies for herself.

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

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

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

Meenal (Nushratt Bharuccha) is a young, sexy maid who dotes on her little sister

Binny (Inayat Verma). Sushil (Abhishek Banerjee) the istri-walla loves Meenal and Binny but has no power and bristles everytime injustice accosts him.

Meenal has a clear worldview — she knows what her place is in this world organised by caste and class. She knows she has no power except guile and the fact that she is very attractive. She uses both to curry small favours.

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

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

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



Vivekh cremated with police honors

ANUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN

The untimely death of popular actor and social activist Vivekh at the age of 59 on Saturday after he suffered a massive heart attack left the Tamil film fraternity and fans in deep grief. Vivekh breathed his last at 4.35 am. He was cremated with police honours at the electric crematorium in Mettukuppam this evening.

The actor, a Padma Shri recipient and who has acted in over 200 films with top Tamil heroes, is known for his work on social issues and the environmental protection front. He actively campaigned and involved himself in planting saplings and afforestation. He also collaborated with the government in disseminating significant social awareness messages to the public on TV including the latest on preventing coronavirus spread. It was heart-wrenching to note that his tweets, which he had posted to condole Abdul Kalam's death, going viral. The post of Vivekh, which is in Tamil, roughly translates as, "A simple, selfless and clean life too will end someday. However, many die away! But only few will live on even after death". An admirer of late president A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, he was actively engaged in planting one crore tree saplings through his Green Kalam initiative. Prime Minister Modi, chief minister K. Palaniswami, DMK president M.K. Stalin, actor Rajinikanth, Makkal Needhi Maiam leader Kamal Haasan were among those who expressed shock and grief over his death and conveyed their condolences to the bereaved.

On Friday morning, an unconscious Vivekh was brought to the SIMS hospital in Chennai. He reportedly suffered a cardiac arrest due to a 100 per cent blockage in the heart vessel. The hospital said in a statement that the actor was revived and underwent an emergency coronary angiogram followed by angioplasty. He was then put on Extracorporeal Membrane Oxygenation (ECMO) support at the intensive care unit. Dr Raju Sivasamy, vice president of SIMS hospital, said Vivekh's condition was not related to the vaccine he took on Thursday. "He suffered an acute coronary syndrome with cardiogenic shock. This is a separate cardiac event. It may not be due to Covid vaccination." He also confirmed that he was not infected with the deadly virus. Vivekh is survived by his wife Arulselvi and two daughters Amrithanandini and Tejaswini.

In a special league of dreary, bad films

The Big Bull

CAST: Abhishek Bachchan, Ileana D'Cruz, Sohumi Shah, Nikita Dutta, Saurabh Shukla, Samir Soni, Mahesh Manjrekar, Ram Kapoor**DIRECTOR:** Kookie Gulati**RATING:** ★

Streaming on Disney + Hotstar

SUPARNA SHARMA

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

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

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

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

films which are bad in ways that many other previous films have been bad.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



wanted a well-settled son-in-law.

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

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

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

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

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

The film, neither clear nor really interested in what actually happened, tells us Harshad Mehta's story in the sort of sketchy way that the arts student would try to fill up the answer-sheet — with gibberish, throwing in some "economics sounding" words at random.

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

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

This is insider trading and Mannu

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

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

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

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

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

Half-naked office employees covering their man-boobs as Hemant stares down at them with a sulky pout is, perhaps, when the film hits the high note of absurdity.

Kookie & Co seem incapable of taking facts and then turning them into a screenplay. If they were capable of doing that they would have just binge-watched *Hansal Mehta's Scam 1992*. They probably did watch it and decided it was all too much and that they'd rather go with a bullshit story and hero's pointless bluster.

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

entirely his own.

Chota Bachchan is all goodness, warmth and decency. So much so that when he tries to be evil or creepy, he has to ham it.

The film gives Abhishek a shitty start — a pouty, pretentious pose in a nightgown — that seals his character's fate and tells us that we should not expect acting, just posturing.

The film is also confused between its love for Abhishek and the story it wants to tell. While *The Big Bull* wants to show Abhishek as a good guy, a "dreamer" who helped many people make money, the story of Hemant — a manipulator of people and money who had little regard for rules — keeps peeing on its party.

So the film can only muster the courage to make its star sit with a manspread and thrust his stomach out to convey indecency and greed. Sometimes it also makes him laugh out loud, without any reason or explanation.

Usually, even in bad films, there are actors who can act. No such luck here.

Sohumi Shah is a decent actor but he has been given nothing here except to be the voice of nagging worry.

Supriya Pathak has spent so much time in the world of Tarak Mehta Ka Ulta Chashma and Khichdi that she now seems incapable of doing anything else.

Ileana D'Cruz has mastered the art of speaking without letting her lips move. Despite that she is not bad. It says a lot about a film and its actors if Ms D'Cruz is the one redeeming thing that comes to mind.

IN BRIEF

Natanz attack suspect named

Tehran, April 17: (AP) Iran state television has named a suspect in the attack that damaged centrifuges at its Natanz nuclear site and says he fled the country. The report Saturday named the suspect as Reza Karimi. It showed a passport-style photograph of a man it identified as Karimi. The report also aired what appeared to be an Interpol "red notice" seeking his arrest. The arrest notice was not immediately accessible on Interpol's public-facing database. Interpol, based in Lyon, France, did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The attack Sunday, suspected to have been carried out by Israel, has inflamed a shadow war between the two nations.

Raul Castro steps down

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

Russia detains Ukrainian consul

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

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

Worldwide Covid death toll tops a staggering 3 million

True number is higher because of possible government concealment

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

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

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

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

Worldwide, deaths are running at over 12,000 per day on average and new cases at more than 700,000 a day. The US toll alone is over 560,000, accounting for more than 1 in 6 of the world's Covid-19 deaths. The US is followed by Brazil, Mexico, India and Britain. This month, the US recommended a pause in the use of Johnson & Johnson's vaccine while authorities investigate blood clots.

—PTI



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

—AP

USTR discusses TRIPS waiver proposal

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

In the virtual meeting with Berkley on Friday, Tai discussed increasing vaccine production, global health issues and the proposed waiver of certain provisions of the World Trade Organisation Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) for Covid-19 pandemic, the USTR said in a statement.

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

Tai expressed her appreciation for the important role GAVI has played in securing and distributing vaccines for developing countries through COVAX and other initiatives, it said.

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

She also welcomed Berkley's views on how to accelerate the rollout and distribution of vaccines to developing countries, the USTR said.

The virtual meeting comes ahead of a May 5 meeting of the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) General Council which is likely to discuss a proposal on the matter by

India and South Africa.

A day earlier, 10 Democratic senators sent a letter to President Joe Biden urging him to publicly support a temporary patent waiver for Covid-19 vaccines that would allow countries to manufacture treatments locally, expediting the global vaccination effort, saving countless lives and crushing the pandemic.

The proposal to temporarily waive the WTO's intellectual property rules was put forward by India and South Africa in October.

—PTI

Afghanistan: US may up troops before recall

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

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

But he said it's logical to assume that you may need some logistics help, maybe some engineering help, you may have to add some force protection capabilities again temporarily just to make sure that the drawdown goes in a safe, orderly and effective way. Biden announced Wednesday that the US will pull all of its more than 2,500 troops out of Afghanistan by Sep. 11.

NATO announced it would follow the same timetable for withdrawing

more than 7,000 allied forces. The president's decision defies a May 1 withdrawal deadline that was agreed to by the Trump administration as part of a peace agreement with the Taliban. Instead, Biden said that the US withdrawal would begin on May 1.

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

The Taliban has warned that it will retaliate if the US does not abide by the Trump administration's agreement.

And those threats are a key concern for the Pentagon as it tries to safely move troops and likely millions of dollars in equipment out of the country.

—AP

\$1.7B US network to track virus variants

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

White House officials unveiled a strategy that features three components: A major funding boost for the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and state health departments to ramp up coronavirus gene-mapping; the cre-

ation of six centres of excellence partnerships with universities to conduct research and develop technologies for gene-based surveillance of pathogens, and building a data system to better share and analyse information on emerging disease threats, so knowledge can be turned into action. Even as we accelerate our efforts to get shots into arms, more dangerous variants are growing, causing increases in cases in people with under immunity, White House coronavirus adviser Andy Slavitt said.

—AP

GAMES

SHORT TAKES

Sports Minister Rijiju is Covid +ve

New Delhi: Sports Minister Kiren Rijiju on Saturday said that he has tested positive for Covid-19 but is feeling "fit and fine". The 49-year-old posted the development on his *Twitter* page. "After getting repeated test for Covid-19, today my report has come out positive," Rijiju wrote in his *Twitter* handle. "I'm taking the advice of the Doctors. I request all those who have come in my contact recently to be observant, exercise self-quarantine and get themselves tested. I'm physically fit and fine," he added. Rijiju was in Uttarakhand on Friday to inaugurate a Water Sports and Adventure Institute in Tehri. —PTI

Ravi retains title; silver for Bajrang

Almaty, Kazakhstan: Indian wrestler Ravi Kumar Dahiya retained his Asian Championship title with a solid performance but Bajrang Punia settled for a silver medal after withdrawing from the much-awaited final against Takuto Otoguro due to an elbow injury, here on Saturday. Ravi Dahiya, though, gave India the first freestyle gold medal of this edition with a commanding show. Bajrang said that he did not want to aggravate the condition of his right elbow. He said he started feeling the pain during the quarterfinal against Korean Yongseok Jeong. —PTI

Tsitsipas makes Monte Carlo final

Monaco: Stefanos Tsitsipas defeated Dan Evans 6-2, 6-1 in the semifinals of the Monte Carlo Masters on Saturday and will face Andrey Rublev or Casper Ruud for the title. Fourth seed Tsitsipas needed just over an hour to dispatch Britain's Evans. Tsitsipas has yet to drop a set in Monte Carlo this week and is through to his third Masters 1000 final. He finished runner-up in Canada in 2018 and Madrid the following year. Rublev and Ruud meet in the second semifinal later on Saturday. Rublev ended Rafael Nadal's bid for a 12th Monte Carlo title in the quarterfinals. —AFP

NEWCASTLE HAMMER WEST

Diop, Joelinton and Willock heroics pip West Ham; Spurs held by Everton despite Kane's double

Newcastle (United Kingdom), April 17: Newcastle moved closer to Premier League survival after Joe Willock's late goal capped a thrilling 3-2 win against 10-man West Ham that dented the visitors' bid for a top four finish in the Premier League.

Steve Bruce's side had squandered a two-goal lead in the closing stages at St James' Park, but Willock came off the bench to snatch a priceless winner.

Newcastle are nine points clear of the relegation zone with just six games remaining in a turbulent season on Tyneside.

The Magpies had taken control in the first half thanks to Issa Diop's own goal and a blunder from West Ham keeper Lukasz Fabianski for Joelinton's strike.

West Ham defender Craig Dawson was sent off for two bookings in between those goals.

But the Hammers set up a tense finale when Diop got one back before Jesse Lingard equalised with a penalty 10 minutes from full-time.

On-loan Arsenal midfielder Willock settled a pulsating encounter with his thunderous header, putting Newcastle in position to avoid relegation.



Tottenham Hotspur's Harry Kane (left) scores his team's second goal against Everton during their English Premier League match at Goodison Park in Liverpool on Friday.

—AFP

Staying up would be an impressive achievement for Bruce, who has battled with dressing room rifts and distracting takeover talk.

The defeat was a big blow for West Ham as they chase an unexpected place in next season's Champions League.

David Moyes' side remain fourth, but Chelsea

are just one point behind with a game in hand, while fifth-placed Liverpool would go above the Hammers if they beat Leeds on Monday.

In another match, England forward Harry Kane suffered a worrying ankle injury ahead of next week's League Cup final after scoring twice in Tottenham Hotspur's 2-2

draw away to Everton in the Premier League on Friday.

Gylfi Sigurdsson also grabbed two goals for Everton in a result that did little for either side's European hopes.

Kane, expected to lead England's attack in this year's coronavirus delayed European Championships, went off in stoppage time

towards the end of the match after rolling his ankle when challenged in the box at an Everton corner.

Kane's 20th league goal of the season put Spurs ahead in the 27th minute at Goodison Park only for Sigurdsson to equalise soon afterwards from the penalty spot.

—AFP

BCCI hopeful of domestic season

New Delhi, April 17: The BCCI plans to kick-start its 2021-22 domestic season in September this year with the Syed Mushtaq Ali T20 tournament and has also allocated a three-month window to the Ranji Trophy from December after the marquee event had to be cancelled last season due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, the Duleep Trophy, Deodhar Trophy and Irani Cup are not a part of the tentative calendar prepared by the cricket operations team. Apart from this, five women's competitions have also been dropped from the roster.

The 2020-21 season was a severely truncated one with only the National T20 (Mushtaq Ali) and ODI (Vijay Hazare Trophy) championships being held in the wake of pandemic. For women, only the National One-Day meet was organised.

Amid a second wave of Covid-19 cases across India, the BCCI is still hopeful of conducting the domestic season across age-groups in men and women's categories after a curtailed last season.

With India playing the

T20 World Cup in October and the mega IPL auctions in the offing next year, it is understood that all stakeholders want to start off with two white ball tournaments — Mushtaq Ali T20 between "mid-September to October" followed by the Vijay Hazare Trophy in November.

Ranji Trophy, India's premier tournament which was cancelled for the first time in 87 years in 2020, has been planned between December and March in the upcoming season.

The BCCI has also slotted the U-23 tournaments for men and women along with the U-19 events which weren't held during the last season.

The performances in the U-19 One Day Challenger tournament along with Cooch Behar Trophy (days format) and Vinoo Mankad trophy (one day) will help in selection of India colts team for ICC U-19 World Cup next year.

Women's T20 as well as ODI Challenger Trophy will not be played along with these events' under-23 versions.

The under-19 women's T20 Challenger Trophy will also not be played.

—PTI

COMPOUND ARCHERS LEFT STRANDED DUE TO COVID

Kolkata, April 17: India's compound archery team members were "left stranded" on Karnal Bypass till late at night on Friday while travelling to Delhi airport but the national federation said it might have happened in its bid to separate them from the recurve group after a coach tested positive for Covid-19.

The Sonepat-based compound archers were to join the Olympic-bound recurve team at Delhi airport to catch a 2.50am flight to Amsterdam en route Guatemala City for the April 19-25 World Cup Stage I.

But after hearing that compound team coach Gaurav Sharma had tested positive for Covid-19 at SAI, Sonepat on Thursday, the Archery Association of India decided not to allow them join the recurve team. The compound archers have now been withdrawn from the tournament, the much-anticipated first event after the pandemic halted all events in March 2020.

"We cannot compromise on the safety of our recurve archers as they are slated to play in the Olympics in less than 100 days. As per the SOP, we had to isolate them (compound archers) who were in direct contact with the coach," AAI secretary general Pramod Chandurkar said.

—PTI

Hamilton revs up to 99th career pole in Emilia GP

Imola (Italy), April 17: World champion Lewis Hamilton edged out the Red Bull duo to claim pole position for the Emilia-Romagna Grand Prix on Saturday.

It was Hamilton's 99th career pole and although there is a Red Bull directly behind the Mercedes driver, it will be Sergio Perez rather than Max Verstappen.

Hamilton edged Perez by 0.039 seconds and was 0.087 faster than Verstappen, who is expected to be his main challenger this season.

"I didn't expect to be ahead of two Red Bulls, they've been so quick this weekend," Hamilton said.

Hamilton's teammate Valtteri Bottas had a scrappy final lap and will start from eighth on the grid after finishing 0.487 slower.

Lando Norris will start just ahead of Bottas. The McLaren driver was heading for the front row after a superb final lap but had his time deleted because of exceeding track limits.

Charles Leclerc qualified in an encouraging fourth for Ferrari but his team-

mate Carlos Sainz failed to make it into the final part of qualifying, known as Q3, and will start 11th on the grid.

Pierre Gasly and Daniel Ricciardo will start fifth and sixth, respectively, while Esteban Ocon and Lance Stroll round out the top 10.

Earlier in the day, Verstappen posted the fastest time in the final practice as the Red Bull driver was nearly half a second faster than the rest of the pack. He was 0.456 ahead of Norris and 0.557 clear of Hamilton.

—AP

