

DECCAN Chronicle

THE LARGEST CIRCULATED ENGLISH DAILY IN SOUTH INDIA

COIMBATORE | SUNDAY 27 | DECEMBER 2020

WEATHER



Max: 31°C
Min: 18°C
Rainfall: Nil

ASTROGUIDE

Sarvari: Margazhi 12
Tithi: Thrayodashi
Star: Krithigai/ Rohini
Rahukalam:
4.30 pm to 6 pm
Yamagandam:
12 noon to 1.30 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 3.40 PM
MOONSET TOMORROW 4.44 AM

CORONA COUNT

CASES	DEATHS
(+18,536)	(+280)
1,01,88,353	1,47,659

covid19india.org

STATE GOVERNMENT BULLETINS

(+ 1,019)
TN: 8,13,161 12,059

WORLD CONFIRMED CASES

8,04,42,779

DEATHS

5,66,80,610

COUNTRIES
AREAS WITH
CASES 218

worldometers.info

Farm laws: Kerala

Assembly session likely to be held on Dec. 31

Thiruvananthapuram: Decks appear to have been cleared for the one-day session of the Kerala assembly on December 31 to discuss and pass a resolution against the three contentious farm laws of the Centre against which farmers are protesting in Delhi. Raj Bhavan sources said the clarification sought by Governor Arif Mohammed Khan has been given by the government and Khan could give his assent for the session by Monday.

Millions more in tough lockdown in UK

London: Millions more people across different parts of the UK entered tougher lockdown restrictions from December 26, the day after Christmas marked annually as Boxing Day, as part of plans announced earlier this week to contain the rapid spread of a highly transmissible variant of coronavirus.

COUNTER

POINT



No need to panic, It's safe!

Oxford vaccine front-runner for clearance in India

New Delhi, Dec. 26: With preparations underway for a possible vaccine-rollout by January, the Indian drug regulator is looking at the United Kingdom, which sources believe may give its nod to the Oxford Covid-19 vaccine next week, before deciding on giving emergency use authorisation to the Serum Institute that is manufacturing the shots here.

Once the UK drug regulator gives its approval to the Oxford vaccine, the expert committee on Covid-19 at the

● **The Pfizer vaccine has already been approved by several countries including the UK, the US, and Bahrain.**

Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) will hold its meeting and thoroughly review the safety and immunogenicity data from the clinical evaluations conducted abroad and in India before granting emergency authorisation for

the vaccine here, official sources said.

The process of granting emergency use approval for Bharat Biotech's Covid-19 vaccine Covaxin may take time as its phase 3 trials are still underway, while Pfizer is yet to make a presentation.

"Going by this, Oxford vaccine Covishield is likely to be the first to be rolled out in India," a source said.

Serum Institute of India (SII) last week also had submitted some additional data required by the Drug

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Actor Rajinikanth progressing well



WORLD | 5

US says ready for stronger post-Brexit

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Bumrah, Ashwin skittle Aussies out for 195



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Farmer unions agree to talk to Centre on Dec. 29

DC CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 26

As the protests demanding the repeal of three new farm laws entered the 31st day, the protesting farmer unions on Saturday decided to resume talks with the government. They have proposed December 29 as the date for the next round of negotiations with the government and sent the draft of the issues to be discussed. These include repeal of the three farm laws, making minimum Support Price a legal guarantee and changes in the draft Electricity Amendment Bill to safeguard the interests of the farmers.

The decision to resume talks was taken at a meeting of Sanyukt Kisan Morcha, an umbrella body of 40 farmer unions protesting at various Delhi border points against three farm laws. Rakesh Tikait, a senior leader of Bharatiya Kisan Union, however, said the modalities for the repeal of three farm laws and guarantee for MSP should be part of the agenda for talks with the government. "We have decided to hold talks with the government on December 29," he said.

The announcement for fresh discussions between farmers' representatives and the government comes

● **The decision to resume talks was taken at a meeting of Sanyukt Kisan Morcha, an umbrella body of 40 farmer unions protesting at various Delhi border points against three farm laws**

a day after Prime Minister Narendra Modi lashed out at the Opposition for the first time since the beginning of the protests. On Friday he stressed that farmers' lands won't be taken away, adding that "some people are spreading lies". The Prime Minister also released a financial aid of ₹18,000 crore under the PM-Kisan cash transfer scheme. Five rounds of talks between the government and farmers have failed in the last couple of weeks.

Carrying ration and other essential items with them, several batches of farmers from Punjab headed towards Delhi borders to join the peasants protesting against the Centre's new agriculture-related laws. According to farmer union leaders, peasants from various places including Sangrur, Amritsar, Tarn Taran, Gurdaspur and Bathinda districts were headed towards Singhu and Tikri borders.

Cong to launch 'save farmer, save cow' campaign in UP

DC CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 26

All India Congress Committee (AICC) general secretary Priyanka Gandhi is likely to put in an appearance at the march the party is organising in Uttar Pradesh in an attempt to corner the state government on the twin issues of farmer agitation and cow protection, the latter being one of the state government's flagship schemes.

Ms Gandhi had in a letter to chief minister Yogi Adityanath on December

22 said she was extremely pained after seeing images of cow carcasses from Saujana cowshed. She said there are no details yet regarding the cause of the death of so many cows but the images suggested that the deaths occurred due to lack of fodder and water. She further added that the Congress government in Chhattisgarh has handled this issue much better by implementing the 'Godhan Nyaya Yojana', and the UP government should take a cue from the scheme.

BJP's ally in Rajasthan quits NDA over new farm laws

Jaipur, Dec. 26: Rashtriya Loktantrik Party (RLP) convenor and Nagaur MP Hanuman Beniwal on Saturday announced a split from the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) over the Centre's new farm laws. "I am not stuck with Fevicol with the NDA. Today, I

separate myself from the NDA," Mr Beniwal said while addressing a farmers' rally in Shahjahanpur in Alwar district. On Friday, Mr Beniwal had announced a march to Delhi in support of farmers' organisations holding a protest against the contentious laws. —PTI

DDC polls in J&K 'moment of pride' for India: Modi

New Delhi, Dec. 26: Prime Minister Narendra Modi asserted on Saturday that free and transparent DDC polls in Jammu and Kashmir coupled with voters' keen participation are a "moment of pride" for India, while hitting back at his rivals for giving him "lessons in democracy".

In a swipe at Rahul Gandhi, who alleged recently that there is no democracy in India, Modi said while his government has completed three-tier panchayat polls in Jammu and Kashmir in over a year of the region becoming a union territory, the Congress dispensation in Puducherry has not carried out local body elections despite a Supreme Court order.

Launching the Ayushman Bharat scheme via a video-conference to extend health insurance



benefits to all residents of Jammu and Kashmir, he said the three-tier panchayat system has fully taken shape here, describing it as a realisation of Mahatma Gandhi's dream of 'gram swaraj' (village self-rule).

He then added that he would like to share his pain before the nation on this occasion. "Some people in Delhi curse Modi day in and day out and hurl abuses. They regularly offer me lessons in democracy. I want to show them the mirror today," he said. —PTI

Only BJP can throw out infiltrators in Assam, says Shah

MANOJ ANAND | DC
GUWAHATI, DEC. 26

Union home minister Amit Shah sounded the poll bugle in Assam on Saturday by saying that the state's two biggest problems — infiltration and floods — could be resolved only by the BJP government. Asserting that only the BJP government can stop infiltration, which affects our culture and snatches away opportunities from youth, Mr Shah, who is on a three-day visit to Assam and Manipur to oversee poll strategies of BJP in the 2021 elections, accused the Congress of doing nothing to protect the rich culture of the state. ■ P4

MP also clears anti-conversion law

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY | DC
BHOPAL, DEC. 26

Madhya Pradesh Cabinet on Saturday cleared the Dharma Swatantra (Religious Freedom) Bill, 2020, known in political parlance as "love jihad" Bill.

The draft bill, which may go through in the Assembly during its three-day winter session commencing on

December 28, provides a maximum of 10 years imprisonment and Rs 1 lakh fine to the perpetrators of forced religious conversion of a girl for marriage. The new bill has the provision of declaring such a marriage null and void.

The bill puts onus on the accused and those associated with the accused, including organisations and institutions, to prove their inno-

cence.

Home minister Narottam Mishra said the Bill provides for imprisonment of 1-5 years and fine of Rs 25,000 for forced conversion and if the victim of forced religious conversion belonged to scheduled caste or scheduled tribe or is a under aged, the offence would attract a minimum jail term of 2-10 years with a maximum penalty of ₹1 lakh.

Controller-General of India (DCGI), the sources said.

Amid fears about the mutated variant of SARS-CoV-2 detected in the UK, government officials recently said that it will have no impact on the potential of emerging vaccines that are being developed in India and other countries.

Bharat Biotech, SII and Pfizer had applied to the DCGI seeking emergency use authorisation for their Covid-19 vaccines earlier this month. ■ P4

THE PARTY REMAINS WITH NDA, SAYS JAYAKUMAR

Accept EPS as CM for truck with us: AIADMK

A. ARUL PALANI | DC
CHENNAI, DEC. 26

Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami is the chief minister candidate of the AIADMK and the party will have an alliance only with parties which accept this, fisheries minister D. Jayakumar said here on Saturday.

The minister's assertion comes a day after Union information minister and senior BJP leader Prakash Javadekar refused to comment on AIADMK's chief minister candidate and evaded questions on AIADMK naming Mr Palaniswami as the leader and whether BJP endorsed it. Mr Jayakumar said the AIADMK remains with NDA and that the alliance



is intact.

"AIADMK's alliance with the BJP will continue," Mr Jayakumar said and recalled that another Union minister had made it clear that the BJP will stay with an alliance led by ADIADMK in the state. "The status quo remains," he said. "It was with the NDA yesterday, today and will be tomorrow."

AIADMK will kick start the campaign in a confer-

ence on Sunday.

The meeting will be addressed by Mr Palaniswami, his deputy O. Pannierselvam, ministers and party leaders at the YMCA ground in Royapettah.

Political pundits say the rift in the alliance has already started showing as alliance partners PMK, DMDK and BJP seek the ruling party to allot more seats for them to contest in the forthcoming elections.

Besides, state BJP president L. Muguran maintained that the party's national leadership would decide who will lead the Tamil Nadu assembly elections and who will be the chief minister candidate. —PTI

Two held for honour killing in Kerala

Palakkad, Dec. 26: Two people, including the father-in-law of a 27-year old man, who was hacked to death in Palakkad district on Friday, have been taken into custody in connection with the incident, which is suspected to be a case of honour killing.

Aneesh, a painter, had married Haritha (21) some three months ago. Due to the differences in their caste and financial status, the woman's father Prabhukumar and uncle Suresh Kumar used to threaten them often, Aneesh's relatives told the

media.

Aneesh, along with his younger brother Arun, was riding a motorcycle and had stopped to get some soft drinks when they were waylaid and attacked near Thenkurissi on Friday evening. —PTI

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SHORT TAKES

Citizen group demands DBT transfer of Pongal cash

DC CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI, DEC. 26

A citizen group is demanding that the distribution of Pongal cash be done through direct benefit transfer (DBT) route instead of selected points in order to avoid stampedes.

Pointing out a stampede was reported in Madurai while beneficiaries were collecting tokens, People's Awareness Forum in the City said in a statement that Tamil Nadu has high banking penetration with nearly 90 per cent holding bank accounts. There are also Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana account holders and DBT was successfully carried out in 2015 when the Jayalalitha government distributed relief for flood victims. It also recalled the incident of a deadly stampede on Dec. 18, 2005 at a school at MGR Nagar in Chennai while relief supplies were being distributed by the Government for flood victims, killing 42 people and injuring 37.

Firm to use advanced tech, AI for water treatment

Chennai, Dec 26: The water technology multinational VA Tech Wabag is focusing on providing sustainable technology led innovations that are helping in treating and extending the life span of usage of the most important resource - water.

Post Covid, the heightened sense of hygiene has resulted in an increase in water consumption. Water joined gold, oil and other commodities traded on Wall Street, highlighting the fact that the life-sustaining natural resource may become scarcer.

The company's state-of-the-art R&D centres have developed advanced technologies to treat wastewater which can directly be used as water of potable grade. Mr. Rajiv Mittal, MD & CEO, VA Tech Wabag, said "To tackle the water related challenges, Wabag has been successful in pioneering removal of micro pollutants and has also licensed and worked upon its technology which will play a significant role in wastewater treatment in the future."

The 100% resource recovery and utilisation out of waste water treatment with byproducts being utilised to render the facilities self-sustainable and eco-friendly makes Wabag a leader in water treatment.

Actor Rajinikanth progressing well

Hyderabad/Chennai, Dec. 26: Actor-politician Rajinikanth, who was admitted to the Apollo Hospitals in Hyderabad for severe blood pressure fluctuations, is progressing well, the hospital said on Saturday.

The actor's blood pressure was, however, still on the higher side and any decision on his discharge could be made only on Sunday morning, according to the hospital.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister K Palaniswami spoke to Rajinikanth over phone and enquired about his health, an official release said, adding that the CM prayed for the star's speedy recovery.

Investigations have not revealed anything 'alarming' so far about his



health, the hospital said in a bulletin. "Mr Rajinikanth who was admitted in the hospital yesterday is progressing well. He has had an uneventful night and his blood pressure is still on the higher side although under better control than yesterday," the bulletin revealed.

His blood pressure medications were being titrated carefully and he would

continue to be under close monitoring. He has been advised complete rest in view of his labile blood pressure and visitors were not being allowed to meet him.

Rajinikanth was on Friday admitted to Apollo Hospitals in Hyderabad for severe blood pressure fluctuations. He was in the Telangana capital since December 13 to shoot for Tamil flick, Annathe, a Sun Pictures production and he isolated himself after four of the crew members tested COVID-19 positive. The superstar, however, tested negative.

The actor is set to launch his own political party next month ahead of the 2021 Tamil Nadu Assembly elections. —PTI

Govt to remove bull bars, crash guards from VIP vehicles

T.SUDHEESH | DC
CHENNAI, DEC. 26

Setting new norms to ensure the safety of passengers as well as pedestrians the government has decided to remove bull bars, crash guards and protruding bumpers, particularly in official vehicles of VIPs as they are a naked violation of the Motor Vehicles (MV) Act.

Issuing a letter to all official department heads in the State on Saturday, Chief Secretary K. Shanmugam said the fitment of crash guards or bull bars and other unauthorised fitments or accessories poses serious safety concerns to pedestrians as well as occupants of the vehicle. All officials are to ensure the vehicles comply with the MV Act 1988 and unauthorised fitments in government vehicles are removed immediately.

The letter also mentions an interim order by Madras high court asking the gov-



ernment to take action against this menace. Further, Union Ministry of Road Transport and Highways had issued an order on December 7, 2019 that the fitments of crash guards or bull bars in vehicles is a violation of section 52 of the MV Act and attracts a penalty under section 190 and section 191 of the MV Act 1988. It called for strict action against unauthorised fitments.

The letter comes at a time when a high court division bench comprising Justice M

Sathyanarayanan and Justice R Hemalatha in November directed the Tamil Nadu chief secretary to file his response by January 20, 2021.

Pointing out that many violations, including affixing stickers in the windshield and rear view mirrors in auto rickshaws and number plate violations are not acted upon by the authorities, the court had said that the authorities concerned would face consequences for such continuous infarctions of the law.

'Higher education can stop child marriages'

Chennai, Dec. 26: Justice V.Bhavan Subbarayan, Judge, Madras high court appreciated the pioneering efforts taken by VIT, Chennai to complete courses in online mode without any disruption and conducting the convocation ceremony virtually in all its grandeur. Presiding over the convocation, she called upon students to keep upskilling and contributing towards productivity and efficiency. "Innovate and learn to relearn for sustenance; solve complex problems of the contemporary, real world," she said while recalling Swami Vivekananda's inspiring call to youth - "Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached."

As many as 2,039 students who completed their courses were eligible for their degrees. Dr. G. Viswanathan, Founder and Chancellor, requested Central and State governments to spend more on higher education. "Development of a country depends on the development of higher education and higher education is not for academic qualification alone; it increases employment opportunities, economic productivity and growth," he significantly added that "Higher education can stop child marriages", he said. Vice Presidents Mr.Sankar Viswanathan, Dr.Sekar Viswanathan, Mr. G.V.Selvam and Asst. Vice president Ms.Kadhambari S. Viswanathan were present.

ISRO developing green propulsion: Sivan

HUMAN SPACE MISSION

Chennai, Dec 26 (PTI) Indian Space Research Organisation Chairman K Sivan on Saturday said the space agency was developing 'green propulsion' for its ambitious human space flight mission, 'Gaganyaan'. It may be adopted for use in every stage of a rocket.

ISRO has made space grade lithium-ion batteries and this technology is useful for mass adoption of electric vehicle", he noted. On the green pro-

pellant, Sivan said, "Even in the rocket propulsion, ISRO is developing green propulsion for its human space flight mission. In future, all the propulsion stages may adopt green propulsion," he added.

According to ISRO, polar satellite launch vehicle (PSLV), a trusted workhorse of space scientists, is a four stage rocket filled with fuel which pushes

the rocket to ensure that the satellite it carries is placed in the intended orbit. GSLV or a geo-stationary launch vehicle (GSLV) is a three stage rocket with a cryogenic upper stage.

The Bengaluru-headquartered space agency had planned to launch its maiden human space flight mission 'Gaganyaan' by December 2021. But

early this month, ISRO indicated that it is likely to be delayed by one year due to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic.

Addressing students in Chennai through virtual platform, the ISRO chief encouraged them to take up calculated risk as it would safeguard them from 'absolute failure'.

"You may fail, but each failure would provide a valuable lesson. I can say with great confidence that India's space programme

has been built on spectacular failures and each failure has resulted in improvements in our system", he said.

Referring to the space sector reforms announced by the Centre in June, he said, "the government has already announced space sector reforms for greater participation of non-governmental entities in space activity".

"Our next PSLV (polar satellite launch vehicle) launch will have satellite

from start-up agencies which will be the first product of this reform," he said.

The Digital India initiative by the Centre was a key area to leverage and ISRO has already initiated reforms to make digital assets available easily to industry as well as for startups for making innovative applications in navigation, earth observation as well as disaster management, he said. —PTI

Northern section of Chennai metro to open in January



Saturday's trial run between Washermanpet Metro Station and Thiruvottriyur/Wimco Nagar Metro Station. —DC

DC CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI, DEC. 26

Chennai Metro made a successful trial run between Washermanpet and Wimco Nagar Metro Stations on Saturday with a diesel locomotive, covering 9.05 kms each way. This is considered a leap in CMRL footsteps. The installation of systems including, ballast-less track, overhead electrification, signalling, tunnel Ventilation, HVAC, platform screen doors and ticket

gates are underway in this stretch to achieve early commissioning.

This trial will pave way to complete the Phase I extension works from Washermanpet to Thiruvottriyur (Wimco Nagar) covering 9.051 kms with 8 Metro stations (2 Underground and 6 elevated) will connect the northern part of the city to the CBD area. The target date for opening the section to commuter traffic is end January 2021.

DOCS LOOK AT LONGEVITY IN DIABETIC FOOT PATIENTS

Chennai, Dec 26: The main topic of discussion at a three-day virtual international conference of the Diabetic Foot Society of India (DFTSI) and Diabetic Foot Association" was on how to achieve longevity in diabetic foot patients. A number of technological and surgical innovations which help in preventing and healing diabetic foot infections and amputa-

tions were showcased.

Other issues discussed during the three-day virtual interactive sessions including the diabetic foot in time of Covid, Telemedicine in Diabetic foot management, managing diabetic during surgery, facilitation of diabetic care and a structured approach to educate and increase awareness among the non-specialist, general,

family and nurses to battle against diabetes related complications.

The conference was organised by Dr. Rajesh Kesavan and Dr. V B Narayananmurthy. Dr. Arun Bal, President of the society, said, "The economic cost of diabetic foot is pretty high and we should look at ways to prevent these complications from happening in the future".

Bribe: Village panchayat chief arrested

ZAKEER HUSSAIN | DC
SALEM, DEC 26

Sleuths of the DVAC wing here on Saturday arrested a former panchayat president for accepting a bribe of ₹2.35 lakh from a registrar.

A DVAC team had raided the registration office at Suramangalam here in October and had seized an amount of ₹2.53 lakh

unaccounted cash there. A case was also registered against Suramangalam registrar, Kanagaraj, and investigations were underway.

In the midst of this, a former panchayat president of the Omalur Kongupatti panchayat, Ammasi, has approached the DVAC pleading them to recommend depart-

ment disciplinary action against Kanagaraj, without prosecuting him. He had also approached Kanagaraj and sought ₹2.35 lakh from him for recommending departmental disciplinary

action to the DVAC officials, instead of a court case. Ammasi had told Kanagaraj that some of the DVAC officials were known to him, and that he could get small favours worked out through them.

But Kanagaraj lodged a complaint with the DVAC about Ammasi. Following this, DVAC sleuths arrested Ammasi as he was receiving Rs 2.35 lakh as bribe from registrar Kanagaraj in Alagapuram area.

Movie review

A quirky film worth a watch

CHIYANGAL

CAST: Karikalan, Risha, Nalinikanth

Direction: Vaigarai Balan

RATING: ★★★

ANUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN

Vaigarai Balan, who made his debut with the critically acclaimed *Kadigara Manithargal*, has come out with *Chiyangal*, which has a quirky subject and is set in a rural area. It addresses the problems faced by aged people, their dreams and joys and how society looks at them.

Set against the backdrop of Megamalai in Theni, where 'Chiyangal' is a word to denote senior citizens, it is a tale of seven close friends who are always together and who indulge in funny activities.

They enjoy each other's company and try to live life to the fullest, although each one has their own problems at home.

Sadayan (Nalinikanth) is one of them and he nurtures the dream of flying in an airplane. A YouTube enthusiast who watches by chance the culinary skills



of the gang gets them a chance to go to Chennai. Meanwhile, two of the Chiyangs perish due to maltreatment from family members, which leaves the others shattered. The rest set off on their journey to Chennai to realise their dreams, but fate has something else in store.

Nalinikanth and Pasupathyraj are the only two known faces in the film

and they prove their versatility. The rest — Eashwar Thiyagarajan, Samuthiraseeni, Durai Sundaram, Sakthivel and Narayanasamy — are all debutants and the credit goes to Balan for extracting natural performances from them. Producer Karikalan who essays a crucial role and Nisha as his love interest play effective foils. Two actresses who play Nalinikanth's wife and daughter, put up a good show.

The film works mainly due to the director's realistic depiction of village life, people's emotions and their joy without taking too many cinematic liberties. Cinematography by Babukumar complements the proceedings. Minor glitches notwithstanding, this film is worth a watch for its honest attempt.

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The film works mainly due to the director's realistic depiction of village life, people's emotions and their joy without taking too many cinematic liberties. Cinematography by Babukumar complements the proceedings. Minor glitches notwithstanding, this film is worth a watch for its honest attempt.

OPK travels in uncharted territory

ORU PAKKA KATHAI
CAST: Kalidas Jayaram, Megha Akash

Direction: Balaji Dharaneetharan

RATING: ★★★

ANUPAMA SUBRAMANIAN

Director Balaji Dharaneetharan of *Naduvula Konjam Pakkaththa Kanom* had asserted that his long-delayed film *Oru Pakka Kathai* (which has hit OTT finally) is a fresh script and has not been touched upon even now by any filmmaker. True to his word, *OPK* has an interesting premise and travels in uncharted territories.

The film begins with a religious discourse at heroine Meera's (Megha Akash) middle class home, which actually lays the foundation for the unusual proceedings. Meera is in college and is in love with her classmate Saravanan aka Sara (Kalidas Jayaram), also middle class. The parents of both know about their relationship and have given their nod for the marriage, but with the condition that the wedding would take place once Sara clears his arrears and gets



a decent job.

Things seem to be going well enough when a twist in the tale turns the couple's life upside down. Meera is pregnant, and Sara is informed of it. The families are shocked, but the young pair is confused as their relationship wasn't physical! The doctors who test Meera also confirm that she is still a 'virgin'.

One can now connect with the earlier discourse where God takes avatars to perform miracles. The remainder of the film is about how Meera became pregnant and what happens to her child, with the story taking a detour to take in God men, faith, and supersti-

tion. There's also a parallel small episode where a school kid Sethu considers himself to be an avatar of god.

Kalidas and Megha look fresh and cute and deliver a credible performance and the actors who play their parents are equally impressive. For a change, Balaji has written lovable characters that are caring and gentle even if they meet up with untoward incidents.

Like his earlier film *NKPK*, Balaji's brilliant narration laced with humour even in tense moments works well in this film too. The director is able to communicate effectively without dialogues

with only Govind Vasantha's BGM playing in the backdrop. And Vasantha's music is a big plus which takes forward the story as envisioned by the director.

The one problem with the film is that it starts off well as an interesting family drama but deviates into bigger topics like science (parthenogenesis) and religious faith, which reduces its sheen. There's a message though that's conveyed towards the end.

There is originality in his writing and good intention to narrate a story in an enjoyable manner which makes it, perhaps, worth the time and money.

SHORT TAKES

CPI observes Mupperum Vizha

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUCHY, DEC. 26

The Tiruchy district unit of the Communist Party of India (CPI) celebrated the party's 96th anniversary and the 96th birthday of senior leader R Nallakannu and the 19th death anniversary of freedom fighter KTK Thaangamani, as 'Mupperum Vizha' by hoisting party flags in more than 50 locations in the party's urban district, in and around Tiruchy, on Saturday.

Party's Tiruchy urban district secretary, Dravidamani, and former secretary, K Suresh, said in a release that similar celebrations were also held in different parts of the district.

Intruder beaten to death

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUCHY, DEC. 26

A middle-aged person was killed when he was allegedly attacked by villagers in Allur, in the city's suburbs, on Friday. Police said, two persons had scaled the compound wall of one Venkatesan of Allur and attempted robbery there. But Venkatesan noticed them and raised an alarm. Neighbours rushed in and caught hold of the duo. The deceased, identified as Deepu of Thiruvananthapuram, had attempted to threaten the villagers with a knife. But he was overpowered by the villagers and severely beaten up. On an alert, police rushed to the spot and shifted injured Deepu to the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial government hospital here, where he died on Saturday, police added. Police secured Aravind, partner of the deceased, and are investigating.

AIADMK alliance intact: Vaithilingam

DC CORRESPONDENT
THANJAVUR DEC. 26

The AIADMK alliance formed during the last LS election is intact, and it still continues, said R Vaithilingam, AIADMK deputy coordinator and RS MP here, on Tuesday. He told presspersons that people welcomed the good works and welfare measures done by the AIADMK government under the chief ministership of Edappadi K Palaniswami. Some of the schemes welcomed by the people are 7.5 percent reservation for government school students in medical courses, Amma mini-clinics, pongal parisu and the kudimaramathu works. The AIADMK will win the coming election and form the government again. "Unable to digest this, the DMK is organising grama sabha meetings with slogans to reject AIADMK in the coming election. But that will not work out, as people are with us," he added.

Two officials suspended

DC CORRESPONDENT
ARIYALUR, DEC. 26

Collector T Rathina suspended two officials of the local administration department for being negligent in duty by not distributing dustbins to people under the solid waste management scheme, at Palayakudi village panchayat, in Sendurai panchayat union of the district, on Saturday.

Lt Guv-CM slugfest continued unabated

Covid, cyclones dealt blows to Pondy in 2020

Puducherry, Dec. 26: The Covid-19 pandemic dealt a severe blow to this largely tourism-dependent union territory while it faced nature's fury in the form of back to back cyclones in 2020 that further strained its purse.

The UT's top two heads - Lt Governor Kiran Bedi and Chief Minister V Narayanasamy - continued to spar on administrative matters, including supply of rice and allowing public to take part in the New Year eve bash.

As the contagion spread quick and fast, health authorities in Puducherry took every possible step to ramp up infrastructure. But a few well-known names from the political circles were among those who fell victim to the virus.

The outbreak of the pandemic severely impacted the fiscal position of Puducherry, as the lockdown brought to a halt largely tourism-dependent activities, with little inflow of visitors. This prompted the territorial administration to make repeated pleas to the Centre to come to its rescue by allowing grants, as almost all activities came to a halt because of the lockdown.

To make matters worse, cyclones Nivar and Burevi contributed their bit of damage to the small UT, forcing the Congress government to once again knock at the doors of the Centre for a relief package.

The differences between Bedi and Narayanasamy were only too apparent and the Lt Governor even skipped her customary address to the MLAs to mark the start of the budget session. The House, however, went ahead with its business and adopted the budget for the fiscal 2020-21 on July 20, envisaging allocation of Rs 9,000 crore.

Bedi addressed the session on July 24 a few days after the budget was adopted. She had initially insisted that unless she was sent a copy of the budget and also demands for grants, it would not be possible to address the session on its opening day.

Incidentally, in a telling sign of the pandemic, the House met under the shade of a neem tree as the Assembly hall was out of bounds after an opposition AINRC legislator got infected with the virus.

The MLA, S J Jayabal later recovered.

Former MLAs V Balane (AINRC), M A S Subramanian (Makkal Needhi Maiyam) and A Elumalai (Congress) fell prey to the deadly virus. As on Friday, the overall toll from the virus was 629, while the cumulative number of infected was 37,914. The UT had 349 active cases.

If the contagion wreaked havoc on the state's economic health, two



Puducherry CM and speaker visit the garden area of assembly premises to convene its session as the hall was being disinfected in the view of Corona pandemic. — PTI

Puducherry logs 33 new virus 19 cases, one fatality

Puducherry, Dec. 26: Puducherry reported 33 new coronavirus cases while a 77-year man succumbed to the infection taking the toll to 630, a top Health department official said on Saturday. Of the 33 new cases, the Puducherryregion reported 18, followed by Mahe (9), Karaikal(4) and Yanam (2), Director of Health and Family Welfare S Mohan Kumar said in a release.

The fresh infections were reported at the end of the examination of 3,391 samples pushing the overall tally to 37,947. The patient who succumbed was a 77-year old resident of neighbouring Muthialpet village, Mohan Kumar said, adding that the toll rose to 630 in the union territory. He said that the fatality and recovery rates were 1.66 per cent and 97.40 per cent respectively.

The Department of Health has so far tested 4.70 lakh samples of which 4.27 lakh samples turned out to be negative. As many as 26 patients recovered and were discharged during the last 24 hours ending 10 am Saturday.

Of the overall 37,947 Covid cases, 355 were active while 36,962 patients had recovered and were discharged so far. — PTI

cyclones by the end of the year added to the challenges. The Nivar and Burevi cyclones in November-December caused extensive losses in the farm sector, with the government pegging the damage at Rs 400 crore. Narayanasamy has sought an interim Central relief of Rs 100 crore.

On the administration front, the year was no different to the previous ones as the tussle between Bedi and Narayanasamy continued over a number of issues. Most decisions of the local government, including that of supply of rice, turned out to be contentious ones, with Bedi referring them to the Centre for approval. She also locked horns over the administration's nod for New Year bash in the open as well as in hotels amid the pandemic threat.

Narayanasamy, while allowing celebrations with Covid precautions, turned down her plea for banning revelries. The free rice scheme was sought to be implemented by the elected government by distributing rice through fair rice shops, instead of paying cash through banks to card holders, but Bedi seemed to have a divergent view.

The Lt Governor insisted on cash equivalent for quantum of rice in bank accounts of beneficiaries and referred the matter to the Centre, which approved her stand.

The ruling Congress' attempt to provide 10 per cent quota for government school students in medical education too ran into rough weather when Bedi once again sent it for the Centre's consideration, saying it was a policy matter.

The Narayanasamy-led cabinet had earlier adopted a resolution, seeking to introduce the quota for students from government schools in medical colleges. Neighbouring Tamil Nadu had earlier provided 7.5 per cent reservation for such students.

The appointment of a State Election Commissioner by the government also saw a clash as the Lt Governor was not in favour of the candidate. She turned down the appointment and wanted the post to be filled-in by an application process involving eligible candidates.

The Centre once again endorsed Bedi and a retired IFS officer was appointed as SEC and

started doing preparatory works to hold the civic polls due for the last nearly 10 years.

Further, when the government wanted to scrap the special excise duty imposed on liquor earlier this year, Bedi insisted it would continue till January 31, 2021 for larger public health safety.

Ahead of the 2021 Assembly elections here, the Congress government launched a free breakfast scheme for school students and named it after the late DMK President and former Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M Karunanidhi. The two parties are allies both in Puducherry and Tamil Nadu.

A Congress legislator N Dhanavelu, elected from Bahoor, was disqualified by the Speaker V P Sivakolundhu in July after a representation was made to the Speaker by the Government Whip R K R Anandaraman that the MLA had indulged in anti-party activities. The disqualification brought down the strength of the Congress from 15 to 14 in the 30-member House. The Congress government, however, banks on the support of three DMK MLAs. — PTI

On 16th anniv, tsunami victims remembered

Chennai, Dec. 26: Victims of the tsunami, that wreaked havoc in 2004, were remembered by people in coastal Tamil Nadu and neighbouring Puducherry on Saturday on the 16th anniversary of the disaster.

Fisheries Minister D Jayakumar and Chief Minister V Narayanasamy led the events to pay homage to those killed in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry respectively.

Jayakumar lit candles at Kasimedu fishing harbour area here and took a boat to the sea and showered flowers over seawater. Narayanasamy visited the beachfront and poured milk in front of a sand statue that symbolised the victims and scattered flowers at that spot.

Across Tamil Nadu and Puducherry, fishermen associations and families of victims paid tributes to those who lost their lives by pouring milk and tossing flowers at beaches.

On December 26, 2004, tsunami, a series of giant waves hit Tamil Nadu and Puducherry's Karaikal in which at least 7,000 people were killed. — PTI

Fisheries Minister D Jayakumar and Chief Minister V Narayanasamy led the events to pay homage to those killed in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry respectively



Women pay floral tribute to 2004 tsunami victims on 16th anniversary at Marina Beach. — DC

Special mass in coastal hamlets

DC CORRESPONDENT
KANYAKUMARI, DEC. 26

Special mass were organised in Churches in the coastal hamlets in the district as a mark of remembering the tsunami victims on the 16th anniversary of the tragedy.

In Kanyakumari district, where around 250 people were killed 16 years ago on December 26, 2004, people took out a peace march towards the sea at Manakudi, Kottilpadu, Kanyakumari and in all the coastal villages from Arockiyapuram to Neerodi, and poured milk in the sea and paid floral tributes to the tsunami victims. Special prayers were held in all churches along the coastal areas in

the district, in memory of the lost lives.

Fishermen from Thesapuram in Thoothukudi district also paid floral tributes to the tsunami victims and offered prayers to the sea, seeking divine blessings and protection on the coastal community, against all kinds of natural calamities. People at Idinthakarai village near Kudankulam in Tirunelveli district, after attending a special mass at Our Lady of Lourdes church on Saturday, in memory of the tsunami victims, went on a procession to the shore and paid floral tributes and poured milk as a mark of respect of the hundreds of lives lost in the tsunami.

Tirunallar Sanipeyarchi festival: CM: Bedi 'overstepping' powers by imposing conditions on devotees

Puducherry, Dec. 26: Puducherry Chief Minister V Narayanasamy on Saturday charged Lt Governor Kiran Bedi with imposing impossible conditions at the eleventh hour on devotees visiting Lord Saturn temple in Tirunallar to offer prayers during Sani Peyarchi festival.

However, the court struck down the condition that devotees

should carry a certificate proving they are Covid-free.

Addressing the media, the Chief Minister said the condition that the devotees visiting the temple on the occasion of Sani Peyarchi festival on Sunday was 'practically impossible' to fulfil. He said around 17,000 devotees had already booked the tickets on line some two weeks ago. — PTI

Cross-border fishing: Fishers to lose boat licence

ARULOLI M | DC
THOOTHUKUDI, DEC. 26

Fishermen here have been warned of cancellation of boat licenses in cases of indulging in cross-border fishing.

Issuing an official statement on cross-border fishing and fishermen being arrested by the Sri Lankan navy, Collector Senthil Raj on Saturday advised fishermen to stick to the marine fisheries regulations, and not cross into Sri Lankan waters for fishing.

The collector added that fishermen indulging in cross-border fishing would be fined ₹1,000, ₹2,500 and ₹5,000 respectively, for the first three violations, and would be subsequently banned from fishing for a week, with maximum fine for the fourth time violation.

"If involvement in cross-border fishing is repeated for the sixth time, such fishermen will have to permanently forgo their fishing boat licences," added the collector, adding that stringent action against repeated violations would be initiated without any hesitation.

The collector's statement has been viewed by the fishermen in line with the threatening recent statement of the Sri Lankan fisheries minister, Douglas Devananda, that Indian fishermen would be arrested and their boats confiscated without mercy for crossing the maritime boundary line into Sri Lankan waters, for fishing.

Industrial sector in southern dists badly hit

ARULOLI | DC
THOOTHUKUDI, DEC. 26

An emerging industrial hub of southern Tamil Nadu, Thoothukudi, is optimistic of resolving some of its major industrial disputes faced by the labour intensive industries like the beach mineral mining and Sterlite copper.

Once considered to be conducive investment destinations, the districts of Thoothukudi, Tirunelveli, Kanyakumari and Virudhunagar lost their prominence in industrial projects for the past 10 years, due to continuous protests on many public sector projects like the Kudankulam nuclear power plant project, the Inayam port project, the Sethusamudram project or even other private projects like the rare earth mining processing and export industry or the Sterlite copper industry.

The state government also could not withstand the protests for political reasons, and hence, abruptly imposed a blanket ban on labour intensive industries like the beach mineral min-

Once considered to be conducive investment destinations, the districts of Thoothukudi, Tirunelveli, Kanyakumari and Virudhunagar lost their prominence in industrial projects for the past 10 years, due to continuous protests on many public sector projects like the Kudankulam nuclear power plant project, the Inayam port project, the Sethusamudram project or even other private projects like the rare earth mining processing and export industry or the Sterlite copper industry

ing, processing and export, affecting around 23 different companies that rendered around 50,000 workers jobless overnight in the three districts of Kanyakumari, Thoothukudi and Tirunelveli in 2012. The protesting groups, however, were not satisfied and targeted the copper major, and got it closed two years ago in 2018, sacrificing 13 lives in a police firing. Many of the thriving ancillary industries of large and small sized industries including the popular fertiliser unit, the SPIC and one of the four key players in the titanium dioxide industry in the country, the VVTI pigments limited, depended on the phosphoric acid and sulphuric acid supplied from Sterlite, also had

to drastically reduce their operations.

Off late, activists have started their preparatory works of campaigning against the Rs 42,000 crore oil refinery and petrochemical product facility proposed to be set up in Thoothukudi by Kuwait-based company, Al-Kharafi, and the ISRO proposed second spaceport facility, Small Satellite Launch Vehicle (SSLV) pad at Kulasekarapattinam, in Thoothukudi.

The industrial fraternity's expectations of the government to protect the industries against these activist groups, have been not fulfilled. Instead, the government for pure political reasons drifted to the side of the anti-development

groups," rued a salt manufacturer, who pleading anonymity added that it was because of this lethargy of the government that not even a single investor who participated in the 2019 Global investors Meet (GIM-2019), showed their intent to invest in the southern districts, though MoUs for the investment to the tune of around Rs 60,000 crore were signed at the meet in 2015.

Added to this, Corona too played spoilsport in 2020, when the Thoothukudi VOC port registered a 11.97 per cent de-growth in its overall business volume between April and November in 2020, in comparison to the same period last year (2019). The fall of capital goods like machineries imported through Thoothukudi port went down by 14.30 percent against the previous year's machinery import of 7107, and increased import of fertiliser by 74.51 percent till November this year, is an indication of lower growth of the manufacturing industries," said a port user, Ragavan, who added that Thoothukudi port being the major importer of coal in

the state, handled 34,93,519 tons of industrial coal between April to November in 2020 against 40,29,259 tons during the same period in 2019.

"The drastic reduction of handling industrial coal by 13.29 percent is a message that coal fired industrial activities not only in the southern districts but in the entire state has been affected this year," inferred a port user, who added that unless the government changes its attitude, setting aside its political agenda in favour of industrial growth, the state will not reset its foot in the path of progress even in 2021.

It is to be noted that the performance of the other two major ports, the Chennai port and the Kamaraj port, between April and November 2020 was much worse than the Thoothukudi VOC port, according to performance data of the Indian port association, Chennai port lost its business volume by 20 per cent and Kamaraj port by 30 percent till November this year, compared to their performance in 2019.

VEEKAHATNAM INDUSTRIAL WATER SUPPLY COMPANY

T.N.No.06/2020-21/Director(Technical)/VWSC Dt:18-12-2020

Request for proposal (RFP)

"Comprehensive study for improvement of existing Tummidgedda & Gambeeram Reservoirs including preparation design and drawings and getting approvals from CE/CDO, study demand of water supply including survey and preparation of data, estimates for pipe line hydraulic designs and drawings from Water supply Canal at KBR upto Tummidgedda & Gambeeram Reservoirs and also survey and design of pipe line from Tummidgedda Reservoir upto Gambeeram Gedda Reservoir, preparation of designs and drawings of water treatment plant and preparation of cost analysis including Revenue operation from pipe and around sea & industries' RFPs are invited from Leading Engineering Consultancy firms for rendering their services for preparation of D.P.R.

The documents containing terms & conditions may be downloaded from website of www.gvms.gov.in from 22-12-2020. Your completed technical and financial proposals must be delivered to the address on or before 03.00 PM on 22.01.2021 duly enclosing Demand draft for Rs.10000/- (Doc Fee)+18000/- (GST)=Rs.11800/- drawn in favour of "Chairman and Managing Director (CMD), VIVSCO payable at Visakhapatnam. For more details contact : Visakhapatnam Industrial Water Supply Company, GVMC Main Office, Tennali Bhavan, Visakhapatnam. E-mail: vivscocom@gmail.com Call No.9533815566 Director(Technical), VIVSCO

PSPC Limited Punjab State Power Corporation Limited

Regd. Office: PSBE, Head Office, The Mall, Patiala-147001

CIN: U40109PB2010SGC033813, Telefax: 0175-2201258

E-mail: cao-revenue@pspcl.in Website: pspcl.in

Office of The CAO Revenue

EOI Press Notice

Punjab State Power Corporation Limited intends to get a System Audit conducted regarding flawless functioning of its digital transactions' system.

Service Providers having technical and financial exposure in this field may submit EOI, covering all activities to be performed under "Digital Transactions' System Audit" to the office of CAO/ Revenue, Room Number 507, 5th Floor, PSPCL Head Office, Patiala or through email to cao-revenue@pspcl.in by 25th January, 2021.

Details of existing flow of activities and tentative scope of the proposed job is available on PSPCL website.

(www.pspcl.in, Information Centre, Office Orders & Circulars, CAO Revenue, Digital Transactions' System Audit)

Date: 23.12.2020

C-386/2020

RO: 76155/12/8/2021/108

CAO/Revenue, PSPCL, Patiala

RAMAGUNDAM FERTILIZERS AND CHEMICALS LIMITED

4th Floor, Mohla Building, 4, Bhikaji Cama Place, New Delhi - 110066

Phone: 011-26701400, Fax: 011-26180729

NATIONAL FERTILIZERS LIMITED

A-11, Sector-24, Dist. Gurgaon, Gurgaon, Haryana - 201301 (U. P.)

Phone: 0120-2412200, 2412405, Fax: 0120-2412397

Advertisement No.: 02 (RFCL)/2020 Date: 23.12.2020

ITI HOLDERS REQUIRED

Applications are invited from interested candidates for recruitment to various posts for ITI Holders (Non-Executive category) in Ramagundam Fertilizers & Chemicals Limited (RFCL), a Joint Venture of NFL, EIL and FCIL as detailed below:

Post Code	Post	Discipline	Pay Scale	Number of Vacancies
(i)	(ii)	(iii)	(iv)	(v)
01	Attendant Gr.I (Mechanical)	Fitter	21500-52000	8
		Diesel Mechanic		2
		Mechanic Repair & Maintenance of Heavy Vehicle		1
02	Attendant Gr.I (Electrical)	Electrician		12
03	Attendant Gr.I (Instrumentation)	Electronics Mechanic		4
		Instrumentation Mechanic		4

Detailed advertisement shall be available "on NFL website: www.nationalfertilizers.com > Careers > Recruitment in RFCL > Recruitment for ITI Holders - 2020 from 23.12.2020. Last date to apply online is 12.01.2021. Any corrigendum/addendum/errata for this recruitment shall be published only on the NFL's website.

GM (HR), RFCL

SHORT TAKES

CONGMEN HELD FOR PROTECT COW, FARMERS STIR

Lalitpur/Jhansi (UP), Dec. 26: Uttar Pradesh Congress president Ajay Kumar Lallu and over 50 party workers were arrested in Lalitpur on Saturday after they tried to take out the 'Gai Bachao, Kisan Bachao' march without permission, but were released hours later, police said.

However, district Congress president Balwant Singh Rajput, who was among those arrested, claimed around 200 party workers were held. He also alleged that about two dozen party workers were injured as the police used force against them.

"About 50 to 60 workers, including state Congress chief Ajay Kumar Lallu and district unit chief Balwant Singh Rajput, were arrested from Dailwara township while trying to take out the march without permission. They have all been taken to police lines," Additional Superintendent of Police Brijesh Kumar Singh said. Later in the evening, the Congress leaders, including Lallu, were released from police lines on furnishing personal bonds and the UPCC president was allowed to leave for Lucknow, the ASP said.

The Congress had announced that it will take out the 'Gai Bachao, Kisan Bachao' march in different districts of Bundelkhand to highlight the alleged mismanagement in cow shelters under the state government.

PM TO INAUGURATE INDIA'S FIRST-EVER DRIVERLESS TRAIN

New Delhi, Dec. 26: Prime Minister Narendra Modi will inaugurate India's first-ever driverless train operations on Delhi Metro's Magenta Line along with the fully operational National Common Mobility Card service on the Airport Express Line on December 28 via video conferencing.

The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) said on Saturday that these innovations will herald a new era of travelling comfort and enhanced mobility. The driverless trains will be fully automated, which will eliminate the possibility of human error, it said, adding that after the start of driverless services on the Magenta Line (Janakpuri West-Botanical Garden), the Pink Line (Majlis Park-Shiv Vihar) of Delhi Metro is expected to have driverless operations by mid-2021.

The National Common Mobility Card, which will be fully operationalised on the Airport Express Line, will enable anyone carrying a RuPay-Debit Card issued from any part of the country to travel on the route using it. This facility will become available on the entire Delhi Metro network by 2022, the PMO said.

I-T DEPT DETECTS BLACK INCOME OF ₹100 CR IN ASSAM

New Delhi, Dec. 26: Unaccounted income of ₹100 crore has been detected after the income tax department raided three "leading" contractors of Northeast India based in Assam early this week, the CBDT said on Saturday.

The search and survey action was initiated on December 22 at fourteen locations in Guwahati, Silapathar and Pathalsala in Assam and in Delhi. "Cash of ₹2.95 crore has been seized. Overall, undisclosed income to the tune of approximately ₹100 crore has been unearthed so far during the search and survey operation," the Board said in a statement without sharing the identities of those raided.

FARMERS AGREE TO FRESH TALKS

From Page 1
They began their journey despite fog and biting cold wave conditions in many parts of Punjab. Tractor trollies, cars and other vehicles carrying farmers, including elderly and women, were seen on the Amritsar-Delhi national highway. The road from Delhi to Ghaziabad near the Ghaziabad border was also closed as the farmer protest split over to the other carriageway.

Kisan Union leader Dr Darshanpal said on Saturday that the farmers will celebrate the martyrdom of Guru Govind Singh's son on December 27 and December 28. The protesters will then meet the Centre for the next round of talks on December 29.

J&K residents get free treatment



Jammu and Kashmir Lt. Governor Manoj Sinha hands over the golden cards to beneficiaries of the Ayushman Bharat PM-Jay Sehat scheme, after it was rolled out by Prime Minister Narendra Modi virtually, in Jammu, on Saturday. — PTI

India, Vietnam begin SCS drills

Sea exercises to be closely watched by an already furious China

PAWAN BALI | DC
NEW DELHI, DEC. 26

The Indian and Vietnamese navies on Saturday started an exercise in the South China Sea, something which will be closely watched by China. The exercise comes when China is becoming increasingly assertive in the South China Sea and has been conducting aggressive military manoeuvres in the region to warn other nations.

"Indian Navy conducted Passage Exercise today with the Vietnam People's Navy in the South China Sea," said a senior official. The relations between India and China has deteriorated this year after the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) violated the Line of Actual Control in Eastern Ladakh and the military stand-off between two armies in the sector has continued for the last eight months. India is now putting

pressure on China at many fronts.

China was already furious over India-Vietnam virtual summit this week, where India had stressed that negotiations for a Code of Conduct (CoC) in the disputed South China Sea (SCS) waters should not undermine the interests of other countries or third parties in the region. Reacting to the summit, China's state mouthpiece *Global Times* had said, "This is not the first time

(nor will it be the last) that India has poked its nose in the South China Sea."

Earlier this week defence minister Rajnath Singh and his Japanese counterpart Nobuo Kishi had also discussed regional situation in the South China Sea. Both had asserted to oppose any activities that escalate tension.

The US Navy has started patrolling in the South China Sea to challenge China. In past few months US aircraft carriers USS

Ronald Reagan and USS Nimitz along with their escorting cruisers and destroyers have conducted exercises in South China Sea.

After clash between Indian Army and the PLA in Galwan Valley in June, India had sent its frontline warship to the South China Sea much to the displeasure of the Chinese who raised objections over the move during diplomatic talks between the two countries.

Amit Shah begins Assam campaign

From Page 1

"The Congress did nothing for the birthplace of Acharya Sankardev whose contributions gave recognition to Assam's history, drama writing, arts and poetry. But BJP believes in strengthening of language, culture, arts of the states," he said.

In an obvious reference to the Congress government, Mr Shah said that there was a period of movements in Assam when many agitations were launched over different issues in which hundreds of youths were killed. The peace of Assam was disturbed and the development was halted, he added.

Asserting that the state's two biggest problems are infiltration and floods, Mr Shah said that neither Congress nor any other party cannot stop infiltration. "Infiltration affects our culture, arts and snatches away opportunities from our youth," Mr Shah said while addressing a public rally at Amingaon.

He said, "All separatist groups have slowly left the path of violence and joined the mainstream. Bodo youth who used to carry guns are now joining the mainstream. Recently conducted polls saw 80 per cent voting without a single incident of violence. This pair of BJP leader - chief minister Sarbananda Sonowal and minister Himanta Biswa Sharma has crossed several hurdles in the story of Assam's progress. People of

● **ASSERTING THAT the state's two biggest problems are infiltration and floods, Mr Shah said that neither Congress nor any other party cannot stop infiltration. "Infiltration affects our culture, arts and snatches away opportunities from our youth," Mr Shah said addressing a public rally at Amingaon.**

Assam will give the mandate to BJP in 2021." "The Bodoland election... was only a semi-final. Now the final is ahead. In the Assam polls, we will have a full majority. The Sonowal-Himanta combination has worked wonders for Assam," he said.

He sought to evoke 16th-century Assamese cultural icon Srimanta Sankaradeva to recall the richness of the state's culture and history, which, he said, will give it a new beginning.

Lauding the initiative of BJP government to support and develop the state's traditional Vaishnavite monasteries, Mr Shah said that it would lead to social transformation in Assam's villages that would also stop young people from taking up arms.

He said that the government was extending a financial assistance of Rs 2.5 lakh each to 8,000 "Namghars", the state's traditional Vaishnavite monasteries, that are over 50 years old.

PAK VIOLATES CEASEFIRE, RESORTS TO FIRING ON IB

Jammu, Dec. 26: Pakistani Rangers violated the ceasefire by resorting to unprovoked firing at forward posts along the International Border (IB) in Kathua district of Jammu and Kashmir, officials said on Saturday.

Firing from across the IB in the Satpal Border Outpost area of Hiranagar sector started around 9.35 pm on Friday, prompting strong retaliation by the Border Security Force (BSF), they said.

The officials said cross-border firing between the two sides continued till 2.45 am on Saturday, but there was no immediate report of any damage on the Indian side.

The latest ceasefire violation comes a day after two Army porters Altaf Hussain and Mohammad Zaif were injured in Pakistani firing along the Line of Control at Dalhan in Poonch district.

The porters, both residents of Noorkote village, were moving towards a forward post when they were fired upon by Pakistani troops from across the border, causing serious injuries to them, the officials said, adding both were hospitalised and their condition was stated to be stable.

● **The ceasefire violation comes a day after two Army porters were injured in Pakistani firing along the LoC.**

CPM for Guv to budge on session

Kochi, Dec. 26: Kerala's ruling CPM on Saturday expressed hope that Governor Arif Mohammed Khan will give his assent to the state government's proposal to convene a special assembly session on December 31 to discuss and pass a resolution against the three contentious central agricultural laws.

"We hope that the Governor would give his official assent, granting his permission for convening the special session of the state assembly," CPM politburo member M A Baby said.

The senior party leader said following the cabinet decision to convene a brief assembly session, two ministers had met Mr Khan at Rajbhavan.

"The ministers have explained to the governor under what circumstances the special session of the state Assembly is being requested," Mr Baby said.

His statement comes a day after law minister A.K. Balan and agriculture minister V.S. Sunil Kumar held discussions with Mr Khan on the government's fresh proposal to convene the special session of the Assembly on December 31.

Mr Baby, however, slammed the governor for turning down the LDF government's earlier proposal for a brief assembly session on December 23, alleging that he was acting on the directive of the Centre.

"The earlier decision of

the governor was against the norms of the Constitution. It is naturally suspected that the governor might not have taken this decision on his own," he said.

Mr Baby said he sees the influence of "some extraneous factors" including a directive from the Centre and the RSS in "creating a crisis in the Left-ruled state."

The CPM leader alleged that "directives from the RSS headquarters in Nagpur" influenced the decisions of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is an RSS pracharak. The governor had declined nod on ground that the government did not address the question raised by him on the nature of emergency warranting the very brief session and pointing to the regular session slated to commence from January 8.

The state cabinet which met on Thursday again decided to recommend to Mr Khan seeking approval for a special session on December 31 over the farm laws with Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan saying his government was "hopeful" that the governor would accord sanction.

Mr Sunil Kumar said Mr Khan was "convinced" about the state government's decision on convening the assembly on December 31. "It was just a communication between the government and the governor. He is convinced about the views expressed by the government," he said. — PTI

New strain needs no new protocol, says Task Force

SHASHI BHUSHAN | DC
NEW DELHI, DEC. 26

The National Task Force (NTF) on Covid-19 has concluded that there is no need to change the existing treatment protocol in view of SARS-CoV-2 mutations emerging in the United Kingdom and spreading to some countries. The NTF on Saturday discussed evidence-based modifications in testing, treatment and surveillance strategies for Covid-19 in view of the new virus strain.

The NTF deliberated on aspects related to the treatment protocol, testing strategy and surveillance of SARS-CoV-2 vis-a-vis the UK variant. It emphasised that since the UK strain is implicated to cause increased transmissibility of the virus, it is critical to identify individuals infected with this strain and adequately contain them to prevent its transmission in India.

The NTF recommended that in addition to the existing surveillance strategies, it is critical to conduct enhanced genomic surveillance for SARS-CoV-2 specially in incoming passengers from the UK. Besides, it will also be critical to conduct genome sequencing in samples where there is dropout of the S gene in lab diagnosis, proven cases of reinfections etc. Routine genomic surveillance of SARS-CoV-2 from repre-

sentative samples all across the samples needs to be a continuous and well planned activity.

According to the Union health ministry, the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) informed that the Centre has taken cognizance of the reports of mutant variants of SARS-CoV-2 reported from the UK and the response of other countries to these reports. The situation is being monitored proactively. A strategy has been put under place to detect and contain the mutant variant.

"The NTF concluded that there is no need to change the existing treatment protocol in view of mutations emerging in the strain. Further, since ICMR has always advocated use of two or more gene assays for testing SARS-CoV-2, it is unlikely to miss infected cases using the current testing strategy," said the Union health ministry.

A total of 251 new deaths and 22,273 infections of Covid-19 were, meanwhile, reported in the country. The number of people who have recovered from the disease climbed to 97,40,108, pushing the national recovery rate to 95.78 per cent, while the fatality rate stands at 1.45 per cent. The active caseload remained below three lakh for the fifth consecutive day. There are 2,81,667 active cases of Covid-19 now.

8 UK returnees to Kerala test +ve

Thiruvananthapuram, Dec. 26: Eight people who recently returned from the UK to Kerala, have tested positive for Coronavirus and their samples have been sent to the National Institute of Virology, Pune for genomic analysis.

Health Minister K. K. Shailaja said on Saturday that samples of eight returnees were found positive for Covid-19 and their samples have been sent to NIV for further tests. Following this development, it has been

decided to subject the returnees to more tests, she added.

Surveillance at the four international airports in the state have been further strengthened. After the recently held local body polls, it was feared that there would be a massive surge in cases. However, that did not occur.

The death rate did not go up in the state as the government had taken precautionary steps in this regard, she said. — PTI

Oxford vaccine is front-runner

From Page 1

The subject expert committee (SEC) on Covid-19 of the CDSCO on December 9 had sought additional safety and efficacy data for Covid-19 vaccines of SII and Bharat Biotech after deliberating upon their applications.

The application by the Indian arm of US pharmaceutical firm Pfizer was not taken up for deliberation as the company had sought more time for making a presentation before the committee.

The Pfizer vaccine has already been approved by several countries including the UK, the US, and Bahrain.

While considering SII's application, the SEC had recommended that the firm should submit an updated safety data of phase 2 and 3 clinical tri-

als in the country, immunogenicity data from the clinical trial in the UK and India, along with the outcome of the assessment of the UK Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) for grant of EUA.

As for Hyderabad-based Bharat Biotech, "after detailed deliberation, the committee recommended that the firm should present the safety and efficacy data from the ongoing phase 3 clinical trial in the country for further consideration," the SEC had said.

The Pune-based SII, the world's largest vaccine manufacturer, has made a collaboration with the University of Oxford and AstraZeneca to manufacture the vaccine. The SII has already manufactured 40 million doses of the vaccine. — PTI

MEDICAL | RECORD

Hemant had developed Lukoskin for leucoderma; several other herbal medicines

DRDO man bags Scientist of the Year Award

New Delhi, Dec. 26: Senior scientist Hemant Kumar Pandey has been honoured with DRDO's 'Scientist of the Year Award' for his contribution in developing several herbal medicines, including the popular drug Lukoskin meant for treatment of leucoderma.

A recipient of several prestigious awards for his contribution in the field of herbal medicine, Pandey has been undertaking

research at the Defence Research and Development Organisation's (DRDO) lab Defence Institute of Bio-Energy Research (DIBER) at Pithoragarh in Uttarakhnad for the past 25 years.

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh had recently facilitated the scientist at an event here with the prestigious award that comprises a certificate and cash prize of ₹2 lakh.

● **DEFENCE MINISTER** Rajnath Singh had recently facilitated the scientist at an event here with the prestigious award that comprises a certificate and cash prize of ₹2 lakh.

● **APART FROM** Lukoskin, Pandey has developed drugs for treatment of eczema and toothache as well as an anti-radiation cream.

"Dr Hemant Kumar Pandey, Scientist 'E', Defence Institute of Bio-Energy Research (DIBER), Haldwani has significantly contributed

in the development of five herbal products and filed seven patents.

ToT of three products has been done with Aimal Pharmaceuticals, New

Delhi, which has launched anti-leucoderma product into the market by trade name Lukoskin.

"In recognition of his invaluable contribution, the Scientist of the Year Award-2018 is conferred on Dr Hemant Kumar Pandey," the citation accompanying the award stated.

Though the scientist has developed six herbal drugs so far, Lukoskin used for treating leucoder-

ma or Vitiligo, a condition in which white patches get developed on the skin, has been most widely appreciated and found huge acceptance in the market.

A formulation of around eight herbs found in Himalayan region, Lukoskin helps in treating white patches and is marketed by Delhi-based Aimal Pharmaceuticals.

Leucoderma is an autoimmune disorder and

over 5 crore people are under its grip in India. It is neither contagious nor life-threatening.

The incidence of leucoderma is 1-2 per cent of the population worldwide. Apart from Lukoskin, Pandey has developed drugs for treatment of eczema and toothache as well as an anti-radiation cream, most of which are already being sold in the market following transfer of technology (ToT). — PTI

SHORT TAKES

MOROCCAN KING GETS BIBI INVITE TO VISIT ISRAEL

Jerusalem, Dec. 26: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Morocco's King Mohammed VI held a telephone conversation during which the Israeli premier invited the king for a visit, Netanyahu's office said Friday.

The phone call comes three days after an Israeli delegation signed a US-sponsored normalisation agreement with Morocco in Rabat.

"The leaders congratulated each other over the renewal of ties between the countries, the signing of the joint statement with the US, and the agreements between the two countries," a statement from Netanyahu's office said.

"In addition, the processes and mechanisms to implement the agreements were determined," it added.

MALI: FRENCH SOLDIER SHOOT TWO OTHERS

Paris, Dec. 26: A French soldier deployed to Mali as part of the Barkhane force fighting jihadist insurgents has wounded two comrades with a pistol while drunk, the army headquarters said Saturday.

The confrontation under the influence happened overnight from December 24 to 25 at a base in Gao in eastern Mali.

"Two soldiers from the same unit were getting on each other's nerves. One soldier wounded two of his comrades with his service weapon," an automatic pistol, army spokesman Frederic Barbry said.

One of the two men was wounded very lightly, while the other's injury was more serious although not life-threatening. Both were flown out following the shooting and brought to hospital in France.

Military police are probing the incident and "once the probe is over, (the shooter) will be flown home," Barbry said.

ATTACK KILLED 207 IN ETHIOPIA: HR COMMISSION

Addis Ababa, Dec. 26: A total of 207 people were killed in a Wednesday attack by gunmen in western Ethiopia, the country's Human Rights Commission (EHRC) said, more than doubling a previous count.

The independent government body had on Wednesday said 100 people were killed in their sleep and crops burned in a pre-dawn assault in the Metekel area of the Benishangul-Gumuz region.

"133 of the victims were adult men and 35 were adult women. Seventeen children, one of whom a six-month-old baby, and 20 elderly persons were killed," the EHRC said in a statement posted to Twitter late Friday.

Mostly inhabited by ethnic Shinasha, Oromo and Amhara people — the last two making up Ethiopia's most numerous groups — the Metekel area has suffered a string of deadly attacks in recent months.

Local leaders blame ethnic Gumuz people for the violence.

Following Wednesday's attack, "effort is underway to identify the victims with the help of survivors and identity cards," the EHRC said.

3 PEACEKEEPERS OF UN KILLED IN C. AFRICA

Bangui, Dec. 26: Three United Nations peacekeepers have been killed by unidentified combatants in the Central African Republic, the United Nations said, as the country prepares for a general election and fighting continues between rebels and government forces.

The news came after a rebel coalition called off a ceasefire and said it would resume its march on the capital, as well as the arrival of troops from Russia and Rwanda to shore up the government of the resource-rich country.

"Three peacekeepers from Burundi were killed and two others were wounded" following attacks on UN troops and Central African national defence and security forces, the UN said in a statement Friday. The assaults took place in Dekoa, central Kemo Prefecture, and in Bakouma, in the southern Mbomou Prefecture, it said, without providing further details.

Stephane Dujarric, spokesman for the UN Secretary-General, strongly condemned the latest incident, and called on the CAR authorities to investigate the "heinous" assaults.

Beijing rushes senior CPC leader to Nepal

To assess the ground situation, avert a vertical split in NCP

Oli Govt for Jan 1 winter session

Kathmandu, Dec. 26: A wary China is rushing a high-level delegation led by a vice minister of the Chinese Communist Party here to assess the ground situation and avert a vertical split in the ruling Nepal Communist Party, according to media reports on Saturday, nearly a week after embattled Prime Minister K P Sharma Oli got the House of Representatives dissolved.

Nepal plunged into a political crisis last Sunday after Oli, known for his pro-Beijing leanings, in a surprise move, recommended dissolving the 275-member House, amidst a tussle for power with former prime minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal 'Prachanda'. Acting on Prime Minister Oli's recommendation, President Bidya Devi Bhandari dissolved the House the same day and announced fresh elections on April 30 and May 10, sparking protests from a large section of the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) led by Prachanda.

Nepal plunged into a political crisis after President Bidya Devi Bhandari dissolved the House of Representatives and announced dates for mid-term elections at the recommendation of Prime Minister Oli on Sunday, sparking protests from a section of the ruling party and various opposition parties.

The ruling Nepal Communist Party has now been virtually divided more than two years after it was formed following the merger of CPN-UML led by Oli and CPN-Maoist Centre led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal

'Prachanda' in May 2018. A Cabinet meeting held on Friday evening decided to recommend that the president summon the winter session of the National Assembly on January 1, Hridayesh Tripathi, who was made minister for health earlier on Friday, told *Kathmandu Post*.

The meeting was held after Prime Minister Oli reshuffled the Cabinet to induct eight ministers, five of them former Maoist leaders, and change the portfolio of five of his ministers.

On Sunday, after the dissolution of the House of Representatives, seven ministers close to Prachanda-led faction had resigned from their posts.

The budget session of Parliament was pro-rogued on July 2 by the president on the recommendation of the government.

— PTI

ular China Southern Airlines flight," the paper reported, citing sources in both factions of the NCP. Bishnu Rijal, Deputy Head of Department of Foreign Affairs of the NCP's Prachanda-led faction, said that the Chinese side has communicated about Gou's visit to Kathmandu. "I don't have much detail to share with you at this point of time," Rijal was

quoted as saying by the paper.

The Chinese embassy here did not respond to its multiple calls and messages, the paper said. Although no specific details about the agenda of the visit are available, senior NCP leaders confirmed that Guo is scheduled to land in Kathmandu on Sunday morning, leading a four-member delegation, *My Republica* newspaper reported.

Observers here believe that the visit could be to assess the ground situation in Nepal following the decision of Oli to dissolve the House of Representatives and the rival faction within the NCP taking to the streets, it said. Citing sources in the ruling party, the paper said during his four-day stay in Kathmandu, the Chinese vice minister is scheduled to meet top leaders.

The development comes after Chinese ambassador in Nepal Hou Yanqi held a series of meetings with the president and top leaders of the NCP, including Prachanda and Madhav Nepal, who has replaced Oli as chairman of the Prachanda-led faction.

During her meeting with Madhav Nepal on Friday, Ambassador Hou, who was concerned about the split in the NCP, inquired about the future political course of the ruling party, the paper quoted Rijal as saying. — PTI

RUSSIA DETAINS TOP ASSOCIATE OF NAVALNY

Moscow, Dec. 26: A top associate of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny was detained after doorstepping an alleged security operative who has inadvertently revealed details of Navalny's supposed poisoning with a Soviet-era nerve agent.

Lyubov Sobol, a key figure in Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, was detained on Friday for 48 hours after a day of interrogation on charges of violent trespassing. The move followed Sobol's attempt on Monday to enter the Moscow apartment of the alleged operative, whom Navalny had previously duped into describing details of the alleged poisoning. Sobol has denied the accusations and insisted that she violated no law by ringing the doorbell to the apartment.

While Sobol was being questioned, the state Investigative Committee issued a statement accusing her of trespassing — charges her colleagues have rejected. Earlier this week, Navalny released the recording of a phone call he said he made to a man he identified as Konstantin Kudryavtsev and described as an alleged member of a group of officers of the Federal Security Service, or FSB, who purportedly poisoned him with the Soviet-era Novichok agent in August and then tried to cover it up.

Navalny said he phoned the man hours before the group Bellingcat released a report. — AP

Blast in Nashville: Communications outages affect all

Nashville, Dec. 26: A recreational vehicle parked in the deserted streets of downtown Nashville exploded early Christmas morning, causing widespread communications outages that took down police emergency systems and grounded holiday travel at the city's airport.

Police were responding to a report of shots fired Friday when they encountered the RV blaring a recorded warning that a bomb would detonate in 15 minutes, Metro Nashville Police Chief John Drake said.

Police were responding to a report of shots fired Friday when they encountered the RV blaring a recorded warning that a bomb would detonate in 15 minutes, Metro Nashville Police Chief John Drake said.

The RV exploded shortly afterward, Drake said. "This morning's attack on our community was intended to create chaos and fear in this season of peace and hope. But Nashvillians have proven time and time again that the spirit of our city cannot be broken," Mayor John Cooper said at a news conference after issuing a curfew for the area.

Police believe the blast was intentional but don't yet know a motive or target, and Drake noted that officials had not received any threats before the explosion. The chief said investigators at the scene "have found tissue that we believe could be remains, but we'll have that examined and let you know at that time."

Police could not say whether it potentially came from someone inside the RV. Three people taken to area hospitals for treatment were in stable condition Friday evening, Cooper said. Surveillance video published on a Twitter account Friday that appeared to be across the street from the blast captured the warning issuing from the RV, "... if you can hear this message, evacuate now," seconds before the explosion.

The blast sent black smoke and flames billowing from the heart of downtown Nashville's tourist scene, an area packed with honky-tonks, restaurants and shops. Buildings shook and windows shattered streets away from the explosion near a building owned by AT&T that lies one block from the company's office tower, a landmark in downtown.

● **POLICE WERE** responding to a report of shots fired Friday when they encountered the RV blaring a recorded warning that a bomb would detonate in 15 minutes.

● **POLICE EVACUATED** nearby buildings and called in the bomb squad. The RV exploded shortly afterward, Metro Nashville Police Chief John Drake said.

● **POLICE BELIEVE** the blast was intentional but don't yet know a motive or target, and Drake noted that officials had not received any threats before the explosion.

● **THE BLAST** sent black smoke and flames billowing from the heart of downtown Nashville's tourist scene, an area packed with honky-tonks, restaurants and shops.

● **BUILDINGS SHOOK** and windows shattered streets away from the explosion near a building owned by AT&T that lies one block from the company's office tower, a landmark in downtown.

"We do not know if that was a coincidence, or if that was the intention," police spokesman Don Aaron said. He said earlier that some people were taken to the department's central precinct for questioning but declined to give details. AT&T said the affected building is the central office of a telephone exchange, with network equipment in it.

The blast interrupted service, but the company declined to say how widespread outages were.

The AT&T outages site showed service issues in middle Tennessee and Kentucky. Several police agencies reported that their 911 systems were down because of the outage, including Knox County, home to Knoxville about 180 miles (290 kilometres) east of Nashville.

AT&T said that it was bringing in portable cell sites and was working with law enforcement to get access to make repairs to its equipment. — AP

Intercepted attack plot by IS: Russia

Moscow, Dec. 26: Russia's FSB security service said Saturday it had foiled an attack planned by a cell loyal to the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group in the country's unstable southern republic of Dagestan, arresting four people.

"Members of the group planned to detonate an explosive close to an administrative building belonging to security services, followed by an armed attack against interior ministry employees" in regional capital Makhachkala, the FSB said in a statement.

As well as arresting four "members of the international IS terrorist group", investigators found "firearms and bladed weapons, a large amount of ammunition and an explosive device", it added, along with mobile phones containing "exchanges with organisers abroad".

On December 17, police killed two attackers targeting security forces in Russia's neighbouring republic of Chechnya.

Six people were also killed during an October "counter-terrorism" operation in Chechnyan capital Grozny, including two members of the security forces.

Russia's territories in the Caucasus were ravaged by two wars between federal troops and Chechen separatists in the 1990s and 2000s.

Increasingly Islamist in character, the insurgency spread to other republics in the region and declared allegiance to IS in 2015.

While the jihadist group's influence remains limited, occasional attacks against the authori-

Mexico City, Dec. 26: Four people have been arrested in connection with the 2018 crash of a helicopter that killed a central Mexican governor and her husband — who had preceded her as governor — authorities said. The Agusta 109 helicopter crashed in flames 10 minutes after takeoff on Dec. 24 that year while carrying newly installed Puebla Gov. Martha Erika Alonso and her husband, former Gov. Rafael Moreno Valle, as well as three other people.

The Puebla state prosecutor's office Friday said the four suspects worked for a Rotor Flight Services, a company "related to the functioning of the aircraft."

It said the suspects were accused of culpable homicide, damage to another's property and false testimony.

The Mexico City prosecutor's office said Friday the woman detained in the capital had been in charge of the shop where the helicopter had received maintenance. Mexico's then secretary of communications and transportation, Javier Jiménez Espriú, said in March 2019 that investigators had concluded the crash was probably caused by a technical problem. — AP

ties persist in Chechnya, Dagestan and neighbouring Ingushetia. — AFP

2 cops killed as explosions strike Kabul

Kabul, Dec. 26: A series of explosions hit the Afghan capital on Saturday morning, killing at least two police officers and wounding another two plus a civilian, officials said.

The officers died and a civilian was hurt when a magnetic bomb attached to a police vehicle detonated in western Kabul, said police spokesman Ferdaws Faramarz. Two other police were wounded when a bomb attached to their car exploded earlier Saturday in southern Kabul, Faramarz said.

A third magnetic bomb detonated in eastern Kabul but caused no casualties, he said. There were reports of at least two other blasts elsewhere in the city but police had no immediate details.

The latest attacks came as Taliban and Afghan government negotiators held talks in Qatar, trying to hammer out a peace deal that could put an end to decades of war.

No one has immediately claimed responsibility for the attacks in Kabul. The Islamic State group has claimed responsibility for multiple attacks in the capital in recent months, including on educational institutions that killed 50 people, most of them students.

The talks in Doha have been suspended until early January and there is speculation they could be further delayed.

At the same time, Taliban militants have waged bitter battles against IS fighters, particularly in eastern Afghanistan,



Afghan security personnel inspect the site of a bomb attack in Kabul, on Saturday.

— AP

while continuing their insurgency against government forces and keeping their promise not to attack US and NATO troops.

IS has also claimed responsibility for last week's rocket attacks targeting the major US base in Afghanistan. There were no casualties. — AP

FLIP | SIDE

Judges who have him to thank for their position rebuffed his claims

Trump made lasting impact on courts

Washington, Dec. 26: On this, even President Donald Trump's most fevered critics agree: He has left a deep imprint on the federal courts that will outlast his one term in office for decades to come.

He used the promise of conservative judicial appointments to win over Republican skeptics as a candidate. Then as president, he relied on outside conservative legal organizations and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to employ an assembly line-like precision to install more than 230 judges on the federal bench, including the three newest justices of the Supreme Court.

Trump never tired of

boasting about it. Indeed, undeterred by Democratic criticism, the Senate was still confirming judges more than a month after Trump lost his reelection bid to Joe Biden.

"Trump has basically done more than any president has done in a single term since (President Jimmy) Carter to put his stamp on the judiciary," said Jonathan Adler, a law professor at Case Western Reserve University School of Law in Cleveland, Ohio, adding that Congress created around 150 new judgeships during Carter's presidency.

The impact will be enduring. Among the Trump-appointed judges, who hold lifetime positions,

● **AS PRESIDENT**, he relied on outside conservative legal organisations and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to employ an assembly line-like precision to install more than 230 judges on the federal bench, including the three newest justices of the Supreme Court.

several are still in their 30s. The three Supreme Court picks could still be on the court at the 21st century's midpoint, 30 years from now. Beyond the Supreme Court, 30 percent of the judges on the nation's court of appeals,

where all but a handful of cases reach their end, were appointed by Trump. But numbers don't tell the entire story.

The real measure of what Trump has been able to do will be revealed in countless court decisions in the years to come on abortion, guns, religious rights and a host of other culture wars issues. When it came to the president's own legal challenges of the election results, however, judges who have him to thank for their position rebuffed his claims.

But in many other important ways, his success with judicial appointments already is paying dividends for conservatives. When the Supreme Court

blocked New York from enforcing certain limits on attendance at churches and synagogues in areas designated as hard hit by Covid-19, Justice Amy Coney Barrett, the newest member of the court, cast the decisive fifth vote.

Previously, the court had allowed restrictions on religious services over the dissent of four justices, including the other two Trump nominees, Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh. Five Trump appointees were in the majority of the 6-4 decision by the full 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in September that made it harder for felons in Florida to regain the right to vote. — AP

DECCAN Chronicle

27 DECEMBER 2020



Shreya Sen-Handley

Off the beaten track

2020, the year I learn I am neurodivergent

The year-end roundup is a festive favourite; a December convention. What is there to celebrate this pandemic year you wonder. But if, instead of asking ourselves how the year shaped up, we asked how it shaped us, would it seem such a wasted year? This solitary annum, without even stepping outside, we've learnt more lessons than in a score of uneventful years.

We've learnt that our sons-of-the-soil leaders care nothing for the true sons of the soil: the farmers, labourers, and key workers. We've unexpectedly found anti-vaxxers amongst friends and neighbours, who, in ignoring science and the common good, will ensure the world remains vulnerable not only to Covid, but a hundred vanquished diseases making a comeback. Most of all, we've discovered important facets of ourselves; a love for baking, an allergy to webinars, or quite simply, who we really are.

What I learned changed my life. I discovered I am, and have always been, autistic. One of the many definitions of autism offered up by the Internet calls it 'a complex, lifelong developmental disability that typically appears during early childhood and can impact a person's social skills, communication, and relationships. It is a "spectrum condition" that affects people differently and to varying degrees. I have what used to be called Asperger's Syndrome. Modern medicine however doesn't see it as a syndrome, but another way of being; atypical, but by no means "abnormal". No more "wrong" than being brown in a white country or a woman in a man's world, but subjected to the same marginalisation as any group outside the mainstream.

Did I know I was different? Yes; having been insistently told all my life. Whilst watching the Rain Mans and The Big Bangs had I suspected I might be one of "them"? No, they never felt true to life. Did it knock me for a six? OMG yes. Was I distraught and crestfallen? Confused at first but then, it brought me peace. My life seen in this new light suddenly made sense.

They say you can't change your past, but this mindboggling new knowledge did just that. It transformed my view of the life I've led, which is the next best thing. Mistakes, misunderstandings, the mistreatment I've borne — much of which I've never forgiven myself for, I now could. We all blame ourselves for so much, but the failure of the neurodivergent to conform and resultant societal exclusion, leads to anxiety, stress, heart disease, and often early death. A recent study of people who had discovered their autism in middle-age revealed how life-changing this is. All of them attested to how they had internalised a lifetime of being told they were "wrong" and "bad". Routine censure and rejection for their unconventional responses had taken a terrible toll on their physical and mental health.

Over the last nine months of reading, analysing and embracing it, I knew I wanted to help prevent this eviscerating future generations of the neurodivergent. Related to the unearthing of my own "condition" was the stressful process of autistic assessment someone I loved dearly had embarked upon. My discovery had been a blessing for me, but what would it mean for this young person?

Mercilessly bullied at school, they were already aware of the dangers of atypicality, so I endeavored to present them with the positives. To tell them all I knew, which was the merest slither on a spectrum of neural states so vast that one in 66 people in the world inhabit it. But when I told him it was as much a gift as a curse I was not dissembling ("Auties/Aspies" can't). Gifts this young man was already displaying in abundance; topping nationwide exams and mathematical challenges. Atypicality not only gave them an approach to life that was original and creative, it equipped them with application not always found in the mainstream.

Putting my arms around him ("Aspies" develop a defensive bubble they allow few into), I reassured that being different wasn't bad. But for the men and women who lived, loved, ideated and worked differently, for reasons of sexuality, belief, neurodiversity, and more, there would have been no advances in science, art, or ways of living. Without the likes of Einstein, Newton, Emily Dickinson, and Bach, this planet would have been a much poorer place (long before 2020). They are the atypical to keep in mind, not Sheldon or Rain Man. Young neurodivergents like you, I encouraged, are the real X-Men. Mutants with a mission to change the world for the better, you are superheroes, not villains. You forge ahead to accomplish so much, surmounting the peer understanding and support you lack.

Besides which, minds can be changed, I emphasised, even if it's one person at a time, and feels like it's taking forever. Providing information is the first step towards dispelling the misconceptions that drive the prejudice you face. There are so many things people don't know. For example, the autistic are often very bright, sometimes exceptionally so, but with some there is a few-seconds lapse before verbal information registers. This doesn't make them stupid, or deaf, or even vague (I always thought I was that). Their brains just work differently. The penny drops infinitesimally slower. But drops with the power of a bomb. Because what they then do with that information has often changed the world.

Ironically, in a year in which I completed writing my third book *The Accidental Tourist*, I found out just how much of an accidental tourist I was on this earth. In beginning to understand myself, I learned to forgive too, not just myself but those I'd felt had let me down and/or misbehaved. We're all bad at "getting" those we perceive as different, and the only thing that makes the neurotypical more culpable is that they are the norm: the muscular majority, with the power to change how society works. How it perceives difference and treats it. Differences frighten people, and scared folk will lash out. For my young superhero, and millions of young 'uns like him, a standing back to consider, a little thinking over, and even a tentative welcoming in, is a large part of what they need from society.

My resolution for 2021 is to convince, if not the typical into seeing the worth of the A, then the atypical themselves of their own value. To exhort them to continue charting their individual course, because neurodivergence, instead of a stigma, is a strength and should be a joy. But it isn't yet. Let this column in which I "out" myself be my first salvo towards this end.

Shreya Sen-Handley is the author of the recently published *Strange: Stories, the award-winning Memoirs of My Body, and a forthcoming book of travel misadventures*. Her Twitter and Insta handle is @shreyasenhana.

Subhani



Politics didn't limit the enigma that was Atalji



Pavan K. Varma

Chanakya's View

There is a new nostalgia for Atal Behari Vajpayee, whose birthday falls two days ago, coinciding with Christmas. Shakti Sinha's book on Atalji is out. Vinay Sitapati has written another one on the "jugalbandi" between Atalji and Shri L.K. Advani. Sagarika Ghosh is finishing a book on him. What explains this renewed spurt of interest in the former Prime Minister?

Not everybody has to agree with everything he believed in, or support him politically, but there will be very few who will disagree with the assessment that Atal Behari Vajpayee was a very likeable human being. Although a product of the RSS, and, therefore, supportive of its wider worldview, he somehow managed to retain an individuality that refused to be straitjacketed in mindless ideological terms. That is why, his relationship with the RSS was often strained.

The thing about Atalji was that he was in politics but not — as with the current crop of BJP leaders — entirely limited by it. In that sense, he was both a participant in the paraphernalia of power, and transcendent of it. There was not a whiff of bigotry in his thinking. His spirit was eclectic, his patriotism transparent, and his worldview suffused with a rare idealism. But, in all of this, there was always that irrepressible humour.

Once his foster daughter, Namita, told me that *Baapiji* — as Atalji was fondly called — told her that it would be nice if I could write some of his written speeches. "But, perhaps, Pavanji is annoyed with my party,"

This disarming humour was reflective of a person who carried the burdens and pageantry of office lightly. The poet in him told him that all this was passing, a shadow play, a fleeting moment in the grand canvas of time.

asked me if I would translate his poems into English. However, I put a condition, which was an audacious thing for a junior joint secretary in the MEA to do, for the request was from no one less than the PM. But, the greatness of Atalji was that he was talking to me then not as the PM of India, but as a poet, and I was responding not as a bureaucrat, but as a writer. I said that I would like to translate his personal poetry, those that he had written not from the pedestal of a politician but from his heart, as one aware of the mortality of life, and not his political poetry. It was his humility, as always accompanied by that remarkable twinkle in his eyes, that he readily agreed.

Atalji was not an insecure person. He was willing to respond to criticism, but was not afraid of it, or did not wish to suppress it. A leading TV anchor once told me that, after Atalji had recorded a show with him, he said — as he was leaving: "I am not happy with you. Come and see me at the PM's residence." The anchor was apprehensive, afraid that, perhaps, he had been too aggressive, and had asked the wrong question. When he went to see the PM, this is what Atalji said: "I said I am unhappy with you because you gave me much too easy a time. You did not ask the tough questions."

Contrast this with how sensitive the BJP has become today to all questions that are

remotely critical, dubbing all those who ask them as "anti-national". Our PM today does not even meet the press in a direct interaction, leave alone feeling unhappy that he was not asked an uncomfortable question. The absence of insecurity facilitates honesty. Nothing brings this out more vividly than Atalji's poetry. For instance, a man who led the BJP campaign in 2004 on the slogan of "India Shining", was the same man who had the honesty to write:

Dharmaraj has not overcome

His addiction to dice.

In every panchayat

Draupadi is robbed of her honour.

Without Krishna

Today

The Mahabharata will be fought,

No matter who claims the throne,

The poor will continue to suffer.

Those in power would do well to remember afresh what makes leaders like Atalji so resiliently popular. When leaders become humourless, unsmiling, insular and inaccessible, and governments become hyper sensitive to criticism, arrogant, perpetually aggressive, and obsessed solely with power, they would do well to remember what Atalji wrote:

My Lord!

Never place me so high

That I cannot embrace

Those who are not my own.

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

Atalji was not an insecure person. He was willing to respond to criticism, but was not afraid of it, or did not wish to suppress it... The absence of insecurity facilitates honesty. His poetry brings this out vividly.

LETTERS

JUMPING JACKS

The general secretary of Makkal Needhi Maiam has quit the party and joined BJP in the presence of Union minister Prakash Keshav Javedkar. He seems to be ignorant that MNM will not be at a loss by his defection as MNM has better prospects than BJP in Tamil Nadu. Politicians have started hopping parties in search of greener pastures for personal benefits keeping in mind the forthcoming assembly elections in Tamil Nadu. The coming days will see a number of opportunistic leaders and functionaries 'hopping' from one party to another speculating on the prospects of each party. Only time will tell is the decisions of these jumping jacks will be fruitful. An anti-defection law may be the need of the hour in the present scenario.

M.C. Vijay Shankar, Chennai

TUG OF WAR

SINCE PRE-INDEPENDENCE days in India every province has its own culture and traditions and even during the Congress regime it never interfered in those cultural traditions and even after 75 years of Independence every state is feeling proud of its traditions. However, after NDA (BJP) came to power at the Centre it is sad to watch that the BJP is interfering in every sphere of life, forcing the natives to forget them and follow the dictates and adamant behaviour of the party as in agricultural reforms, banking norms, etc. All this is becoming a burden on the general public (*Farmers intensify stir, insist on repeal of laws for parleys*, Dec. 26). For the success of any government at the Centre it is necessary to open-heartedly listen to the demands of main Opposition parties and come to a amicable solution by a give and take resolution which is lacking in the present central government led by BJP.

N.S. Sharma, via e-mail

FOLLOW JALLIKATTU RULES

IT DOES not require any extraordinary intelligence or super wisdom to understand the reason that made the TN government to accede to the demand for conducting the Pongal Jallikattu as it had already understood "the feel of the pulse" of the people especially of those in the southern districts by the events that took place on Marina in 2017. Naturally the ruling party would not like to rub the people's emotions on the wrong side when elections are to follow in a few months. However, the organisers of the bull taming game have been strictly instructed to adhere to the norms specified so that neither the bulls nor the tamers suffer any physical injuries during the daring acts. I wish jallikattu organisers would follow the government's directives in letter and spirit.

B. S. Jayaraman, Coimbatore

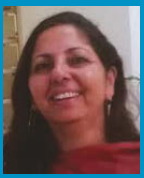
COMPLETE PROJECTS ON TIME

A RESERVE Bank of India paper has emphasised on the need to increase the capital expenditure in the country to increase income and output in the long-run as tax revenues have plunged. It's indeed true that capital expenditure increases the assets in the country, which is sine qua non for economic growth. But it is imperative that the governments complete the capital projects on time and avoid cost escalations. Otherwise mere spending of huge money can only push up the price level and affect the common man.

S. Ramakrishnasayee, Chennai

Anita Katyal

Political Gup-Shup



Wait for RSS' pungent take on a Turkish drama series

The Turkish television drama series *Dirili: Ertu?rul* has been a runaway hit not just in Turkey but across the world with Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan suggesting that everyone in the country should watch it as it promotes an understanding of Islam. The show, which chronicles the life of Ertugrul, the father of Osman I, founder of the Ottoman empire, has also proved to be extremely popular in Kashmir. But guess who else is watching the series being aired on Netflix? None other than some members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Not just that but they are also recommending the drama series to others. The Sangh members apparently evinced interest in the show after they learned about its popularity in Kashmir. They felt it will help the RSS to understand the psyche of the Kashmiri Muslim and also provide vital inputs in furthering its agenda of Hindu nationalism by fuelling Islamophobia. The RSS is helped by the fact that the Turkish series portrays Islam as a militant religion,

which has been decried by moderate Muslims.

When Congress president Sonia Gandhi called a meeting of senior party leaders, including the core group of dissenters last week, it was expected that Rajya Sabha MP Kapil Sibal would be among them as he has been a leading member of the G-23 as this group is called. But surprisingly, he was not present at the long-awaited interaction. Different reasons have been cited for his absence. It is said that Sibal was not in Delhi on the day of the meeting as he had made prior plans to go on holiday to Dubai for the festive season. Though he was urged to change his flight plans by other members of the G-23 but he declined to delay his departure. However, the other side of the story is that perhaps Sibal was kept out of the list of invitees by Sonia Gandhi's office. The names of the G-23 representatives were sent in advance and were apparently vetted by Priyanka Gandhi who was in constant touch with former Mad-

hya Pradesh chief minister Kamal Nath who was mediating between the dissenters and Sonia Gandhi's office. As the most visible and vocal member of the G-23, Sibal would have done some plain speaking at the meeting unlike his colleagues who were at their diplomatic best.

While on the subject of Sonia Gandhi's much-talked-about meeting, the development has catapulted former Maharashtra chief minister to the political centre stage once again. Chavan has been sidelined ever since he demitted office as chief minister. As an MLA from Karad, he has been confined to Maharashtra for the past six years now. There was some talk that he would be included in the Congress Working Committee, the party's highest decision-making body, or given some other responsibility at the Congress headquarters in Delhi since he has the seniority and the experience for such a slot — he was a minister in the Manmohan Singh government and also served as party general secretary. But unfor-

tunately for him, he was not considered by the Congress leadership for any important slot in Delhi. After his inclusion in the group of dissenters invited by Sonia Gandhi, Chavan is back in the limelight. Later, he was also asked to brief the media about the deliberations.

If reports from Jaipur are anything to go by then the Ashok Gehlot government in Rajasthan is set to face serious trouble in the coming months. Apparently, the BJP has renewed its efforts to topple the Congress government. It is obviously undeterred by its earlier efforts when it was let down by Congress rebel leader and former deputy chief minister of Rajasthan Sachin Pilot who could not muster the requisite numbers to oust his bete noire Gehlot. The BJP has since sidelined former chief minister Vasundhara Raje who had played spoiler last time and ensured that her party's plans did not fructify. The saffron party is reasonably confident that it will succeed this time as home minister Amit Shah has placed his loyalists

in key positions in the desert state.

At a meeting convened recently, BJP MPs from Uttar Pradesh were specifically told that they should only display photographs of Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the banners and hoardings they put up for programmes in their constituencies. This has obviously not gone down well with the lawmakers but they have little option but to abide by this direction. Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh are due only in 2022 but these instructions are obviously aimed at sending out a clear message that the electorate is voting for Modi who is synonymous with the BJP. Interestingly, even photographs of Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath are not to be displayed. Maybe, this has something to do with the fact that Yogi has acquired a larger-than-life image and is even being talked about as the BJP's future prime ministerial candidate.

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist

SHORT TAKES

Conflict complaint against Kuruvilla

Mumbai: A complaint alleging conflict of interest has been filed against newly-appointed national selector Abey Kuruvilla by former Madhya Pradesh Cricket Association member Sanjeev Gupta. The complaint against the former pacer has been lodged with the BCCI's Ethics Officer Justice (Retd) D K Jain. Gupta has alleged that Kuruvilla's conflict of interest centres around his twin roles of being the Sports Director of the DY Patil academy and a national selector.

Kuruvilla, who played 10 Tests and 25 ODIs for India, was on Thursday named in the national selection panel by the Board's Cricket Advisory Committee (CAC) comprising Madan Lal, R P Singh and Sulakshana Naik. A similar complaint alleging conflict of interest has been filed by Gupta against Mumbai Cricket Association (MCA) president Vijay Patil. Patil was elected as the president of the MCA in October last year when the elections of the association were held.

— PTI

UKC puts at stake \$1 million

New Delhi: The 2021 season of the Ultimate Krick Challenge (UKC), a unique one-on-one cricket tournament, will offer a hefty USD one million prize purse to the winner, the organisers said on Saturday.

Six star all-rounders, including India's Yuvraj Singh, along with five others are part of the ongoing inaugural season, which kicked off on December 24.

"Season 2 will have more than 6 superstars vying to be declared the real champ in a one-on-one format as well as USD 1 million as winners cheque," Ravi Thakran, Chairman, UKC said in a release.

The second season of the event will commence in first quarter of 2021.

The first season, which concludes on January 1 next year, has six global superstars as contenders Yuvraj, Chris Gayle, Kevin Pietersen, Rashid Khan, Eoin Morgan and Andre Russell.

The 16-match tournament has new cricket rules with each match consisting of two contenders squaring off against each other across 4 innings of 15-balls each in every match. — PTI

Norman Covid +ve, in hospital

New York: Golf Hall of Famer Greg Norman shared photos on social media suggesting he has been hospitalised with COVID-19.

The 65-year-old Australian posted a video on Instagram on Thursday night saying he was experiencing coronavirus symptoms, then posted photos on Friday showing himself in a hospital bed.

"This sums it all up," he wrote. "My Christmas Day."

Norman's son, Greg Norman Jr, also said on social media that he and his wife, Michelle, have tested positive. The Normans played in the father-son PNC Championship in Orlando, Florida, last weekend.

The elder Norman said Thursday that he had flu-like symptoms, including a mild fever, a cough, aches and pains, and a mild headache. He said he took a virus test Tuesday that came back negative, but he was in self-quarantine anyway.

He was apparently admitted to a hospital Friday. — AP

EMOTIONAL DEBUT

Bereaved paceman Siraj savours emotional Test debut

Melbourne, Dec. 26: India paceman Mohammed Siraj was urged by his captain Virat Kohli and his mother to stay in Australia and push for selection in the test side rather than head home to grieve with his family following the death of his father last month.

On Saturday, at a sun-bathed Melbourne Cricket Ground, Siraj was rewarded for his tough decision as he took two wickets on an emotional debut to help India bowl Australia out for 195 on day one of the Boxing Day test.

Prior to Mohammed Shami's injury, Hyderabad native Siraj had no assurances he would feature at all in the four-test series but he hit the pitch hard in the tour matches to put himself at the front of the queue.

The door opened when Shami suffered an arm fracture in the series opener, and Siraj found himself thrust into a much-changed team needing to respond to the eight-wicket humiliation within three days at Adelaide Oval.

Siraj had to bide his time on Saturday, as stand-in skipper Rahane Ajinkya opted for spinner Ravichandran Ashwin as first change bowler on a moist wicket in the morning.

The captain's call proved a sound one, as Ashwin took two wickets to leave Australia shaky at 65 for three at lunch.

Siraj was finally thrown the ball after lunch and made his presence felt with a bouncer that struck Marnus Labuschagne on the helmet.

Though wicketless from his first spell, Siraj returned to remove danger man Labuschagne for 48, helped by fellow debutant Shubman Gill's fine catch at backward square leg.

Siraj then trapped



Test debutants Shubman Gill (left) and Mohamed Siraj.

Cameron Green lbw for 12 with a ball that nipped back in after lulling the young all-rounder with a number of deliveries that moved away.

With Ishant Sharma and Shami sidelined, there were fears in India that

pacemen Jasprit Bumrah and Umesh Yadav would have to shoulder too big a burden over the remainder of the series but Siraj's special day renewed hope the tourists might have the resources to claw their way back in

Melbourne.

After India went to stumps at 36 for one, Bumrah, who led India's bowling with four wickets, praised Siraj for his impressive support role.

"Playing his first international (test) match, he

bowled really well and he showed confidence of using all his skills," he said.

"That's a very heartening sign for us and hopefully he continues to play like this."

— Reuters

New Zealand 222/3 at stumps

Mount Maunganui, Dec. 26: Kane Williamson made an unbeaten 94 and shared a 120-run partnership with Ross Taylor which lifted New Zealand into a strong position at stumps Saturday on the first day of the first cricket test against Pakistan.

Taylor made 70 and Williamson added a further 89 with Henry Nicholls who was 42 not out at stumps when New Zealand was 222-3. Williamson came to the crease when only three balls had been bowled and remained for the next 86.3 overs, reshaping the New Zealand innings and changing the course of the first day.

Pakistan had been on top after winning the toss, bowling on a green pitch and after Shaheen Afridi removed New Zealand openers Tom Latham for 4 and Tom Blundell for 5 with only 13 runs on the board. New Zealand faced its first real crisis of the domestic summer. In two tests against the West Indies it lost the toss and made scores of 519-7 and 460 to set up innings victories



Kane Williamson

and a 2-0 series sweep.

On Saturday, Pakistan's more disciplined attack made much better use of the toss and conditions than the West Indies.

Shaheen brought pace and bounce which generated catches behind the wicket: Latham and Blundell were caught in the slip cordon and Taylor fell to a catch by wicket keeper Mohammad Rizwan. Mohammad Abbas brought immense accu-

cy and perseverance, conceding only 10 runs from his first 11 overs.

Williamson and Taylor were forced to graft for runs early. Taylor's half century from 127 balls was his 34th in tests but second slowest in terms of balls faced while Williamson's, from 154 balls, was his 33rd and his second slowest in New Zealand. By lunch they had lifted New Zealand to 55-2 and they reached their half century part-

nership from 125 balls. The pitch mellowed in the second session and, while the Pakistan bowlers maintained good line and length, Taylor and Williamson were able to bat more freely. They posted their 10th century partnership in tests from 249 deliveries, adding to the record of New Zealand's most prolific test partnership.

Taylor had special cause to celebrate as he was making a record 438th international appearance across all formats, overtaking Daniel Vettori's record of 437. He has form a special alliance with Williamson, with whom he has batted more than 150 times in tests and scored more than 3,000 runs.

"At the start of my career I was happy just to play one or two games and to have come this far is nice," Taylor said. "Throughout the whole of the summer the pitches have been a little bit green, this one not as green as the other two. In tests you expect it to do a little bit for the first couple of hours and it certainly did that." — AP

Centurion, Dec. 26: South African players raised a fist to acknowledge the country's struggle against apartheid but refrained from taking the knee associated with the global Black Lives Matter Movement just before the start of the first Test against Sri Lanka, here on Saturday.

The players, led by Quinton de Kock, raised their fists after singing the South African national anthem before the start of the opening day at the Super Sport Park.

Pressure has been mounting on the Proteas to show their support to the global BLM Movement by taking a knee, but the players in a statement said that the raised fists have more historical context to the South Africans.

"The raised fist is a powerful gesture in our own history, as expressed in the iconic images of Nelson and Winnie Mandela on Mandela's release from prison in 1990," the players said in a statement.

"In this context it was a powerful gesture of tri-

DOWN UNDER | DIARY

MCG may witness surge of spectators

Melbourne, Dec. 26: If the third Test between India and Australia shifts to Melbourne because of stringent COVID-19 restrictions in Sydney, the MCG will consider allowing more than the currently permitted 30,000 spectators here, the ground's president Stuart Fox said on Saturday.

Uncertainty looms over the New Year's Test being held at the SCG from January 7 because of stricter quarantine rules set by Queensland, the host of the fourth Test, for people arriving from Sydney due to the surge in COVID-19 cases there. MCG is hosting the second Test right now and has capped the spectator count at 30,000.

India are set to play their fourth and final Test in Brisbane from January 15 and current health protocols would require the touring side to undergo quarantine if they play the third Test at the SCG.

"I would love it but we have to go to what's right for the community. If it's confirmed the MCG is hosting it, we go back to the government and re-submit another plan and they will have a look at it," Fox was quoted as saying by the 'Sydney Morning Herald' when asked if the permissible crowd numbers could surge if the match is held in Melbourne.

"It's more important we get this one away safely and then we will reassess after that," Fox said.

While Fox said that the MCG will be ready if required, he would ideally like SCG to host the Test match.

"Yes we can, we are ready to go but, I have said all along, we really do hope it can stay in Sydney. It's a really, really special Test," he said.

"...I really do hope it gets away in Sydney but we are on standby, we are ready to go. There are a few challenges with that but, if we are needed, we are ready."

Victorian sports minister Martin Pakula said that his government and health officials took a cautious approach in terms of capacity for the Boxing Day Test after having agreed to allow an extra 5000 into the stadium.

"This was always going to be the event where we were more on the conservative side in terms of numbers. We want to test the processes," Pakula told the paper.

He felt that MCG's capacity can allow a larger crowd which Cricket Australia won't mind.

"I am sure Cricket Australia would like to see a slightly bigger crowd if they could get it. I think our position on that is, let's wait and see for a decision on where the Test is," he said.

"If the Test is going to be at the MCG, then Cricket Australia would submit a plan. If it's for a slightly higher number, then that would be a matter for the CHO (chief health officer) to assess," he said.



Spectators at Melbourne Cricket Ground.

— Twitter

South Africans raise fists before Boxing Day Test

Pressure has been mounting on the Proteas to show their support to the global BLM Movement by taking a knee, but the players said that the raised fists have more historical context.

umph, an acknowledgment of the struggle against apartheid, and a commitment to continuing to fight for equality, justice and freedom, while also honouring the religious and cultural responsibilities of every member of our team."

The players said the team had, on multiple occasions, declared its "unmistakable" support to the BLM campaign and committed to continue doing the same together.

"We recognize that our actions will most likely result in criticism from some community, one way or another, but ... we have taken the decision through a process of deep democra-

cy to raise our fists.

"We recognize the historical and political connotations of the raised fist as a gesture of ongoing solidarity in the fight for racial justice and anti-racism work. So, we stand together and raise our fists as a gesture of solidarity and commitment to continuing the work of pursuing racial justice in our life-times."

They said the raised fist has a long history within the Civil Rights movement, like American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos did during the medal ceremony at the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games.

South Africa players have so far refused to take a knee — as many high profile figures in sport have done in the wake of George Floyd's killing by Minneapolis police in the USA on May 25. "We recognize that gestures have histories and contexts, which carry meaning beyond themselves (both positive and negative) and that these gestures may be open to misinterpretation." — PTI



South African players raise a fist to acknowledge the country's struggle against apartheid but refrained from taking the knee associated with the global Black Lives Matter Movement just before the start of the first Test against Sri Lanka.

— Twitter

SHORT TAKES

Dean remembered during MCG Test

Melbourne: More than three months after his death, Dean Jones was paid another tribute at his home ground here by Indian and Australian players, who were joined by his wife, daughters and the legendary Allan Border in remembering the effervescent former player on Saturday.

Jones' family and former Australia captain Border participated in the farewell during the tea break of the ongoing second Test here. Border, Jones' wife Jane, and daughters — Augusta and Phoebe — took a long walk from the boundary of the Melbourne Cricket Ground to the centre, carrying his baggy green, sunglasses and Kookaburra bat and laid the items to rest on the stumps at the Great Southern Stand end of the ground. Later, 12th men from both sides — K.L. Rahul (India) and James Pattinson (Australia) — collected the items and rested them on a seat by the boundary. — *PTI*

Ex-Eng cricketer Jackman no more

London: Former England cricketer Robin Jackman, who played four Test matches and 15 one-day internationals, has died, the International Cricket Council said. He was 75. Jackman took 1,402 wickets in a 399-game first-class career between 1966 and 1982. Following his retirement he became a commentator in South Africa, where he lived with his wife Yvonne. A statement on Friday from the ICC read: "We are saddened to learn about the death of legendary commentator and former England bowler Robin Jackman, who has passed away aged 75."

Former New Zealand bowler and fellow commentator Danny Morrison tweeted: "Awoken to the sad news of dear buddy & comms colleague Robin Jackman passing... Blessed to have had wonderful times shared 'Jackers'. RIP Rob". — *AP*

De Silva hurt after leading SL revival

Centurion, South Africa: Dhananjaya de Silva and Dinesh Chandimal put Sri Lanka in a strong position on the first day of the first Test against South Africa in Centurion on Saturday. De Silva made 79 before retiring hurt and former captain Chandimal hit 85 as Sri Lanka reached 340 for six at the close.

De Silva suffered what appeared to be a left hip injury while running between wickets and was taken off the field on a motorised stretcher. It was not clear whether he would be able to take any further part in the match.

His injury ended a partnership of 131 with Chandimal. — *AFP*
Brief scores: Sri Lanka 340/6 (D. Chandimal 85 batting, D. De Silva 79 retired hurt, W. Mulder 3-68) vs **South Africa**

Irving, Robinson spark NBA routs

Miami: Brooklyn's Kyrie Irving and Miami's Duncan Robinson each matched an NBA Christmas Day record with seven 3-pointers to ignite lopsided victories Friday, as the Heat stretch their holiday win streak to eight games. Irving scored 37 points, hitting 7-of-10 3-point attempts in his return to Boston, as the Nets ripped his former Celtics teammates 123-95. — *AFP*

Live on TV

CRICKET

India vs Australia: Second Test — Day 3 from 5 am (Monday) 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: Kerala Blasters vs Hyderabad from 7.20 pm on Star Sports 2, 3

Premier League: Leeds City vs Burnley from 5.30 pm; West Ham vs Brighton from 7.45 pm; Liverpool vs West Brom from 10 pm on Star Sports Select 1, HD

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BOWLERS' DAY OUT

Bumrah, Ashwin skittle Aussies out for 195 as India dominate

Melbourne, Dec. 26: Jasprit Bumrah's menace was matched by Ravichandran Ashwin's guile as an inspired India led by Ajinkya Rahane shot out Australia for a sub-par 195 to dominate the opening day of the second Test here on Saturday. India then lost an out-of-form Mayank Agarwal (0) to Mitchell Starc but debutant Shubman Gill (28 batting) survived a hostile spell to hit some delectable boundaries in the day end score of 36 for 1 in 11 overs.

Giving him company was the seasoned Cheteshwar Pujara (7 batting). The line-up would look to exorcise the ghosts of the opening Adelaide game last week when India were shot out for their lowest ever Test score of 36.

"Not being reckless but playing with confidence will be the motive going forward," said Bumrah at the end of day's play, spelling out the team's plan.

As much as the day belonged to the Indian bowling unit for another fired-up show, new captain Rahane deserved equal credit for marshalling his resources to perfection during the 72.3 overs that Australia batted.

Bumrah (4/56 in 16 overs) and Ashwin (3/35 in 24 overs) were the stars but debutant Mohammed Siraj (2/40 in 15 overs) also did his bit repaying the faith shown in him with wickets of Marnus Labuschagne (48) and Cameron Green (12) with the old ball.

However, the Test series is increasingly looking like Ashwin's paradise as he once again made the opposition's best batsman Steve Smith (0) look ordinary, exploiting the turn and bounce that the first day of the MCG track offered. The Indian team looked way more galvanised despite being without regular skipper Virat Kohli, who is on paternity leave. — *PTI*

SIRAJ FULFILLED HIS LATE FATHER'S DREAM: BROTHER

Mumbai, Dec. 26: Pacer Mohammed Siraj could not perform the last rites of his late father last month as he was in Australia with the national team but he made him proud by making India Test debut in Melbourne, his family said on Saturday.

The 26-year-old Siraj lost his father Mohammed Ghaus, an auto-rickshaw driver in Hyderabad, on November 20, around a week after the Indian team landed in Australia and he could not return home due to Covid-19 restrictions.

His brother Ismail said it was his late father's dream to see Siraj play for the country in Tests and finally the dream was fulfilled on Saturday at the MCG. "It was my (late) father's dream that Siraj should represent India in Tests... He always wanted to see him (Siraj) in blue and white jersey to represent the nation, so our dream got fulfilled today," Ismail said. — *PTI*



India's Ravichandran Ashwin (left) celebrates with captain Ajinkya Rahane after dismissing Australia's Tim Paine on Day One of the Boxing Day Test at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on Saturday. — *AP*

SCORECARD

Australia Innings: Joe Burns c Pant b Bumrah 0, Matthew Wade c Jadeja b Ashwin 30, Marnus Labuschagne c Shubman Gill b Mohammed Siraj 48, Steven Smith c Pujara b Ashwin 0, Travis Head c Rahane b Bumrah 38, Cameron Green lbw b Mohammed Siraj 12, Tim Paine c Vihari b Ashwin 13, Pat Cummins c Mohammed Siraj b Jadeja 9, Mitchell Starc c Mohammed Siraj b Bumrah 7, Nathan Lyon lbw b Bumrah 20, Josh Hazlewood not out 4. Extras (b-10, nb-3, w-1) 14. **Total (In 72.3 overs) 195.**
FoW: 1-10, 2-35, 3-38, 4-124, 5-134, 6-155, 7-

155, 8-164, 9-191, 10-195.
Bowling: Jasprit Bumrah 16-4-56-4, Umesh Yadav 12-2-39-0, Ravichandran Ashwin 24-7-35-3, Ravindra Jadeja 5.3-1-15-1, Mohammed Siraj 15-4-40-2.
India 1st Innings: Mayank Agarwal lbw b Starc 0, Shubman Gill (batting) 28, Cheteshwar Pujara (batting) 7, Extras (nb-1) 1. **Total (For 1 wkt, in 11 overs) 36.**
FoW: 1-0.
Bowling: Mitchell Starc 4-2-14-1, Pat Cummins 4-1-14-0, Josh Hazlewood 2-0-2-0, Nathan Lyon 1-0-6-0.

Gavaskar refrains from praising leader Rahane

Melbourne, Dec. 26: Former India skipper Sunil Gavaskar is impressed by Ajinkya Rahane's field placements but said he will refrain from praising his captaincy as it is still "early days" and he does not want to be accused of backing a fellow Mumbaikar.

Taking charge of the team in the absence of regular skipper Virat Kohli, Rahane marshalled his resources well as India dismissed Australia for a sub-par 195 in 72.3 overs on the opening day of the second Test here.

Asked for his comments on Rahane's leadership, Gavaskar said: "... let's not jump into conclusions too quickly. If I say that his captaincy is outstanding, then again, I will be accused of backing a Mumbai boy and all kinds of things will happen.

FOR THE RECORD

● R. Ashwin and Ravindra Jadeja are playing together for the second time in away Tests. The first time both Ashwin and Jadeja played together outside Asia and the West Indies was Old Trafford, Manchester, in 2014 as part of a five-man attack. The last time a team played two front line spinners at Melbourne was India in 2007-08.

● Mohammed Siraj and Shubman Gill made their debuts in this match. India have played two debutants overseas only on two occasions since 2001. Virender Sehwag and Deep Dasgupta against South Africa at Bloemfontein in 2001-02 and Virat Kohli, Abhinav Mukund and Praveen Kumar against the West Indies at Kingston in 2010-11.

● Steve Smith slumped to his maiden duck in 23 innings against India. It was his fifth duck 134th innings of 75th Test match.

● It was Mayank Agarwal's maiden duck in 20 innings.

— *S. PERVEZ KAISER*

"So I don't want to get into that because these are early days," the legendary batsman said on *Sony Sports Network*.

Gavaskar was impressed with Rahane's field placements as three Australian batsmen — Marnus Labuschagne, Steve Smith, and Travis

Head — were all caught by fielders deployed at different positions.

"From what I have seen in the last 2 Tests he captained and the one-day matches he captained, he has got a great sense of where the fielders should be kept," Gavaskar said. — *PTI*

Foxes strike late to frustrate Utd

Leicester, Dec. 26: Leicester and Manchester United missed the chance to put pressure on Liverpool at the top of the Premier League as the battle between second and third ended 2-2 at the King Power on Saturday.

Slow starts had been a feature for United on the road this season as they had won their previous six away league games despite conceding first.

However, this time it was the Red Devils who twice failed to hold onto the lead given to them by Marcus Rashford and Bruno Fernandes.

Harvey Barnes's thunderous strike levelled before half-time and Jamie Vardy's predatory instincts kept Leicester one point and one place above United in the table as his shot deflected in off Tuanzebe five minutes from time.

Liverpool's lead at the top now stands at three points and Jurgen Klopp's men can move further clear when they host West Brom at Anfield on Sunday.

"One point is not the worst result but we are disappointed we didn't get away with three," said United boss Ole Gunnar Solskjaer.

THE RESULT

Leicester 2
(Barnes 31, Vardy 85)
Manchester United 2
(Rashford 23, Fernandes 79)

"We had loads of big chances and we could've finished it off. They are a very dangerous side, a quality side, and Vardy just shows his quality."

Solskjaer has been keen to put an end to his side's sluggish starts and should have been celebrating inside 90 seconds when Rashford headed over Fernandes's inch-perfect cross with only Kasper Schmeichel to beat.

The England international was not so forgiving to the Foxes when given a second chance midway through the first-half as he swept Fernandes's prodded through ball into the bottom corner for his 13th goal of the season.

However, Barnes hauled his side back into the game with one moment of brilliance as his powerful blast from outside the box had too much power for De Gea on 31 minutes.

— *AFP*



Leicester City's Jamie Vardy (left) celebrates with James Maddison after scoring against Manchester United in their EPL match in Leicester on Saturday. — *AFP*

Steinmann scores as EB hold Chennaiyin

Vasco (Goa), Dec. 26: German striker Matti Steinmann struck twice to help SC East Bengal pull off a 2-2 draw against two-time champions Chennaiyin FC in an Indian Super League match here on Saturday.

It was East Bengal's third draw (to go with four defeats) as victory eluded them again.

Chennaiyin led 1-0 at half-time thanks to a 13th minute strike from Lallianzuala Chhangte before Steinmann equalised for East Bengal in the 59th minute.

CFC went ahead in the 64th minute through Rahim Ali's strike before East Bengal restored parity when Steinmann scored his second of the game.

The scoreline remained 2-

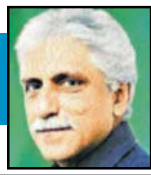
2 at the end of full-time and five minutes of added time despite the best effort of both sides to find the elusive winning goal.

Chennaiyin with two wins, two losses and three draws moved up to seventh spot with nine points while East Bengal remained winless and in 10th place with just three points.

After an action-packed first half during which Chhangte's strike enabled CFC gain a 1-0 lead, Steinmann scored in the 59th minute to level things up. Rahim Ali slotted home for CFC in the 64th minute from close range.

However, an error from CFC goalie Vishal Kaith allowed Steinmann to score five minutes later and bring East Bengal on level terms. — *PTI*

Debutants Siraj and Gill impress with strong showing



Ayaz Memon
Over The Top

India have started the Boxing Day Test match in fine style, bowling out Australia for a paltry 195. Apprehensions that the team would still be in trauma after the crushing defeat at Adelaide proved to be unfounded.

The approach of the team was positive, the body language of players assertive and bowlers demonstrated excellent skills to scuttle Tim Paine's hopes of notching up a big score batting first.

Lambasted and lampooned after being bundled out for 36, India's lowest ever Test score, at Adelaide, and then losing the services of stalwarts Virat Kohli and Mohamed Shami — for different reasons — the team was under enormous pressure going into this match. In this backdrop, the first day's performance was uplifting.

To shrug off acute gloom after the fiasco of the previous match and make such a robust comeback

was admirable from the players.

Also terribly important in a series where three matches have still to be played. Brooding — in contrast to hard and harsh introspection — could only have made the situation worse.

Ajinkya Rahane led the team marvelously. To introduce spin in the 11th over of the day seems outrageous on the first morning of a match at the MCG. But it turned out to be a masterstroke as Ashwin plucked out two wickets, including that of mainstay Steve Smith.

Ashwin winning this psychological battle was the turning point of the day I thought. Without Warner, and with Smith not making a substantial contribution, the Australia

batting looks vulnerable and flaky. There were no fielding lapses this time by India, and the Aussie innings was throttled by the attacking bowlers.

While Ashwin and Bumrah were exceptional, my picks for the day from the Indian team were debutants Siraj and Gill who didn't look out of place at this level. With the team under so much duress, both showed strong nerves, fine skills and sound temperament.

Siraj was understandably edgy in his first spell. In the second, he worked up hot pace, and probed and tested batsmen with movement in the air and off the wicket, picking up two important wickets which exposed the Australian tail.

In the difficult final hour,

Gill impressed with panache and compact technique.

He got a life, true, but came back with some stunning drives in front of the wicket without being wantonly risky. A sweet timing of the ball and pleasing to the eye, Gill's set sail on his international career. Hopefully it will be long and fruitful.

My reason for dwelling at some length on India's smart display on Saturday is two-fold: one, it stokes optimism about the future course of this series. Even diehard Indian supporters startled fearing a clean sweep for Australia after the first Test debacle. That despondency has been somewhat dissipated.

The second is perhaps even more compelling. It has to do with the World

Test Championship where New Zealand have become a big threat to India to make it to the final in mid-2021.

India and Australia lead the WTC table on points. But under the ICC's revised formula, it is win-percentage that will determine finalists, not volume of points.

By the new methodology, New Zealand have crept ahead of India after beating West Indies 2-0 in the recently concluded series. The Kiwis are now engaged in a two-Test series with injury hit Pakistan (Babar Azam, Shadab Khan missing), and have begun the first Test strongly. If they win both these matches, they become a potent threat to India and Australia. However, by virtue of the