

# DECCAN Chronicle

THE LARGEST CIRCULATED ENGLISH DAILY IN SOUTH INDIA

COIMBATORE | SATURDAY 26 | DECEMBER 2020

## WEATHER



**Max:** 30°C  
**Min:** 17°C  
**Rainfall:** Nil

## ASTROGUIDE

**Sarvari:** Margazhi 11  
**Tithi:** Dwadashi  
**Star:** Bharani/ Krithigai  
**Rahukalam:**  
9 am to 10.30 am  
**Yamagandam:**  
1.30 pm to 3 pm

### PRAYERS

**Fajar:** 5.11 am  
**Zohar:** 12.13 pm  
**Asar:** 3.23 pm  
**Maghrib:** 5.48 pm  
**Isha:** 7.04 pm

**SUNSET TODAY** 5.51 PM  
**SUNRISE TOMORROW** 6.29 AM  
**MOONRISE TODAY** 2.58 PM  
**MOONSET TOMORROW** 3.53 AM

## CORONA COUNT

CASES	DEATHS
(+22,275)	(+251)
1,01,69,743	1,47,379

covid19india.org

### STATE GOVERNMENT BULLETINS

(+1,027)  
TN: 8,12,142 12,048

### WORLD CONFIRMED CASES

8,00,15,430

### DEATHS

17,53,997

COUNTRIES  
AREAS WITH  
CASES 218

worldometers.info

## India is Asia's 'gravity point': Japanese deputy defence minister

**New Delhi:** Describing India as "Asia's gravity point", Japanese Deputy Minister of Defence Yasuhide Nakayama has said his country would like to see India "commit more" towards the Quadrilateral coalition or Quad. In an interview to news channel Wion, Nakayama also expressed concerns over growing challenges emanating from Chinese military assertiveness in the key maritime zones in the region, and said it is important for like-minded countries to expand collaboration to deal with the situation.

## EU nations assess Brexit trade deal with UK

**Brussels:** Ambassadors from the European Union's 27 nations convened on Christmas Day to start assessing the free trade deal the bloc has struck with former member Britain, a historic accord that takes effect in just a week. At Friday's exceptional meeting, the EU delegations asked for more time to study the texts before sending them to lawmakers at the European Parliament, according to an EU diplomat.

## Afghan Army: 2 officers killed by roadside bomb in north

**Kabul:** At least two Afghan army officers including a battalion commander were killed Friday when their vehicle was hit by a roadside bomb in the northern Balkh province, the military said. Hanif Rezaie, a spokesman for the army in the country's north, said Capt. Mohammad Qasim Paikar and another officer were killed and two other soldiers were wounded in the explosion.

## COUNTER POINT



Not personal, it's political... the wife and husband are from different parties!

### NATION | 4

**Pokhran Vajpayee's 'best call', says EAM**



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**Reliance to buy out IMG Global**

### SPORT | 8

**Former England player Edrich dies at 83**



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**DISBURSES ₹18,000 CRORE TO NINE CRORE FARMERS**

# In mega outreach, PM Modi talks to farmers on agri laws

**DC CORRESPONDENT**

NEW DELHI, DEC. 25

Amid intensifying farmers agitation against three new farm laws, the Prime Minister on Friday squarely blamed those with political agenda for the deadlock in the government's talks with protesting farmers and said genuine apprehensions about minimum support price guarantee have got overshadowed by unrelated issues such as the release of those accused of violence and making highways toll-free.

Mr Narendra Modi, in his address to farmers through video conferencing, put up a strong defence of the three new farm laws and said the Centre is willing to resume dialogue on all farmers-related issues, even with those staunchly opposed to his government as long as the talks are based on issues, facts and logic.

His address to farmers followed the release of over ₹18,000 crore to more than nine crore farmer families under the 'Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi' (PM-Kisan), an effort being seen to placate the agitating farmers.

The Prime Minister asserted that an overwhelming number of farmers across the country have welcomed the new laws and are already reaping the benefits, and listed out the Bharatiya Janata Party's victory in panchayat elections across states, in which farmers were the main voters, including in areas surrounding protest sites.

He said the parties rejected by the electorate are pushing their political agenda by misleading farmers.

**UNDER THE PM-KISAN SCHEME, A FINANCIAL BENEFIT OF ₹6,000 PER YEAR IS PROVIDED TO THE ELIGIBLE BENEFICIARY FARMERS. PAYABLE IN THREE EQUAL 4-MONTHLY INSTALLMENTS OF ₹ 2,000 EACH THROUGH DIRECT BENEFIT TRANSFER**



■ Modi said the entire country is benefiting from the PM-KISAN programme, but only one state, West Bengal, has not implemented this scheme..

■ "The public is watching those doing selfish politics very closely. The parties who do not speak on the benefit of farmers in West Bengal are engaged in harassing the citizens of Delhi in the name of farmers and are ruining the economy of the country," Modi said.

■ As a result, over 70 lakh farmers are not able to take benefit of this scheme and this money is not reaching them, he claimed, adding that this is because of political reasons..

■ Referring to the protests, Modi said farmers had some genuine apprehensions about new laws including on MSP guarantee when the agitation started, but soon people with political affiliations came in between and started firing from peasants' shoulders to push their own and unrelated demands.

# Didi hits back after PM says her 'ideology' destroyed WB

**RAJIB CHOWDHURI & ANIMESH SINGH | DC**  
NEW DELHI/ KOLKATA, DEC. 25

Amid escalating tensions between the BJP and the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, which goes to polls in just four months, the Prime Minister on Friday directly targeted chief minister Mamata Banerjee, saying her ideology had 'destroyed' the state and added that her government had blocked funds under a Central scheme meant for 70 lakh farmers in the state.

Ms Banerjee responded to the attack by accusing Mr Modi of attempting to "mislead people with half-truths and distorted facts", adding that the Modi government had "done nothing" to help

West Bengal.

Speaking at an event in which PM Narendra Modi distributed ₹18,000 crore to over nine crore farmers, he accused the West Bengal chief minister of "doing politics" by blocking the scheme to provide farmers ₹6,000 every year under "Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi" (PM-Kisan). "If you listen to a 15-year-old speech of Mamta Ji, then you will know how much her ideology has ruined Bengal," he said.

"The public is watching those doing selfish politics very closely. The parties that do not speak on the benefit of farmers in West Bengal are engaged in harassing the citizens of Delhi here in the name of the farmers and are ruining the economy of the country," Mr Modi said. ■ **P4**

## Farmers intensify stir, ask for repeal of laws on agenda for talks

**SANJAY KAW | DC**  
NEW DELHI, DEC. 25

A day after the Centre extended a fresh invite to farmer unions for talks, protesting farmers' on Friday intensified their ongoing agitation against the three agriculture laws not just around the protest sites but in various other parts of the country.

While three Union ministers appealed to the protesting farmers to resume negotiations with the government, the farmers unions insisted that the scrapping of the three recent farm laws be put on the agenda to resume parleys. In Haryana, protesting farmers took over several toll plazas to allow free movement of vehicles. ■ **P4**

# MNM leader joins BJP in front of Union minister

**A ARUL PALANI | DC**  
CHENNAI, DEC. 25

Union Minister Prakash Javadekar has alleged that 'some' farmers protesting against the recently enacted Central laws were misguided by their "political masters" and that they were painting a picture as if farmers across the country were with them. He was addressing farmers at Maraimalai Nagar, near Chennai, organised by the Tamil Nadu unit of the BJP on Friday.

A senior functionary of Kamal Haasan's Makkal Needhi Maiam party, A. Arunachalam, quit MNM and joined the BJP in the presence of the Union minister in Chennai on Friday.

He was MNM's General Secretary and he joined BJP at the party headquarters.

It is believed that the MNM leader was unhappy with the way that party's



Union environment minister Prakash Keshav Javadekar addresses the press on farmers issue to spread Prime Minister Narendra Modi's message in Chennai on Friday.

— DC

leader was function8ng.

Hailing from Thoothukudi district, Arunachalam was responsible for doing the ground-work in many rural parts of the state for the actor-politician.

The blow to Kamal comes at a time when he is engaged in intensive campaigning around the State after beginning his serious work for the forthcoming polls with an inaugural at Madurai.

# Auto driver's son makes Test debut at MCG

**DC CORRESPONDENT**  
MELBOURNE, DEC. 25

It will be an emotional moment for fast bowler Mohammed Siraj when he receives his maiden India Test cap at the colossal Melbourne Cricket Ground on Saturday.

As India made four changes in their bid to bounce back from the Adelaide debacle in which they were shot out for 36 in their second



innings after taking a lead in the Test, Siraj, the son of an autorickshaw driver in Hyderabad, has come in as replacement for an injured

● **Siraj has already played an ODI and three T20s for India, but making his Test debut in a Boxing Day match would be a dream come true for him**

Mohammed Shami.

Siraj has already played an ODI and three T20s for India, but making his Test debut in a Boxing Day match would be a dream

# Rajinikanth admitted to hospital in Hyderabad

■ **Treated for severe blood pressure fluctuations**

**DC CORRESPONDENTS**  
with agency inputs

**Hyderabad/Chennai** Dec. 25:

Actor-politician Rajinikanth was on Friday admitted to Apollo Hospitals for severe blood pressure fluctuations and he was 'stable', the hospital said. Stating that he is "stable and resting", the hospital said the actor will stay here and undergo further investigations on Saturday.

Rajinikanth was shooting for *Annathe* in the Film City in Hyderabad for 10 days but had isolated himself after at least four people on the sets tested Covid-19 positive. The 70-year-old actor had tested negative.

It is too early to say when he would move to Chennai where he was to announce the name of his political party any day after Sanipeyarchi on December 27.

While his party may be inaugurated in January, possibly on Jan. 17, he was



to make his party formation official before the end of the year in the state capital.

What happens now to his much awaited political entry can only be speculation.

But, earlier, he had once hinted that his doctors had advised him not to get into the rough and tumble of full-time politics due to concerns over his health as he had undergone transplantation of a kidney a few years ago.

Later, he had come out and announced in a media conference held from his home that he had decided to take the plunge after meet-

● **It is too early to say when Rajinikanth would move to Chennai where he was to announce the name of his political party any day after Sanipeyarchi on December 27**

ing his party functionaries at the Raghavendra kalyana mandapam.

The Tamil Nadu political scene, agog with his keenly awaited entry, is left guessing over his formal entry now with a party name, flag, office-bearers, etc.

Telangana Governor N Chandrababu Naidu wished the actor a speedy recovery. DMK chief M.K. Stalin spoke to him on the telephone and wished him a speedy recovery.

# US requires UK passengers to get negative test

**Atlanta, Dec. 25:** The United States will require airline passengers from Britain to get a negative Covid-19 test before their flight. The US is the latest country to announce new travel restrictions because of a new variant of the coronavirus that is

spreading in Britain.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says airline passengers from the United Kingdom will have to get negative Covid-19 tests within three days of their trip and provide the results to the airline.

The agency says the order will be signed Friday and go into effect on Monday.

The CDC says because of travel restrictions in place since March, air travel to the US from the UK has been cut by 90 per cent. — PTI

**4 MORE UK RETURNEEs TEST +VE**

# Flyers from UK to undergo RTPCR test

**A. ARUL PALANI | DC**  
Chennai, Dec. 25

The State government requested the flyers who returned to the State from United Kingdom between November 25 and December 23 to come forward and undergo RTPCR test to ascertain whether they have contracted new strain of Covid-19 or not.

In a communication released on Friday the State Department of Public Health and Preventive Medicine appealed them to contact toll free telephone number 104 to clear doubts.

Earlier addressing reporters at the King's Institute, Health Secretary Dr J Radhakrishnan said four more flyers with travel history to UK tested positive for COVID-19 in Tamil Nadu. They include a patient from Madurai, two from Thanjavur and one from Mogappair in Chennai.

In the wake of the UK observing a new COVID strain and a flyer testing positive at the Chennai airport recently, the state had decided to screen every single passenger who returned from there.

● **In the wake of the UK observing a new Covid strain and a flyer testing positive at the Chennai airport recently, the state had decided to screen every single passenger who returned from there**

The Health Department had collected data on a total of 2390 flyers, who had returned to Tamil Nadu from the UK or via transit from November 25 to December 21. Of these, 1126 flyers were from Chennai. The department has tested 1126 samples so far and 440 results have arrived. Five have tested positive in all, including the 25-year-old student who had earlier tested positive," he said.

"People must not fear the new strain and we don't have research data on severity or pathogenicity of the strain. So far, it is known that the strain has a higher transmissibility," Radhakrishnan said.

# Two-day dry run planned for vaccine in four states

**VINEETA PANDEY | DC**  
NEW DELHI, DEC. 25

With all eyes now on Covid-19 vaccine, the Central government will carry out a dry run of Covid-19 vaccination on December 28 and 29 in Assam, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Punjab as a step to prepare for the administration of the vaccine and assess the readiness of the supply chain and officials. A detailed checklist has been prepared by the Union health ministry and shared with the four states to guide them in the dry run.

"To strengthen the capacity of our human resource for Covid-19 vaccine introduction and roll-out, detailed training modules have been developed for different categories of vaccine handlers and administrators including medical officers, vaccinators, alternate vaccinators, cold chain handlers, supervisors, data managers, ASHA coordinators and all others involved in the implementation process at different levels," the government release said.

The Union government, in coordination with states and Union Territories, has been training health workers. According to the Union health and family welfare ministry, 2,360 people, including state immunisation officers, cold chain officers, IEC officials and development partners have been trained during a national-level "Training of Trainers", apart from more than 7,000 at the district level.

The training includes all operational aspects like organisation of vaccination sessions, use of Co-WIN IT platform for management of the entire vaccination process, deployment of HR cold chain preparedness, management of adverse events, communications and inter-sectoral coordination etc. ■ **P4**



## SHORT TAKES

**Franklin Templeton: CFMA moves SC**

New Delhi, Dec. 25: Chennai Financial Markets and Accountability (CFMA) has filed an application in the Supreme Court alleging that despite the apex court's December 9 order, "no apparent steps" have been taken by the SEBI to appoint an observer for overseeing the e-voting process with regard to winding up Franklin Templeton's six mutual fund schemes. The top court had on December 9 asked the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) to appoint an observer for overseeing the e-voting process, scheduled between December 26 to December 29.

"The concern of CFMA is, though the aforesaid order was passed on the 9th of this month, there has been no apparent steps taken by SEBI to appoint an observer. The voting is scheduled to commence from tomorrow (December 26) and there is no update about who the observer is, or his/her e-mail id, contact information, etc.," CFMA said in a press statement. In its statement, CFMA has said it has moved an interim application in the apex court. On December 9, the top court had said its December 3 order, in which it had said that "for the time being, there will be a stay of redemption payment to the unit holders", would continue till the next date of hearing. "SEBI shall appoint an observer regarding the e-voting of unit holders which is scheduled between December 26 to December 29, 2020. The result of the e-voting would not be announced and would be produced before us in a sealed cover along with the report of the observer appointed by the SEBI", the apex court had said in its December 9 order. It had posted the matter for hearing in the third week of January.

—PTI

**Rope car facility to Rathnagiriswarar hill temple soon**

DC CORRESPONDENT  
KARUR, DEC. 25

The ₹6.17 crore rope car facility to Sri Rathnagiriswarar hill temple at Aiyar Malai near Kulithalai in Karur district will be completed shortly, said Karur Collector Mrs. S. Mazarvizhi.

She told newsmen soon after inspecting the ongoing rope car project on Thursday that the hill temple was located at a height of 1,178 feet and the devotees walked along 1,117 steps to reach the top. Aged people, differently abled and children are finding it inconvenient climbing the steps and worship the ancient Shiva temple.

"The rope car facility will be available and steps towards offering it have been taken. The construction of lower and upper stations are nearing completion," she added.

Simultaneously four cabins will go up while another four will come down and each cabin can house two people.

In all, 120 devotees will reach atop per hour, she said. After the completion of the work, there will be a trial run of the rope car facility and then opened to the public, the district collected added.

# NGT seeks safety audit of thermal power stations

A. ARUL PALANI | DC  
CUDDALORE, DEC. 25

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has directed the Central government to conduct a safety audit of thermal power stations, including thermal power station at Neyveli Lignite Corporation of India Limited, Neyveli, Cuddalore district, across the country in six months. The order came on a petition filed against the Neyveli Lignite Corporation of India Limited (NLCIL) in the aftermath of an accident in July, which killed 15 workers. As many as 29 employees were killed in 22 accidents in the public sector NLCIL, Neyveli, Cuddalore district, for the five years.

On July 1, 2020, an explosion occurred in the boiler of Unit 5 of Thermal Power Station-II, which killed six workers on the spot and injured several others. Nine other workers died later after treatment failed. The petition was filed alleging negligence on the part of the public sector in ensuring the safety of the infrastructure, employees and workers.

The NGT, while hearing the petition, ordered an interim compensation of Rs 5 crore. Meanwhile, it

also set up an independent committee to ascertain the facts of the incident, and to submit a report detailing the causes of failure, impact on human lives, environment, compliance of safety norms etc. The independent committee consisted of members from the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB), National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI), Indian Institute of Technology, Madras, and the District Collector of Cuddalore. The said committee visited the site in September and submitted its report dated October 23 to the NGT.

According to the independent committee, the root cause of the accident was insufficient knowledge among the staff, poor safety protocols, poor safety awareness.

The committee was of the view that the root causes of the accident in the girder of boiler supporting structure can be attributed to insufficient knowledge amongst staff, insufficient knowledge of the chemical properties of lignite, especially formation of water gas when water is applied on the lignite in hot conditions, poor safety protocol, poor safety awareness, inade-

quate risk assessment and response, poor process safety management systems and failure in conducting awareness programs among all the employees and workers about handling the smoldering. It added that the emergency plan set up by NLCIL did not have any measures to deal with incidents of smoldering.

"The onsite emergency plan prepared by NLCIL lacked measures to combat smoldering but only provided for fire occurrences and other accident scenarios. The NLCIL had no Emergency Plan to tackle the smoldering and water gas generation. The Committee was satisfied with the compensation paid by NLCIL, around Rs 6.11 crore to the families of the deceased and the injured workers.

Considering the facts stated in the report, the NGT ruled that the staff did not have the required knowledge of the standard operating protocols and of the process in the equipment they were tasked to deal with. The tribunal also stated that the occupier, the head of operation and maintenance and the safety officer were held responsible for the accident. "There is violation of safety norms under section 38 of the Factories Act, 1948. There is also

violation of the Manufacture, Storage, Import of Hazardous Chemicals Rules, 1989. It added that the workers should have been briefed about the SOPs in the local language understandable by them as part of creating awareness.

The NGT also pointed out that while the petitioner alleges that the technology used in power plants I to VII are obsolete and the plants are nearing retirement by 2022, the Director of Boilers, Public Works Department (PWD), had certified that the said boiler was fit for continued operation till October 2024. "In view of above, while we refrain from directing retirement of the unit, all safety measures may be duly adopted which may be regularly monitored and audited by teams of experts on the subject and also by the Regulators," the tribunal ordered.

The tribunal has directed that a safety audit be conducted in similar thermal power plants across the country within a period of six months to avoid recurrence of such incidents. It may be noted that in response to RTI query the NLCIL recently replied that 29 employees were killed in 22 accidents in the public sector for the five years.

## Panel to submit report on air pollution caused by Ennore, Manali industries

A. ARUL PALANI | DC  
CHENNAI, DEC. 25

The southern bench of National Green Tribunal, Chennai, has formed an expert committee to assess adverse damage caused to the ambient air quality by six major industries in Ennore and Manali. Initiating suo motu proceedings the bench comprising judicial member Justice K. Ramakrishnan and expert member Saibal Dasgupta passed the order on Friday.

The report alleged that air quality in Ennore - Manali region has been seriously affected on account of the emission made by six industries - Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation Limited (TANGEDCO's) North Chennai Thermal Power Station (NCTPS) Stage 1, NTECL Vallur Power Plant, Chennai Petroleum Corporation Limited (CPCL), Tamil Nadu Petro products Limited (TPL), Manali Petrochemicals Limited (MPL), and Madras Fertilizers Limited (MFL).

These industries are constantly violating the conditions, consent and permissions granted resulting in serious emission from the industries affecting the air quality in that area. The bench said there is a duty cast on the state government, its departments and its regulators to provide clean air which is part of right to life as enshrined under Article 21 of the

● The report alleged that air quality in Ennore - Manali region has been seriously affected on account of the emission made by six industries - Tamil Nadu Generation and Distribution Corporation Limited (TANGEDCO's) North Chennai Thermal Power Station (NCTPS) Stage 1, NTECL Vallur Power Plant, Chennai Petroleum Corporation Limited (CPCL), Tamil Nadu Petro products Limited (TPL), Manali Petrochemicals Limited (MPL), and Madras Fertilizers Limited (MFL).

Constitution. They are highly polluting industries and when such industries are allowed to function they are expected to take more effective pollution control mechanism to prevent pollution being caused in the area.

The regulators are also expected to make regular motoring of the area so as to avoid such things recurring and protect the area from air pollution as it is seen from the research conducted by the authorities and the international organisations dealing with this issue that more death are being caused on account of air pollution and it is a serious concern to be looked into by the authorities, in order to save the lives of the people.

The bench said, "We feel it appropriate to appoint a joint committee comprising

senior officer from Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change, regional office, a senior scientist from Central Pollution Control Board, Chennai, a senior officer from the Tamil Nadu State Pollution Control Board, a professor from Anna University of Environmental Engineering, to inspect the area and submit a factual and action taken report, if there is any violation found."

The committee is directed to inspect the units in that area and ascertain as to whether the units are complying with the pollution norms and also complying with the conditions imposed while granting permission to establish such industries in that area by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change and State Environmental Impact Assessment Authority (SEIAA) as the case may be and the Tamil Nadu State Pollution Control Board (TNPCB). If there is any violation, what is the action taken by the regulators, so as to make the erring industries comply with the norms. They are also directed to assess the environmental compensation against the erring units as has been directed by the principal bench in several cases of this nature applying the guideline provided by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), the bench said.

## Paint the city green this New Year



N. SAMPATH | DC  
CHENNAI, DEC. 25

The department of horticulture and plantation crops has begun distributing green celebration packs to citizens. The department has taken up the initiative through Tamil Nadu Horticulture Development Agency (TANHODA).

The pack contains a flowering or ornamental plant, vegetable seeds and chocolates produced by TANHODA. "These are growing gifts for your friends and family with a piece of nature," said a poster from the department. It may be noted that a similar initiatives taken up during Ganesh Chaturthi and Deepavali were huge hit among people.

"On account of festivals, the packs are available for a discounted price of ₹100 per bag," said an official from the horticulture department. The gifts can be customised based on the pots and plants of choices. Citizens can procure these gifts from Kasturba Nagar Association building Adyar, horticulture department near Anna arch, state horticulture farm, Madhavaram and Semmozhi Poonga on Cathedral Road.



The deity of Sri Prasanna Venkatchalapathy temple at Tallakulam in Madurai being taken out on a procession on Vaikunta Ekadasi. —K.Manikandan

## Thanjavur MP presides over makkal gram sabha meeting

G. SRINIVASAN | DC  
THANJAVUR DECEMBER 25

"MPs and MLAs can call for meetings in villages. I don't understand under which law the state government

banned gram sabhas conducted by DMK. But with a view to respect government ban, our party president M.K. Stalin renamed our meetings as Makkal gram sabha meetings" said S.S.P.

alanimanickam, Thanjavur MP and former union minister here on Friday.

He presided over the Makkal gram sabha meeting at Mariammankoil village near Thanjavur on

Friday. T.K.G. Neelamegam, Thanjavur MLA participated.

Resolutions were adopted to reject AIADMK in the coming assembly election and elect DMK under the

presidentship of M.K. Stalin.

Those who attended the meeting signed the resolution. Participants urged to build a speedbreaker on Gnanam Nagar road, stop

trains at Marimankoil station, introduce boating in rani samudram lake, drainage facilities in the village and toilet facilities at Punnainallur mari-amman temple.

The MP, Palanimanickam, also said that people are frustrated with AIADMK rule. They don't get ration provisions properly. Youth complain about unemployment.



Faithfuls gather for a Christmas mass at St Michael's church in Coimbatore on Friday. —DC

## Christmas celebrated in TN adhering to Covid protocols

Chennai, Dec 25: The Covid-19 pandemic cast a shadow over Christmas celebrations in Tamil Nadu on Friday as churches saw devotees offering prayers strictly adhering to all the protocols laid down by the government. Members of the Christian community while maintaining social distancing norms and wearing masks, attended midnight masses and special prayers held in various churches,

including the ancient Santhome Basilica here and exchanged greetings.

Devotees were directed to collect tokens before entering churches so as to ensure limited number of them were allowed were present in view of the pandemic. Christians decorated their houses with Christmas tree and stars. Children carried candles and the Bible in small processions in their respective neighbour-

hoods. The Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Health at Vailankannai in Nagapattinam district also saw devotees offering prayers following the norms laid down in view of the pandemic. Tamil Nadu Governor Banwarilal Purohit, Chief Minister K. Palaniswami, DMK chief M. K. Stalin and leaders of various political parties extended Christmas greetings. —PTI

## XMAS TIME Good inflow of tourists in Ooty

B. RAVICHANDRAN | DC  
OOTY, DEC. 25

Special mass in churches with changed protocol marked the festival celebration in the hills here even as Xmas holidays began to see an impressive inflow of tourists to the hills for the winter break.

This year all the churches in the hills cancelled the midnight special mass on Thursday night. The special mass in the churches began on Friday early morning adhering to Covid-19 prevention norms as only limited number devotees and members of the parishes were allowed to enter the church to attend the mass.

The mass was also held a couple of times in the morning hours, for different select groups in the parishes, to help the devotees to attend.

Dr A. Amalraj, the Bishop of Ooty catholic diocese, presided over the special mass held on Thursday evening at the Sacred Heart church here. On Friday morning the vicar-general of Ooty catholic diocese Fr. Christopher Lawrence presided over the special mass at the 182 years old St. Mary's church and gave



a Christmas message. Hotels could not hold the Christmas eve celebrations for the large array of tourists who turned up for the Xmas holidays. However, tourist spots saw vibrant tourism activities.

(Above) Dr A. Amalraj (centre), Bishop of Ooty catholic diocese, delivers Christmas message at Sacred Heart church in Ooty. —DC

Government Botanical Garden in Ooty sees a huge inflow of tourists on Friday. —DC









## IN BRIEFS



## Thiruvananthapuram gets 21-yr-old mayor

DC CORRESPONDENT  
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM,  
DEC. 25

The CPM, which weathered anti-incumbency factor in the local body elections by roping in the youth in large numbers, has picked the youngest member in the Thiruvananthapuram municipal corporation council to be the mayor of the capital city, and perhaps the youngest mayor in the country. Arya Rajendran, the 21-year-old BSc mathematics student of All Saints College here representing Mudavanmugal ward will be elected formally when the corporation council meets next. The party's district secretary took the decision on Friday. The CPM-led Left Democratic Front won 53 seats in the 100-member Thiruvananthapuram corporation council in the recent election. Ms Rajendran, a CPM branch member, at present heads Balasamgham, the children's organisation affiliated to the CPM. She is also a state committee member of Students Federation of India. Daughter of an electrician and an LIC agent, Ms Rajendran told local media that her priority would be to address women's issues.

## Shivraj threatens to bury mafia alive

**Bhopal:** Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Friday threatened to bury mafia alive if they did not mend their ways. Opposition Congress, however, dared him to 'walk the talk'. Addressing a farmers' meet at Hosangabad, nearly 120 km from here, Chouhan roared that "Mama (as he identifies him) is in full form now. Mafias have no place in Madhya Pradesh. They have to leave the state, or I will bury them (alive)". The Chief Minister recounted the anti-mafia drive being undertaken by his government in which the encroachments of government lands by musclemen have been freed and buildings constructed illegally were razed to ground.

## Odisha: 64-year-old clears NEET

**Bhubaneswar:** Age can never be an impediment to achieve a dream. This is what a 64-year-old man hailing from Odisha's Bargarh district has proved. Jay Kishore Pradhan of Attabira has qualified National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test to get enrolled into the Veer Surendra Sai Institute of Medical Science and Research, popularly known as VIMSAR Medical College and Hospital, at Burla in Odisha's Sambalpur district for MBBS courses. A banker by profession, Pradhan worked with the SBI for a major chunk of his life. As per his own admission, when he first appeared for the medical entrance test in 1974, he could not make the cut. Disheartened, Pradhan decided to abandon his dream and join a bank instead. However, once his father was bedridden owing to urinal ulcer, his buried desire to don the stethoscope and serve humanity started germinating again.

## Season of joy



A man dressed as Santa Claus distributes candies among children on the occasion of Christmas in Howrah on Friday. The pandemic cast a shadow on the celebrations this year as people followed strict protocols and celebrated the holiday in a low-key manner across the country. — PTI

## No corporate can snatch farmers' land, says Shah

New Delhi, Dec. 25: No corporate can snatch away a farmer's land as long as Narendra Modi is the Prime Minister of the country, Union home minister Amit Shah said on Friday and asserted that the provision of MSP will continue and mandis will not be shut down. Addressing a gathering in Kishangarh village in the national capital, Shah said if farmer organisations felt that any provision of the three new farm laws was against their interests, the Modi government was ready to discuss and consider it with an open mind.

The opposition is crying hoarse over the farm laws, he said assuring farmers that the three agricultural reform laws were in their interest and do not cause any harm to them.

"Neither MSP will end, nor anyone can snatch your land. I want to tell farmers that as long as Narendra Modi is the Prime Minister, no corporate can snatch away your land, this is BJP's promise to you," he asserted. Shah blamed the opposition, including the Congress, for spreading lies about the minimum support price (MSP) and other provisions of the farm laws.

"Opposition is telling brazen lies. I again reiterate that the MSP will continue and the mandis will not be closed. Farmers' welfare is the top-most priority of the Modi government," Shah said. — PTI



Police intervene after a mild altercation between BJP supporters and a section of protestors, who were agitating against the new farm laws, in Bathinda on Friday. — PTI

## Farmers intensify stir, insist on repeal of laws for parleys

FROM PAGE 1

In Uttarakhand's Udham Singh Nagar district, farmers clashed with the police with the demonstrators running a tractor over a barricade as dozens of policemen tried to hold them back. The cops were finally forced to get out of the way of the protesters. In Phagwara, Punjab, some BJP leaders had to slip out from the backdoor under police protection after farmers picketed the hotel where they were observing the birth anniversary of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

The farmers' unions have not yet responded to the Centre's fresh letter urging them to decide a date and time for holding the next round of talks. In its new letter, the Centre on

Thursday reiterated that it is ready to find a "logical solution" to the issues raised by protesting farmer unions. A section of the farmer unions have alleged that the government's latest letter for talks is nothing but propaganda against the peasants to create the impression that they are not interested in dialogue and asked that the scrapping of the three recent farm laws be put on the agenda to resume parleys. Terming the letter a "delaying tactic", farmer leader Shiv Kumar Kakka said, "The government should bring the repeal of the three farm laws in the agenda for a fresh round of dialogue."

Bhartiya Kisan Union (Charuni) chief Gurnam Singh Charuni rejected the offer of Haryana deputy chief minister Dushyant

Chautala to mediate between the Centre and the protesting farmers. He said that they don't need any mediator. In a video message, he, however, urged the farmers to hold protests peacefully and not indulge in any violence.

Soon after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's virtual interaction with farmers on Friday, Union agriculture minister Narendra Singh Tomar said those misguiding farmers will be taught a lesson by the public in future. Stating that there is some misconception in the minds of Punjab farmers, the agriculture minister said, "I want to urge them to leave the protest and come forward for the dialogue. I am hopeful that farmers will understand the importance of new laws and reach a solution."

## RAHUL LYING, MISLEADING FARMERS: IRANI

Amethi (UP), Dec. 25: Union minister Smriti Irani launched a scathing attack on Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Friday, accusing him of "lying and misleading" farmers over the Centre's recent farm laws.

Addressing a farmers' rally in her parliamentary constituency Amethi, Irani said, "Rahul Gandhi is telling lies and misleading farmers. He is shedding crocodile tears for farmers and misleading them, his own *jija* (brother-in-law) has encroached upon the land of farmers." Irani's attack on Gandhi comes amid protests by farmers on various border points of Delhi against the Centre's recent farm laws.

Throwing a challenge at Gandhi for a debate on farmer issues, Irani asked him to come in the midst of farmers here and claimed that she would expose him for every single sin committed by him. The Union minister addressed the rally in Singhpur block in Tiloi as part of a mega exercise undertaken by the BJP to reach out to farmers as Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday released over ₹18,000 crore under the 'Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi' (PM-KISAN).

Irani said Gandhi, whom she defeated in the last parliamentary election, is showing sympathy for farmers now, but he himself has "grabbed" the land of farmers. Irani alleged that the Gandhi family did not think about the development of Amethi after winning elections. — PTI

## Didi: PM spoke 'distorted facts'

FROM PAGE 1

Stung by the Prime Minister's attack, Ms Banerjee said, "While he publicly claimed his intention to help farmers of West Bengal through his PM-Kisan Yojana and alleges non-cooperation of the state government, the fact is that he is trying to mislead the people with half-truth and distorted facts. Let me set the record straight... I personally have written two letters and have even spoken to the concerned minister two days ago but they are refusing to cooperate and are instead indulging in malicious propaganda for political gains... When we are implementing so many schemes with the Central government, the question of not cooperating on a scheme that is benefiting farmers seems absurd... For all the posturing of the Central government, the fact is that the Modi government has done nothing to help the state of West Bengal... Let me reiterate, that in the interest of the people of Bengal, we will do everything that is needed on our part, even if it means supporting schemes of Central government that are purely meant to further their political agenda, are at odds with the spirit of federalism, and are definitely not guided by their desire to help the people at large; so long it ensures even incremental benefit for the people of Bengal."

"Lakhs of farmers are protesting on the roads demanding the withdrawal of the new farm laws which are anti-farmers as they threaten to dilute the MSP, the state procurement system, and take away the basic protective mechanisms of the farmers, hence, leaving them at the mercy of big private players. And today the Prime Minister

## GHOSH MOCKS MAMATA, CALLS HER DURMUKH

RAJIB CHOWDHURI | DC  
KOLKATA, DEC. 25

West Bengal BJP president Dilip Ghosh, who is known for making controversial comments, on Friday mocked Chief Minister and Trinamul Congress supremo Mamata Banerjee as a "Durmukh" as a CM face of the ruling TMC in the next year's Assembly election.

He said, "TMC is asking us where is your face (CM candidate)? I tell them: We have many. But you have only one face. But that too has become *Durmukh* (bad face) now. She claims she is the only face in all of 294 seats. It means there is no one else. That is why no one believes in that party. People are not calling TMC 'Didi's party' anymore. They now claim it to be *Pishi's* (Aunt) party."



showed his apparent concern for the farmers through a televised address, instead of proactively working to resolve their issues," Ms Banerjee added.

"They are yet to release even a portion of the Rs 85,000 crore of outstanding dues that includes unpaid GST (Goods and Services Tax) dues of Rs 8,000 crore," the chief minister said.

## Pokhran Vajpayee's 'best call,' says EAM

SRIDHAR KUMARASWAMI | DC  
NEW DELHI, DEC. 25

India's decision to carry out the Pokhran nuclear explosions in 1998 will remain then prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's "most enduring contribution", External Affairs Minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar said on Friday, even as President of the US-India Business Council and former US State Department official Nisha Biswal said Vajpayee foresaw the "potential dangers posed by a rising and unchecked China".

In an indication of the almost certain increased focus on human rights and democratic values by the forthcoming Biden Presidency, she also said that the Indo-US strategic convergence "needs to be buttressed with a broader focus on our shared democratic values".

Biswal was delivering the A.B. Vajpayee Memorial Lecture, an annual lecture series begun by the MEA on the occasion of the former PM's 96th birth anniversary.

Biswal, who previously served as US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia during the

Obama Administration, said in her Address, "Vajpayee was able to foresee what many others failed to see, he saw the potential dangers posed by a rising and unchecked China. And he saw the importance of a US-India partnership, built on the foundation of our democratic values, to advance a rules-based order that would enable a more peaceful, prosperous and pluralistic Asia."

She further said, "The last several years have seen a more aggressive and assertive China that sought to leverage its growing economic clout to advance its strategic ambitions, often at the expense of its neighbors. The words of prime minister Vajpayee, some 20-year-ago, foreshadowed the challenges that we are seeing play out across the Indo-Pacific. And in the face of these destabilising actions, the United States and India have forged a closer partnership and cooperation."

Biswal added, "With the incoming Biden-Harris administration, there will be a renewed focus on restoring our global alliances and strengthening our global institutions."

## Centre prepares detailed outline for vaccine dry run

FROM PG 1

Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Gujarat and Punjab will carry out the dry run in two districts in preferably five settings, e.g. district hospital, CHC/PHC, urban site, private health facility, rural outreach etc on December 28 and 29. The process will also include testing the cold storage and transportation arrangements for the vaccine, management of crowds at the session sites with proper physical distancing.

"An important focus of the dry run will be management of any possible adverse events following immunisation (AEFI). In addition, adherence and



management of infection control practices at the session site, to prevent disease transmission. The mock drill will include concurrent monitoring and review at the block and district levels, and preparation of feedback to be shared with the state and Union health ministry," officials said.

The National Expert Group on Vaccine Administration of Covid-19 (NEGVAC) has recom-

mended three prioritised population groups, including healthcare workers (about 1 crore), frontline workers (about 2 crore), and prioritized age groups (about 27 crore).

India on Friday had 23,067 fresh cases of novel coronavirus which were 6.6 per cent lower than the day before. India's total cases so far stand at 1,014 crore while deaths due to Covid-19 have crossed 1.47 lakh out of which 336 fatalities were in the last one day. However, India's active caseload has further slipped and comprises merely 2.78 per cent of the total cases and the recovery rate has improved to 95.77 per cent.

## BILATERAL | ISSUES

## BGB raises concern over cross-border illegal smuggling

## Bangla refutes illegal immigration claim

MANOJ ANAND | DC  
GUWAHATI., DEC. 25

After five-days long deliberations on bilateral issues, Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) on Friday claimed that no illegal immigration is taking place into India from the neighbouring country, but expressed concern over rising incidents of smuggling across the border.

However, Border Security Forces pointed out that they have apprehended 3,204 persons this year for illegally entering India from Bangladesh and 60 of them, whose

nationalities were established, were handed over to BGB.

Addressing a joint press conference with Border Security Force (BSF) director-general Rakesh Asthana, BGB director-general Maj Gen Md Shafeenul Islam told reporters that at least 86 Bangladeshi nationals were killed on the Indian side in the last three years for their alleged criminal activities.

Discussing various issues concerning the border during the ongoing five-day 51st DG-level talks between the BSF and BGB that started on December

22, the two forces also signed a Joint Accord of Discussion and decided to increase coordinated night patrolling to prevent illegal activities across the international border.

The BGB chief while justifying the reason that has stopped immigration to India from Bangladesh said, "The GDP of Bangladesh is on a steady upward trend. There is no reason for any citizen to come to India for jobs or any other reason. People have come with valid documents only for medical purposes."

He, however, admitted that many families in bor-

der areas have their relatives on the other side and they keep visiting them during festivals or other occasions, but with only valid travel documents.

The BGB DG also denied the reports that some people have crossed over to his nation from Assam as they did not find their names in the National Register of Citizens (NRC).

The top officers of the two forces, however, expressed concerns over the illegal movement of Rohingyas and said BSF and BGB are taking measures to control it by regularly apprehending such

people on both sides of the border.

Both of them also accepted that criminal activities, mostly smuggling of various items, are on the rise. "We are concerned about cross-border illegal trade. These syndicates are mainly dealing with narcotics and cattle smuggling. We are constantly monitoring them and have increased our vigil along the border," said Asthana. On rising incidents of cattle smuggling, Mr Islam said it is affecting the local cattle farms in Bangladesh as the country is self-sufficient in cattle production.



## SHORT TAKES

## BUS CRASH IN WESTERN RUSSIA KILLS 4, 11 HURT

**Moscow, Dec. 25:** An intercity bus veered off a road in western Russia, killing four people and injuring another 11, authorities said on Friday.

The bus driving from Moscow to Volgograd veered into a ditch and overturned in the Ryazan region, about 250 kilometers (155 miles) south of Moscow.

At least four people, including the bus driver, died and at least 11, including several children, were hospitalized with injuries after the overnight crash, authorities said. Police said the driver may have lost control of the bus after falling asleep.

## HK 'SPEEDBOAT FUGITIVES' TO FACE TRIAL IN CHINA

**Beijing, Dec. 25:** Ten of 12 Hong Kong pro-democracy activists arrested as they tried to flee the territory by speedboat to Taiwan will face trial in mainland China on December 28, campaigners and family members said on Friday.

Relatives of the detainees have been told by Chinese government-appointed lawyers that a video hearing will take place Monday afternoon at Yantian District People's Court in the southern city of Shenzhen, according to the Save 12 HK Youths campaign.

China has a history of putting on trial dissidents around the Christmas and New Year period to avoid Western scrutiny.

In a video hearing, defendants appear from the detention centre instead of going to court, explained Lu Siwei, a mainland Chinese human rights lawyer working on the case despite a ban and threats from the authorities.

## INDIAN HELD IN CANADA OVER TELEPHONE SCAMS

**Toronto, Dec. 25:** A 25-year-old Indian-origin man in Canada has been arrested for his alleged involvement in a series of transnational telephone scams, wherein he was recruited by overseas scammers to process and launder locally-received money, police said.

Abhinav Bector, who lives in Brampton, Ontario, has been charged with fraud of over \$5,000, possession of the proceeds of crime and money laundering, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) said in a press statement on Wednesday. The arrest came following an investigation, named Project OCTAVIA, initiated by the RCMP in October 2018 to combat telephone scams and other interrelated frauds. "To date, 10 individuals have been charged with respect to this investigation," the statement said.

"These telephone fraudsters, operating from overseas, have been targeting the Canadian public since 2014. Despite a number of police raids on illegal call centres in India, and arrests in Canada, these fraudsters continue to modify their deceitful pitch and target Canadians," it said.

## RUSSIAN PROF. SENT TO JAIL FOR KILLING STUDENT

**St Petersburg, Dec. 25:** A court in St Petersburg on Friday convicted a prominent history professor on charges of murdering and dismembering a female student and sentenced him to 12 1/2 years in prison.

The court found 64-year-old Oleg Sokolov, who taught at St. Petersburg State University, guilty of shooting and killing 24-year-old doctoral student Anastasia Yeshchenko at his apartment in November 2019. Sokolov was detained after being pulled from the Moika River outside his St. Petersburg apartment with a backpack with two severed arms inside.

The limbs were identified as Yeshchenko's, and investigators found other body parts in the river and in Sokolov's apartment in the historic part of St. Petersburg, less than a mile from the Hermitage Museum. During the trial, Sokolov testified that he and Yeshchenko had a romantic relationship and that he shot her during a quarrel. Prosecutors have requested a 15-year sentence. Sokolov was known for his books about the Napoleonic era and his enthusiastic participation in reenactments of historic battles, and his case attracted broad attention in Russia.



Participants sporting Santa Claus costumes jump into the water during the 111th edition of the Copa Nadal (Christmas Cup) swimming race in Barcelona's Port Vell on Friday. The traditional 200-meter Christmas swimming race gathered around 300 participants on Barcelona's Port Vell (old harbour).

— AFP

## Covid shadows Christmas joy

Mass, traditionally held at midnight, was moved forward to meet Italy's curfew

## Boko Haram kills 11 on Christmas eve attack

## GODADDY SORRY FOR FAKE BONUS EMAIL

**Washington, Dec. 25:** US web company GoDaddy apologised on Thursday after an email that promised employees a Christmas bonus in the midst of the economic crisis turned out to be a computer security test.

"GoDaddy takes the security of our platform extremely seriously. We understand some employees were upset by the phishing attempt and felt it was insensitive, for which we have apologised," a spokesman for GoDaddy, the largest internet domain management company in the world, said in a statement.

"While the test mimicked real attempts in play today, we need to do better and be more sensitive to our employees," added the Arizona-based company.

In December, around 500 employees clicked on an email from the company offering a Christmas bonus of \$650 and asking them to fill out a form with their personal details.

Two days later, a different message appeared in their inboxes. "You are receiving this email because you failed our recent phishing test," the email from GoDaddy's security chief read, according to Arizona's Copper Courier newspaper. — AFP

**Kano, Nigeria, Dec. 25:** Boko Haram jihadists killed at least 11 people, burnt a church and seized a priest on Christmas Eve in Nigeria's restive northeast, local sources said on Friday.

Security agencies had in recent days warned of an increased risk of attack during the holiday season. Fighters in trucks and motorcycles stormed Pemi, a predominantly Christian village in Borno state on Thursday, shooting "indiscriminately" and setting buildings on fire, said Abwaku Kabu, a

militia leader. In many parts of Nigeria, communities have resorted to armed vigilantes or militias, who work alongside the army, for self-defence.

"The terrorists killed seven people, burnt 10 homes and looted food supplies that were meant to be distributed to residents to celebrate Christmas," Kabu said.

"Four more dead bodies have been found in the nearby bushes by search and rescue volunteers," local community leader Ayuba Alamson said Friday. "This has moved

the death toll to 11." The number of dead could rise as villagers fled to the bush and some people are still unaccounted for.

The assailants, who drove from the group's nearby Sambisa forest enclave, looted medical supplies from a hospital before setting it ablaze, the militia leader said, adding they also burnt a church and abducted a priest.

The village is located only 20 kilometres (12 miles) from Chibok, where Boko Haram kidnapped more than 200 schoolgirls six years ago. — AFP

attending her local church for fear of catching the virus.

"It's Christmas time and people are supposed to be shaking hands, kissing or hugging," she said after missing Christmas midnight mass for the first time in her life.

Despite warm weather, the usual picnicking crowds also avoided the sands of Sydney's Bondi Beach, while the waves were empty of surfing Santas and patrolling police officers enforced social distancing rules.

Pope Francis, spiritual leader of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics, celebrat-

ed Christmas Eve mass in St Peter's Basilica before fewer than 200 masked faithful, mostly employees of the tiny Vatican state.

The mass, traditionally held at midnight, had been moved forward to meet Italy's curfew rules.

Before the pandemic hit, several thousand believers and tourists had obtained precious tickets to attend the papal mass.

St Peter's Square, usually thronged with people on Christmas Eve, was deserted on Thursday evening, illuminated by the glow of its towering Christmas tree and the lights of a police car.

The Christmas Eve mass commemorates the birth of Jesus of Nazareth in Bethlehem.

In his homily, the Argentine pope stressed that the birth of a child reminds us not to spend our days "lamenting our lots, but soothing the tears of those who suffer", serving "the poor".

Francis, who just celebrated his 84th birthday, will give his eighth Christmas message "Urbi et orbi" ("to the city and the world") Friday by video from the apostolic palace, to prevent a crowd from gathering in St Peter's Square. — AFP

## Explosion rocks downtown Nashville

**Nashville (US), Dec. 25:** An explosion shook the largely deserted streets of downtown Nashville early Christmas morning, shattering windows, damaging buildings and wounding three people.

Authorities said they believed the blast was intentional. The FBI is leading the investigation. Police spokesman Don Aaron

said the 6:30 am explosion was believed to be "an intentional act." Police earlier said they believe a vehicle was involved in the explosion.

Aaron said three people were taken to area hospitals for treatment, although none were in critical condition. The FBI will be taking the lead in the investigation, said spokesman Joel Siskovic.

Federal investigators from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives were also on the scene.

The FBI is the primary law enforcement agency responsible for investigating federal crimes, such as explosives violations and acts of terrorism. Investigators from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and

Explosives were also on the scene.

Black smoke and flames were seen early Friday billowing from the area, which is packed with bars, restaurants and other retail establishments and is known as the heart of downtown Nashville's tourist scene.

Buildings shook in the immediate area and beyond after a loud boom

was heard. Buck McCoy, who lives near the area,

posted videos on Facebook that show water pouring down the ceiling of his home. Alarms blare in the background and cries of people in great distress ring in the background. A fire is visible in the street outside.

McCoy said the windows of his home were entirely blown out. — AP

## MJ's | FAIRYLAND

Property sold for \$22 million to Ron Burkle, King of Pop had paid \$19.5 million in 1980s

## Jackson's Neverland ranch sold to billionaire

**Los Angeles, Dec. 25:** Michael Jackson's former Neverland Ranch in California has sold to US billionaire Ron Burkle, his spokesman said on Thursday, reportedly at a steeply discounted price of around \$22 million.

The late "King of Pop" famously converted his sprawling, gated home into a fairytale-themed retreat — complete with toy railroad, Ferris wheel and orangutans — and penned some of his top hits on the ranch.

But Neverland was also the infamous location

where Jackson invited children to visit and sleep over, and where he was accused of molesting young boys. It was rebranded after Jackson's 2009 death as Sycamore Valley Ranch.

Burkle, a Montana-based businessman with investments ranging from supermarkets to the entertainment industry, purchased the ranch "as a land banking opportunity," his spokesman said.

The \$22 million price tag reported by the Wall Street Journal — and confirmed to AFP as roughly



This file photo shows an aerial view of singer Michael Jackson's Neverland Valley Ranch in Santa Ynez, CA.

— AFP

accurate, by a source familiar with the deal — would mark a dramatic

decline from the ranch's \$100 million asking price in 2015.

That lofty fee, dubbed "optimistic" by realtors even at the time, was

## Britain faces major Brexit challenges

**London, Dec. 25:** Britain is set for a new chapter on Friday after securing a hard-fought post-Brexit trade deal with the European Union as EU envoys gathered to discuss an accord reached only after months of tortuous negotiations.

The country will now not tumble off a trade "cliff-edge" come January 1, avoiding a mountain of harmful tariffs and quotas. But major changes are inevitable as Britain definitively quits the EU's single market and free movement with the bloc comes to an end after nearly half a century of integration.

"We shouldn't underestimate the economic shock Britain will experience," one European diplomat said. Britain had been in a standstill transition period still subject to the bloc's rules since formally leaving the EU on January 31.

Standing in front of a Downing Street Christmas tree in a video message late Thursday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson vaunted the hundreds of pages of text as "a 'good deal for the whole of Europe' and a 'present' for Britain.

The address was "a victory speech," Anand Menon, director of the UK in a Changing Europe think-tank, said.

"Boris Johnson was elected Prime minister to get Brexit done, he has now definitively got Brexit done," Menon said. Johnson has come under fierce criticism for his management of the country's Coronavirus outbreak, which has so far left almost 70,000 dead, the heaviest toll in Europe.

In recent days, thousands of trucks have been backed up at Channel ports, after France and other European partners blocked crossings over rising cases of a new virus variant believed to spread faster.

With ferry and tunnel crossings unusually staying open on Christmas Day and British soldiers carrying out virus tests, there were signs of the logjam clearing on Friday. Some had pointed out that the transport chaos, which raised fears of shortages of fresh produce, could be a glimpse of what awaited the country if it crashed out of the EU single market without a deal. — AFP

## US: Fresh outrage over POC's death

**Columbus, Dec. 25:** The fatal shooting of an unarmed person of colour by police in Columbus, Ohio — the US city's second such killing this month — sparked a fresh wave of protests on Thursday against racial injustice and police brutality in the country.

Andre Maurice Hill, 47, was in the garage of a house on Monday night when he was shot several times by a police officer who had been called to the scene for a minor incident.

Seconds before the gunfire, bodycam footage shows Hill walking towards the policeman holding a cell phone in his left hand, while his other hand cannot be seen.

Columbus police chief Thomas Quinlan announced on Thursday that he was moving to fire the officer, Adam Coy, on allegations of "critical misconduct".

"We have an officer who violated his oath to comply with the rules and policies of the Columbus Division of Police," Quinlan said in a statement.

"This violation cost an innocent man his life." According to local media reports, Coy had previously received complaints of excessive force.

Coy and his colleague waited several minutes before approaching Hill, who was still alive, but died later.

Hill, the second African-American killed by police in Columbus in less than three weeks, was not carrying a weapon.

Casey Goodson Jr, 23, was shot several times on December 4 while returning home. His family has said he was holding a sandwich which law enforcement mistook

## 'BALLOON BOY' HOAX PARENTS RECEIVE PARDON

**Los Angeles, Dec. 25:** Two Colorado parents jailed for falsely claiming their six-year-old son Falcon had floated away in a homemade balloon shaped like a flying saucer have been granted pardons by the western US state's governor.

Richard and Mayumi Heene pleaded guilty in 2009 to the "balloon boy" hoax, which became a worldwide media sensation with millions watching live as the silver helium balloon drifted through the skies for 70 miles (110 kilometers). — AFP

for a gun.

Several dozen protesters gathered on Thursday, waving Black Lives Matter signs and calling for justice for people killed in police shootings.

The killings in Columbus come after a summer in which the US was rocked by historic protests against racial injustice and police brutality, sparked by the May killing of African-American man George Floyd.

Floyd, also unarmed, suffocated beneath the knee of a white police officer in Minneapolis. Horrified passers-by filmed his death, with the footage swiftly going viral.

"Once again officers see a person of colour and conclude that he's criminal and dangerous," said lawyer Ben Crump, who defends several families of police brutality victims including Floyd's, on Wednesday. — AFP



# DECCAN Chronicle

26 DECEMBER 2020

## A thorough policy debate is Cong's need of the hour

After the December 19 meeting between the Congress leadership, in effect the Gandhis, and a clutch of so-called dissenters (the G-23), neither side appears to have come away with satisfaction. It is necessary to maintain form and not be carried away by noise, especially in the media whose fundamental purpose these days appears to be to discomfit the opponents of the ruling dispensation. And yet, what have the Gandhis done?

As usual, they do not speak to the people. They have eagerly embraced the vice of non-communication, which in politics is like popping the cyanide pill. They do not take the country into confidence about what they think of the current state of the Congress, the goings-on in the party, possible plans for its rejuvenation, and plans for the country.

It is said the process is on to elect the party president after about 20 years. But what's happening on that front? No one seems to know. Isn't the matter of interest to India? Angry tweets or two-line criticisms of the Prime Minister or

**The mere creation of a parliamentary board or election authority, as the G-23 demand, is of little value**

the BJP government made by some of the Gandhis, even when valid, have failed to enthuse because these lack gravitas. These are not efforts in a wider ecosystem of consciously working toward building a political and an ideological momentum by the Opposition to take on the ruling dispensation.

The Congress may well be the only all-India challenger to the ruling dispensation, if that is by now not a hyperbole, considering how few the elected representatives of the party are in the country. But does the party deserve that tag

when it does not let on how it proposes to go about the task of challenging?

And what of the G-23? In the main, these appear to be a bunch of time-servers who whine because, when the party is in the Opposition, they cannot get to high-sounding posts. They have been out of power six years and fear the worst in the next election. So, they seem to be angling to throw Rahul and Priyanka out of the equation and get to be in positions of decision-making themselves. Barring Kapil Sibal, none amongst them raised the question of party elections and inner-party democracy when the Congress was in power and the gravy train chugged along. Most of them are a liberal, educated lot. But not many amongst them, barring Shashi Tharoor and possibly Manish Tewari, can hope to clear the field in any election where there would be lakhs of voters.

The G-23 grumble about leadership. Everyone does, or should, when there have been no elections for two decades. But few among them are likely to make the cut when proper polls are held because most lack mass appeal and do not have much appeal within the party either. In any case, will better electoral results flow just because the Gandhis step away?

But harping on leadership alone begs the real question: What does the Congress stand for today? If anyone has the answer, let them come to the debate with those propositions. Let them demand a party conclave of the AICC variety where party policies regarding the poor and the middle classes, about industry and agriculture, and above all about secularism, casteism and communalism, are debated threadbare. The mere creation of a parliamentary board or election authority, as the G-23 demand, is of little value.

## Brexit deal: Relief for UK

The United Kingdom may be exulting over its post-Brexit trade deal with the 27-nation EU as negotiators pulled out a "get out of jail" card in the nick of time. It will, however, be entering a world that is far different from the day the referendum delivered its narrow verdict for the Brexiters in June 2016. The trade barriers in place today are real even as globalism has been forced to take a back seat with supply chains having to be closer home ideally for all countries thanks to the restricted movement of people and goods in the new normal of Covid-ridden reality. Also, the highly charged post-pandemic political environment is unlikely to be conducive for anyone to cut trade deals with China, still a very important economic powerhouse.

Notwithstanding all the uncertainties, Boris Johnson must seem a heroic figure once again for having achieved what seemed impossible during 11 months of tortuous negotiations for a non-tariff, non-quota free trade agreement with UK's biggest trading partner. The devil may lie in the details, even so this is nothing but a messy divorce that the more insular parts sought while leaving at least Scotland quite sore about the "sweet sorrow" of separation. How a Joe Biden-led USA views the finality of Brexit will determine the larger economic outcome and analysts are already forecasting a contraction of one per cent in the immediate term and as much as four per cent in the 2020s.

Johnson's gamble in picking the side of the "Leavers" has paid off handsomely. He might see liberation from the shackles of Brussels' bureaucracy bringing greater gains than sovereignty, which may not achieve much in terms of trade even if it was an emotive issue he exploited at the hustings. India should sense an opportunity in dealing afresh with the UK as it can expect to collaborate on AI and other futuristic tech that the UK is eyeing to build upon in its new innings as a wholly sovereign nation with free trade agreements on its mind.

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Subhani



## Little cheer at Xmas time, hope for a healthier 2021



Shobhaa De

The whole world loves Xmas and celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ without necessarily belonging to the Christian faith. What matters is an almost universal spirit of good cheer and bonhomie as people gear themselves for a brand new year and say goodbye to the one that is ending. Well... 2020 has changed everything! It is as if it never happened! Most of us will look back at a blur and wonder — where did the months go? Into one big black hole of sorrow — that's where. For the first time in memory, this is going to be a Blank Xmas, as opposed to the more traditional White Xmas. It feels so eerie and weird here in Mumbai, where Xmas Eve was one of the biggest, most looked forward to party nights on the calendar. Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray has intently stuck in London and has no idea when he can get back home. He has been informed that as a tourist he will only be able to leave London after he takes the vaccine. Again, as a tourist, he is at the bottom of the vaccine ladder — he will have to wait till all the other groups (front-line workers, doctors, senior citizens) get vaccinated first. This means he could be stuck

this gloomy day/year is over.

There has been a great deal of debate over the Maharashtra government's bold decision to impose a night curfew at a time when the city is reeling under a crippling economic slowdown. Health over all else is the right way forward and all that, but at this point we know very little about the behaviour of the latest mutant strain. By all means take every precaution, but why a night curfew? It feels like surrender — a sense of defeat — at a time when everything was looking up and our collective hopes were pinned on the vaccine being made available within a month or so. This fresh development (the mutant strain) has raised a number of new questions and taken us totally off guard. A young man who came over for some work, mentioned the plight of his cousin, who is indefinitely stuck in London and has no idea when he can get back home. He has been informed that as a tourist he will only be able to leave London after he takes the vaccine. Again, as a tourist, he is at the bottom of the vaccine ladder — he will have to wait till all the other groups (front-line workers, doctors, senior citizens) get vaccinated first. This means he could be stuck

**There has been a great deal of debate over the Maharashtra government's bold decision to impose a night curfew at a time when the city is reeling under a crippling economic slowdown**

**Dinners have become sundowners, while others are quickly rejigging their eggnog-turkey-Xmas pudding-mulled wine dinner menus and hosting long brunches instead**

inside his obliging relative's home till March 2021! What a dismal prospect! There he is, this young fellow from Mumbai, staring out of his window at a grey sky outside. Food deliveries are erratic, most grocery stores shut shop by 5 pm. Oxford Street is dead, as are all the other streets, parks and restaurants. His business schedule has gone for a toss, and soon his relative will want him out! What then?

Closer to home, we are trying not to let the pall of gloom and doom affect us by distracting ourselves the best we can. People who had planned elaborate Xmas and New Year's Eve parties have hastily switched over to other programmes. Dinners have become sundowners, while others are quickly rejigging their eggnog-turkey-Xmas pudding-mulled wine dinner menus and hosting long brunches instead. Human beings are so resilient and brilliant! I love the optimism of people with an indestructible "never-say-die spirit" — *khao-pee-jiyo*. Why not? While in Pune recently, sipping tea inside a spacious lounge at the swankiest property in India (the Ritz Carlton), I watched with my jaw dropping to the floor as not one, not two, but three *baraats* of extremely well-heeled families arrived simultaneously! Three heavily decorated white mares, with three overdressed *dulhas* atop each and three sets of garishly clad *baraatis*, added to the mayhem, as guests scurried around, wondering which of the three huge weddings they'd been invited to! Every posh five-star hotel in Pune is fully booked up with lavish shaadis taking place at all available venues. A young jeweller proudly showed me a dazzling diamond set he had created for a local bride — it was priced at more than one crore rupees! Chatting with the family of one of the beautiful brides, her father told me how he had reallocated funds meant for a five-day international extravaganza for his beloved *beti* and invested the funds in a fancy penthouse for the couple. As he put it: "Instead of feeding one thousand guests over five days and hosting multiple functions, we thought this was a better option. It is one way to secure our daughter, plus, it's a solid investment which will appreciate down the line." If there is something like a "silver lining" to the pandemic, maybe it is this — that people are being more sensible about money matters and looking at the future more realistically. "Have money, will spend" has changed to "Have money, will save".

Dear readers... yup... the times have been bad... in fact, terrible. But you are alive... and so am I! As the lucky survivors of this deadly scourge, let us raise a glass to a better, healthier, saner future! See you on the other side! Here's to a Covid-free 2021!

Readers can send feedback to [www.shobhaade.blogspot.com](http://www.shobhaade.blogspot.com)

**If there is something like a 'silver lining' to the pandemic, maybe it is this — that people are being more sensible about money matters and looking at the future more realistically**

### LETTERS

#### EQUALITY IS PARAMOUNT

The editorial (*PM's platitudes at AMU play up contrast to reality*, Dec.25) pummels the PM's rhetoric that equality is a paramount guarantee as enshrined in the Constitution and any intervention of religiosity will be relegated to the back seat. The rape of a Dalit girl and such episodic happenings in the troubled area where he addressed the grads of AMU are also mentioned. It is the duty of every citizen to envision a national endeavour, which is entirely different from national pastime. Will citizens deliver is left to the test of time.

**E.S. Chandrasekaran, Chennai**

#### TRUMP'S LARGESSE

IT SEEMS strange for us that the out-going US president Trump has pardoned 26 people who were serving sentences on serious charges. The list includes the father of his son-in-law, Jared Kushner. This type of pardon reeks of favouritism and nepotism and American citizens have to grin and bear it. Indian Presidents are not endowed with such a privilege to pardon his cronies while demitting office and has to follow due protocol with home ministry in such sensitive matters. The whims and fancies of the temperamental Trump have considerably lowered the dignity of the august office of the president of USA in the eyes of global citizens. We have to wait and watch till January 20 what more can Trump do to tarnish the American system of administration.

**Parthasarathy Mandadi, Tirupati**

#### RAJAJI REMEMBERED

**CRIMINAL LAWYER** CR (Mr C. Rajagopalachari, usually called Rajaji) was the epitome of logical reasoning and he convinced his avid audience that advertising was basically tantamount to pocket-picking! As a clever advocate, he could always give right reasons for wrong conclusions, albeit pursuing facts with vigour, zeal, skill and devotion to the cause he had espoused. Little wonder he was called "the 20th century fox" by the reporting rooms of newspapers. The memory of the just is blessed. Many people just could not agree with his views on the vaccine against tuberculosis BCG, the bomb, the bottle and birth control. How ingeniously he had advanced and marshalled his arguments. What President Franklin Roosevelt said on the death of Mr Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr would apply totally to CR. I should like to emphasise again that it is well worth taking a leisurely look at CR's statue in bronze, sculptured by Mr Kalasagaram Rajagopal at South Block. New Delhi.

**P.R. Krishna Narayanan, Chennai**

Farrukh Dhondy  
**Cabbages & Kings**



*"Sing a song of six pice  
A sauce pan full of Dhanya  
Your mother was an Estonian  
Your father was a Banyia.*

*When the curry was sizzling  
The mirch began to bite  
Wasn't that a dainty dish  
To serve on Holi night?"*

— From **SONG OF THE SINDHI SOPRANOS** (Duet Aria by Thanni Ravan and Getthi Minoani)  
*Translated from the Canadian by Bachchoo*

Of creativity in a plague year... gadget fixing & dosa repair!

No surprise that this has been the year of plague reportage, of hospital admissions, fatality statistics, government bulletins restricting this and that and dissenters who want this unrestricted or that enforced. This Christmas periodicals have taken to offering us Covid-era stories and columns with annals of this plague year.

I have myself been exploring the idea that enforced idleness may be the chief benefactor of creative genius. A recent TV satire had Shakespeare, stuck in an Elizabethan dwelling

during London's plague year, writing *Macbeth*. I thought it was *King Lear*, but perhaps it was both.

A writer friend in Mumbai boasts of writing two books over the period with a couple more to complete. You see? It could become a Latin proverb — "Idlo Ergo Creato" — or some such.

In support of which, gentle reader, I can add my own experiences.

Fed up of the repeated American video jokes and musical clips endlessly, tediously posted on WhatsApp groups I have haplessly become part of, I have taken to switching on my phone only when I wish to call out. It is nobler to call than to receive (hah! another proverb gestating! — *fd*. Get the f— on with it. We don't pay you to fill space! — *Ed*.)

Well, in the main, I have perfected my Parsi-fusion recipes, leading with *Cleopatra ni machchi*, an Egyptian-Parsi concoction, and then *Lagan noo Last Stand Custer*, an invention for Zoroastrian Thanksgiving.

Apart from these inventions, I have been attending to eternally recurring emergencies. As everyone

knows, fate has decreed that you wake up with the most excruciating toothache on the night before a bank holiday shuts down every dentist's *dookaan*. Just so, domestic appliances break down just when the Christmas or Diwali holidays are being observed by plumbers, electricians, washing-machine repair-wallas and the experts we rely on when fate deals us these irritating hands.

In this Covid period every emergency seems to occur on that bank holiday or Christmas, which it now is. Let's say, as did happen, that the box that directs signals from the cable to your TV set is suddenly no longer operative. You call, just for example, Virgin Media, who has supplied your cable network after searching for the right number through your very haphazard filing system. The Internet has, in tandem, stopped working with your smart-TV box so you can't ask it for the connection. You use your mobile to call.

After attempting to remember the password you gave them three years ago and failing, the voice tells you that you can fill in a new password in a link they will send you on your

phone. All done and back on the call, you are told to go to the website because the call centre is flooded and it will take upto an hour or more to get an operator. You've already tried the website and got nowhere, so you try the phone line again. You resolve to hang on and they play you music while you hold which has the single purpose of making you terminate the call.

In one of my books, a character says that if he is on death row and is given a last wish, he would want to be played Ravi Shankar for six hours — at the end of which he would have lost the will to live. For me, substitute poor genius Ravi Shankar with Robindro Shonagheeth or call centre musak. You may have guessed by now that the call was never answered, and the problem left for yours truly to solve.

Reinforced call centres should be provided in these trying times to deal with such technicalities. But what about other little problems?

In attempting to cook dosas from a packet mix the other day, I diligently followed the instructions. Yet the first dosa — and the next and the next one — cracked in the pan,

resembling the old W.H. Auden's canalled features. I poured more mixture on the cracks and the dosas, refusing to obey, as the perfect pancakes I cook do, began developing large holes. I gave up.

It occurred to me that the international India-packet-food company may have a helpline. I could call it. But could the masala potatoes I had separately cooked wait? And anyway. I'd probably get some Australian call centre with the respondent Barry pretending his name was Vardarajan or something and telling me to use moose fat instead of ghee.

I know, I know, he would know all about dosa repair. I was once researching a film on Indian call centres when the instructor was telling a class of trainee operators about British culture and chit chat. He asked the class if they knew what a pie was. A lad answered saying it was 22 over 7, or 3.142. No, no, protested the instructor, he meant the comestible. A young lady put her hand up and said: "Pie is meat concealed under biskoot".

Yes, the Australian would possibly know how to repair dosas!



quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	46,973.54	1.14
Nifty 50	13,749.25	1.09
S&P 500*	3,700.86	0.29
Dollar (₹)	73.54	0.30
Pound Sterling (₹)	100.01	-1.04
Euro (₹)	89.66	0.29
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	50,030	1.19 0.24
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	51.10	-0.10
IN 10-Yr bond yield	5.929	-0.003
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	0.936	-0.019

\* As of 9:30 PM IST

3.97cr ITRs filed for 2019-20 fiscal till December 24

As many as 3.97 crore taxpayers have already filed their income tax returns for assessment year (AY) 2020-21 (fiscal year 2019-20) till December 24, the Income Tax Department said on Friday. “Over 3.97 crore Income Tax Returns have already been filed till 24th of December, 2020. Have you filed yours as yet? If not, please do it TODAY! File your Return of Income Tax & ...Relax!” the department tweeted.

Experts want Centre to pursue FTA with UK, EU



With European Union and the United Kingdom clinching a post-Brexit trade pact, India should now aggressively pursue free trade agreements (FTAs) separately with both the regions, according to experts. Although it is premature to assess the gains for India from the agreement between EU and the UK, Indian goods would not get much benefit from this pact, the experts said.

SJVN gets 3 hydel power projects in Himachal Pradesh

State-owned power producer SJVN Ltd has been awarded three hydroelectric power projects totaling 501 megawatts (MW) by the Himachal Pradesh government. The three projects are to be developed in the Chenab river basin in Himachal Pradesh, SJVN said in a statement. With the latest allocation, the company said it now has six projects with a total capacity of 1,279 MW in the basin.

Aavas Financiers to raise ₹100 cr through bonds

Aavas Financiers on Friday said its board of directors has approved raising ₹100 crore by issuing bonds on a private placement basis. The executive Committee of the board at its meeting held on Friday approved the issuance of rated, listed, senior, secured, redeemable, non-convertible debentures aggregating to ₹100 crore, the company said. The bonds will be issued on a private placement basis, it said.



Job scenario inches closer to pre-Covid levels in Q3

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, DEC. 25

Building on an impressive recovery in the second quarter, employment at the end of the December quarter has almost reached pre-Covid levels.

Before the world's toughest lockdown was announced in India to control the spread of coronavirus, India had jobs of 406 million or 40.6 crore. The employment plummeted after the lockdown had brought the economic activity across the country to a standstill.

In the September quarter, employment had recovered to 39.49 crore from the low of 32.06 crore in the June quarter.

According to data from private think tank CMIE,



the third quarter of fiscal 2019-20 would end with employment of 39.5 crore, which is shy of just one crore jobs to reach the pre-Covid level.

The initial gains were large as self-employed persons got back to their trade when the economy

opened up and desperation drove daily wage labourers to accept any form of employment even at lower wage rates. Soon these options were exhausted and the pace of recovery slowed down during the second quarter. However, employment in

each month of the second quarter was higher than it was in its preceding month.

The recovery was progressing fairly well, as per the data from private think tank CMIE.

At 393.6 million in November, employment was still about 10 million short of what it was in the March 2020 quarter, finds CMIE.

Weekly estimates for the first three weeks of December indicate an improvement in aggregate employment compared to November.

“It is likely that employment could close at 394 million in December. The third quarter of fiscal 2019-20 would end with employment of 395 million,” estimates CMIE.

SIAC appoints panel on Future row

SANGEETHA G. CHENNAI, DEC. 25

In the Amazon-Future Retail case, Singapore International Arbitration Centre will be setting up a tribunal of arbitrators before January 23 as the 90-day period to set up tribunal ends by then.

In the last week of October, Amazon had received an interim award that put on hold the Future Group's sale of its retail business to Reliance Industries. SIAC usually gives a 90-day period to respond to the interim award and suggest the names of their arbitrators.

Amazon had suggested Brussels-based Albert Jan van den Berg, a founding partner of law firm Hanotiau & van den Berg, and the Future Group has nominated Swedish arbitration veteran and Three Crowns LLP founding partner Jan Paulsson. However, Future Retail has not responded yet. SIAC will finalise the members of the panel, which will also include an independent arbitrator.

Once the panel is finalised, the proceedings are likely to start at the earliest. “Usually, the proceedings are likely to get completed in five to six months,” sources said.

According to sources privy to the case, Future Retail will have to respond to SIAC as the Delhi High Court too has validated the award of Emergency Arbitrator. Even if the HC had not validated the arbitrator, it would not have had a bearing on the proceedings of the SIAC.

“India is on a quest to become the hub of arbitration, given the fact that we have so many global transactions. Increasingly all players in the judicial system are becoming more conscious about the need to make arbitration successful in our country. Everyone is working toward this common goal.

In this context, it was very unlikely that the High Court would not validate it. If it had not validated the EA, the order would set a very bad precedent and send a wrong signal to foreign investors about the sanctity of contracts as well as the ease of doing business in India,” said Gopal Jain, senior advocate, Supreme Court of India.

“This case will become a landmark case wherein it will be established once and for all that contract enforcement is of paramount importance in the Indian business ecosystem,” the Supreme Court lawyer added.

COMMERCE MIN PUSHES FOR LEVY ON CARBON BLACK IMPORTS

New Delhi, Dec. 25: The commerce ministry has recommended for extension of anti-dumping duty for five years on carbon black used in the rubber and tyre industry from China and Russia, with a view to guard domestic players from cheap imports from these two countries.

In a notification, the ministry's investigation arm Directorate General of Trade Remedies (DGTR) has said there is a “positive” evidence of likelihood of dumping of ‘carbon black used in rubber applications’ and injury to the domestic industry if the existing anti-dumping duty would be removed. “The authority considers it necessary to recommend continuation of definitive anti-dumping duty” on all imports from China and Russia for a “further period of five years,” it has said. The directorate has recommended two duties, \$494 per tonne for imports coming from China and \$36.17 per tonne from Russia.

The finance ministry takes the final decision to impose this duty. — PTI

Reliance to buy out IMG Global

New Delhi, Dec. 25: Billionaire Mukesh Ambani's Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL) has agreed to buy out IMG Worldwide LLC from their sports management joint venture for ₹52.08 crore.

The nation's biggest company by market value, in a stock exchange filing, said it will buy IMG Worldwide's 50 per cent stake in IMG-Reliance Ltd (IMG-R) for no more than ₹52.08 crore in cash. RIL will rebrand the company after the closure of the deal.

RIL had formed an equal joint venture with IMG Worldwide, an international sports marketing and management company, in 2010 to develop, market and manage sports and entertainment in India.

IMG is a global leader in sports, fashion, events and media, operating in more than 30 countries, and is a part of the Endeavor network.

IMG-R is engaged in the business of creation, management, implementation of sporting, fashion and entertainment events in India.

“The company has entered into definitive agreements to acquire the



shares held by IMG Singapore Pte Ltd in IMG-R, for a cash consideration not exceeding ₹52.08 crore,” the filing said. IMG Singapore Pte Ltd, a wholly-owned subsidiary of IMG, holds 50 per cent of the share capital of IMG-R.

“Post completion of acquisition, IMG-R will become a wholly-owned subsidiary of the company,” RIL said.

IMG-R had a turnover of ₹181.70 crore (including GST of ₹25.79 crore) and a net profit of ₹16.35 crore in FY20. “No governmental or regulatory approvals are required for the aforesaid acquisition and the acquisition is expected to be completed during this calendar year,” said Reliance Industries in the statement. — PTI

Govt. initiatives catapult real estate to recovery

DC CORRESPONDENT HYDERABAD, DEC. 25

While developers helped the real estate sector recover by bringing on several schemes and benefits for property buyers, much of the credit for the revival goes to the government which came through with proactive regulatory changes, according to Anarock Property Consultants CEO Shajai Jacob.

“One of the government's first major initiatives was the formation of a Special Window for Affordable and Mid Income Housing (SWAMIH) fund to aid projects which are stuck in the last mile of construction. As this fund evaluated projects and then began disbursing the monies, market sentiment saw a gradual uptick as many previously stuck projects could get back on track for delivery,” Jacob said.

The primary intention behind these initiatives, he said, was to ensure that more unsold inventories get liquidated at the earliest, bringing

Manufacturing sector is in recovery mode: RBI

Mumbai, Dec. 25: Demand conditions in the manufacturing sector returned to the recovery mode with a softer contraction of 4.3 per cent on year-on-year basis in the second quarter of this fiscal in terms of nominal sales after shrinking 41.1 per cent in the previous quarter that was hit by countrywide lockdowns due to Covid-19, according to RBI data.

The recovery was led by iron and steel, food products, cement, automobile and pharmaceuticals companies, showed the data on the performance of the private corporate sector during the second quarter of 2020-21.

Manufacturing companies reported sales of ₹5,99,479 crore in the second quarter, compared to ₹3,97,233 crore in April-June of FY 2020-21.

The data has been drawn from abridged quarterly financial results of 2,637 listed non-government non-financial (NGNF) companies, the RBI said.

Nominal sales of non-IT services sector also registered lower contraction of 14.5 per cent (Yo-Y) led by expansion in sales of telecommunication and real estate companies.

Sales growth of IT sector companies remained steady at 3.6 per cent (Yo-Y) in Q2 FY 2020-21.

As per the data, sales of non-IT firms and IT firms during the second quarter stood at ₹80,842 crore and ₹1,01,353 crore, respectively. “Operating profits of manufacturing companies increased on the back of savings in expenditure; operating profits of services (both IT and non-IT) companies also increased

Bank deposits register double-digit growth

FC BANKING BUREAU MUMBAI, DEC. 25

Banks have witnessed a 11.3 per cent growth during the last two fortnights as compared to 10.3 per cent in the year ago period.

Additionally, the banking system liquidity is expected to remain in a surplus position aided by sustained growth in bank deposits as against slower growth in the bank credit.

Time deposits accounted for 89 per cent of aggregate deposits compared to 89.5 per cent share as on December 06, 2019, grew at a slower pace compared to demand deposits which account for the balance 11 per cent (10.5 per cent share as on December 06,

2019). The credit investments of schedule commercial banks rose by 9.9 per cent in September, 2020 compared with the year-ago period aided by LTRO, TLTRO, partial credit guarantee schemes of RBI/government of India.

Within bonds and debentures, private corporate bonds and debentures accounted for 52.8 per cent share of bonds/debentures; the public sector accounted for 21.5 per cent and the balance 25.7 per cent is made up by others.

In the first half of the financial year 2020-21, total corporate bond issuances amounted to ₹4.43 lakh crores, 33 per cent higher than ₹3.33 lakh crores in the year-ago period.

in Q2:2020-21,” the RBI said in a statement.

On expenditure, it said input cost pressure from raw materials remained subdued for manufacturing sector in the July-September quarter of the fiscal.

Meanwhile, staff cost growth (Yo-Y) decelerated for IT companies in the second quarter, whereas it remained in contraction zone for the manufacturing and non-IT services sectors.

As per the data, with rise in profits, interest coverage ratio (ICR) of manufacturing companies

improved to 4.6 in the second quarter of 2020-21 from 2.4 in the previous three-month period. The ICR of non-IT services companies remained below one.

Also, profit margins improved across manufacturing and services companies on account of rise in profit from cost saving.

The coverage of companies in different quarters varies, depending on the date of declaration of results. This is, however, not expected to significantly alter the aggregate position, the Reserve Bank said. — PTI

TELCOS SEE ACTIVE SUBSCRIBERS TALLY RISE BY 25L IN OCT

New Delhi, Dec. 25: The telecom industry's ‘active’ subscriber base rose by nearly 2.5 million in October 2020 to touch about 961 million, and user additions benefited from vanishing impact of SIM consolidation triggered from tariff hike, according to a latest report.

ICICI Securities, in its report crunching Trai's telecom subscription data, said Bharti Airtel's active subscribers rose about three million to reach nearly 320 million in October 2020, “most of which was driven by total subscriber net adds, thus indicating improving quality of subscriber addition”.

According to the ICICI Securities' report, Jio's active subscribers rose 1.1 million to 319 million in October.

It added that Vodafone Idea Ltd's (VIL) active subscriber numbers continued to decline, but at a lower pace. — PTI

AIRTEL, VODA IDEA SUBMIT OFFER DETAILS TO TRAI

New Delhi, Dec. 24: Airtel and Vodafone Idea have submitted to Trai the details of segmented or concessional offers that were made to subscribers, and the regulator is in the process of examining the information, sources said.

The move assumes significance as Trai, in early December, had directed the telcos to submit various details of ‘segmented’ offers made to users, after the Supreme Court asked the operators to disclose details of such special tariffs to the sector regulator.

The sources said Airtel and Vodafone Idea have now submitted the requisite details to the regulator, which is in the process of examining the information. Segmented offers are the promotions and discounts dished out to customers showing an inclination towards shifting to other telecom operators. — PTI

DIGITAL | MONEY Investors consider crash in Bitcoin price as an opportunity to accumulate more of them

Bitcoin crushes doubters with a rally of 224%

EDDIE VAN DER WALT LONDON, DEC. 25

Bitcoin just won't go away. The original cryptocurrency again had commentators eating their words in 2020 — yours truly included. It's now time to accept it's here to stay.

Like Monty Python's Black Knight, Bitcoin believers treat near-fatal volatility as mere flesh wounds. Drops of 80 per cent are welcomed as fortuitous buying opportunities. But far from being a weakness, this is evidence of the asset class' longevity. The cryptocurrency rallied 224 per cent this year, bringing to mind the wild advances of 2017 as it

soared to record highs. While the supply side of the schedule is algorithmically defined, I was caught off guard by the ability of the demand side to withstand volatility. I went into more detail in how my thinking on this asset class evolved in this YouTube podcast:

Supply of the digital tokens are capped at a maximum of 21 million which it is expected to reach in 2140, with periodic reductions in the reward for the network of computers that certify transactions. Yet supply dynamics aren't sufficient to guarantee a long-term future. Many assets have artificially limited



supply: Baseball cards, limited print-run art work, and a number of historic Ponzi schemes fall into this category.

What distinguishes the successes is how investors respond to crashes. In most cases, when a vehicle designed purely

billion in March 2013, there have been two cycles of spikes to record highs, followed by drawdowns of more than 80 per cent. Each of those cycles were preceded by a halving of the block reward. The first cycle could be dismissed as an anomaly, the second as a coincidence. But a halving again occurred in May, and the cycle is repeating before our eyes with the cryptocurrency coming within a whisker of the all-time peak last week. To ignore it now is to dismiss the evidence of history.

Like social networks, cryptocurrencies derive their value from the number of users. I could build

a platform with the exact qualities of, and even some improvements over, Facebook, but achieving critical mass is another matter.

The cryptocurrency remains a speculative asset and more needs to happen to secure its claim to preserve wealth over time. Volatility would have to decline, and a reliable link to inflation would have to emerge. But to bet against Bitcoin recovering from the next crash is to bet against experience. And its sheer, bloody-minded survival is what gives it the best chance at eventually becoming the ultimate store of value. — Bloomberg



## SHORT TAKES

## Unadkat to lead Saurashtra squad

**Rajkot:** Seasoned speedster Jaydev Unadkat will lead a 20-member Saurashtra squad at the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy National T20 Championships, which will kick off the 2020-21 domestic season next month. Saurashtra are the reigning Ranji Trophy champions.

The Saurashtra Cricket Association (SCA) on Friday announced the squad through a media release after its senior selection committee held an online meeting. All the regulars — Prerak Mankad, Chirag Jani, left-handed batsman Arpit Vasavada, wicket-keeper-batsman Harvik Desai — have been named in the squad.

The bowling attack also has left-arm pacer Chetan Sakariya and slow-left arm orthodox bowler Dharmendrasinh Jadeja. The tournament begins from January 10 and Saurashtra is placed in Elite Group 'D' along with Services, Vidarbha, Goa, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. The league matches will be played at Indore. — PTI

## Former Eng player Edrich dies at 83

**London:** England's former "fearless" opening batsman John Edrich has died at the age of 83, the England and Wales Cricket Board announced on Friday. Diagnosed with leukaemia in 2000 the left-hander who played for county side Surrey scored 103 first-class centuries. He played 77 Tests, scoring 5,138 runs at an average of 43.54.

## NZ set sights on World Test final

**Mount Maunganui, New Zealand:** New Zealand start their last push to make the World Test championship final on Saturday in the first Test against an injury-hit Pakistan at Bay Oval in Mount Maunganui. The Black Caps are full of confidence coming off a comprehensive 2-0 series win against the West Indies, and need to produce a similar result in the two Pakistan Tests. India and Australia head New Zealand on the Test championship ladder, but if India continue to struggle and New Zealand sweep the series against an under-strength Pakistan, it could be enough to see the Black Caps at Lord's for the final in June. Pakistan rank seventh in the world while Williamson-less New Zealand are equal on points with Australia at the top. — AFP

## 40-day Hungary training for Vinesh

**New Delhi:** The central government has sanctioned a 40-day training camp for champion wrestler Vinesh Phogat along with her personal coach Woller Akos, sparring partner Priyanka Phogat and physiotherapist Poornima Raman Ngomdir for a total cost of ₹15.51 lakh. The camp was sanctioned under the government's Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS). The camp will take place from December 28 to January 24 at the Vasas Sports Club in Budapest, Hungary and from January 24 to February 5 at the Olympic Training Centre in Szczryk in Poland. The total cost includes airfare, local transportation, boarding and lodging charges and out of pocket allowance. — PTI

## Live on TV

## CRICKET

**India vs Australia:** Second Test — Day 2 from 5 am (Sunday) on Sony Ten 1, 3, Sony Six, HD

**Big Bash League:** Sydney Thunder vs Melbourne Renegades from 12.40 pm on Sony Ten 2, HD

## FOOTBALL

**Indian Super League:** Chennaiyin FC vs East Bengal from 7.20 pm on Star Sports 2, 3

**Premier League:** Leicester City vs Manchester Utd from 6 pm; Arsenal vs Chelsea from 11 pm on Star Sports Select 1, HD

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## GLOVES ARE OFF

## Bruised India look to fight back in Boxing Day Test

**Melbourne, Dec. 25:** A few bruised egos will eye redemption when India square off against Australia in the second Test here from Saturday, ready to bounce back in skipper Ajinkya Rahane's hour of reckoning after hitting the 'nadir of 36'.

Seldom has an Indian outfit been at such difficult crossroads in recent years as it is in the aftermath of the humiliating defeat in Adelaide and Virat Kohli's departure for the birth of his child.

But the good thing is that star-in-waiting, Shubman Gill, is ready to honour his team's leap of faith in him when he makes his Test debut at the imposing Melbourne Cricket Ground.

Likewise, young workhorse Mohammed Siraj will step in temporarily to fill the void created by crafty Mohammed Shami's injury and it will be about how Rahane, touted as a bowler's captain, handles him.

It's not about the defeat but the manner of capitulation which can come back to haunt a side that's not short on quality. The next few days will be a test of real character and it's only fair that a strategic shift was on the cards.

A couple of forced and an equal number of tactical changes was always on cards for the visitors as they take on Tim Paine's confident men, spending Christmas without their families.

Gill's languid approach and that extra second while facing fast bowlers, coupled with a way tighter technique than Prithvi Shaw, might just give the dressing room the confidence required in testing times.

He will have the company of Mayank Agarwal, who would be wanting to do an encore, if not better, of his performance at a venue where he made his Test debut.

Similarly, Rishabh Pant is expected to play his fearless brand of cricket which is the need of the hour.

However, the Indians would like to take that big front-foot stride forward while facing Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood not only physically but also figuratively. — PTI



India pacer Mohammed Siraj who will make his Test debut on Saturday takes a break during a training session in Melbourne. — AFP

## PLAYING XI

## INDIA

● Ajinkya Rahane (captain), Mayank Agarwal, Shubman Gill, Cheteshwar Pujara, Hanuma Vihari, Rishabh Pant (wicket keeper), Ravindra Jadeja, Ravichandran Ashwin, Umesh Yadav, Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammed Siraj.

## FOR THE RECORD

## 100TH TEST BETWEEN INDIA &amp; AUSTRALIA

● It will be the 100th Test between India and Australia. Australia have won 43, lost 28 and drawn 28, including a tied match



Australia coach Justin Langer (centre) watches his players with Steve Smith (left) and Marcus Harris during a training session in Melbourne on Friday. — AFP

## Taylor talks up India's chances

**Melbourne, Dec. 25:** Former Australia captain Mark Taylor reckons India's best chance to bounce back from the Adelaide humiliation is to bat first and score plenty of runs in the Boxing Day Test starting here on Saturday.

India were bundled out for their lowest-ever Test score of 36 in their second innings as Australia claimed an eight-wicket win in the pink-ball Test to take a 1-0 lead in the Border-Gavaskar trophy.

"India's best chance is to put runs on the board. They've still got some very fine players. Obviously (Virat) Kohli leaves a big hole in terms of batting and leadership, but they've still got (Cheteshwar) Pujara and

(Ajinkya) Rahane," Taylor told *Wide World of Sports*.

Taylor opined India's potent bowling attack is capable of scalping 10 wickets if their batsmen put enough runs on the board.

"If they put runs on the board, they've got the bowling attack to take 10 wickets. If India have runs to play with, their bowlers can do the job.

"India can't let one bad innings define their tour. If you put the Adelaide match into perspective, they probably won the first two days. Obviously, they got belted on the third, but you're allowed to have one bad day. The key will be to see how they bounce back," Taylor further added. — PTI

## Decision to rotate Saha &amp; Pant is unfair, says Gauti

**New Delhi, Dec. 25:** The Indian team management has made players "insecure" and the decision to rotate between Wriddhiman Saha and Rishabh Pant has been "unfair" on both the wicketkeepers, feels former opener Gautam Gambhir.

Saha was on Friday dropped from the Boxing Day Test due to his poor batting form in the opening game and Gambhir asked whether the team's think-tank will do the same with Pant if he falls in the next two games.

"It's unfortunate and Wriddhiman Saha has played just one Test match in this series and he hasn't done well and gets dropped.

"Imagine what happens to Pant if he doesn't do



Gautam Gambhir

well in this Test or the third Test. What do you do then? Would you go back to Wriddhiman Saha," Gambhir questioned on *Sports Today*.

For Gambhir, it's not lip-service but actions that makes players secure, something that this current regime has failed,

according to him.

"That's why this team looks so unsettled because no one is secured. Professional sport is all about security. Everyone has talent when they are representing the country.

"All they want is security and that assurance that we are there to back you, not just by words but by action," he added.

No one apart from India rotates wicketkeeper based on conditions, said Gambhir.

"Actually, it's been unfair on Rishabh Pant and Wriddhiman Saha both over a long period of time when they have picked and chosen players on conditions. You don't do that with wicketkeepers. You do that with bowlers," he fumed. —PTI

## Proteas seek revenge against Lanka

**Pretoria, Dec. 25:** South Africa return to the test arena for the first time in 11 months on Saturday hoping to arrest a dismal slide in the five-day game and with revenge on their minds as they host Sri Lanka in the first of a two-test series at Centurion Park.

They have lost eight of their last nine tests, a run that began in February 2019 with a shock 2-0 home defeat by Sri Lanka who became the first Asian side to win a series in the country.

They have slipped to number six in the world, behind fifth-placed Sri Lanka, and have a host of

questions to answer, not least around a brittle top six and the balance of the side.

"We've got a young team," captain Quinton de Kock said this week. "We need our younger guys to come through and learn fast so we can have a structured team.

"That's what I would hope for from this season, for the new guys to come in and start scoring runs and putting up their hands," he added.

They start the first test without key fast bowler Kagiso Rabada, who has a groin problem, but will be buoyed by the fact both matches will be played on



South Africa pacer Anrich Nortje during a training session ahead of Sri Lanka Test series.

fast, bouncy Highveld pitches.

Left-arm seamer Beuran Hendricks has been withdrawn from the squad along with batsman Keegan Petersen. Neither player entered the tour bubble when the players gathered on Saturday, after two positive COVID-19 results were detected last week.

Hendricks' absence means Glenton Steunman is almost certain to make his test debut at the age of 29, with his ability to move the ball both ways off the pitch and his excellent recent domestic form putting him ahead of rivals. Wiaan Mulder or

Dwaine Pretorius are likely to play in an all-rounder role.

The make-up of Sri Lanka's side is much harder to predict after they brought a squad of 21 players "to cover all positions", according to coach Mickey Arthur.

They are missing injured stalwart Angelo Mathews and Oshada Fernando in their top-six batting lineup, but Arthur is upbeat about their ability to cope with South Africa's quicks.

Sri Lanka have not played any tests since a victorious tour to Zimbabwe that ended in late January. — Agencies



India's stand-in captain Ajinkya Rahane (left) is all ears to coach Ravi Shastri during a training session in Melbourne on Friday. — AFP

## Rahane wary of Oz mind games

**Melbourne, Dec. 25:** India's stand-in captain Ajinkya Rahane on Friday said he would rather focus on his team than worrying about Australia's "mind games" ahead of the 'Boxing Day' Test starting here on Saturday.

Australia coach Justin Langer had on Thursday said he would be "happy" if the Indian team is under a bit of stress after the humiliating defeat in the first Test and would like to put pressure on Rahane, who is taking charge in absence of regular skipper Virat Kohli.

"Australians are very good at playing mind games and I will let them do that. We are focussing on ourselves, what we want to do as a unit and we are going to back our every individuals," Rahane said on the eve of the match.

Not as expressive or eloquent as Kohli, Rahane repeated his answers in a loop which was all about "playing to your strengths and backing each other".

"It is a proud moment for me leading India, obviously it is a great opportunity, responsibility as well but I don't want to take any pressure," said the depend-

able middle-order batsman.

"I think what I want to do is back my team. So focus is not on me, it is all about team and how we want to do well as a team. We are focussing on that," he added.

Even skipper Kohli, before leaving for India for the birth of his child, urged Rahane to be himself and play fearless cricket.

"Yeah, Virat spoke to all of us, before leaving. We had our team dinner in Adelaide, so he spoke to all of us about staying in the moment, playing for each other and yeah enjoying each other's success and help each other out on the field," he further added.

Rahane said one hour of poor cricket on the third morning in Adelaide doesn't define this team.

"Talking about last Test match, see comparatively we had two good days, just one bad hour, where we actually lost it completely," he said.

"The chat was all about backing myself as an individual and as team, play to our strengths and whatever we have planned in the first Test match just stick to that," he added. — PTI

## I SAID SORRY TO VIRAT AFTER RUN OUT: AJINKYA

**Melbourne, Dec. 25:** Ajinkya Rahane on Friday said he had apologised to Virat Kohli after his horrible mix-up with him led to the India captain's game-changing run out in the first Test against Australia in Adelaide.

Kohli was looking solid before the suicidal run out for 74 on the opening day at Adelaide Oval. Upon realising that there was no run in it, Rahane decided to send back Kohli but it was too late by then.

What followed was an inexplicable batting collapse, due to which the visitors crumbled to their lowest Test score of 36 in their second innings.

"After the end of day's play I went and said sorry to him (Kohli) but he was all okay, he was okay about it," Rahane said on the eve of the second Test here.

"We both understood that the situation we were in, we were going well at that point, but such things happen in cricket, you got to respect that and you got to move forward," he added.

Stand-in skipper Rahane admitted that the run out handed Australia the momentum as they recorded an eight-wicket win inside two and half days. — PTI

## Chennaiyin brace for EB challenge

**Vasco, Dec. 25:** A victory over FC Goa boosting their confidence, two-time champions Chennaiyin FC would look for another positive result when they take on a winless SC East Bengal in their Indian Super League match here on Saturday.

Chennaiyin are meeting the Kolkata side for the first time ever and they would hope to continue the momentum after beating a strong FC Goa on December 19.

A win would propel CFC into the top half of the standings.

SC East Bengal, on the other hand, are still searching for a win after six matches. They have scored just three goals and conceded 11.

Also, luck has not been on their side though their performance has improved in the last two games.

Coach Robbie Fowler will be hoping that his men will come up with a better performance and notch up a win.

He insisted that his players had put behind the disappointment of allowing Kerala Blasters to snatch a draw with a late equaliser in their last match.

CFC will be wary of the threat SC East Bengal poses as the Kolkata team motivated to get its first win. Three former Chennaiyin FC strikers are now part of SC East Bengal — Jeje Lalpekhlua, Balwant Singh and CK Vineeth. And, they will be keen to do their best in an important game.

Chennaiyin will be hoping that skipper Rafael Crivellaro and India international Anirudh Thapa will continue their good work in the game against FC Goa. — PTI