

Chief Secretary Somesh Kumar's troubles deepen?

Just a few days after the judiciary took serious note of the wilful contempt and utter disdain of the bureaucracy and decided to teach the stubborn set of the supremely recalcitrant to obey the law by sentencing a district collector to imprisonment, the entire officialdom in the state has sat up to check the scores. Unlike in cricket, a captain topping the scoring list did not emerge as the best news for Team IAS, with news circulating that Chief Secretary Somesh Kumar tops the list of contemnors of the various orders of the Telangana High Court. Making it worse, scuttlebutt in the power corridors began to keenly follow a senior Congress leader, who is making a trip to Delhi with a file listing and detailing allegations of misconduct, misuse of power and corruption against Kumar, demanding

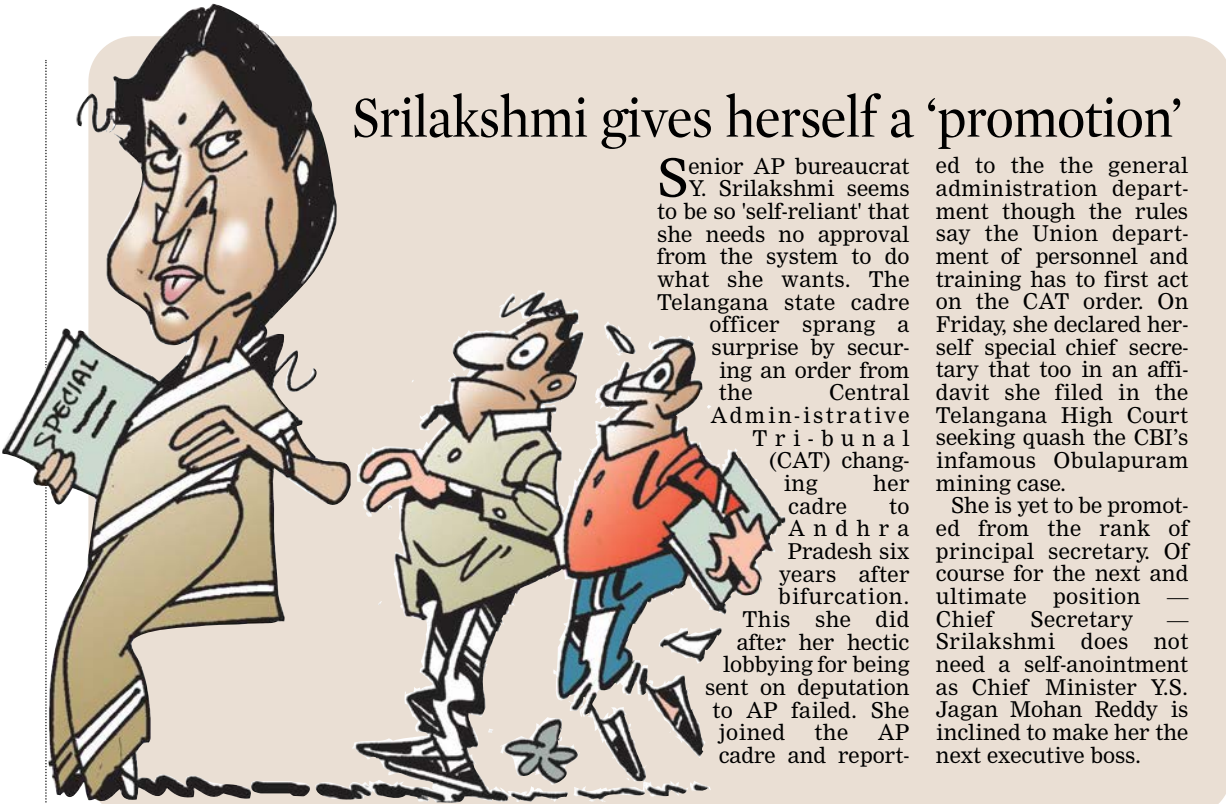
that he be relocated to his parent cadre, Andhra Pradesh. While a senior Congress leader seeking appointments with senior BJP leaders in the government, with allegations against a bureaucrat would normally not ruffle feathers, it is the appointments he is trying to get with Prime Minister Narendra Modi and home minister Amit Shah that are causing concern in officialdom. Added to it is the belief that the BJP wants this leader to jump ship from Congress to strengthen their bid for power against the TRS in Telangana state that is underlying fears that the BJP top brass may actually hear him out seriously.

How will things shape up in court in Hyderabad and the political durbars in Delhi in the coming week - everyone is waiting and watching with bated breath.

NETA'S NATTER

CJ Hima Kohli putting fear of law in babus

Since the day she was named to the Telangana High Court, Chief Justice Hima Kohli has stirred up the political and bureaucratic circles in Hyderabad. Known for her high and unimpeachable integrity and fearlessness, Chief Justice Kohli has made it a mission to create fear of law amongst the high and mighty who would normally feel entitled to total exemption and immunity from any implications of law on their power ambitions. Little wonder, the mood was subdued and apprehensive when the first women CJ in the state took the oath of office, given her insistence on actually implementing the canon that the law is equal for all. The "more equals" were clearly not happy. Constantly taking up the government, and various officials and departments over their disobedience of court orders and judgment, reckless disobedience and other actions falling under the purview of contempt of courts or irresponsible questioning and criticism of judges, the higher judiciary, under her captainship, is now making it a mission to punish the officials. While some mercy was shown in the first order of imprisonment of a district collector, later reduced to service and imprisonment consequent only to failure to pay a fine, the others may not be so lucky. Will IAS officers actually go to jail is a question on top of people's minds. While common people, activists and crusaders against corruption and highhandedness of officials are celebrating CJ Kohli's tough approach, the powerful are counting days for her short stint to soon get over.



Srilakshmi gives herself a 'promotion'

Senior AP bureaucrat S.Y. Srilakshmi seems to be so 'self-reliant' that she needs no approval from the system to do what she wants. The Telangana state cadre officer sprang a surprise by securing an order from the Central Administrative Tribunal (CAT) changing her cadre to Andhra Pradesh six years after bifurcation. This she did after her hectic lobbying for being sent on deputation to AP failed. She joined the AP cadre and reported

to the the general administration department though the rules say the Union department of personnel and training has to first act on the CAT order. On Friday, she declared herself special chief secretary that too in an affidavit she filed in the Telangana High Court seeking quash the CBI's infamous Obulapuram mining case.

She is yet to be promoted from the rank of principal secretary. Of course for the next and ultimate position — Chief Secretary — Srilakshmi does not need a self-anointment as Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy is inclined to make her the next executive boss.

MIB leaves AP redfaced... again

The Most Influential Bureaucrat (MIB) has landed the Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy government in an embarrassing situation, once again. It was an open secret in babudom both at the state and the Centre that he was instrumental in the AP government clamping charges of deriving personal gains by exerting pressure on subordinate staff against retired Union health secretary Preeti Sudan. She was served a show-cause notice that created ripples in the administrative circles. The grapevine was that the MIB

bore a grudge against Preeti Sudan for a personal reason but projected it to the political bosses that she had refused his request to back the state in its fight against the decision of State Election Commissioner N. Ramesh Kumar to postpone the local body polls last year and that she needed to be taught a lesson. Now that Preeti Sudan has replied to the notice and backed her argument by citing DoPT rules, the state has no option left but to drop the charges. One more tight slap!

OTHER STORIES

SEC TO FOCUS ON VIJAYAWADA, VIZAG, GUNTUR, TIRUPATI

DC CORRESPONDENT VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 6

Following complaints of rampant misuse of money and liquor, resulting in flouting the poll code, the State Election Commission (SEC) has decided to focus on four municipal corporations to curb such illegal practice.

In a statement issued here on Saturday, the SEC stated that it received more complaints on rampant misuse of money and liquor in the run up to the urban local body polls, especially in municipal corporations like Visakhapatnam, Vijayawada, Guntur and Tirupati. The SEC also requested the income tax department and enforcement directorate to focus on such issues and check violations related to the implementation of model code of conduct especially related to misuse of money and liquor. The SEC is holding a teleconference with all the concerned on the issue at 11 am on March 7.

SEC TAKES STEPS TO CURB ILLEGAL ELECTIONEERING

DC CORRESPONDENT VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 6

In the wake of complaints on some ward volunteers involving in electioneering illegally in the urban local body polls, the State Election Commission (SEC) has initiated steps to curb such practice.

In a statement issued on Saturday, the SEC stated that a 24/7 call centre was set up at No. 0866-2466877 asking people to lodge complaints on such illegal practice with an assurance to take action on such complaints immediately.

The SEC suggested to the people to send an email to 'secyapsec2@gmail.com' and district collectors, municipal commissioners, and call centres in districts for necessary action. It also asked the people to lodge a written complaint also to deal with such electoral malpractice effectively.

18 TD NOMINEES MOVE HC TO STALL POLLS IN CHITTOOR

DC CORRESPONDENT VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 6

Eighteen Telugu Desam contestants filed lunch motion in the High Court seeking its direction to stall the election in the Chittoor municipal corporation, alleging that their nominations were withdrawn with their forged signatures on Saturday. The TD contestants in their petition said that they did not withdraw their nominations to contest from 18 divisions in the urban local body polls and alleged that it was a clear case of fraud on the election process.

Advocate Krishna Reddy to represent the petitioners in the court hearing on Sunday.

Parties go into aggressive mode in VMC elections

Candidates and prominent leaders visit wards to attract voters

DC CORRESPONDENT VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 6

Campaigning for the Vijayawada Municipal Corporation (VMC) elections is in full swing with candidates of YSRC, Telugu Desam, Jana Sena, BJP and Communist parties visiting wards to attract the voters.

Providing a celluloid touch was actor Ali, who campaigned for YSRC candidates in Vijayawada on Saturday. He went around Vidyardharapuram and other localities along with endowments minister Vellampalli Srinivas Rao and other leaders.

Ali recalled that the economic growth of underprivileged sections by way of implementation of several welfare schemes happened during the time of Y.S. Rajasekar Reddy. He said that this is being replicated to remarkable levels by the Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy government, which has fulfilled most election promises. He claimed that recently Jagan Mohan Reddy had sanctioned crores of rupees for the development of Vijayawada. He appealed to the voters to support YSRC nominees in the VMC elections.

YSRC MP Nandigam Suresh conducted an election campaign in 49 division and other areas of the city. He stated that people are eagerly waiting to give a massive win to the ruling party like they did in the gram panchayat elections.

Meanwhile, TD chief N. Chandrababu Naidu will campaign for his party candidates on Sunday. On Saturday, his Vijayawada MP Kesineni Srinivas (Nani) met Muslim clerics and sought their cooperation in the elections.

The MP recalled that YSRC had supported NRC, CAA and NPR in the Parliament while he had opposed them and stood by Muslims.

Nani lamented that



Comedian Ali conducting campaign at One Town area for YSRC candidates in municipal elections in Vijayawada on Saturday.

— DC

YSRC predicts four VMC seats for TD

DC CORRESPONDENT VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 6

YSR Congress predicted four to five seats for Telugu Desam in Vijayawada Municipal Corporation elections.

Minister for Panchayat Raj Peddireddi Ramachandra Reddy expressed confidence that YSRC will continue its win-spree and trump in both Vijayawada and Guntur municipal corporations.

Speaking after a meeting with Krishna district leaders on their poll strategy, he asked TD leaders to focus on ironing out differences within their party before criticising YSRC. Condemning TD chief N. Chandrababu Naidu's unwarranted criticism, Reddy said the TD would hardly win three or four seats as their internal differences had reached a flashpoint.

when TD was at the helm, minority students had opportunities to study abroad but after assuming power, Jagan Mohan Reddy has stopped the scheme and put minority students into a lot of financial troubles. The TD leader said that he was working for the welfare of Muslims and other sup-

Meanwhile, Minister Kodali Sri Venkateswara Rao, alias Nani, said that N. Balakrishna was unaware of the situation in the state and was criticising Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy for not questioning Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Vizag Steel Plant issue despite the former writing a letter to the Union government on the issue. He said the actor-politician reads the script written by Naidu and knows nothing about anything else.

Meanwhile, Nani took on BJP state president Somu Veerajulu saying that Veerajulu was talking illogically these days. Vijayawada Central MLA Malladi Vishnu asked Veerajulu how the Modi government can control Jagan government when the fact is that both were democratically elected by people.

pressed communities and would continue to do so. MLC Batchula Arjunudu and other leaders also campaigned for TD candidates.

Leaders from Jana Sena, BJP and Communist parties campaigned extensively in various divisions seeking votes for their respective candidates.

3,000 POLICE DEPLOYED FOR VMC ELECTIONS

DC CORRESPONDENT VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 6

Vijayawada police are making foolproof arrangements for a smooth conduct of the elections scheduled to be held on March 10. Vijayawada City Police Commissioner B. Srinivasulu said that the department is deploying about 3,000 police personnel for the peaceful conduct of elections in Vijayawada. He said that 1,870 rowdy-sheeters were bound over under Section 110 and 109.

The commissioner said they were deploying 62 mobile parties, 27 striking forces and 12 special striking forces. He stated that flag march is being carried out in problematic areas time and again and special arrangements have been made by the local police along with the SEB to prevent distribution of liquor and cash.

CONG COMPLAINS ON DISTRIBUTION OF MONEY BY YSRC, TD

DC CORRESPONDENT VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 6

Congress lodged a complaint with the State Election Commission over the violation of the election model code of conduct by distributing money to the voters by the YSRC and Telugu Desam.

Congress Vijayawada City president Naraharishetti Narasimha Rao has complained to the SEC that both the ruling YSRC and the Opposition TD were distributing money to the voters.

Vizag development possible under TD rule only: Naidu

DC CORRESPONDENT VISAKHAPATNAM, MARCH 6

Development of Visakhapatnam City was possible only under TD rule, said former chief minister and TD national president Nara Chandrababu Naidu, during his second-day campaign in Visakhapatnam on Saturday.

Addressing election meetings from in the city, Naidu said apart from his efforts to make Vizag the financial capital, his party also launched welfare schemes like Anna Canteen and Kalyana Lakshmi, which the Jagan Mohan Reddy government later withdrew.

He asked the people to recollect his 10-day services after super cyclone Hudhud ravaged the city and when he sourced food and water from neighbouring states. "I worked as chief minister for 14 years with a vision and provided house pattas to 60,000 people and built houses for 80,000," Naidu said.

He said the Jagan Mohan Reddy government began taxing water and air and would not hesitate to tax stray dogs. Making satirical comments on the YSRC government liquor policy, Naidu said it was a pity to see people lined up in front of wine shops for brands of which were never heard. "What is Boom Boom beer? It seems Jagan Mohan Reddy manufactures liquor himself to make profits ignoring the popular and safe brands," Naidu said.

He said this was the time to give a fitting lesson to the YSRC government by defeating all their candidates in the current elections. Stating that the development, which was initiated during the TD regime, came to a grinding halt and the chief minister was seeking blessings from a fake godman to get rid of his sins. Later, MLC from Anakapalle Buddha Naga Jagadishwara Rao called on Naidu and asked him to campaign in Anakapalle, where five TD candidates were fighting to win the GVMC polls.

Naidu ran away to Kuppam, says YSRC

DC CORRESPONDENT VISAKHAPATNAM, MARCH 6

Continuing their aggressive campaign all over Visakhapatnam, the YSRC leaders alleged that chief minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy made Chandrababu Naidu run away to Kuppam from Chandragiri.

Campaigning in 52, 56 and 57 wards for the party candidates, ministers K. Kannababu and Muttamsetti Srinivasa Rao, accompanied by Lok Sabha members M.V.V. Satyanarayana and K. Satyavathi said that TD, under the leadership of Naidu, resorted to large scale corruption in the state in the name of Janma Bhoomi committees.

Naidu handed over all the government funds to these committees in the name of welfare schemes, the ministers alleged.

TD HAS NO MORAL RIGHT TO SEEK VOTES FOR CIVIC POLLS, SAYS GUDIVADA

DC CORRESPONDENT VISAKHAPATNAM, MARCH 6

Anakapalle MLA and YSRC official spokesperson Gudivada Amarnath said the TD had lost moral right to seek votes for the civic polls.

Talking to reporters in Visakhapatnam on Saturday, Amarnath said, "The Opposition have sternly opposed Vizag being executive capital, and they have stalled distribution of house sites to over two lakh people, placed hurdles for building a guest-house and tried to damage the brand image of Visakhapatnam on various counts and shamelessly the father-son duo have come to town seeking votes."

"TD has no interest in developing Visakhapatnam or North Andhra region, but in return loot-

ed the place for personal and political gains," the MLA said and added that opposition leader N. Chandrababu Naidu was all set to spoil the brand image of Visakhapatnam on multiple accounts, even by involving in land-grab cases but was now shedding crocodile tears to gain political mileage ahead of municipal polls.

After facing a major defeat in Naidu's own constituency in the Kuppam GP elections, Naidu and Nara Lokesh have come for GVMC elections campaign with a faulty narrative and fake promises. "How can Chandrababu and Lokesh ask for votes in Vizag when they are opposing it to be Executive Capital?"

There were many land grabs during the Naidu regime, he said.

HC | ORDER

RTC directed to consider giving job to claimant on compassionate grounds

RTC told to provide job to married daughter

DC CORRESPONDENT VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 6

Andhra Pradesh High Court directed the APSRTC to consider the claim of the married daughter of the deceased employee, as her husband lacked regular source of income, for appointment on compassionate grounds in any suitable post under the 'Bread Winner Scheme' within six weeks.

A single judge bench headed by justice Battu Devanand delivered the verdict recently and struck down the word 'unmarried' in clause-III of eligibility criteria of 'Bread Winner Scheme' of the APSRTC saying that it is discriminatory, arbitrary, unjust and violative of articles 14, 15, 16 and 21 of the Constitution of India. The court also set aside the proceedings of

APSRTC declining to provide employment on the rule that any one of the widow of the deceased employee or son or unmarried daughter was eligible to get the job under the scheme and as the deceased employee's daughter was married, she was not eligible for the job. Ch. Pentaiah, hailing from Srikakulam, used to work as a driver in APSRTC and died in 2009. He was sur-

vived by wife Chinnammulu and daughter Damayanti. Pentaiah was the sole breadwinner. Though his daughter got married subsequently, her husband was not having any regular source of income as he works on daily wages. Pentaiah's wife applied for a job of either conductor or Shramik in the RTC on compassionate grounds. However, her application

was rejected on grounds that she was not having eligibility criteria for such posts. Subsequently, her daughter Damayanti applied for a job on compassionate grounds and her mother gave a 'no objection certificate'. However, the RTC authorities set aside her application for the reason that the state government imposed a ban on appointments on compassionate grounds.

IN BRIEF

Teacher dies in road accident

Kakinada: A 30-year-old teacher Boddu Satyanarayana died in a road accident on Saturday near Mandapam centre on National Highway at Annavaram. According to the police, Satyanarayana was working as a teacher in Raja High School at Tuni, and while he was returning to his native village Kirlampudi, a lorry hit him near Mandapam village. Annavaram Sub-Inspector S.Ravikumar said that when he was going to Kirlampudi by bike, a lorry hit him from behind. He died on the spot. The Annavaram police registered a case

NALLAMALA REVERBERATES WITH OM CHANTS

DC CORRESPONDENT
KURNOOL, MARCH 6

The Nallamala forest is reverberating with chants of “Om Namah Shivaya” by Shiva Deeksha devotees and general devotees as they go on foot to Srisaillam on the occasion of Mahashivaratri Brahmotsavams. Thousands of people are trekking the Nallamala hills to reach Srisaillam temple town to have darshan of Lord Mallikarjuna Swamy and Goddess Bhramaramba Devi on foot through the dense forest.

The pilgrims have to bear several hardships as amenities like water and food are scarce while covering 50 km from Venkatapuram of Atmakur mandal. They trek through the forest for 48 hours, taking rest when tired on the way wherever possible. Apart from this, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the temple executive officer K.S. Rama Rao appealed to pilgrims not to come in groups. He suggested the devotees not to form in large groups instead advised them to split into small groups and save from getting affected with the virus. The devotees also advised wearing face masks and should maintain physical distance anywhere in the temple town during their Srisaillam visits on the occasion of Mahashivaratri.

Bhagavan, a devotee said, some philanthropists arranged food and water at Pedda Cheruvu in the deep forest of Nallamala, but the forest officials threw it down. The food was prepared to serve a few thousands of devotees, he said. “We are facing a lot of problems from the forest officials,” he said.

BRAHMOTSAVAMS COMMENCE IN SRIKALAHASTI

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, MARCH 6

The 13-day Mahashivaratri Brahmotsavams has commenced on a grand note at the temple town of Srikalahasti, the abode of Lord Vayulingeswara, with the conduction of “Ankurarpanam” (initiation) and hoisting of the Kannappa flag (dwajarahanam) atop the Kannappa hillock on Saturday.

Srikalahastheeswara Swami Vari temple is one of India’s major Saivite shrines and popularly called ‘Dakshina Kashi’. The temple was situated on the banks of the Swarnamukhi river in Srikalahasti in the Chittoor district.

It is expected more than one lakh devotees will visit this temple during the 13-day annual festival.

As per the age-old tradition of this temple, the first puja will be performed to Bhakta Kannappa, an ardent devotee who gave his two eyes to Lord Shiva with devotion. Accordingly, the deity of Bhakta Kannappa was taken on a procession from Alankara Manda-pam to the top of the adjoining hillock – called Kannappa Konda, with all traditions amidst the chanting of Vedic hymns by the priests. After performing dwajarahanam at the hilltop, Kannappa’s procession was taken around the four Mada streets, encircling the Srikalahasti temple.

The temple authorities will also perform another Dwajarahanam at Lord Shiva temple on Sunday. The temple follows two dwajarahanam ceremonies – one for Bhakta Kannappa in the glory of his devotion for Lord Shiva and the other for Swamyvaru.

In the meanwhile, the temple management has made elaborate arrangements for providing hassle-free darshan of Lord Shiva and Goddess Gnana Prasunambika for the devotees during the 13-day festival.



Chief Justice of AP High Court Justice Arup Kumar Goswami addresses during a programme organised upon his maiden visit in Vizianagaram on Saturday.

Mahila courts will help in quick dispensation of justice, says CJ

High Court Chief Justice visits Vizianagaram after 30 yrs

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIZIANAGARAM, MARCH 6

Andhra Pradesh High Court Chief Justice Arup Kumar Goswami inaugurated newly built Mahila and Pocco Courts in the court premises of Vizianagaram district on Saturday.

The Chief Justice said these courts would help in the quick dispensation of justice in the women related cases.

He said on the eve of International Women’s Day, and the entire world focused on women and their issues.

Justice Goswami said after he took over the office two months ago, he took stock of the problems pending in various courts in the state.

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● District sessions judge Guttala Gopi said the chief justice visit was a memorable event for the district. This is also the first visit of the chief justice to a district court after taking over the new office.

● About pendency, Gopi said around 250 cases were pending with each court in the district and requested the chief justice for sanctioning a new building for the Vizianagaram District Court.

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ic character to the Chief Justice.

He said in spite of the district being economically and academically challenged, and it produced seven high court judges so far. Of them, five belonged

to Parvathipuram to which he also belonged. The judge said the district needed a senior civil judge.

District portfolio judge and high court judge Battu Devanand said the

district should take pride in having the visit of the high court’s chief justice after a gap of 30 years.

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Later, district judges and senior lawyers felicitated the chief justice.

In Visakhapatnam, the chief justice was received by district judge A. Harihari Nadha Sharma, collector V. Vinay Chand and commissioner of police Manish Kumar Sinha.

IRREGULARITIES IN BHAVANNARAYANA TEMPLE LANDS

DC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, MARCH 6

Bhavannarayana Swamy Temple Committee chairman Pulla Seshukumari alleged that several irregularities in lands belonging to the temple and the endowments department officials who worked previously should take responsibility for the irregularities. She said that there was no clarity on the position of nearly 12 acres of temple lands.

Seshukumari said that some of the lands had been shown in section 43 form instead of Section 38 and the irregularities were taken place in most of the survey numbers.

She cited the example of 448.19 ½ acres of land under Section 38 and Section 43, but the officials have shown only 436.20 acres of land.

Seshukumari said that there was no mention of the extent of lakes or ponds in Section 38, but 3.53 acres of land was shown in section 43. She said that there were 15.82 acres of land in Medaline area, but the officials approached the court with an extent of only 7 acres of land and there was no action to secure the remaining land.

questioned whether he had lost public support. That is why he wants to win with anarchy, said Veerraju.

He said that if crores of rupees were sanctioned to the municipalities under the Amrut scheme, work was not started in many places to date. He said the BJP government had provided mechanised equipment to city panchayats.

Chronicle, Sai Prasad Reddy said he had great respect for Owaisi but only pities him now. He pointed out that Adoni is a sensitive place where Hindu-Muslim conflicts used to be regular phenomenon in the past. It was only under Jagan Mohan Reddy’s rule that peace is prevailing in the town.

“But Owaisi is again pushing the local population on to a crazy path,” the MLA warned.

could indulge in such street talk. Sai Prasad Reddy retorted, “Yes. I am people’s chaprasi (servant) and proud to be one.”

He maintained that the dilapidated Idgah had been demolished only to construct a new one at a cost of ₹2.56 crore sanctioned by Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy.

He further said works on ITI building and Urdu college will be speeded up. Speaking to *Deccan*

AP CHAMBERS INKS PACT WITH KL INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY CENTRE

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 6

Andhra Pradesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry Federation has signed an MoU with KL Intellectual Property Facilitation Centre (KLIPFC) to promote and provide intellectual property rights registration (Trademark, Copyright, Patents, Design Patents, etc.) for MSMEs, start-ups and businesses. Chambers president K.V.S. Prakash Rao and general secretary Potluri Bhaskara Rao said that Andhra Chambers would play the role of a coordinator in bringing awareness and educating interested parties about the importance of intellectual property rights and fostering the culture of IPR registration in the State. KLIPFC will provide intellectual property rights registration services.

Both the leaders said that AP Chambers and KLIPFC would be organising a series of webinars to educate the Chambers’ members about the importance of intellectual property rights registration and the process involved. They stated that the first webinar, “Innovation and Intellectual Property Rights for Start-ups and MSMEs” is being organised on Monday, March 8, from 3 to 5 pm via the Webex platform. They said that Chambers is inviting MSMEs, Start-ups and interested business owners to register for the webinar by calling AP Chambers at +91 99120 92222.

The MoU was signed by Mr K.V.S. Prakash Rao, President, AP Chambers and Dr K. Raghava Rao, Prof. in CSE, KLEF and PI-KLIPFC in the presence of Mr Potluri Bhaskara Rao, General Secretary, AP Chambers, Prof V.S.V. Prabhakar, Director, Industrial Relations, KLEF, Mr Velagapudi Sambasiva Rao, President, All India Chilli Exporters Association, Mr M.S. Ramachandra Rao, General Secretary, AP Small Industries Association, and Mr B.S. Koteswara Rao, Managing Director, Profit Shoe Company.

TWO YOUTHS ELECTROCUTED IN VEMPALLE

DC CORRESPONDENT
KADAPA, MARCH 6

Two youths were electrocuted to death in the Vempalle Papaghni river on Saturday. The deceased have been identified as Mangapatnam Mahesh, 20, and Pathan Ameer, 21, of Vempalle.

According to Vempalle Police Sub-Inspector Abrumu Subhash Chandrabose, the two youths staying at College Road in Vempalle town, went fishing in the Papaghni River on Saturday afternoon. They died of electric shock when they went fishing in the Papaghni River. When the bore’s electrical wires fell in well in the river basin they were electrocuted.

HISTORIC | NEGLECT Town quite prominent when Raja ruled it

Pithapuram lacks amenities

DC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, MARCH 6

Historical and spiritual town of Pithapuram, once a prominent town of Eastern Chalukyas, is now lacking even basic civic amenities. This is despite the town having the famous shrines of Goddess Kunthi Madhava Swamy, Lord Kukkuteswara Swamy, and Goddess Puruhitika Devi. Pithapuram, also known as “Pada Gaya” and “Dakshina Kasi”, is said to be the birthplace of

● Crops grown in Pithapuram constituency, like paddy, sugarcane are quite famous and tasty.

Lord Dattatreya. The town was quite prominent when Pithapuram Raja ruled it. He donated hundreds of acres of lands in East Godavari district to spiritual and educational institutions. Crops grown in Pithapuram constituency, like paddy, sugarcane, maize and vegetables, are quite famous and tasty.

AP reports 115 Covid-19 cases

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, MARCH 6

Andhra Pradesh registered 115 fresh Covid-19 cases and one death in the last 24 hours.

The state health authorities reported on Saturday that out of 46,566 samples tested, 115 persons were infected with confirmed Covid-19. Out of a total number of 1,41,90,477 samples tested so far in the state, 8,90,556 persons were found infected with the virus and of them, 8,82,462 were recovered and 921 are still active with the virus.

Among the daily Covid-19 cases, Chittoor registered the highest at 32, followed by 20 in Krishna, 18 in Visakhapatnam, eight each in Kadapa and West Godavari, six each in Anantapur, Guntur and Srikakulam, five each in East Godavari and Kurnool, one in Vizianagaram and zero cases in Nellore and Prakasam.

With regard to the cumulative Covid-19, Chittoor continued to lead the state with 236 fol-

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lowed by 115 in Krishna, 76 in East Godavari, 67 in Guntur, 66 in Visakhapatnam, 64 in Srikakulam, 60 in Nellore, 57 in Kadapa, 55 in Anantapur, 35 each in Prakasam and West Godavari and nine in Vizianagaram.

Among the daily Covid-19 deaths, one death was reported at Chittoor; taking the toll to 7,173.

The state health authorities discharged 93 Covid-19 infected patients after recovery in the state.

AP conducted Covid-19 tests on 2,65,739 samples per one million population and registered a positive rate of 6.28.

Kin of political bigwigs in fray

DC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, MARCH 6

The kin of several politicians are testing their fortunes in the Tirupati Municipal Corporation (TMC) election, slated for March 10. Prominent names include Bhumana Abhinay Reddy, son of YSR Congress MLA and former TTD trust board chairman Bhumana Karunakar Reddy and B. Venkata Keerthi, granddaughter of former TD legislator M. Sugunamma.

Though the YSR Congress party candidates have won 22 of the 50 divisions, which are up for grabs, unanimously, the MLA is leaving no stone unturned to ensure a big win for the ruling party. He has been personally campaigning in all the wards and reaching out to every household, explaining the welfare schemes being implemented by the state government.

His political heir Abhinay Reddy is making his electoral debut from the 4th division. As no candidate from the opposition parties has filed nomination in this division, his winning has become a near foregone conclusion. However, the youth leader has been leading the party’s campaign by touring all the divisions.

Abhinay is confident of winning all the 27 divisions in the city, banking on the state government’s welfare schemes. “Panchayat polls proved that YSRC was the clear winner and with people’s

● Bhumana Abhinay Reddy, son of YSR Congress MLA and former TTD trust board chairman Bhumana Karunakar Reddy and B. Venkata Keerthi, granddaughter of former TD legislator M. Sugunamma.

blessings, the winning streak will continue in TMC. The state government has been providing welfare schemes to all eligible people, irrespective of caste, religion and party affiliation. On top of it, people are satisfied with Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy’s good governance,” he asserted.

Venkata Keerthi is contesting from the 18th division, which is witnessing a keen triangular contest between YSRC, TD and Jana Sena. The ruling party has fielded S. Sulochana while the Jana Sena nominee is K. Mani Deepthi, all of whom are in the fray for the first time. The 18th division was once a TD bastion.

Meanwhile, former TUDA chairman and TD leader G. Narasimha Yadav’s sister-in-law G. Shanthi is contesting on behalf of the TD in the second division. Another brother of Narasimha Yadav, M. Krishna is contesting from the third division. Similarly, Congress leader and RPS convener P. Naveen Kumar Reddy’s brother P. Bhuvan Kumar Reddy is in the fray in 28th division as an independent candidate.

State suffered badly with BJP betrayal, says Tulasi

DC CORRESPONDENT
KADAPA, MARCH 6

Pradesh Congress working president Dr Narreddy Tulasi Reddy called on the people that the YSR Congress, TD and Jana Sena parties are slaves to the Bharatiya Janata Party and should

defeat them in the current municipal elections and vote for the Congress.

He said that the state had suffered badly due to the BJP betrayal, YSRC and TD incompetence.

He said that none of the major promises given to the state in the Split Act were fulfilled.

insufficient in catering to the needs of the town, particularly the outskirts.

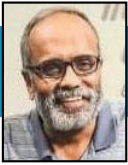
Proposals had been prepared in 2005 for creating a reservoir for drinking water at an estimated cost of ₹20 crore.

This estimate has risen to ₹36 crore, as no government, including that of Congress, Telugu Desam or now YSRC, has taken up the project yet.

People are hoping that at least the new municipality that gets elected will develop the city and complete the reservoir.

DECCAN Chronicle

7 MARCH 2021



Shashi Warrier

Off the beaten track

Mirror, who's most civilised of 'em all?

A neighbour, an amateur historian, happens to be believe that all good things come from India. The other day he dropped in, waving a small book. "Look what I got!" he said. "It's the *Lekhapaddhati*!"

"What's that?" I asked. "It's a set of model documents and letters from more than a millennium ago," he said. "It tells you how they wrote charters and mortgage deeds and passports and other legal papers in those days. It's probably the first-ever manual on writing official documents, and it proves just how civilised India was!"

"India?" I asked. "As best I know, there was no India a millennium ago, just several hundred kingdoms in the area is that now India."

"Well, mostly Gujarat and bits of Rajasthan and bits of Madhya Pradesh," he said, making an effort to keep calm. "The areas ruled by the Chalukyas. Around Pattan, in modern Gujarat. Not the Chalukyas of the Deccan."

"Ahi!" I said. "And what do these papers show?"

"You can tell a lot from them," he replied. "They tell you about the organisation of government, crops, harvests, things like that."

"Harvests?" I asked.

"Of course," he replied, as if I were mildly challenged. "Taxes came after harvests. They had a fiscal year, but tax collection was flexible to account for variations in weather. And there's lots more. The documents cover the social hierarchy, and even family ties!"

"Family ties?" I asked, mystified.

"Yes!" he replied. "See? This tells you how to write a letter to your son or your son-in-law. It tells you how a loving husband wrote to his wife, or an angry one!" He pointed out an entry in the table of contents that said, "A Letter of the Displeased Husband to His Wife."

"Does it tell an angry wife how to write her husband?" I asked.

He paused. "Of course!" he said after he had taken time out to look through the contents. "There was gender equality even in those days." He pointed out an entry that said, "A Letter of an Angry Wife to Her Husband." He handed me the book. "Here you are," he said. "See for yourself!" I took the book and flipped through the pages more or less at random, moving back and forth. There were two examples of documents about female slaves, one regarding a slave who had been captured and the other regarding a voluntary slave. "What's this about slavery?" I asked.

"It was the norm for those days," he said, shrugging.

I found it hard to swallow the idea of a widespread norm because, as I remembered it, there wasn't much contact between faraway kingdoms. "Norm where?" I asked.

"Over most of the world," he said. "Europe. England of those days. Most of what we call the Americas now was far behind, as was Africa."

"Ahi!" I said. "You said something about gender equality... How come there's mention only of female slaves?"

"Well, they captured only women in raids," he said. "The men were all killed."

"What about boys?" I asked. "Male children?"

"We don't really know," he said.

"That seems fairly barbarous to me," I said.

"But that was how it was in those days!" he said, getting a little heated.

I didn't want to anger him so I let it slide and asked, instead, "What's this about voluntary female slaves?"

"It's actually a form of social security," he replied. "If bad weather or a natural disaster or a war or something left a woman with no assets, she always had the option of becoming a slave, with her owner being responsible for her well-being."

"And was there some way of ensuring that slaves were treated reasonably?" I asked.

"Two things," he said. "In the first place, we don't know. Second, it went on all over the place in those days. You see, slavery was probably better than begging or dying, which were the only two alternatives available."

I kept flipping the pages, and stopped when another interesting title caught my eye. "Letter to a Servant", it went. I couldn't help saying, "Well, if they taught their servants to read and write they must have been very civilised indeed!"

"Don't be silly!" he said. Apparently he knew what I was talking about. "The title of that letter is misleading. The servant is not a house servant but an employee in someone's business. It's not as if they taught their housemaids to read."

I checked. Sure enough, the letter was to a man who ran a part of the business, telling him not to do anything that would harm the business or let rascals into the premises. I said, "So they thought of office employees as personal servants. That doesn't seem very civilised!"

"Well," he said, shrugging, "it was the norm..." Then, flipping more pages, I found a chapter heading that went, "Ordeals as Usual". I looked it up and discovered matter-of-fact comments on ordeals to be used in the absence of evidence. After I read some bits about having people hold hot ploughshares in their hands I couldn't read any further so I handed it to him to read, which he did. When he was done, he looked up and said, "Well, it was what they did," he said, irritated. "Not just in those days but even today, when they put you in jail for sedition."

"But that's not fair, is it?" I asked.

He seemed to take umbrage, for he put the book in his bag and rose to leave, muttering something about spoilsports and traitors, and as I closed the gate behind him I wondered why I ended up more confused each time he came visiting.

Shashi Warrier has written fairy tales, thrillers, a semi-fictional biography, satires, and a love story. Besides writing, he teaches strategic communication at a business school.

Subhani



Freedom, conspiracy & other anti-national sins



Pavan K. Varma

Chanakya's View

Frankly, in my view, Freedom House, the Washington based global democracy watchdog, should be booked by our ever-vigilant government for sedition. The organisation has had the audacity to demote India from "free" to "partly free" in the rankings of its latest annual report. The government has rightly called the report "misleading, incorrect and misplaced". To call the world's largest democracy only "partly free" is incontrovertible evidence of an attempt to subvert our sovereignty and integrity, an international conspiracy directed against the Indian State. I think our law enforcing authorities should immediately file an FIR against the organisation and those who run it, and officially protest to President Joe Biden.

Anurag Kashyap and Tapsee Pannu should also reject this report forthrightly. If the income tax department has raided them, and unearthed hundreds of crores of discrepancies, it is only doing its job. Obviously, the raids have nothing to do with their being vocal critics of the government. Our tax sleuths are mandated to uncover such wrongs, and the investigation was a routine exercise in fulfilling it. It just so happens that there are no "discrepancies" to be found in those in Bollywood who happily sing praises of the government. Why can't Kashyap and Pannu just be like them?

The report should also be trashed by the hundreds of activists who protested against the CAA-NRC combine. If they are facing the might of the police, and many

are still languishing in jail, it is because their intent was not to invoke the right to dissent but to act as part of a planned conspiracy against the State. Journalists, who have had draconian laws slapped against them for reporting facts on the ground in UP and elsewhere, should also reject the report. Journalistic ethics demand "objective" reporting. No one should presume that they have the right to unnecessarily be critical of the government, because how can a government which has been duly elected not know what is in the best interests of the people?

Farmers protesting against the new farm bills must also junk the report. If some in the ruling dispensation called them Khalistanis, anti-nationals, stooges of Pakistan, and puppets in the hands of political parties determined to malign the government, there must be valid reasons to do so. Farmers cannot sit in peaceful protest for months on the borders of the capital of the nation, with many dying in the bitter Delhi winter, unless they are part of a "foreign hand" hatching a plot against the government. Now, the government has hard proof of such a plot. Climate

To call the world's largest democracy only 'partly free' is incontrovertible evidence of an attempt to subvert our sovereignty and integrity, a global conspiracy directed against the Indian State. Our authorities should file an FIR against the organisation...

Anurag Kashyap and Tapsee Pannu should also reject this report forthrightly. If the income tax department has raided them, and unearthed hundreds of crores of discrepancies, it is only doing its job... It was a routine exercise...

activist, Disha Ravi, all of some 21 years old, was rightly arrested for sedition for supporting the farmers, because her toolkit could well undermine the great Indian State. It appears Rihanna and Greta Thunberg are also part of this dangerous conspiracy. The ramifications of what is going on are huge, and require the authorities to take prompt and penal action.

Stand-up comics, dalit activists, human rights advocates — even Election Commissioners who dare to right dissenting notes — must join hands to condemn this seditious report. They must accept that they have no right to question the government in a manner that diminishes its self-esteem, or that of its leaders. The tremendous work the government is doing for the people needs to be acknowledged. It is indecent to subject it to irreverent questioning. Right to Information activists, worried about the reducing ambit of the Act, must not worry. If the government wishes not to reveal certain things, which otherwise it must do, there must be very good reason for it. The security of the State is a very important matter. So is the image of our great nation.

Truly patriotic citizens should take umbrage at this attempt to call India only "partly free". We are a nation of completely free agencies. The CBI acts freely; so does the I-T department; so does the NCB; so does the CBDT; so does the NIA; and so does the media.

Nobody tells them what to do, and who to target. They may have been a "caged parrot" in the past. Not anymore.

All free citizens must be patriotic in ways approved by the government. For instance, any questioning of defence policy is tantamount to treason, and an insult to our brave soldiers. Those who are critical of the government become ipso facto critics of the nation, and those who are critical of the nation, are naturally anti-national. A democratic government must act strongly against such traitors.

Our former rulers, the British, had the following lines — still visible — engraved in stone at the North Block of the Central Secretariat in New Delhi: "Liberty will not descend to a people, a people must raise themselves to Liberty. It is a blessing which must be earned before it is enjoyed." How relevant these lines are today. How can India be accused of being only "partly free" when the real problem is that the people — and especially the Opposition — have not yet raised themselves to enjoy liberty? They must earn their liberty, behave "properly", watch what they write and speak, not protest about any and everything, learn to be patriotic citizens, and then the benevolent government can allow them the freedoms that it deems appropriate for them.

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

Farmers protesting against the new farm bills must also junk the report. If some called them Khalistanis, stooges of Pakistan and puppets in the hands of political parties determined to malign the government, there must be valid reasons to do so.

LETTERS

FREEBIES NOT GOOD

Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy does not seem to be losing any opportunity to announce freebies to the people, the latest being the proposed free sanitary napkin distribution to the class VII to XII girl students of government educational institutions. Just for the sake such freebies, no parent would like to admit his/her girl child into a government school or junior college as the system still remains skewed, to say the least. The previous regime of the Telugu Dsam drove the state into a debt trap without showing commensurate development. In other words, that party looted people's money. The present rule of YSRC is also further deepening the debt quotient by indulging in free distribution of cash/kind in the name of implementing its electoral promises.

Govardhana Myneedu
Vijayawada

FIGHTING FAKE NEWS

With reference to the report 'Jagan launches website for checking fake news' (*DC, March 6*) the move must be implemented with utmost seriousness because this is one area that misleads/misguides everyone. The culprits must be identified immediately, FIRs lodged and led to their logical conclusions after due process of law. Then only the menace of fake news can be curbed. Let's hope Jagan makes it worthwhile initiative.

K. Nehru Patnaik
Visakhapatnam

BORROWED MONEY

This is with reference to the report 'Finance minister justifies state govt's borrowings' (*DC, March 6*). Finance minister Buggana Rajendranath Reddy wrongly justified the government's borrowed money more than limits which were spent on welfare schemes and arguing that spending money on welfare schemes will revive economy. He knows very well that due to huge welfare schemes implemented by government has spoiled the state financially.

Panchakarla Govardhana Rao
Kankipadu

50 YEARS AGO IN DECCAN Chronicle

All set for Bengal poll: Sen-Verma in Calcutta

CALCUTTA, March. 6 With the twin polls in West Bengal only four days away, the Chief Election Commissioner, Mr Sen-Verma flew in here today to acquaint himself with polling arrangements finalised at a top level conference on Thursday.

Mr. Sen-Verma, who was accompanied by the Commission Secretary, Mr. A.N. Sen, was himself to have attended the conference which decided on the biggest ever protective cover for any poll in India. The army Chief, Gen. Manekshaw, union Home Secretary, Mr. Govind Narain and the Principal Adviser to the West Bengal Governor, Mr. B.B. Ghosh were those who gave "okay" to security measures.

Anita Katyal
Political Gup-Shup



On Azad, Cong misfired twice; how's Tomar for new MP CM?

The Congress leadership was clearly worried when it first heard that some members of the "infamous" G-23 planned to participate in a public event in Jammu, ostensibly to honour senior leader Ghulam Nabi Azad who recently retired from the Rajya Sabha. The real purpose was to send out a message to Congress president Sonia Gandhi and Nehru-Gandhi scion Rahul Gandhi. Consequently, party general secretary Mukul Wasnik was tasked to contact Mr Azad and dissuade him from proceeding with the Jammu programme. It is evident Mr Wasnik's mission proved to be a failure. As a face-saver, the central leadership then issued orders to the party's Jammu workers to organise a special welcome for Mr Azad, suggesting that the party's central leadership had given its blessings to Mr Azad's programme. However, this move also backfired as it did not deter the leaders from speaking out, with Mr Azad going to the extent of praising Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This proved to be the proverbial red rag to a bull, and within two

days, party workers in Jammu who had publicly welcomed Mr Azad were out on the streets protesting against him for his remarks on Mr Modi.

Ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi took the coronavirus vaccine in the second phase of the immunisation drive, his ministers and Bharatiya Janata Party MPs have made a beeline to hospitals to get their shot. But that's not the end of the story. This has been followed by a full-throated campaign to publicise each minister's participation in the vaccination drive. Newspaper editors have been inundated with appeals from the publicity managers of these ministers and MPs with repeated requests that they publish the photographs of their bosses taking the shot. They are particularly keen that the photos appear in the Delhi newspapers even when a minister has taken the shot outside the capital. Among those who have rushed to the press with such a request included the ministry of external affairs, which was kept their minister S. Jaishankar's photo

be published in Delhi.

It may appear far-fetched but there is a connection between the West Bengal election and Madhya Pradesh chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan's future. Both his detractors — BJP general secretary Kailash Vijayvargiya and state home minister Narottam Mishra — have been entrusted with key responsibilities in West Bengal. While Mr Vijayvargiya is in charge of West Bengal affairs, Mr Mishra is responsible for election preparations in 48 Assembly segments of the poll-bound state. Needless to say, both these leaders are putting their best foot forward to ensure that the BJP scores well in the forthcoming elections. This will strengthen their case for a promotion in their home state — both leaders are eyeing the chief minister's post. But there is every possibility that the two hopefuls may be beaten to it by Union agriculture minister Narendra Singh Tomar, a hot favourite with both Mr Modi and home minister Amit Shah.

Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot and his bete noire Sachin Pilot set tongues wagging when they travelled together in a helicopter recently to address a series of meetings and mahapanchayats in the desert state. This was the second occasion in the recent past when the two political rivals put up a show of unity and appeared together on a public platform. This has led to speculation that Mr Gehlot has made his peace with Mr Pilot and that the latter may return as deputy chief minister. The truth is that Mr Gehlot has an ulterior motive in extending an olive branch to his younger colleague. Four by-elections are to be held this month and the constituencies headed for polls have a large Gujar population. The chief minister needs Mr Pilot's help here as the latter has a large following among the Gujjars. There is no telling how this story will unfold post-elections.

Samajwadi Party president Akhlesh Yadav has not been particularly active in the field after his party's disastrous perfor-

mance in the 2019 Lok Sabha election and an equally dismal showing in the previous Assembly poll. This had led to considerable disquiet in the party as its members felt that they would have to pay a heavy price for Akhlesh's laziness and that their opponents would seize this opportunity to expand their footprint. But the results of the last elections to the legislative council held out some hope for the Samajwadi Party cadres who are now professing their loyalty to Akhlesh Yadav. Their confidence in him flows from the party's victory in two legislative council seats from Prime Minister Narendra Modi's constituency Varanasi. This is the first time that the Samajwadi Party won these seats in Varanasi, ousting the BJP after 10 years. This has given hope to the party's rank and file that all is not lost and it is the Samajwadi Party, and not the Congress or the Bahujan Samaj Party, which is cashing in on anti-incumbency against the Yogi Adityanath government.

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist

IN BRIEF

SARPANCH IN ODISHA DISQUALIFIED

AKSHAYA KUMAR SAHOO | DC
BHUBANESWAR, MARCH 6

A sarpanch from Odisha's Ganjam district has been declared disqualified from his post for not knowing Odia and having two wives and six children.

According to the 1994 Odisha Gram Panchayat Act, a person is ineligible of holding any position in a gram panchayat if he or she does not know how to write and speak Odia, have more than two children and illegally has more than one husband/wife. Such a person cannot contest any post too.

P Simadri was elected as the sarpanch of Agastinuagam gram panchayat under Chhatrapur block of Ganjam district during the panchayat polls held in the year 2017. He had won by defeating his nearest rival Niwasi Gouda.

However, after losing the polls, Gouda had filed a petition at the Civil Judge Senior Division Court in Chhatrapur challenging his disqualification as sarpanch of Agastinuagam gram panchayat on the grounds of not having the knowledge of Odia language, having two wives and six children.

After the hearing was over, Gouda's lawyer, Srikanth Mishra said, "Based on the statements of four witnesses, two from each side, the Chhatrapur Civil Judge Senior Division disqualified the standing sarpanch Simadri for not knowing Odia. The Court has also directed the District Collector to take further action in this regard," Mishra added. "I had filed the petition against Simadri after the panchayat elections in 2017. My three and half years of legal battle is over now as he has been disqualified from his post by the court for violating the Odisha Gram Panchayat Act. The court has also sent notice to the district collector and communication officer to take further action as the post will be lying vacant after Simadri's dismissal," said Gouda.

Vaiko agrees to fight polls on DMK symbol

Amit Shah on day-long political tour of TN, Kerala today

DC CORRESPONDENT
with agency inputs
CHENNAI, MAR 6

The MDMK signed an agreement with the DMK on Saturday to contest the April 6 Assembly election in six seats and to fight the polls in the DMK's 'Rising Sun' symbol, while two of the prominent allies, the Congress and the CPI, may have to wait till Monday to resume talks.

The MDMK general secretary, Vaiko, who broke away from the DMK in 1994 to form his own party, had been insisting that his party would only use its own symbol, 'the spinning top,' but gave in to pressure from the DMK to chose the 'Rising Sun' symbol for his candidates. Since the DMK is holding a grand public meeting near Tiruchy on Sunday, the leaders would not be available in Chennai for further talks at least for a day.

The CPM representatives, who visited the DMK office for discussions on Saturday morning, said that they would be getting back after taking the views of their party functionaries.

From the Congress, however, there was no word of confirmation on accepting the seats offered by the DMK, while sources in the DMK said that their leaders were only waiting for the Congress to return to the negotiating table.

In the AIADMK camp, the DMDK, which had been asking for 25 seats, expressed the hope that an amicable settlement would be reached soon as they had climbed down from their earlier demand, while the Tamil Maanila Congress leader G K Vasan was closeted with the Chief Minister at his



Former Trinamul Congress MP Dinesh Trivedi joined the BJP on Saturday, weeks after he announced quitting his Rajya Sabha membership on the floor of the House deploring "violence" in poll-bound West Bengal. He joined the BJP in the presence of its president J P Nadda, and Union ministers Piyush Goyal and Dharmendra Pradhan (not seen in the picture) besides other leaders.

- PTI

CONG SAYS SUSHMITA WITH PARTY AMID DIFFERENCES OVER SEAT-SHARING

Guwahati, Mar 6: The Congress on Saturday said that its women's wing chief Sushmita Dev was with the party, dismissing reports in a section of the press that she has resigned amid differences over seat-sharing.

The reports of Dev's resignation came amid differences with leaders over seat-sharing with AIUDF. "It has been brought to the notice of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee that a speculative news about resignation of President, All India Mahila Congress Ms Sushmita Dev is doing the rounds on television and web portals. We want to make it clear that Ms

Sushmita Dev has not resigned from the party," party spokesperson Bobbeeta Sharma said. Earlier, Dev barged out of a Congress meeting on the selection of candidates at a city hotel, party sources said. Her supporters also demonstrated against Congress leaders who favoured allotting more seats to AIUDF in the Barak Valley. However, sources close to Dev said that though there were differences she was sure that those would be resolved soon. The Congress-led 'Mahajoth' has AIUDF, BPF, CPI(M), CPI, CPI(ML) and the Anchalik Gana Morcha as its constituents.

- PTI

CDS BRIEFS MODI ON DISCUSSIONS IN COMMANDERS CONFERENCE

PAWAN BALI | DC
NEW DELHI, MARCH 6

Prime minister Narendra Modi on Saturday addressed the valedictory session of the three days Combined Commanders Conference of top commanders of Army, Navy and Air Force at Kevadia, Gujarat.

The Prime Minister was briefed by the Chief of Defence Staff General Bipin Rawat about the discussions during the Conference. The Prime Minister expressed his appreciation for the structure and agenda of the Conference. He particularly appreciated the inclusion of Junior Commissioned Officers and Non Commissioned Officers in the Conference.

Speaking to the highest civilian and military leadership of the National defence system, Prime Minister conveyed his strong appreciation for the resolute dedication shown by the Indian Armed Forces over the past year, in the context of the Covid pandemic and the challenging situation on the northern border, said a statement issued by PMO.

He stressed the importance of enhancing indigenisation in the national security system, not just in sourcing equipment and weapons but also in the doctrines, procedures and customs practiced in the armed forces. He emphasized the need to optimise manpower planning in both military and civilian parts of the national security architecture. He also called for a holistic approach, focused on breaking down civil-military silos and on expediting the speed of decision making.

2 killed in BJP MLA's birthday party in MP

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY | DC
with agency inputs
BHOPAL, MAR 6

Two people were killed in a group clash at the birthday party of local BJP MLA Dharmendra Singh Lodhi in Madhya Pradesh's Damoh district, police said on Saturday.

The incident took place in the village of Banwar at around 10 pm on Friday, Damoh district superintendent of police Hemant Chouhan said.

According to the police, a group clash broke out during the birthday bash of Jaberia MLA, leading to the death of two people.

While Arvind Jain, said to be the MLA's representative, died of gunshot, Yoginder Singh Rajput, an invitee at the party, was lynched.

On the other hand,

INDIA RECORDS 18,327 COVID CASES; OVER 1.9 CRORE VACCINATED SO FAR

DC CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 6

As many as 18,327 new Covid-19 cases and 108 deaths were reported in India in the last 24 hours, the union health ministry informed on Saturday.

The country's overall cases tally has reached 1,11,92,088, including 1,80,304 active cases while the toll has mounted to 1,57,656.

A total of 22,06,92,677 samples have been tested for Covid-19 up to March 5. Of these, 7,51,935 samples were tested on Friday, as per the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR).

According to the health ministry, a total of 1,94,97,704 people have been vaccinated against coronavirus so far.

Maharashtra reported 10,187 new Covid-19 cases and 47 deaths in the last 24 hours. Total number of cases rose to 22,08,586, death toll stood at 52,440.

Similarly, Punjab reported 1,179 new Covid-19 cases, 644 recoveries

and 12 deaths on Saturday. Total cases stood at 1,87,348.

Rajasthan reported 233 new Covid-19 cases and 114 recoveries in the last 24 hours. No new death reported during this period. Total cases are 3,21,356. Covid-19 cases continue to rise in Tamil Nadu which reported 562 cases, including 243 cases in the capital Chennai. Four deaths took the toll to 12,517.

As many as 2,791 new Covid-19 cases, 16 deaths & 3,517 recoveries were reported in Kerala on Saturday. Active cases at 42,819, death toll 4,287 and recovered cases stand at 10,27,826. A total of 61,764 samples were tested for Covid-19 in the last 24 hours, said Kerala CM Pinarayi Vijayan.

Meanwhile in Punjab, curfew to remain imposed in Jalandhar between 11pm and 5am in view of rising cases of Covid-19, according to the district administration.

Delhi recorded as many as 321 fresh cases.

Delhi to have its own school education board: Kejriwal

DC CORRESPONDENT WITH
AGENCY INPUTS
NEW DELHI, MARCH 6

Delhi will have its own school education board like other states, chief minister Arvind Kejriwal announced on Saturday. The state government approved the formation of the Delhi Board of School Education during a Cabinet meeting.

The capital has 1,000 government schools and 1,700 private schools. All government schools and most private schools are affiliated to the CBSE, the chief minister said. About 20 to 25 government schools will be made part of the new Delhi Board of School Education (DBSE) in the coming academic year and their CBSE affiliation will be scrapped, he said. The schools that will be brought under the state board will be decided after discussions with school principals, teachers and parents. In the next four-five years all the schools will be brought under it, Mr Kejriwal said.

The DBSE will be aimed at imparting such education that prepares "fiercely patriotic" and self-dependent students who serve the society and the country in a selfless manner, he said.

"The Board will bring in best international practices and high-end techniques in school education. It will impart education as per the aptitude of the students," Mr Kejriwal added. "The focus will not be on learning

Ambani case: BJP reiterates demand for probe by NIA

SONU SHRIVASTAVA | DC
with agency inputs
MUMBAI, MARCH 6

A day after the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government handed over probe related to explosives planted near Mukesh Ambani's house to Anti Terrorism Squad, the BJP reiterated its demand for the NIA probe.

While the MNS demanded that a sitting judge should be appointed to investigate the case.

Meanwhile, the Shiv Sena leader Sanjay Raut admitted that it was important for the "image and prestige" of the Maharashtra government to find out the truth behind the mysterious death of Mansukh Hire, who was said to be the owner of the vehicle abandoned outside Ambani's house.

In a tweet, the BJP leader and in charge of Maharashtra CT Ravi said, "Mansukh Hire, owner of the Scorpio that was packed with gelatin sticks and parked near Mukesh Ambani's Antilla has been found dead in mysterious circumstances. Is it Suicide or Murder? Will Maharashtra Vinashak Aghadi CM @OfficeofUT order for a NIA probe to let truth come out? (sic)"

Expressing suspicion on assistant police inspector (APD) Sachin Vaze, MNS leader Sandeep Deshpande said that Sachin Vaze had joined Shiv Sena in 2008. "The officer, who has been inclined towards a particular party, cannot conduct a fair probe. This creates suspicion among the people," he said. Mr Deshpande also asked whether the ATS, which is efficient, conduct conduct a fair probe into when there is a

lot of political pressure.

The MNS leader also questioned why all the important cases are being given to Sachin Vaze?

"Therefore, under a supervision of sitting High Court judge, the investigation should be conducted into this whole case," he added.

The Sena spokesperson and Rajya Sabha member Sanjay Raut said that it is unfortunate and shocking that Mansukh Hire had lost his life. There is also suspicion that whether it is a suicide or a murder.

"What are the reasons behind his death? Who are the responsible for it? Truth should be found out by the home department as soon as possible as it would be better for the image and prestige of this government," Mr Raut said.

Opinion on Mansukh Hire's death reserved in autopsy report

Opinion on likely cause of the death of Mansukh Hire, who is said to be the owner of the vehicle with explosives found near industrialist Mukesh Ambani's residence in Mumbai last month, is reserved in his postmortem report on Saturday, a Thane police official said. Viscera of Hire has been sent to a forensic laboratory in Mumbai for analysis, he said.

The body of Hire (46) was fished out of a creek along the Mumbra-Reti Bunder road in neighbouring Thane on Friday morning, police had said.

The postmortem report received on Saturday mentioned that there are no visible external injuries on Hire's body, the official said.

CUB OF TIGRESS AVNI RELEASED INTO WILD AFTER 2 YEARS

Nagpur, Mar 6: female cub of tigress Avni, who was shot dead after being declared a man-eater in November 2018, has been released into the wild in the Pench Tiger Reserve (PTR) of Maharashtra's Nagpur district after over two years of "re-wilding" efforts, authorities said.

This adult tigress, now named as PTRF-84, was released on Friday, Chief Conservator of Forests and Field Director of the PTR said in a release.

This female cub of Pandharkawada tigress Avni (PKT-1), was housed in the in-situ enclosure at Titralmangi of the PTR since December 2018.

She was reared/re-wilded as per the standard operating procedures (SOPs) of National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), it said. She is approximately 3.2 years old.

She had been brought to the PTR as an orphaned cub on December 22, 2018, following a rescue operation. After that, she was housed in 5.11 hectares of enclosure for over two years, the release added.

An expert committee supervised her entire rewilding experiment and as per its decision, a proposal was sent to the NTCA for her release, which was approved, it said.

Before her release, the tigress was radio-collared with the help of scientists from the Wildlife Institute of India (WII).

- PTI



Farmers during Kisan Ekta Morcha to mark the 100th day of the ongoing protests against the new farm reform laws, at KMP Expressway near Kundli in Haryana on Saturday.

Farmers block expressway in Haryana

Chandigarh/New Delhi, Mar 6: Thousands of protesting farmers on Saturday blocked the six-lane Kundli Manesar Palwal (KMP) Expressway in Haryana to mark the completion of 100 days of their agitation at the Delhi border even as the Centre said it is ready to amend the three contentious agricultural laws to respect their sentiments.

The farmer leaders on their part said the protesting unions stood firm on

their demand for a complete repeal of the three laws, and asserted they are ready for talks with the government, but it should be held without any pre-conditions.

The opposition Congress said the 100-day period of farmers' protests was a "black chapter" in India's democracy for the treatment meted out to the protesters, and also alleged it marked 100 days of the ruling BJP's "arrogance".

Congress leader Rahul

Gandhi said nails were laid at Delhi's borders for those, whose sons risk their lives at the country's borders.

Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar said the union government under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi is committed to farmers' welfare, and its priority is to uphold the respect for farmers and therefore is ready to make amendments to the agricultural laws.

He also attacked opposition parties for doing politics on this issue at the cost of agriculture economy and by hurting farmers' interest.

The road blockade in Haryana began at 11 am and continued till 4 pm.

Farmers holding black flags and wearing black armbands and some women protesters with black dupattas shouted slogans against the Central government for not acceding to their

demands. Protesters in Sonapat and Jhajjar districts and some other places brought their tractor-trolleys and other vehicles and parked them in the middle of the KMP Expressway at some stretches.

The call for blocking the expressway was given by the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), an umbrella body of protesting farmer unions which is spearheading the agitation.

- PTI

SHORT TAKES

**6 UKRAINIANS
DIE, DOZENS HURT
IN BUS CRASH**

Warsaw: A bus carrying dozens of Ukrainian citizens rolled off an embankment into a ditch in Poland, killing six people and injuring 41, Polish media reported on Saturday.

The accident occurred around midnight on the A4 motorway near the town of Jaroslaw, which is in south-eastern Poland near the border with Ukraine. *TN24*, a private all-news station, reported that the bus had a Ukrainian license plate and was travelling with 57 Ukrainian citizens, including two drivers.

A large rescue operation involved dozens of firefighters, paramedics and helicopters to transport the injured to hospitals. There was no immediate cause given for the accident. Ukrainians travel for work to Poland, a European Union state on Ukraine's western border.

**LANDMINE BLAST
KILLS 1, SEVERAL
HURT IN CROATIA**

Zagreb: A landmine blast killed one migrant and injured several others in a central Croatia area infested with the explosive devices, left over from the country's 1990s war, police said on Friday.

The accident occurred when a group of illegal migrants entered mine-infested woods near Saborsko, close to the Bosnia border, on Thursday, police said in a statement.

One young man was killed when he stepped on the explosive device and other migrants were injured in the blast, it added.

Police found the mine victims soon after the accident. Another ten migrants, who left the scene of the accident immediately, were rescued from the area after an hours long search on Friday.

Four of those hit by the blast were hospitalised, one with life-threatening injuries.

Police did not reveal the migrant's nationalities but a hospital in nearby Ogulin said two of the injured were Pakistanis.

**ITALY SEEKS
LIFER FOR U.S.
COP KILLERS**

Rome: Italian prosecutors on Saturday requested life sentences for a pair of young US citizens accused of murdering an Italian policeman two years ago while holidaying in Rome.

Officer Mario Cerciello Rega, 35, died from knife wounds in July 2019 after he and a colleague, both in plain clothes, had a nighttime confrontation with Finnegan Lee Elder and Gabriel Natale-Hjorth.

Elder has admitted stabbing Cerciello multiple times with an eight-inch combat knife, but has said he and Natale-Hjorth were jumped by men they thought were drug dealers.

"It was an aggression, a violent, deadly, disproportionate attack," prosecutor Maria Sabina Calabretta told a court in Rome, as quoted by the *AGI* news agency.

Describing him as "a good man," she said Cerciello "could have done little to defend himself even if he had been armed, which he was not," and said the defendants had the "sole intention to kill."

**PROTESTS OVER
DEFAMATION
LAWS IN THAI**

Bangkok: Hundreds marched in Bangkok and lit ceremonial fires in front of a courthouse on Saturday to protest Thailand's draconian royal defamation law and the jailing of several prominent pro-democracy activists.

The protesters are part of a youth-led movement that kicked off last July calling for an overhaul to Premier Prayut Chan-O-Cha's government and a scrapping of the country's military-scripted constitution.

They are also demanding the abolition of a lese majeste law which shields the kingdom's ultra-powerful King Maha Vajiralongkorn and the royal family from defamation, and carries penalties of up to 15 years per charge.

The law has been broadly interpreted to cover anything perceived as negative towards the royals, effectively muzzling critics — which is why the movement's calls for reforms have sent a lightning bolt through Thai society.

As protesters marched to Bangkok's criminal court, they chanted "Prayut, Get Out!" and "Abolish 112" — the penal code section of the lese majeste law.

Mount Etna volcano spews lava

Lava flows down from the crater of Indonesia's most active volcano Mount Merapi, seen from the tourist site of Grojogan Watu Purbo in Sleman Regency near Yogyakarta early on Saturday. — AFP

Protests continue in Myanmar

Yangon, March 6 : Anti-coup demonstrators took to the streets of Myanmar on Saturday, a day after a United Nations envoy urged the Security Council to hear the nation's "desperate pleas" and take swift action to restore democracy.

The country has been in turmoil since a February 1 coup ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi from power, triggering a massive uprising from hundreds of thousands opposed to the new junta.

Security forces have in response initiated an increasingly brutal crackdown on demonstrators, killing more than 50 people since the coup.

But protesters rallied

again on Saturday, from the dusty roads of northern Lashio — where young protesters stared down police behind homemade shields — to central Loikaw city in view of Myanmar's eastern mountains.

"Our revolution must win," chanted protesters in Loikaw, who included civil servants such as teachers in their green and white uniforms.

The country's vital sectors have been crippled by an ongoing "Civil Disobedience Movement" — a campaign urging civil servants to boycott working under a military regime. The impact has been felt at every level of the

national infrastructure, with shuttered hospitals, empty ministry offices, and banks unable to operate. On Saturday, state-run media announced that if civil servants continued to boycott work, "they will be fired" with immediate effect from March 8.

But protesters in Myanmar continued to defy authorities, gathering across commercial hub Yangon as police deployed tear gas, stun grenades and rubber bullets to disperse them.

In Tamwe township, soldiers prowled empty streets looking for protesters — even using a slingshot to shoot projectiles at residential build-

ings.

Activist Maung Saungkha said the movement would persist — even as security forces continued to step up enforcement tactics — as many remember the repression under the previous junta.

"In our past revolutions, we never won... this time we must fight to win," he said.

"We must fight together with the younger generation to get victory." Myanmar's ruling generals have shown no sign of heeding calls for restraint despite mounting international pressure, including targeted sanctions by Western powers. — AFP

**India ties changed
life in Afghanistan**

**SRIDHAR
KUMARASWAMI | DC
NEW DELHI, MARCH 6**

It will be very difficult for the Taliban to capture power through force in Afghanistan even if there is a total absence of foreign troops due to the presence now of a well-trained professional Afghan National Army unlike what happened in 1996, Afghan sources have said, adding that a lot has changed in the country since the Taliban were driven out of power two decades ago.

Sources also said that Afghans cherished their deep friendship with India which has already carried out several major development works in the war-torn country that have changed the lives of ordinary Afghans for the better.

Sources indicated that one major difference between the mid-1990s and the situation now is the emergence of Afghan women in all walks of life as equal stake-holders in the

future of their country. Sources pointed out that even during the Afghan peace process talks in Qatar's Capital Doha, Afghan women journalists boldly interacted with Taliban representatives, seeking to know the vision that the insurgent outfit has for the country now.

The Afghan Government in Kabul too seems determined to safeguard the precious gains especially in the field of women's empowerment made in the past several years and is determined not to compromise on that.

The assessment of the Afghan Government now seems to be that even the Taliban have realised that much has changed from the horrific times when they ruled the country with extreme brutality from 1996 to 2001.

The assessment seems to be that the Taliban can secure a role in governing Afghanistan only through the peace process and not through brute force anymore.

**Pak PM Imran
wins trust vote**

Islamabad, March 6: Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan on Saturday comfortably won a trust vote in the National Assembly, boycotted by the Opposition, days after the ruling party's high-profile candidate suffered an embarrassing defeat in the hotly-contested Senate elections.

Khan secured 178 votes in the 342-member lower house of Parliament during a special session called after he voluntarily sought a trust vote following the defeat of his finance minister Abdul Hafeez Shaikh in Wednesday's elections to the upper house. The floor test took place without the Opposition as the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) — an alliance of 11 parties — boycotted the voting, making it easier for Khan to secure the required

numbers.

Khan decided to take a vote of confidence after Shaikh was defeated in the Senate election by former prime minister Yusuf Raza Gilani.

The Opposition demanded the Prime Minister's resignation after the debacle. Addressing the House after securing the trust vote, the 68-year-old cricketer-turned politician thanked all lawmakers from his party and allies for supporting him.

Earlier, foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi earlier tabled a single-point resolution that the House reposes confidence in Prime Minister Khan. Speaker Asad Qaiser announced the result, saying Prime Minister Khan had been elected to the post with 176 votes following the 2018 general elections. — PTI

**Amanda Gorman:
Followed by guard**

New York, March 6: African-American poet Amanda Gorman, who became a star after her reading at President Joe Biden's inauguration, has said a security guard claimed she looked "suspicious" and followed her as she walked home. "This is the reality of black girls: One day you're called an icon, the next day, a threat," she tweeted on Friday.

"He demanded if I lived there because 'you look suspicious.' I showed my keys & buzzed myself into my building. He left, no apology," she wrote. Gorman, whose Twitter account says she

lives in Los Angeles, did not immediately reply for more information.

Gorman became an international sensation after reciting her original work "The Hill We Climb" at the inaugural, a poem inspired by the January 6 attack on the US Capitol. The 22-year-old Harvard University graduate was invited to perform in Washington after First Lady Jill Biden saw one of her readings.

She was the youngest poet ever to recite at a presidential inauguration, a role first given to Robert Frost by John F. Kennedy in 1961. — AFP



OUR CRITIC'S RATING Outstanding ★★★★★ | Great ★★★★ | Good ★★★ | Okay ★★ | Poor ★ | Truly Terrible TT

A dazzling adventure

Raya and the Last Dragon

CAST: Kelly Marie Tran, Awkwafina, Gemma Chan, Daniel Dae Kim, Benedict Wong, Jona Xiao

DIRECTOR: Don Hall, Carlos López Estrada

RATING: ★★★★★

Releases on Disney+ Hotstar

Contrary to what *Game of Thrones* might have you believe, not all dragons are agents of destruction. In the newest offering from Walt Disney Animation, *Raya and the Last Dragon*, they are kind, full of magic and, when needed, the saviors of humanity.

Five hundred years ago, we're told in a prologue, dragons sacrificed themselves for humans when a mystical evil called the Druun passed through the lands of Kumandra and turned many to stone. The kingdom splintered into factions — Tail, Talon, Heart, Fang

and Spine — who perpetually teeter on the edge of war. Sisu, the only remaining dragon, hasn't been seen in five centuries.

Raya (voiced by *Star Wars'* Kelly Marie Tran) is the young Princess of Heart. Her father (voiced by Daniel Dae Kim) is the Chief who hopes to unite all the territories. It doesn't go as planned, he's turned to stone, and Raya is set on a dangerous quest to track down the dragon who she believes is their last hope.

The film comes from the odd but inspired pairing of co-directors Carlos López Estrada (who made the Sundance breakout *Blindspotting*) and Disney veteran Don Hall (*Big Hero 6*) and was co-written by Vietnamese playwright Qui Nguyen and *Crazy Rich Asians* co-writer Adele Lim. The result is a sweet-natured and wonderfully imaginative fantasy adventure that has shades of *Indiana Jones* and is suitable for the whole family.

Raya gets off to a bit of a slow start but stick with it. Once she sets out on her mission, things pick up considerably thanks in no small part to the introduction of Sisu, played by Awkwafina, who

Raya gets off to a bit of a slow start but stick with it. Once she sets out on her mission, things pick up considerably thanks in no small part to the introduction of Sisu, played by Awkwafina, who doesn't try to disguise her wonderfully distinctive voice.

doesn't try to disguise her wonderfully distinctive voice. Raya discovers Sisu is not quite the hero she is looking for, but that's just part of the journey. Along the way their brood grows with others displaced and orphaned by the Druun and Raya must confront her main foe, a Princess from another land, Namaari (Gemma Chan) who is part of the reason things went awry in the first place.

The animation is both stunning and very computer generated. Sometimes extended shots of the humans talking can start to feel like the uncanny valley and it makes you miss the hand drawn elements of the form. But hand drawn animation also wouldn't be able to create the stunning vistas and astoundingly life-like water. It's a compro-

mise and *Raya* is undoubtedly a visual feast.

It's also the best kind of feminist film in that it's one that doesn't clobber you with the message. Raya is allowed to be awesome without the script shouting about it all the time and it's better for it. It does however hammer home a message about trust, which, you know, is fair enough. And it has chosen to have yet another middle-aged semi-dystopian female leader bedecked in all white with a severe gray haircut (Namaari's mom, voiced by Sandra Oh). It's not that it's inherently bad, it's just a lazy choice for a film that is otherwise so inventive. "Raya" is also notable for the simple fact that it features predominately Asian American voice actors — a first for Disney Animation. The animated *Mulan* had a fair amount too, but a lot were white actors voicing Chinese roles. Will that make a difference to the kids watching? Probably not at the moment, but down the line the authenticity will be appreciated.

Raya and the Last Dragon, a Walt Disney Pictures release, in theaters and on Disney+ Friday, is rated PG by the Motion Picture Association of America for "Some violence, action and thematic elements."

— AP



In Truffle Hunters, an enchanting but beset world

The Truffle Hunters

CAST: Piero Botto, Sergio Cauda, Maria Cicciù, Aurelio Conterno, Enrico Crippa

DIRECTOR: Michael Dweck, Gregory Kershaw

RATING: ★★★★★

You've got to love a movie that credits its dogs before it does its executive producers.

The Truffle Hunters, Michael Dweck and Gregory Kershaw's exquisitely charming documentary about old Italian men who scavenge truffles and the dogs they're bound to, lists the canines with the appropriate respect in the end credits. Birba, Biri, Charlie, Fiona, Nina, Titina, Yari. These are some of the stars of *Truffle Hunters*, a profoundly lovely movie that delights in the noble scavengers of a dog-eat-dog world.

The Truffle Hunters, which is shortlisted for best documentary at the Academy Awards and which Sony Pictures Classics will release in theaters Friday, is

set in the northern Italy forests of Piedmont. Dweck and Kershaw, both cinematographers, film the truffle hunters — aging, sweet men practicing an ancient and secretive tradition — in painterly, pointillistic tableaux as they walk through autumnal forests, foraging with their dogs. They seep into the landscape.

The film, scored by composer Ed Cortes with retro Italian pop mixed in, conjures an otherworldly enchantment. In between backwoods trips where their dogs smell their way to the high-priced delicacies, the hunters live humbly in old country homes. Our main characters are never explicitly introduced, but we're drawn intimately into their world, as if we just passed through a magical portal. Aurelio, 84, dines with his companion, Birba, sitting on the table.

Carlo, 88, never seems to stop smiling, especially when he manages to get past his wife (who sternly believes him too old to truffle hunt at night) and slip into the woods with his dog, Titina. The younger, long-haired Sergio, a kindly but passionate soul, bathes with his pups — Pepe and Fiona — in a pink-tiled



tub. This, surely, is a gentle realm every bit as bewitching as Narnia.

But the hunters' earthy endeavor isn't as simple as it seems. Their way of life is a dying one. The rare white Alba truffle is increasingly hard to find because of effects on the soil connected to climate change. The hunters are often pressed for their secrets. "If tomorrow something happens, your wisdom would be lost," one man urges Aurelio. So sought-after are the truffles that their dogs are perpetually at risk of being poisoned by competitors.

Sergio, terrified of losing his, pounds on his drums for catharsis. Another hunter, intent on putting something down, hammers furiously at his typewriter. "Dogs are innocent," he writes.

The sense that the hunters — who are really in it for the dogs more than money or anything else — are, like their four-legged friends, innocents in a corrupt world only expands when the filmmakers follow the truffle food chain. Hagglng over prices by headlight, the hunters seem always lowballed by a well-dressed buyer. Higher up, still, are the Michelin-starred restau-

rants and auction houses that feast on the hunters' finds. This commercial world, miles removed from the muddy forests of Piedmont, is seen in *The Truffle Hunters* like an antiseptic, colorless modern life that has lost the taste of the simple and eternal.

Wonder and whimsy is back in the forest. *The Truffle Hunters* — surely among the greatest dog movies — even wryly occasionally shifts to a dog's point of view. We see — via dog cam — like one of the hunters' dogs when he's let out of the car and runs down a path, panting.

Just as last year's beekkeeping beauty *Honeyland*, *The Truffle Hunters* is a richly allegorical documentary of a vanishing agricultural pastime. The truffles, weighed and sniffed at market, are delicacies. But the finer things rhapsodised here are not expensive rarities. What's worth savoring is natural splendor; the charms of tradition, and, above all, a good dog. Those things aren't delicacies, but they're fragile just the same.

The Truffle Hunters, a Sony Pictures Classics release, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association of America for some language.

— AP



The disorientation of dementia

In Florian Zeller's *The Father*, Anthony, 80, in the grip of dementia, is a captain ready to go down with the ship. Overhearing his daughter and son-in-law contemplating a nursing home, he curses them as "rats" abandoning him. Pacing his London apartment in a bath robe, he mounts a noble resistance.

"I am not leaving my flat!" he shouts.

But if the battle lines are clear for Anthony, little else is. Every time Anthony leaves a room, when he re-enters, the light has shifted, the furniture is rearranged and sometimes even the people are different. In staging and perspective, *The Father* mimics the disorientation of dementia. Anthony, a regally theatrical man played by Anthony Hopkins, is an actor who every time he takes the stage, the scene has changed before him. Timelines, settings and faces are all kaleidoscoped by a splintered memory. His ship — his flat — might not even be his.

The Father, which opens in theaters Friday, is Zeller's directorial debut but he's a well-known French playwright and author who's here adapting his own play, one that's been put on around the world. (On Broadway, the father, named Andre, was played by Frank Langella. In London, it was Alfred Molina.)

Dementia is often seen on screen but usually from the viewpoint of an intimate watching their loved one recede away. Michael Haneke's *Amour*, with Jean-Louis Trintignant and Emmanuelle Riva, which likewise remained set within an elegant apartment, gazed with a cold, clear eye on a great love violently fading.

Haneke's film had larger reverberations because of its actors — both titans of French film approaching the end — and Zeller has likewise suggested — or rather insisted on — real-life echoes. Hopkins, 83, shares his character's name, and *The Father* could be taken as a late, self-aware wail from a magnificent performer. Zeller has also cast Olivia Colman as Anthony's care-taking daughter, Anne, and another Olivia, Olivia Williams, as who Anne sometimes appears to Anthony.

To me, these winks reinforced the feeling that "The Father" is a clever concept, not a profound film. Terrifically acted and finely crafted though it is, it's a brilliant but hollow exercise in perspective that calls more attention to its artful orchestration than it does life or loss.

And yet, few, if any films, have so fully illuminated the nightmare and confusion of dementia. Rather than gawk at it, "The Father" puts us smack in the middle of Anthony's personal hall of mirrors. We are just as unmoored as he is, left to figure out what's real and what's not as scenes are played and then, with shifting details, replayed: Anne coming home with chicken for dinner; her husband, Paul (Rufus Sewell), sitting with the newspaper; an interview with a prospective nurse (Imogen Poots).

In every encounter, Anthony struggles for comprehension. He's doubtful when facts don't line up, and outraged when he's contradicted. Sometimes, pangs of realization seem to flit across his face when he's at a loss he can't resolve. The stranger he finds in the apartment tells him he's Anne's husband. The flat, the man tells him, isn't his. His wristwatch (another pun) keeps going missing.

To see Hopkins play all these ever-fluctuating turns of mood is riveting. He has grasped, at least for a proud man like Anthony how one's ego keeps fighting a battle it doesn't know is already lost. The resentment for a reality that won't cohere. "What is this nonsense?" asks Anthony, furious. For an actor so intense, so rigorously unsentimental, this is his Lear.

Yet *The Father* often feels like a clinical puzzle to work out. By the time the fog clears — for us, not Anthony — and the splices of memory become synced, a final scene pushes *The Father* into territory beyond the simulation of Anthony's condition. A late scene brings a rush of heart-breaking clarity. It clears up the specifics of Anthony's situation while also pondering what, perhaps, there's still to cling to when everything else slips away.

The Father, a Sony Pictures Classics release, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association of America for some strong language, and thematic material.

— AP

Coming 2 America charms cut can't match the original

I'm Your Woman

CAST: Eddie Murphy, Arsenio Hall, Shari Headley, Jermaine Fowler, Leslie Jones, Tracy Morgan

DIRECTOR: Craig Brewer

RATING: ★★★

Streaming on Amazon Prime

Once upon a time, dear children, before you were born, they made a fairytale movie about a kingdom called Zamunda. *Coming to America*, starring Eddie Murphy at the height of his popularity and charisma, became a huge hit and a cult classic. In this film, dear children, Murphy played Prince Akeem — he didn't need to be called Prince Charming, because he was already so darned charming. We met him on the morning of his 21st birthday, awakening in his palace bedroom to a full orchestra, servants tossing rose petals at his feet, and gorgeous naked women servicing him in the bathtub until his royal appendage was deemed

clean.

Oops! Sorry, kids. Some parts of *Coming to America* didn't age very well. Including most of the stuff about women.

But 33 years and one #MeToo movement later, it's time for a reboot. The good news about *Coming 2 America*, directed by Craig Brewer, is that things have gotten better for women in Zamunda. Yes, it's still a patriarchy (more on that soon) and yes, there are still obedient royal bathers. But we don't see their naked breasts or backsides. There's also a bathtub gag involving the great Leslie Jones that flips the gender dynamic entirely and gratifyingly (especially for her).

And now, Prince Akeem is not a randy young heir but an established family man. Happily married for 30 years to Princess Lisa — the bride he found in Queens in the last film — he has three daughters, brave and feisty. The eldest wants to be his heir. A female heir? That's not done, in Zamunda. But the times, they are — or might be — a-changin'.

That's the good news. The bad news is that this sequel, despite (or perhaps because of) its nod to modern sensibilities, isn't nearly as funny or edgy



Paul Bates (from left), Leslie Jones and Jermaine Fowler in *Coming 2 America*.

as the original. It has seemingly everything — the original cast, some well-known newcomers, high-profile cameos — and eye-popping costumes by the great Ruth E. Carter (an Oscar winner for *Black Panther*). It has set

pieces and choreography and de-aging technology and overlaying plot lines. What it has less of, is fun.

Still, just like we go to college reunions 30 years later to recapture the magic, fans of the first will flock

to it on Amazon Prime. They likely won't be too disappointed. Especially because, despite the knowing references to urban gentrification, transgender offspring, Teslas and even unnecessary movie sequels, little has really changed.

Obviously Murphy is back, as producer and star. So is Arsenio Hall, as trusty sidekick Semmi (and a bunch of other roles). Also back: the stately James Earl Jones as King Jaffe Joffer; Shari Headley as Lisa (a seriously underwritten role); and Louie Anderson as Maurice. John Amos is back as Lisa's dad, still ripping off McDonald's. And of course the My-T-Sharp barbershop crew is back in Queens.

A new presence is the casually appealing Jermaine Fowler as Lavelle, Akeem's previously unknown son. Celebrity guests include a highly amusing Wesley Snipes as flamboyant General Izzi, leader of Nexdoria (next door); Tracy Morgan as Lavelle's uncle; and Jones as his uninhibited mother. Another *Saturday Night Live* face, Colin Jost, makes the most of a brief cameo. Among notable musical appearances, Gladys Knight sings *Midnight Train From Zamunda*.

The plot follows a familiar trajectory, beginning in Zamunda and traveling to Queens to solve a major need. In this case, the need is not a bride, but a male heir. Akeem, who becomes king upon his father's death, learns he unknowingly sired a son during that Queens trip three decades ago (it was Semmi's fault!) He needs a male heir to cement his power. So he brings Lavelle, a ticket scalper who aspires to much more, back to Zamunda, along with Mom.

ters entirely, Lavelle falls not for his intended bride, Izzi's daughter, but for his royal barber, Mirembé, who aspires to her own shop one day (women don't own businesses in Zamunda).

But Lavelle needs to learn royal ways, and pass a "princely test" which includes facing down a lion. There's also the matter of Akeem's daughter, Meeka (a luminous KiKi Layne, not given enough screen time), who rightly deserves to be queen one day. Complicating matters entirely, Lavelle falls not for his intended bride, Izzi's daughter, but for his royal barber, Mirembé, who aspires to her own shop one day (women don't own businesses in Zamunda).

— AP

SHORT TAKES

Pooja beats world champ, 9 in finals

New Delhi: Asian Championship gold medallist Pooja Rani (75kg) defeated world champion Atheyna Bylon of Panama in the semi-final bout as 9 Indians stormed into the finals of 35th Boxam International Boxing tournament in Castellon, Spain, on Friday. Pooja dominated her opponent from the beginning and looked unfazed throughout and assured a unanimous win. Other Women boxers joining Pooja in the final are debutant Jasmine (57kg) and Simranjit (60kg). However, it was a flawless day for the Indian male boxers as all 6 of them marched into the finals. CWG bronze medallist Mohammed Hussamuddin (57kg) continued his fine run and displayed technical superiority over Panama's Orlando Martinez to win 4-1. He will be facing Puerto Rico's Paul Rivera in the final.

Srinu, Sudha eye Tokyo qualifiers

New Delhi: India's top long-distance runners Srinu Bugatha and Sudha Singh will be aiming to attain the Tokyo Olympics qualifying mark during the sixth edition of the Ageas Federal Life Insurance New Delhi Marathon to be held here on Sunday.

At the eve of the event, the two elite athletes disclosed the tough training regimens that they have been going through with their sights firmly fixed on berths for the flight to Tokyo later this year. Srinu declared that he was aiming to clock the required under-2:11.30s timing to turn his dream into a reality.

Sudha, a former Asian Games gold medallist in 3,000 steeplechase, also said that she would be targeting the national marathon record of 2:30.00s set by O.P. Jaisha to break into the Indian squad.

Nagal out of Argentina Open

Buenos Aires: Playing fearless brand of tennis, India's Sumit Nagal ran world number 46 Albert Ramos-Vinolas close before exiting the ATP Argentina Open after suffering a three-set defeat in the men's singles quarter-final here. His relentless hitting kept Nagal in the match despite trailing 2-5 in the decider. Eventually errors at key moments spelled his ouster, losing 6-4, 2-6, 5-7 in the quarter-final that lasted two hours and 26 minutes. It is Nagal's best performance on the ATP tour after entering the event as a qualifier. The gutsy show earned Nagal 45 main draw ranking points that will push him to 132 from the current 150th slot. Yet again Nagal's trademark inside-out forehand was at work as he put the Spaniard under the pump. — PTI

Spinners help Lanka level series

St. John's, Antigua and Barbuda: Sri Lanka's spinners bamboozled world champions West Indies to claim a 43-run win in the second Twenty20 International on Friday. Having lost by four wickets in the opening game on Wednesday, in a game where West Indies skipper Kieron Pollard launched six sixes in an over, the tourists successfully defended 160 on Friday to level the three-match series. West Indies were all out for 117 in the 19th over as Sri Lanka ended an eight-game losing streak in T20. Leg-spinner Wanindu Hasaranga finished with 3-17, off-break bowler Akila Dananjaya had 1-13. Wrist spinner Lakshan Sandakan took 3-10, including Pollard's wicket. — AFP

Brief scores: Sri Lanka 160/6 (Gunathilaka 56, Nissanka 37, Bravo 2-25) beat **West Indies 117** (McCoy 23, Sandakan 3-10, Hasaranga 3-17).

Live on TV

BADMINTON

Swiss Open: Finals from 3.30 pm on Star Sports 2 HD, 3

FOOTBALL

English Premier League: West Brom vs Newcastle from 5.30 pm; Liverpool vs Fulham from 7.30 pm; **Manchester City vs Manchester United** from 10 pm; Tottenham vs Crystal Palace from 12.45 am (Monday) on Star Sports Select 1

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INDIA LORD IT OVER

Kohli & Co. crush England to make WTC final at Lord's

Ahmedabad, March 6: Axar Patel and R. Ashwin once again made a mockery of an eternally confused English batting line-up as India cantered into the inaugural World Test Championship final with a resounding innings and 25 run victory on the third afternoon of the fourth and final Test here on Saturday.

All India needed was a draw to book a Lord's date in June with New Zealand but Patel (24-6-48-5), in company of Ashwin (22.5-4-47-5), literally blew England away in a session and half for a paltry 135 in 54.5 overs to complete a 3-1 rout, ensuring that the Anthony De Mello Trophy will stay at the Cricket Centre in Mumbai.

It was another two-and-a-half-days finish but even the most partisan England experts like their former skipper Michael Vaughan have admitted that the 22-yard strip had almost nothing to do with their side's abject surrender.

A case in point could be India's first innings score of 365 and a lead of 160 on the same track where England could cumulatively manage only 340 runs across two innings.

Atrocious application and unbelievably poor mindset while playing spinners cost the Englishmen dearly during the last three Tests and skipper Joe Root had little to offer in terms of explanation.

"We haven't matched India in the last three, and we need to keep learning and keep getting better for this experience and this series," admitted Root.

This was one Test match where Indians, even before a ball being bowled, created an illusion of a turning track. It was a ploy of playing with the minds of a team that was already deep into a negative zone.

There wasn't much turn but enough to ensure that the visitors wilted under pressure as Patel's series tally stood at highest for a newcomer (27) while man of the series Ashwin was peerless as ever with 32 scalps in his kitty. — PTI

GAVASKAR FELICITATED ON 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF TEST DEBUT

Ahmedabad, March 6: Former India captain Sunil Gavaskar was on Saturday felicitated by the BCCI on the 50th anniversary of his Test debut with Board President Sourav Ganguly saying that the batting legend and his then teammates played a key role in making "the game as strong as it is today".

The 71-year-old former skipper received a commemorative Test cap from BCCI secretary Jay Shah during the lunch break on day three of the fourth and final Test between India and England at the Narendra Modi Stadium here. Gavaskar is doing commentary for the match. "Celebrating 50 glorious years of the legendary former #TeamIndia Captain Mr. Sunil Gavaskar's



Sunil Gavaskar poses with the commemorative Test cap. — PTI

Test debut today," the BCCI tweeted. Shah also posted pictures of the brief ceremony on his official Twitter handle.

Ganguly, also a former skipper, paid his tribute via twitter. — PTI



Axar Patel (right) and teammate Rishabh Pant pose with the trophy after winning the Test series against England at the end of their fourth Test in Ahmedabad on Saturday. India won the Test series 3-1. — AFP

SCORECARD

England 1st Innings: 205
India 1st Innings (overnight 294-7): S. Gill lbw b Anderson O, R. Sharma lbw b Stokes 49, C. Pujara lbw b Leach 17, V. Kohli c Foakes b Stokes O, A. Rahane c Stokes b Anderson 27, R. Pant c Root b Anderson 101, R. Ashwin c Pope b Leach 13, W. Sundar not out 96, A. Patel run out (Bairstow/Root) 43, I. Sharma lbw b Stokes O, M. Siraj b Stokes O. Extras (b10, lb6, nb3) 19. **Total (all out in 114.4 overs) 365.**
FOW: 1-0, 2-40, 3-41, 4-80, 5-121, 6-146, 7-259, 8-365, 9-365, 10-365.
Bowling: Anderson 25-14-44-3, Stokes 27.4-6-89-4 (nb1), Leach 27-5-89-2 (nb1), Bess 17-1-71-0 (nb1), Root 18-1-56-0.
England 2nd Innings: Z. Crawley c Rahane b Ashwin 5, D. Sibley c Pant b Patel 3, J. Bairstow c R. Sharma b Ashwin O, J. Root lbw b Ashwin 30, B. Stokes c Kohli b Patel 2, O. Pope st Pant b Patel 15, D. Lawrence b Ashwin 50, B. Foakes c Rahane b Patel 13, D. Bess c Pant b Patel 2, J. Leach c Rahane b Ashwin 2, J. Anderson not out 1. Extras (b4, lb8) 12. **Total (all out in 54.5 overs) 135.**
FOW: 1-10, 2-10, 3-20, 4-30, 5-65, 6-65, 7-109, 8-111, 9-134, 10-135.
Bowling: Siraj 4-0-12-0, Patel 24-6-48-5, Ashwin 22.5-4-47-5, Sundar 4-0-16-0.

NUMBERS GAME

INDIA'S FOURTH BIGGEST WIN OVER ENGLAND:

- India recorded their fourth biggest win against England by winning the fourth and final Test by an innings and 25 runs in Ahmedabad on Saturday.
- India's an innings and 75 runs victory at Chennai in 2016-17 is their biggest over England while an innings and 46 runs win at Leeds in 2002 is biggest in England. An innings and 23 runs victory at Mumbai in 2016-17 is India third biggest over England.
- Washington Sunder recorded his highest score in Tests by making an unbeaten 96 off 174 balls with 10 fours and one six. His previous highest was 85 (not out) in the first Test match of the series at Chennai.
- Ravichandran Ashwin took 32 wickets in the series and joins the great Sydney Barnes as the only bowler to twice take more than 30 wickets in a series of four matches or fewer. Ashwin took 31 wickets in the four-Test series against South Africa in 2015-16.

— S. PERVEZ KAISER

Kohli lauds bench strength

SHASTRI PRAISES PANT'S GAME-CHANGING INNINGS

Ahmedabad, March 6: India coach Ravi Shastri on Saturday said Rishabh Pant's game-changing hundred against England in the fourth Test here was the best counter-attacking knock that he has seen by a number six Indian batsman on home soil.

Pant notched up 101 off just 118 balls, playing a crucial role in India winning the match by an innings and 25 runs to close the series 3-1 on Saturday.

"He has worked like hell in the last three or four months and the results are showing. Yesterday's innings is the best counter attacking innings, I have seen in India by an Indian, especially at number six when the ball was turning," Shastri said.

"Nothing comes easy and he was told in no uncertain terms that he has got to respect the game a little more. He has got to lose some weight and work hard on his keeping. We know the talent he has. He is a genuine match winner and he has responded." — PTI

and so the comeback was very heartening," Kohli said.

"Our bench strength is extremely strong and that's a good sign for Indian cricket. When the transi-

tion happens, the standards won't fall and Rishabh and Washy's partnership showed exactly that in a crucial juncture of the match," Kohli added. — PTI

Sindhu in final, all other Indians out

Basel, March 6: Olympic silver medallist P. V. Sindhu dished out a superlative performance to outclass Mia Blichfeldt of Denmark in straight games and enter the women's singles final of the Swiss Open Super 300 tournament here on Saturday.

Sindhu, the reigning world champion, beat fourth seeded Blichfeldt 22-20, 21-10 in 43 minutes to avenge her first-round loss to the Danish world number 12 at the Yonex Thailand Open in January. This is Sindhu's first final appearance since the World championships here in 2019.

The second seeded Indian will take on top seed and Rio Olympics gold medalist Carolina Marin in the summit clash on Sunday. It will be the first meeting between the two in over two years.

Former champion Kidambi Srikanth, however, couldn't cross the semi-final stage as he went down 13-21, 19-21 to top seed and former world champion Viktor Axelsen.

World number 10 Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty also bowed out after losing 10-21, 17-21 to sixth seeded Danish pair of Kim Astrup and Anders Skaarup

SWISS OPEN



P. V. Sindhu

Rasmussen in the last-four stage. The Indian duo had a last four finish in their last event at Toyota Thailand Open in January.

Sindhu thus emerged as the lone Indian survivor in the \$140,000 event, the first tournament in the extended Olympic qualification period which ends on June 15.

On Friday night, Srikanth had beat sixth seed Kantaphon Wangcharoen of Thailand 21-19, 21-15 to enter the semifinals. — PTI

Man City up for Red Devils test

London, March 6: Manchester City have history in their sights as the runaway leaders bid to take a huge step towards the Premier League title in Sunday's showdown with fading challengers Manchester United.

City are 14 points clear of United with 11 games left and victory in the derby would effectively end their second placed rivals' faint hopes of catching them.

Pep Guardiola's side have been so dominant since the end of last year that it is the landmarks they can shatter on the way to a third title in four seasons that now hold the greatest interest.

They are unbeaten in 28 games and will set a new club record if they avoid defeat this weekend.

That could be the first of many milestones to fall for City, who are on an English top-flight record run of 21 successive wins in all competitions.

The only teams from the top five European leagues ever to record longer winning streaks in all competi-

tions are Bayern Munich (23) and Real Madrid (22).

City can edge closer to Bayern's tally if they clinch a 16th successive Premier League victory this weekend, which would also take them to the brink of their own record of 18 consecutive Premier League wins, a mark shared with Liverpool.

Guardiola's team are six wins short of equalling the world record for consecutive victories in all competitions by a top-flight side — set by Welsh team The New Saints in 2016.

City's incredible run is all the more remarkable given their troubled start to the season.

When they were held to a 0-0 draw at United in December, they were a point behind their rivals in ninth place and the death knell was ringing for their title hopes. But, aided by some clever tactical tweaks from Guardiola, including the use of full-backs Joao Cancelo and Kyle Walker as auxiliary attackers, they have been perfect since then. — AFP

BCCI source reveals IPL 2021 to begin on April 9

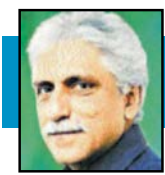
New Delhi, March 6: The 2021 edition of the Indian Premier League (IPL) will begin on April 9, exactly 12 days after the Indian cricket team completes its ongoing assignment against England, a BCCI source revealed on Saturday.

"We have provisionally decided that IPL will start on April 9 and end on May 30," a senior BCCI source said.

"The formal approval of dates and venues will be done during Governing Council meeting next week," the source added.

Considering the prevailing circumstances when efforts are being made to minimise the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the BCCI has decided to host IPL matches in five cities — Chennai, Kolkata, Bengaluru, Delhi and Ahmedabad. — PTI

England's shortcomings cannot undermine India's big win



Ayaz Memon
Over The Top

India's 3-1 series win was a function of excellent all-round performances and collective self-belief. After losing the first match, the team was under enormous pressure. The rubber was at stake, and with it also a place in the final of the inaugural World Test Championship final, a matter of great prestige.

In the event, India did it in style, winning the third Test in less than two days (by 10 wickets), and the fourth in under three by an innings. Victory can't get more comprehensive.

Nevertheless, England's slump after winning the first Test handsomely was a major surprise. For some reason Joe Root's team lost focus, confidence and stumbled unexpectedly and badly in the remaining three Tests.

If the tactic was to sit on the 1-0 lead and plan a stealth attack to win the series, it was ill-founded. In India, visiting teams have to not only get the combination and balance of their playing XIs right, but also must guard against slipping into a prolonged attritional or ultra-

defensive mode.

In 2012-3 series they won, England had Cook to bat long, and Pietersen to take the attack to the bowlers. This time, with Stokes mesmerized by Ashwin, there was overreliance on Root to play bulwark as well as aggressor. It didn't work beyond the first Test.

England weren't terribly rich on players with experience of Indian conditions. A quirky rotation policy further robbed them of key players (Jos Butler) and was compounded by flawed selections, like 4 pacers in the day/night match on a spinner's track.

The biggest problem was the failure of the batting. Barring Joe Root (primarily in the first Test), Ben Stokes (all too sporadically) and Dan Lawrence in the fourth match, the batsmen floundered, showing

little technical skill, nerve, or conviction.

Instead, they viewed pitches with deep suspicion and surrendered abjectly at the first sight of seeing the ball turn or jump off the pitch. To an extent, criticism of the Motera pitch for the third Test was justified. A Test ending in less than two days, with neither side making more than 150 in their first innings, is a below par surface.

The collapse in both innings of the fourth Test however very little to do with the pitch. To be bowled out for 135 in the second innings in 54.5 overs on the same surface where India's last four batsmen put on 219 runs shows that the demons were more in the minds of the England batsmen.

England's shortcomings

cannot undermine India's superb effort though. Losing the first Test was a jolt. To recover from it so swiftly redounds to the ability and ambition of the players. There was obviously a lot of self and collective pride to be redeemed, and this was done handsomely.

From the standpoint of individual performances, Ashwin (32 wickets) and Axar (27) enjoyed a fabulous series, giving the batsmen no respite with their accuracy, control, spin, and in the former's case. These two will feature in the nightmares of England batsmen for a long while one reckons.

Rohit Sharma showed sublime form batting on difficult pitches. In defence or attack, his technique, balance, stroke selection, and elegance in

executing these was quite superb. A late bloomer in the five-day format, he's reaching his peak and is perhaps the most feared batsman — in white ball or red — in the world.

Washington Sundar, tagged as white ball specialist at the start of the season, has shown fine maturity and ability though only 21. He and Axar represent the richness and depth of talent of Indian cricket. Think of it, had Jadeja not been injured, one or both might not have played a single match. How to keep them out now will vex the team management!

The pick of the players for me is Rishabh Pant. He made 270 runs in the series (502 runs in the season), often coming in to bat with the team in crises and turning things around

with his chutzpah and bold strokeplay.

Through the season he's reeled off crucial half centuries — in Australia and in this series — and his swash-buckling century on Friday was the main reason why India were able to take a big first innings lead and win the fourth Test.

It's not just Pant's adventurous batting — always a threat to opponents — that has been of high value to the team. He's improved enormously as wicket-keeper too, as 8 catches and 5 stumpings in this series on difficult pitches testify.

He may lack eye-catching finesse, but has worked on his fitness and flexibility, sharpened his reflexes, which has reduced the margin of error in his wicket-keeping. He's made himself indispensable.