

DECCAN Chronicle

THE LARGEST CIRCULATED ENGLISH DAILY IN SOUTH INDIA
RAJAMAHENDRAVARAM | SUNDAY | 27 DECEMBER 2020



NATION | 4

**Ajit sees return of
NCP leaders to BJP**



WORLD | 5

**China hails 'success'
in curbing Covid**

SPORTS | 8

**Bumrah, Ashwin bowl
Australia out for 195**



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WEATHER



Max: 29.0°C
Min: 14.0°C
RH: 73%
Rainfall: NIL

Forecast: Clear.
Max/Min temp.
29/14 °C

COVID-19 COUNT

| CASES | DEATHS |
|----------------------------|----------|
| (+18,549) | (+280) |
| 1,01,88,353 | 1,47,659 |
| covid19india.org | |
| STATE GOVERNMENT BULLETINS | |
| (+317) | (+2) |
| TS: 2,84,391 | 1,529 |
| (+282) | (+1) |
| AP: 8,80,712 | 7,092 |

CASES AROUND THE WORLD

| 8,04,36,796 |
|-----------------------------------|
| DEATHS |
| 17,61,278 |
| COUNTRIES AREAS WITH CASES |
| 218 |
| worldometers.info/ coronavirus |

ASTROGUIDE

Sarvari; Dakshinayana
Tithi: Margasira Shuddha
Trayodasi till 6.19 am (Monday)
Star: Kritika till 1.16 pm
Varjyam: Nil
Durmuhurtam: 4.18 pm to
5.02 pm
Rahukalam: 4.30 pm to 6 pm
HJRI CALENDAR
Jamadi-ul-Awwal 11, 1442 AH
PRAYERS (ROYAL MOSQUE)
Fajar: 5:30 am
Zohar: 1:30 pm
Asar: 4:15 pm
Maghrib: 5:38 pm
Isha: 8:30 pm
SUNRISE TOMORROW 6.30 AM
SUNSET TODAY 5.37 PM
MOONRISE TODAY 3.26 PM
MOONSET TOMORROW 4.44 AM

COUNTER POINT



No need to panic,
It's safe!

SHORT TAKES

BJP to push for 1 nation, 1 poll

New Delhi: The BJP will organise nearly 25 webinars over the next few days on the issue of "one nation, one election", as it seeks to build popular support for what has been a strong plank of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Party sources said its senior leaders, besides members of academia and legal fraternity, will be attending these 'webinars', seminars that are held online. "We plan to hold 25 webinars by the end of this month," a party leader said.

MP clears new 'love jihad' Bill

Bhopal: Madhya Pradesh Cabinet on Saturday cleared the Dharma Swatantra (Religious Freedom) bill, 2020, known in political parlance as 'Love Jihad' bill. The draft bill, which may see through in the assembly during its 3-day winter session commencing on December 28, provides a maximum of 10 years imprisonment and ₹1 lakh fine to the perpetrators of forced religious conversion of a girl for marriage. The new bill has provision of declaring such a marriage null and void. The Bill puts onus on the accused and those associated with accused including organisations and institutions, to prove their innocence.

■ Report on Page 4

PM: Cong. need not lecture BJP

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

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

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



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

"Some people in Delhi curse Modi day in and day out and hurl abuses. They regularly offer me lessons in democracy. I want to show them the mirror today," he said, blasting the Congress for not undertaking local polls in Puducherry. "The party of those teaching me democracy is in power in Puducherry," the prime minister said. —PTI

FARMERS SEND DRAFT FOR TALKS ON DECEMBER 29

**DC CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 26**

As the protests demanding the repeal of the three farm laws entered the 31st day, the protesting farmer unions on Saturday decided to resume talks with the government.

They have proposed December 29 as the date for the next round of negotiations and sent the draft of the issues to be discussed. These include repeal of farm laws, making the MSP a legal guarantee and changes in the draft Electricity Amendment Bill to safeguard the interests of farmers. There is also a demand to exclude farmer from the amendments in Commission for the Air Quality Management in Delhi Region and Adjoining Areas Ordinance, 2020.

■ Report on Page 4

₹4.39 CRORE COLLECTED IN TIRUMALA HUNDI

**DC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, DEC. 26**

On the day of Vaikuntha Ekadasi, the Srivari Hundi at the Lord Venkateswara temple at Tirumala received ₹4.39 crore in offerings. This is the highest-ever since Srivari Darshan was resumed by the Tirupati Tirumala Devasthanams on June 8, after the lockdown called for the Covid-19 pandemic.

According to the TTD, a total of 42,825 pilgrims had Vaikuntha Dwara Darshan in the Tirumala temple on Friday. Supreme Court Justice Indira Banerjee had Vaikuntha Dwara Darshanam on Vaikuntha Dwadasi on Saturday.

TTD Executive Officer Dr K.S. Jawahar Reddy received the judge at the main entrance of the temple before she had darshan of Lord Venkateswara.

Later the Supreme Court judge was rendered Vedasirvachanam by a team of Vedic scholars inside R a n g a n a y a k u l a Mandapam.

The TTD EO offered prasadams, a laminated picture of the lord to the Judge.

● **THE SRIVARI Hundi** at the Lord Venkateswara temple at Tirumala received ₹4.39 crore in offerings.

● **SC Justice Indira Banerjee** had Vaikuntha Dwara Darshanam on Vaikuntha Dwadasi on Saturday.

Faith matters



On the auspicious occasion of Vaikuntha Dwadasi, Chakrasnanam was performed in Ekantam to Sri Sudarshana Chakratallwar in the sacred waters of Swamy Pushkarini in Tirumala on Saturday.

— BY ARRANGEMENT

Theatre owners want 50% bar on seating to be lifted

**DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, DEC. 26**

A section of Tollywood has appealed to the Centre to permit theatres to run to capacity while complying with standard operating procedures (SOPs) against Covid-19. Theatres can currently run at 50 per cent of the capacity in Andhra Pradesh.

The huge turnout of viewers to watch *Solo Brathuke So Better* starring actor Sai Dharam Tej — the first film to be released after the theatres reopened — on Friday left Tollywood jubilant that it could revive the forgotten practice of going to the

movies with family and friends.

Between 50 and 60 per cent of the 1,250 theatres in the state reached permitted capacity.

Film-makers and exhibitors want the same practice to be continued to encourage more people to visit the theatres so that it will help them overcome the loss of revenue during the nine months of closure of theatres. They assured that they would comply with Covid-19 protocols and the SOPs drafted by the Centre and the AP government.

Their main contention is that when aircraft and buses are permitted to

carry passengers to capacity, and permission is accorded to political parties to organise public meetings and take out huge rallies, film theatres should be permitted to run to their full capacity.

They are also appealing to the Andhra Pradesh government to issue the GO to waive power bills of film theatres for three months from April to June and permit deferred payment of power bills for six months from July to December. The Cabinet has already taken the decision.

■ Page 2: Section of
Tollywood cautious

Centre accepts ₹55,548 cr as revised Polavaram cost

**DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, DEC. 26**

The efforts of the YSR Congress government led by Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy to get adequate funds for the construction of the Polavaram irrigation project expeditiously seemed to have yielded the desired result as the Centre accepted the revised cost estimate of the project at ₹55,548 crore at the 2017-18

● **THE UNION** Jal Shakti ministry, in its annual release through Press Information Bureau (PIB), announced the new project cost

price level. The Union Jal Shakti ministry in its release through the Press Information Bureau here on Saturday announced the new project cost.

It may mentioned that CM had met the Union

home minister Amit Shah and Union Jal Shakti minister Gajendra Shekhawat and requested them to accept the revised cost estimate to enable completion of the project so as to extend its benefits to all the targeted people and the farmers. He appealed for acceptance of revised cost estimate-2 at ₹55,656 crore at 2017-18 price level.

■ Page 2: YSRC managed
to persuade Centre on cost

UK returnees pose challenge in Kurnool

**DC CORRESPONDENT
KURNOOL DEC. 26**

Even as the spread of Covid-19 was controlled in Kurnool district, with just two positive cases being reported in the past 24 hours, the issue of UK returnees is posing a challenge in view of the discovery of a more infective mutation of the SARS-CoV-2 in the island nation.

So far 39 persons are identified as having returned from the UK in recent days, of whom 33 were from Kurnool, said District Medical and Health Officer Dr Rama Giddayya.

He said the returnees include children, adults and elderly persons.

A few had returned to Adoni and Nandyal divisions.

The DMHO said all the UK returnees were isolated and their samples were

sent for tests and found to be negative. They were advised to self-quarantine in their own houses, he said.

Asked whether there was any instances of the new variant found in UK returnees, he said nothing had been reported. He said the administration was on high alert and was monitoring the situation minutely.

"The Covid infections have come down. We hope to see that there won't be any spike as testing and tracing has been continuously taken up in the district, he said.

DRUG REGULATOR TO CLEAR OXFORD COVIDSHIELD FIRST

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

Once the UK drug regulator gives its approval to the Oxford vaccine, the expert committee on Covid-19 at the CDSCO will hold its meeting and thoroughly review the safety and immunogenicity data from the clinical evaluations conducted abroad and in India before granting any emergency authorisation for the vaccine here, official sources said.

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

"Going by this, Oxford vaccine 'Covishield' is likely to be the first to be rolled out in India," a source said. Serum Institute of India last week also had submitted some additional data required by the DCGI, the sources said. Amid fears about the mutated variant of SARS-CoV-2 detected in the UK, government officials recently said that it will have no impact on the potential of emerging vaccines that are being developed in India and other countries. Bharat Biotech, SII and Pfizer had applied to the DCGI seeking emergency use authorisation for their Covid vaccines early in December.

—PTI

SHORT TAKES

APFDC WISHES
EARLY RECOVERY
OF RAJINIKANTHDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, DEC. 26

AP Film Development Corporation chairman T. Vijay Chandar wished early recovery of actor-politician Rajinikanth who is undergoing treatment at Apollo hospital for severe fluctuations in blood pressure.

In a statement issued here on Saturday, the APFDC chairman said that he was praying to the God to help the actor get speedy recovery from his health problem and added that the actor's services were indispensable to the society by entering into the politics.

DEVOTEES WHO
PAID ₹11,000
GET RAW DEALDC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, DEC. 26

Devotees who bought tickets under Sri Vani Trust scheme by paying ₹11,000 for special darshan on the occasion of Vaikunta Ekadasi criticised TTD for sending them in the ₹300 queue and offering only Laghu darshan on Saturday at Tirumala.

They alleged that TTD staff handled women and children roughly when they questioned the rationale behind providing darshan from Bangaruvakili instead of allowing them into the sanctum sanctorum.

Police officials spoke to the women devotees who complained against staff outside the temple while assuring to take action against the staff responsible for high-handed behaviour with them.

Meanwhile, Rayalaseema Porata Samiti leader Naveen Kumar Reddy criticised the TTD for the ordeals of devotees holding Sri Vani Trust ticket after paying ₹11,000 per head for darshan on Vaikunta Ekadasi day.

He demanded to know the number of tickets issued for special darshan and also explanation for increasing the ₹300 darshan ticket to ₹1,000.

Meanwhile, TTD authorities in a release said that they have printed about laghu darshanam for devotees who bought tickets under Sri Vani trust scheme. However, some devotees demanded regular darshan inside the temple after reaching Bangaru Vakili. They have blocked the way for devotees waiting for darshan.

SC NOTICE TO
CONVICT FOR
MISLEADING ITDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, DEC. 26

Supreme Court has served show-cause notice to a convict for misleading it by submitting a wrong copy of the trial court's verdict to escape jail term.

S. Sankar was convicted on December 31, 2000, along with others, on charges of graft and other offences, including criminal breach of trust and conspiracy. Special Judge for CBI cases, Hyderabad, awarded him a sentence of one-year jail term and imposed a fine of ₹1,000 for criminal breach of trust under provisions of IPC and Prevention of Corruption Act.

However, Sankar, accused number 5 in the case, moved AP High Court challenging the sentence awarded by the trial court. However, the HC upheld the sentence awarded by the trial court.

Sankar then moved Supreme Court claiming that AP High Court had wrongly construed the operative portion of sentence passed by the trial court. He went on to claim that he was only sentenced to pay a fine of ₹500 each on each count, apart from undergoing one month simple imprisonment in case of failure to pay the fine.

Accordingly, the SC, in its verdict delivered on July 23, 2019, allowed Sankar to walk free in the graft case on payment of ₹1,000 as fine.

Subsequently, the Supreme Court secretary general held an inquiry and submitted a report that the convict had misled the court to avoid the jail term.

Following this, an SC division bench comprising justices Surya Kant and Aniruddha Bose issued an order to serve a show-cause notice to appellant Sankar as to why the earlier order of the court not be recalled and modified to initiate a further suitable action against him.

Sankar's advocate on-record A. Venkateswara Rao accepted the show-cause notice on behalf of Sankar, who has been granted four weeks' time to respond.



Beneficiaries of the housing scheme gathering at Gandhiji Mahila Kalasala for receiving house pattas at One Town in Vijayawada on Saturday.

— C. NARAYANA RAO

Housing to create jobs,
boost economy: Dokka

Distribution of 31 lakh of houses will lead to growth of state's GDP: MLC

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, DEC. 26

YSR Congress MLC Dokka Manikya Varaprasad Rao has stated that distribution of house sites and construction of houses is not just a welfare scheme but would generate revenues for the state, apart from providing employment to people.

Specifically, he claimed, distribution of house sites to 30 lakh women will lead to employment of people with 30 types of skills, apart from unskilled persons, in all 13 districts of the state.

Speaking to media here on Saturday, the MLC flayed opposition TD for creating hurdles in house sites distribution and construction scheme by moving courts. He asked opposition party leaders to withdraw cases they have filed if they have any concern for poor. He maintained that housing for poor is a brainchild of Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan

Lokesh: CM telling lies on
demographic imbalanceDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, DEC. 26

Telugu Desam national general secretary N. Lokesh has criticised Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy for "deliberately misinterpreting" demographic imbalance as caste imbalance with the ulterior motive to derive undue political advantage. He said that the Chief Minister was telling all lies only to rake up caste feelings and thereby divert the people's

attention from the pressing issues and problems in the state. He claimed that Jagan Reddy fully aware that demographic imbalance had nothing to do with caste but yet he was resorting to cheap political gimmicks with utter disregard for decorum and decency.

Mr Lokesh said that it was because of his non-stop lying that Jagan Reddy was called a fake CM. He claimed that no section of society in Andhra Pradesh was now

ready to trust the Chief Minister's words and statements considering his dubious track record in just 19 months of his misrule. He further claimed that the real caste imbalance took place in the present regime as it was discriminating against the weaker sections in nominated posts and works.

Mr Lokesh said that over 850 posts at the government and corporations' top levels were given to only one caste.

that distribution of 31 lakh of houses will lead to growth of state's GDP by three per cent, as it would create direct and indirect employment worth ₹20 crore. He claimed that

next to agriculture, majority of employment comes from the housing sector. He underlined that while the state government wanted to provide houses for 54,000 poor families in

While the state government wanted to provide houses for 54,000 poor families in Amaravati region, TD leaders approached the High Court on grounds that it would lead to demographic imbalance. He wondered whether such an objection is a democratic act or another cheap political stunt.

The MLC said that TD is now blocking provision of housing for poor after abandoning them during its own regime. He pointed that all commercial sectors have been facing a slump due to Covid crisis across the country. As such, it is a great thing that Jagan Mohan Reddy government is taking up a massive housing programme to generate economic activity on a large scale.

Amaravati region, TD leaders approached the High Court on grounds that it would lead to demographic imbalance. He wondered whether such an objection is a democratic act or another cheap political stunt.

The fixing of the project cost has been a bone of contention for long. Recently, the Centre had raised queries on the project cost and announced that it would extend financial help as per earlier agreement with the previous Telugu Desam regime at the price level of 2014-15. However, the YSR Congress government submitted relevant details and managed to persuade the Centre to consider the revised cost estimate of the project at the 2017-18 price level.

As per Central Water Commission's revised cost estimate-II, the total cost of the project was ₹55,656.87 crore at 2017-18 price level while the revised cost committee recommended the price level at ₹47,725.74 crore at the 2017-18 price level.

With regard to reimbursement details, the total expenditure incurred up to December 11, 2020, was ₹17,733.75 crore and expenditure incurred after declaration as national project up to December 11, 2020, was ₹12,597.70 crore. The amount reimbursed to the AP government by the Polavaram Project Authority was ₹10,741.46 crore while the amount yet to be reimbursed was estimated at ₹1,856.24 crore.

The year started with Jagan Mohan Reddy, fulfilling his election promise with the launch of a pilot project on January 3 in West Godavari district, which provides medical cover for treatment cost-

death rate logged was 0.81 per cent, which is considerably lower than the national average.

An effective control system was put in place by developing testing facilities, setting up of Covid care centres, and establishing a structured network right from 104 toll-free number to telemedicine. The number of virology labs went up to 150 when there was not even one before. The State has followed a decentralised model of sample collection centres and about 1,519 facilities acted as sample collection centres ranging from teaching hospitals to primary health centres

taken up by volunteers on each and every demanding situation and adequate medical staff were recruited for Covid centres.

The data, as on Friday, shows that about 1.15 crore tests were conducted, covering nearly 20 per cent of the population standing first in the country. About 8.80 lakh were infected with an average positivity rate of 7.64 per cent, the

demic by widening the network and pressing into service the village secretariat system and closely monitoring the situation almost on a daily basis. It stood first in the number of tests per million in the country and its recovery rate was higher and mortality rate lower than that of the national average. Labs were established in a record time. "Trace, Test and Treat" was the policy followed and ANMs, village and ward volunteers along with sanitation workers and medical personnel did a commendable job in containing the pandemic.

A household survey was

The year 2020 threw a lot of challenges to the State government, more specifically the Covid-19 pandemic, which the administration not only contained well but also strengthened the medical and health sector. Further, the government increased the extent of YSR Aarogyasri scheme by incorporating many more diseases under its cover.

The State, led by Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, made rapid strides in developing infrastructure and facilities in controlling the pan-

demographic imbalance as caste imbalance with the ulterior motive to derive undue political advantage. He said that the Chief Minister was telling all lies only to rake up caste feelings and thereby divert the people's

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Section of Tollywood
cautious over Covid

FROM PAGE 1

K.L. Damodar Prasad, film-maker and Telugu Film Chamber secretary, said, "As people have started visiting the theatres in large numbers to watch films, we appeal to the Centre to allow viewers to full capacity in the theatres to help the industry to recover quickly from huge financial loss. We also appeal to the AP government to issue GO on waiver of power bills and deferred payment to give us some relief."

Another section of Tollywood is cautious, given the threat of a second wave of Covid-19 and the discovery of a mutant

strain of the Coronavirus in the UK and elsewhere. They want to play safe with regard to allowing viewers into theatres. They maintain that they are expect a large turnout at the theatres as more are scheduled for release during the Sankranti festival in January.

Andhra Pradesh Film Development Corporation (APFDC) former chairman Ambica Krishna said, "Though allowing theatres to run to full capacity helps quick revival of the industry, with shooting of films and other related activities gaining pace, we should be more careful about the health risk."

3 women killed
in mishap on NHDC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, DEC. 26

Two woman and a 14-year-old girl were killed on the spot and four others injured critically when a minivan in which they were travelling was hit by a speeding truck on the Putalapattu-Naidupeta National highway early on Saturday.

According to the police, one P. Vijay Kumar and his brother P. Sekhar belonging to Nangili in Karnataka had planned a trip to Tirumala and other temples in Chittoor district on the occasion of Vaikuntha Ekadasi. Their houseowner Subhramanyam and his family members joined them. The three families hired two vehicles for the pilgrimage.

The mishap took place near Gadanki in Pakala mandal when a speeding lorry going towards Tirupati hit the minivan

when the families were returning to Nangili after offering prayers in Tirumala on Friday.

Among the victims were Vijaya Kumar's wife Annapurna, 60, mother Rajamma, 80, and a relative, Jyothi 14. The injured were shifted to the SVR Ruia Government General Hospital in Tirupati.

Some passersby alerted the police and 108 staff. Pakala police rushed to the spot and shifted the injured to hospital. Police registered a case and are investigating.

Meanwhile a couple were killed on the spot after an unidentified vehicle hit their bike near Jadadevi village in Varikuntapadu mandal of SPSR Nellore district on Saturday.

The couple identified as Gangi Srinivasulu Reddy and Rathnamma belong to Vadlamudi village in Udayagiri mandal.

It's TD vs YSRC



TD activists stage protest against YSRC activists outside the Vizag-east MLA office at MVP Colony in Visakhapatnam on Saturday.

— K. MURALIRKISHNA

YSRC GOVT MANAGED TO PERSUADE
CENTRE ON REVISED PROJECT COST

FROM PAGE 1

The fixing of the project cost has been a bone of contention for long. Recently, the Centre had raised queries on the project cost and announced that it would extend financial help as per earlier agreement with the previous Telugu Desam regime at the price level of 2014-15. However, the YSR Congress government submitted relevant details and managed to persuade the Centre to consider the revised cost estimate of the project at the 2017-18 price level.

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The year started with Jagan Mohan Reddy, fulfilling his election promise with the launch of a pilot project on January 3 in West Godavari district, which provides medical cover for treatment cost-

ing ₹1,000 or more and bringing 2,059 ailments under its purview from the earlier 1,059.

The scheme was extended to Vizianagaram, Visakhapatnam, Guntur, Prakasam, YSR Kadapa and Kurnool districts from July 16 covering 2,200 ailments. Later, it was implemented in Srikakulam, East Godavari, Krishna, Nellore, Chittoor and Anantapur districts.

Procedures were increased by 234, taking the total to 2,436 on November 10. During the year, the State recruited 508 Aarogya Mithras and 670 new help desks were set up in the network hospitals.

OTHER STORIES

AP RECORDS
282 NEW
COVID CASESDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, DEC. 26

AP registered 282 new Covid-19 cases scaling up tally to 8,80,712 and one death taking toll to 7,092. The state health authorities issued Covid-19 bulletin on Saturday, reporting that out of 42,911 samples tested for Covid-19, 282 persons were found infected with the virus. Out of a total 1,15,74,117 samples tested so far in the state, 8,69,920 infected persons were recovered while 3,700 infected persons are still active with the virus.

Among the daily cases, Guntur recorded the highest with 56 followed by 53 in East Godavari, 39 in Chittoor, 38 in Krishna, 27 in West Godavari, 18 in Visakhapatnam, 16 in Nellore, 15 in Kadapa, 10 in Anantapur, four each in Srikakulam and Vizianagaram and one each in Kurnool and Prakasam. Krishna topped the state with the highest number of cumulative confirmed Covid-19 active cases with 639 followed by 541 in Nellore, 488 in Guntur, 478 in East Godavari, 380 in Chittoor, 264 in Visakhapatnam, 182 in West Godavari, 161 in Kadapa, 143 in Srikakulam, 140 in Anantapur, 136 in Prakasam, 86 in Kurnool and 62 in Vizianagaram.

The state registered only a single case of death of Covid-19 infected patient from Kadapa in the last 24 hours. Among the cumulative cases of Covid-19 deaths, Chittoor topped with 839 followed by 663 each in Guntur and Krishna, 636 in East Godavari, 596 in Anantapur, 578 in Prakasam, 549 in Visakhapatnam, 533 in West Godavari, 505 in Nellore, 487 in Kurnool, 459 in Kadapa, 346 in Srikakulam and 238 in Vizianagaram.

Silpa, Raja Singh spar over
'desecration' of Srisailam

Srisailam MLA offers to resign if allegations are proved by Goshamahan MLA

DC CORRESPONDENT
KURNOOL, DEC. 26

Srisailam MLA Silpa Chakrapani Reddy offered to resign if allegations of harbouring Muslims in the temple town of Srisailam are proved by Goshamahan legislator Raja Singh.

The BJP MLA from Hyderabad alleged that Srisailam temple was under the control of Muslims and all contracts and shops were monopolised by them. He alleged cows in Goshala are being killed to extract their meat.

Denying the charges, Silpa said he was ready for a debate after Sankranti.

Srisailam, one of the Shaktipeeths, and an important Jyothirlinga in

India has been in the eye of controversy as the major revenue sources of commerce and business are cornered by Muslims. Raja Singh had alleged that one Razaq, who is a contractor with Srisailam temple and his wife, a Hindu, is employed as a supervisor in the temple.

He said Razaq is a close aide of Silpa Chakrapani Reddy while Razaq's brother is a TD leader. Irrespective of which party is in power, the Razaq brothers are controlling the temple with the help of political parties.

When contacted, Raja Singh told *Deccan Chronicle* that several cases are pending against Razaq, which include transporting of mutton in

flower baskets. These flowers are used for puja in the temple. He said the goshala is supervised by Razaq's wife, who is helping her husband. Cows are killed with the connivance of the supervisor and its meat was being consumed, which is prohibited in the temple town.

Rubbishing the allegations, Silpa Reddy said Muslims have been living in the temple town for ages and he became MLA only two years back.

He clarified that he had nothing to do with Razaq and Singh's allegations were "baseless, malicious, mischievous," and only intended to provoke a section of the community and spreading ill-will in the community.

He claimed that he was a staunch Hindu by practice and had built temples with his own money. He challenged Singh to prove his allegations in the presence of Peetadhipathis at Srisailam after Sankranti and he was ready for any eventuality.

The goshala run by the Srisailam Bhramaramba Mallikarjuna Swamy temple has about 1,542 cows including ox. Every month at least one or two cows reportedly die due to dis-

ases, said a temple official.

A dedicated veterinary doctor, along with 44 helpers, is working at the goshala. The official said that the goshala supervisor was shifted after allegations of killing of cows surfaced.

The official said Endowments Act clearly states that people of other religions are not allowed to live in temple towns. But the Muslims staying in Srisailam approached courts and the issue is now pending before the Supreme Court.

"Once a decision is out, we will proceed accordingly," he said.

Atmakur DSP, Y. Sruthi said no cases have been filed against Razaq at Srisailam.

House sites ideal
for country: MPDC CORRESPONDENT
KADAPA, DEC. 26

District Collector Chevuri Harikiran and Kadapa MP Y.S. Avinash Reddy jointly said that the state government's ambitious distribution of house sites to the poor as part of the Navratnas was an ideal for the country. On Saturday, they launched a program to distribute 590 plots allotted to the poor to the beneficiaries in the 22-acre Rajivnagar Colony layout in Vempalle urban area in Kadapa district.

Collector Harikiran said that 1.1 lakh home plots had been prepared for distribution to eligible beneficiaries across the district. For this, 3000 acres of land has been acquired in the district. Of this, 2500 acres were government land and 500 acres were purchased from farmers. For this, Rs 120 crore has been paid to the

Collector Harikiran said that 1.1 lakh home plots had been prepared for distribution to eligible beneficiaries across the district.

land owners. Kadapa MP Y.S. Avinash Reddy said the state government was an ideal for the world as it was handing over housing titles to nearly 31 lakh beneficiaries in a manner never seen before in India's history.

In another occasion the state deputy Chief Minister S.B. Amjad Basha distributed 1,782 house sites at Chalamareddypalli layout in Kadapa municipal corporation limits. YSR Congress Kadapa parliament president Suresh Babu, Joint Collector Midde Gowthami, sub-collector Prudhvitej and other officers present in the event.



Medical staff collect the swab from the people for Covid-19 testing at Sanjeevini Bus which was set up at Govt ENT Hospital in Vizag on Saturday. —DC

NO NEW STRAIN
CASES IN
NELLORE: DMHODC CORRESPONDENT
NELLORE, DEC. 26

District Medical and Health Officer G. Rajyalakshmi struck down the rumours over Covid-19 new strain cases in SPSR Nellore district. She said only one person returned from the UK was tested positive so far and there is no evidence that it is a new strain of Covid-19 which was detected in the UK. 47 persons returned from the UK to Nellore district in the recent past and 41 among them are in the district and others in different places.

Among the others, four persons left for Karnataka, one person travelled to Amritsar and another person back to London.

According to Dr Rajyalakshmi, they have traced 37 persons and 28 among them tested negative till now and one person was detected positive and results of eight people are awaited.

The positive case returned from the UK about 13 days back is asymptomatic yet he has been sent to quarantine as a precautionary measure.

She made it clear that there are no Covid-19 second strain cases in the district while appealing the people to wear face masks, maintain social distance, and other precautionary measures.

LEADERS CALL TO
END SUICIDES BY
FARMERSDC CORRESPONDENT
KADAPA, DEC. 26

A round table meeting on farmer issues in the state was held at the YSR Press Club in Kadapa under all parties' auspices, demanding farmers' suicides be prevented.

Leaders at the meeting demanded that justice be done to all in crop damage registration and that farmers be given minimum supportive price on their produce.

The Telugu Desam, Congress, CPI and CPM party's leaders were present in the meeting. TDP Kadapa parliamentary party president Mallela Linga Reddy said that the state government, which is proud to be said a farmer-friendly government, has done nothing for the farmers. He said that no compensation had been provided so far to the farmers affected by the cyclone Nivar.

TDP state executive secretary Balisetty Hariprasad demanded the government roll back meters for electrical pump sets. Congress district president, Neeli Srinivasa Rao, demanded to make justice to all farmers whose crops were lost their crops because of the cyclone.

He insisted that the government has to pay the crop insurance amount on behalf of the farmers.

Reaching out



BJP national general secretary, Dagubati Purandeswari addresses a press conference at City BJP office in Visakhapatnam on Saturday. —DC

Buchaiah boycotts
sites distributionDC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, DEC. 26:

Telugu Desam Party MLA of Rajamahendravaram Rural Gorantla Buchaiah Chowdary boycotted the house site distribution programme at Velugubanda village in Rajanagaram Constituency on Saturday. He said in Rajamahendravaram on Saturday that the government promised to distribute 60,000 house sites to Rajamahendravaram Urban and Rajamahendravaram Rural Constituencies, but there were only 24,000 house sites provided to the beneficiaries. He said that the gov-

ernment should clarify when the remaining sites would be given and where they would be given. He said that the government has selected Velugubanda village for giving house sites to Rajamahendravaram and Rajamahendravaram Rural Constituency beneficiaries and the site is 23 km from the Rajamahendravaram city and there were no infrastructure facilities provided in the layouts. He said that how can the poor people reside in such layouts. He also alleged that there were many flaws in the housing scheme and the government should clarify the allegations.

KOMARAGIRI SITES NOT SUITABLE FOR
HOUSING: FORMER MLA KONDABABUDC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, DEC. 26

Telugu Desam leader and former MLA of Kakinada Urban Vanamadi Venkateswara Rao (Kondababu) has remarked that the house sites given to the homeless poor Komaragiri village in U. Kothapalli mandal of East Godavari by the Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy are not at all suitable

for house constructions as the area gets frequently inundated due to ebb and tide in Bay of Bengal.

Further, it is 23 km from Kakinada and the beneficiaries will not be able to stay thereby losing their livelihood in urban areas, he said and added that therefore, the ruling party is making a lot of fuss over it and the beneficiaries are not at all happy.

GRAFT | CHARGE TD: Leaders bought lands cheaply, sold it at high rates

Probe housing scam: Desam

DC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, DEC. 26:

Telugu Desam Kakinada Parliament District President Jyothula Naveen Kumar demanded that the government probe the housing scam involved in Rs 4,500 crores in the state. He told the reporters on Saturday Evening at the TDP office that there was a Rs 50 crores to 200 crores housing scam taking place in each constituency. He said that some of the leaders purchased the lands with low rates from the farmers and sold it to the government for housing schemes with higher prices, and the scam may be around Rs 4,000 crores.

He further said that crores of rupees looted from the government in the name of levelling of sites and also Rs 500 crores were looted from the beneficiaries to allot the house site to them. He cited the example that the government bought Ava lands at Rs 45 lakhs per acre instead of actual value of Rs 15 lakh per acre and the government spent Rs 80.8 crores. He said that in Kakinada, though the officials are aware of mangroves and 106 acres of land of mangrove site was selected for housing, and 50 acres of mangroves were destroyed. Now, the state government and the officials have to answer to the National Green Tribunal.

He also found irregularities in house sites allotted to Kakinada residents in Komaragiri village of U. Kothapalli mandal where the Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy inaugurated. He said that Mr Jagan might not know about the house site condition as it is near the seashore, but the district MLAs and Ministers are aware of it.

But either officials or the Ministers could not give a real picture on the sites to the CM on the Komaragiri land condition as it is being inundated during ebb and tide twice in a month. He also asked the Chief Minister why Komaragiri area was chosen for distri-

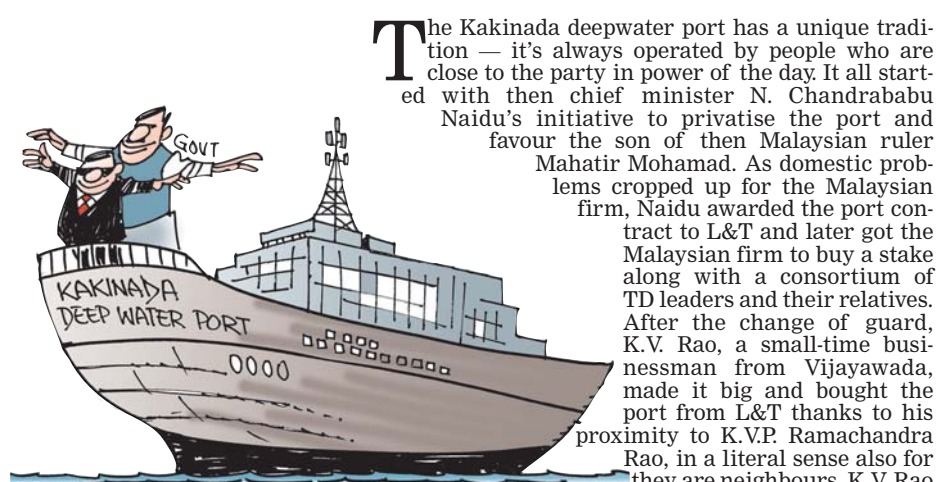
bution of house sites. There were plenty of lands available in Gurajnapalli and Indrapalem villages, very nearer to Kakinada. He said that the late N.T. Rama Rao distributed 5 cents of house sites each beneficiary, but Mr Jagan now has provided only 1 or 1.5 cents sites and how it will be suitable for construction of a house in the area.

He felt that at least 2 cents should be given to the beneficiaries.

Mr Naveen Kumar said that Mr Jagan and the ruling party leaders are arguing for not conducting local body elections on the pretext of the Covid-19 pandemic.

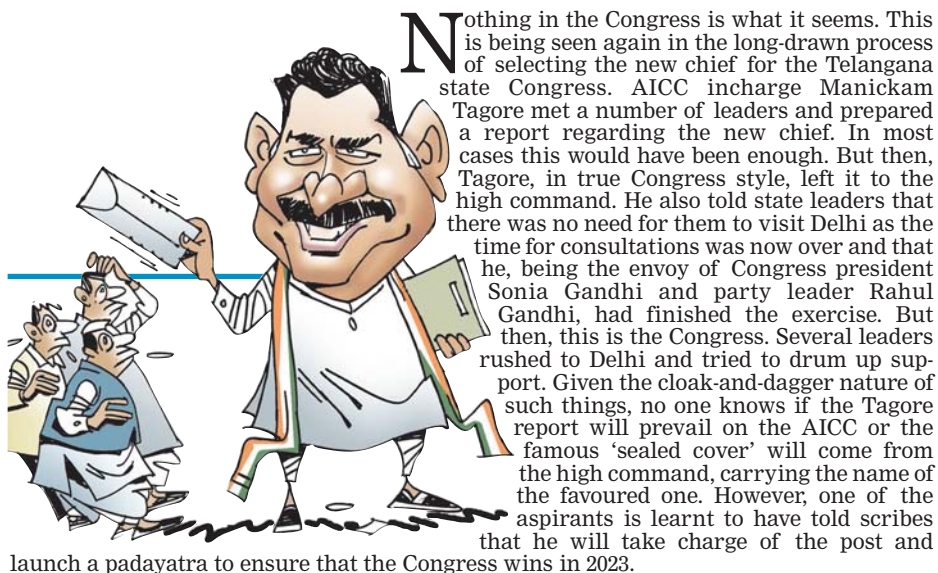
NETA'S NATTER

Kakinada deepwater port is ported out again



managed to get the government to agree to dilute the concession agreement and Chandrababu Naidu never uttered a word against the gross compromise of the state's financial interests. Finally, it's curtains down for K.V. Rao with the Aurobindo group, which enjoys the most favoured company status in the Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy regime, buying a major stake in the port company.

In Congress, secret within a secret



launch a padayatra to ensure that the Congress wins in 2023.

Easy jump from TS to AP

Kendram oka midhya (Centre is a myth)" was a famous slogan of Telugu Desam founder and former chief minister N.T. Rama Rao, who fought relentlessly against the big brother attitude of the Centre. The executive heads of two the Telugu states seem to have taken a leaf out of NTR's book when it came to accommodating the long-pending wish of senior bureaucrat Y. Sri Lakshmi who is facing many cases. Ever since Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy took over the reins of Andhra Pradesh, the Telangana state cadre officer made Herculean efforts to go on deputation to Andhra Pradesh.

With all efforts failing, she got an order from the Central Administrative Tribunal changing her cadre to Andhra Pradesh, six years after bifurcation. What is more shocking is that Telangana state Chief Secretary Somesh Kumar gave her relieving orders and his Andhra Pradesh counterpart Nilam Sawhney not only admitted Sri Lakshmi in the Andhra Pradesh cadre but also made her secretary to municipal administration. Neither took the Union department of personnel and training, the deciding authority over all-India services officers, into cognisance.

Jagga reddy joins
the gorakshaks

Congress MLA T. Jayaprakash Reddy, better known as Jagga Reddy, is feeling the pain and agony for losing six cows which he said he had bred with utmost love and affection. Jagga Reddy made a request to the director general of police through the media that the cows were stolen by some unidentified persons two months ago, in October. He said that thieves had taken away the cows, leaving the behind their calves.

He told the director general of police that he had lodged a complaint with the Sangareddy police, but they had failed to either recover his cows or trace the thieves.

But then, this is no Uttar Pradesh and he is not Azam Khan for the police to go rushing off to find missing cattle. And, in the style of Bharatiya Janata Party MLA T. Raja Singh, darkly hinted that cow slaughter gangs may have something to do with it. Is there a message here?

SHORT TAKES

CONGMEN HELD FOR PROTECT COW, FARMERS STIR

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

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

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

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

PM TO INAUGURATE INDIA'S FIRST-EVER DRIVERLESS TRAIN

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

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

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

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

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

The search and survey action was initiated on December 22 at fourteen locations in Guwahati, SIlapathar and Pathasala in Assam and in Delhi. "Cash of ₹2.95 crore has been seized.

Overall, undisclosed income to the tune of approximately ₹100 crore has been unearthed so far during the search and survey operation," the Board said in a statement without sharing the identities of those raided.

It added that "jewellery of ₹9.79 lakh has been seized and the sources of acquisition of some other jewellery worth ₹2 crore is under verification." The Central Board of Direct Taxes frames policy for the I-T department.

The entities covered are "leading contractors of Northeast and one group is also involved in the hospitality business," it said.

"The main allegation against the three groups is that they have taken accommodation (dubious) entries in the form of non-genuine unsecured loans and also securities premium from dubious Kolkata-based shell (dummy) companies." "The three groups have suppressed their net profits across the years and routed back into business the unaccounted income through entry operations based out of Guwahati and Kolkata," the CBDT said.

J&K residents get free treatment



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

India, Vietnam begin SCS drills

Sea exercises to be closely watched by an already furious China

PAWAN BALI | DC
NEW DELHI, DEC. 26

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

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

pressure on China at many fronts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

MP Cabinet clears 'Love Jihad' Bill

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY | DC
BHOPAL, DEC. 26

The Madhya Pradesh Cabinet on Saturday cleared the Dharma Swatantra (Religious Freedom) Bill, 2020, known in political parlance as 'Love Jihad' bill. The draft bill, which may sail through in the Assembly during its three-day winter session commencing on December 28, provides a maximum of 10 years imprisonment and ₹one lakh fine to the perpetrators of forced religious conversion of a girl for marriage.

The new bill has the provision of declaring such a marriage null and void.

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

Chief Minister Shrivraj Singh Chouhan, who chaired the cabinet meeting, justified the bill saying that instances of religious conversion of a girl for political purpose has come to the fore.

If someone is looking to capture a panchayat, he gets married to a girl and fields her in elections, Chouhan explained.

"We have rescued many minor girls from various places recently. We will not allow this to happen to innocent girls from Madhya Pradesh", he added.

Later, briefing reporters, Home minister Narottam Mishra said that the new bill provides

● THE DRAFT bill, which may sail through in the Assembly during its three-day winter session commencing on December 28, provides a maximum of 10 years imprisonment and ₹one lakh fine to the perpetrators of forced religious conversion of a girl for marriage.

imprisonment of 1-5 years and a fine of ₹25,000 for forced conversion. If the victim of forced religious conversion belongs to Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe or is under-aged, the offence would attract a jail term of 2-10 years with a maximum penalty of Rs one lakh.

Under the new bill, it is mandatory for both the bride and groom sides, to notify local district magistrate on change of religion two months in advance, failing which the marriage would be declared illegal.

Religious leaders and priests associated with such marriages would attract five-year jail terms and organisations and institutions involved in such marriages would be deregistered.

The new bill has also made provision of maintenance for the victim and her children. The Uttar Pradesh government passed a similar law on November 28.

However, cases of abuse of law in Uttar Pradesh have come to the fore.

NTF: No need to change protocol for new strain

SHASHI BHUSHAN | DC
NEW DELHI, DEC. 26

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

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

The NTF recommended that in addition to the existing surveillance strategies, it is critical to conduct enhanced genomic surveillance for SARS-CoV-2 specially in incoming passengers from the UK. Besides, it will also be critical to conduct genome sequencing in samples where there is dropout of the S gene in lab diagnosis, proven cases of re-infections etc. Routine genomic surveillance of SARS-CoV-2 from representative samples all across the samples needs to be a continuous and well planned activity.

8 UK returnees to Kerala test +ve

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The NTF concluded that there is no need to change the existing treatment protocol in view of mutations emerging in the strain. Further, since ICMR has always advocated use of two or more gene assays for testing

SARS-CoV-2, it is unlikely to miss infected cases using the current testing strategy," said the Union health ministry.

A total of 251 new deaths and 22,273 infections of Covid-19 were, meanwhile, reported in the country. The number of people who have recovered from the disease climbed to 97,40,108, pushing the national recovery rate to 95.78 per cent, while the fatality rate stands at 1.45 per cent. The active caseload remained below three lakh for the fifth consecutive day. There are 2,81,667 active cases of Covid-19 in the country, constituting 2.77 per cent of the total caseload.

Farmers ready for talks with Centre on Dec. 29

ASHHAR KHAN | DC
NEW DELHI, DEC. 26

As the protests demanding the repeal of the three farm laws entered the 31st day, the protesting farmer unions on Saturday decided to resume talks with the government. They have proposed December 29 as the date for the next round of negotiations and sent the draft of the issues to be discussed.

These include repeal of the farm laws, meeting the minimum support price (MSP) a legal guarantee and changes in the draft Electricity Amendment Bill to safeguard the interests of the farmers. There is also a demand to exclude farmer from the amendments to be the Commission for the Air Quality Management in National Capital Region and Adjoining Areas Ordinance, 2020.

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

Rakesh Tikait, a senior leader of the Bharatiya Kisan Union, said the modalities for the repeal of farm laws and guarantee for MSP should be part of the agenda for talks with the government. "We have decided to hold talks with the government on December 29," he said.

The announcement for fresh discussions came a day after Prime Minister Narendra Modi lashed out at the Opposition for the first time since the beginning of the protests. On Friday he stressed that farmers' lands won't be taken away, adding, "Some people are spreading lies".

The Prime Minister also released a financial aid of ₹18,000 crore under the PM-Kisan cash transfer scheme.

Five rounds of talks between the government and farmers have failed in the last couple of weeks.

The government has been repeating its stand that the farm laws will benefit the farmers. Several senior ministers have said that farmers

should have faith in the government and that if at any stage the laws cause hindrance to the farmers the government will not hesitate to rethink these.

Union minister Dharmendra Pradhan said that during Dr Manmohan Singh's government in 2013-14, the farmers were paid ₹1,310 for a quintal of paddy but now they are being paid ₹1,815.

Carrying ration and other essential items with them, several batches of farmers from Punjab headed towards Delhi borders to join the peasants protesting against the Centre's new agriculture-related laws.

According to farmer union leaders, farmers from various places including Sangrur, Amritsar, Tarn Taran, Gurdaspur and Bathinda districts were headed towards Singhu and Tikri borders. They began their journey despite fog and biting cold wave conditions in many parts of Punjab.

Tractor trolleys, cars and other vehicles carrying farmers, including the elderly and women, were seen on the Amritsar-Delhi national highway. The road from Delhi to Ghaziabad near the Ghazipur border was also closed as the farmer protest split over to the other carriageway.

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

On December 30, farmers will march from Singhu to Tikri and Shahjahanpur alongside their tractors on the Kundli-Manesar-Palwal (KMP) highway. "We request people from Delhi and other parts of country to come and celebrate New Year with protesting farmers," he said.

Dr Darshanpal added. He went on to say that the farmers are inviting everyone to have langar with them on December 31 and January 1 at Singhu border.

BJP leaders will join NCP: Pawar

SONU SHRIVASTAVA | DC
MUMBAI, DEC. 26

Deputy chief minister of Maharashtra and Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leader Ajit Pawar on Saturday said that leaders who had joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) will return to NCP in the next three-four months. Mr Pawar said that he will refrain from commenting on who will be joining the party as election code of conduct for the gram panchayat elections is in effect as of now.

Few days ago 18 Congress corporators shifted their loyalty to NCP. Mr Pawar indicated that BJP leaders are next in line.

Mr. Pawar said that those joining the NCP were earlier in the same party before defecting to the BJP. These leaders

are not being heard by the BJP.

The NCP leader's statement would assume a political significance as elections of the several local bodies and gram panchayats are round the corner.

"The leaders who joined the BJP thought that they would be heard when the BJP would come to power. Now, they want to leave BJP because their works weren't done. Some leaders from Pune and Pimpri-Chinchwad have wished to return. They will soon be welcomed," Mr Pawar said.

Reacting to Pawar's statement, the BJP state president Chandrakant Patil said, "When Ajit Pawar failed to keep his 28 MLAs, whom he thought were with him when tried to form the government with the BJP, how would he get any other MLA now?" — PTI

MEDICAL | RECORD Hemant had developed Lukoskin for leucoderma; several other herbal medicines

DRDO man bags Scientist of the Year Award

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Leucoderma is an autoimmune disorder and

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

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

SHORT TAKES

JUDGE DELAYS
EXECUTION OF
U.S. WOMAN

Washington, Dec. 26: A federal judge said the Justice Department unlawfully rescheduled the execution of the only woman on federal death row, potentially setting up the Trump administration to schedule the execution after president-elect Joe Biden takes office.

US District Court Judge Randolph Moss also vacated an order from the director of the Bureau of Prisons that had set Lisa Montgomery's execution date for January 12.

Montgomery had previously been scheduled to be put to death at the Federal Correctional Complex in Terre Haute, Indiana, this month, but Moss delayed the execution after her attorneys contracted Coronavirus visiting their client.

TURKISH OPPN
TV STATION
SHUTS DOWN

Istanbul, Dec. 26: A private Turkish TV station that aired pro-Kurdish opposition views has shut down less than a month after launch, raising press freedom concerns in a country often chastised by rights groups.

Olav TV, owned by businessman and former minister Cavit Caglar, began broadcasting on November 30 and was pulled off the air on Friday.

Its staff announced its closure live on air.

Caglar said he pulled out of the venture because the station's editorial line veered too close to the pro-Kurdish opposition, while the editor claimed he had bowed to government pressure.

Executive editor Suleyman Sarilar said on air that the network had aimed to maintain equal distance from every segment in Turkey's polarised society. "But we have seen that we can no longer keep up with this kind of broadcasting ... Cavit (Caglar) said he was under intense pressure from the government and that he cannot move forward," he claimed.

BUTCHERING
LOVER: RUSSIAN
GETS 12.5 YRS

Saint Petersburg, Dec. 26: A Russian historian and Napoleon enthusiast was sentenced to 12-and-a-half-years in prison for murdering and dismembering his young lover last year.

The Saint Petersburg trial, which spurred activists to voice growing anger over domestic abuse in Russia, began in June after delays due to the Coronavirus pandemic.

Oleg Sokolov, 64, had admitted murdering 24-year-old Anastasia Yeshchenko but said he committed the crime against his former student and lover in the heat of the moment during an argument.

He was arrested in November last year after he was found drunk and carrying a backpack containing a woman's arms. Judge Yulia Maximenko sentenced Sokolov on Friday to "12 years and six months in a strict regime penal colony" on charges of murder and the illegal possession of firearms.

"He was aware of his actions at the time of the crime," Maximenko said as she read out the verdict.

BRITISH DOUBLE
AGENT GEORGE
BLAKE DIES

Moscow, Dec. 26: George Blake, a former British intelligence officer who worked as a double agent for the Soviet Union, has died in Russia. He was 98.

Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, known as SVR, announced his death Saturday in a statement, which didn't give any circumstances of his death. Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed condolences, hailing Blake as a "brilliant professional" and a man of "remarkable courage." Blake has lived in Russia since his daring escape from a British prison in 1966 and was given the rank of Russian intelligence colonel.

Born in the Netherlands, Blake joined British intelligence during World War II. He was posted to Korea when the war there erupted in 1950 and was detained by the Communist north. He said he volunteered to work for the Soviet Union after witnessing relentless US bombing of North Korea. In a statement issued in 2017 through SVR, Blake emphasised that he decided to switch sides after seeing civilians massacred by the "American military machine."

UK variant strikes Spain, France

New virus strain has prompted more than 50 countries to impose travel restrictions on the UK

Madrid, Dec. 26: Spain has registered its first cases of a Coronavirus variant believed to be particularly infectious that emerged in Britain, Madrid's regional government said on Saturday.

The first case of a particularly infectious coronavirus variant that recently emerged in Britain has been confirmed in France, the health ministry said on Friday.

The person — a French citizen living in Britain — is asymptomatic and self-isolating at home in Tours in central France, the ministry said.

The person arrived from London on December 19 and was tested in hospital on December 21 and found to be positive for the strain of the virus known as VOC 202012/01.

"The health authorities have carried out contact-tracing for the health professionals taking care of the patient," the ministry said in a statement.

Any of their contacts that were seen as vulnerable would similarly be isolated, the statement said.

In addition to this first case, "to date, several positive samples that may suggest the VOC 202012/01 variant are being sequenced" by the specialist laboratories of the national Pasteur Institute, the statement added.

The region said four cases had been detected involving people who had recently arrived from the UK or had close contact with someone who had.

The father, mother and sister of a young man who arrived in Madrid by plane last week have tested positive for the coronavirus variant, it added.

The young man is suspected to have the new variant as well but Spanish authorities are waiting for the results of a polymerase chain reaction PCR test to confirm this.

The fourth confirmed case of the new variant involves a man who arrived in Madrid on December 20 on another flight.

"The patients are not seriously ill, we know that this strain is more transmissible, but it does not cause more serious illness," Madrid regional deputy health chief Antonio Zapatero told a news conference.

"There is no need for alarm." There are another three suspected cases of the coronavirus variant but the results of tests will only be available on Tuesday or Wednesday, Zapatero said.

The new strain of the virus has prompted more than 50 countries including Spain to impose travel restrictions on the UK.

Madrid has banned all entries from the United Kingdom except for Spanish nationals and residents.

France and Italy have also already confirmed cases of the new variant, while the World Health Organisation reported that nine cases have been detected in Denmark and one each in the Netherlands and Australia.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has said the new viral strain "may be up to 70 percent more transmissible than the original version of the disease". — *AFP*



A near-deserted Old Bond Street in London is pictured on Saturday, as Londoners continue to live under Tier 4 lockdown restrictions. Fears over new strains and surging Covid-19 infections in general across Europe have severely dampened the mood over the holiday season. — *AFP*

UK millions face tough
post-Christmas curbs

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

Around six million people in east and south-east England have joined many others into Tier 4, England's highest Covid level which includes a "stay at home" order. Lockdowns have also started in Scotland and

● **LOCKDOWNS HAVE also started in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and measures have been reimposed in Wales after being eased for Christmas Day, when the UK crossed another grim milestone of 70,000 virus deaths.**

Northern Ireland, and measures have been reimposed in Wales after being eased for Christmas Day, when the UK crossed another grim milestone of 70,000 Coronavirus deaths.

Under the toughest Tier 4 restrictions, all non-essential shops, bars and

restaurants are closed and people are not allowed to meet other households, except in a support bubble or in an outdoor public space with one other person. Large parts of England were already in this tier pre-Christmas, including London, after the new mutation was found to be spreading fastest in those regions. With the devolved administrations setting their own strategies,

Northern Ireland goes into a six-week lockdown from Saturday with non-essential shops shut and hospitality open only for takeaway services. — *PTI*

NO COMMERCIAL
FLIGHTS IN LANKA
AS OF NOW

Colombo, Dec. 26: Sri Lanka has postponed the reopening of its airspace for commercial flights, scheduled for Saturday, to prevent the spread of a new variant of the Coronavirus, officials said.

The next date for resumption of flights will be announced later. The Civil Aviation Authority of Sri Lanka (CAASL) had announced last week that it will resume international flights operations from December 26, eight months after they were closed in view of the Covid-19 outbreak. The decision was taken in the wake of the new Coronavirus strain. — *PTI*

EGYPT HOSPITAL
FIRE KILLS SEVEN
COVID PATIENTS

CAIRO, Dec 26, 2020 (AFP)

A fire at a hospital north of Cairo on Saturday killed seven coronavirus patients, security and judicial sources said.

The blaze in the intensive care unit of the hospital in Obour district, on the outskirts of Cairo, also injured five other people, the sources said.

It was not immediately clear what caused the fire, the sources said, adding prosecutors had launched an investigation into the incident.

Firefighters were dispatched to the facility and stopped the blaze from spreading, local media reported.

Egypt has so far registered 130,126 Covid-19 cases, including 7,309 fatalities.

Health facilities in the North African country, like elsewhere, have been strained by the mounting number of infections.

In June, a fire at a hospital in Egypt's coastal city of Alexandria killed seven coronavirus patients and injured seven others.

Beijing residents
face restrictions

Beijing, Dec. 26: China's capital has urged residents not to leave the city during the upcoming Lunar New Year holidays, implementing fresh restrictions after several Coronavirus infections last week.

Two domestic cases were reported on Friday, a convenience store worker and a Hewlett Packard Enterprise employee. Another two asymptomatic cases were discovered in Beijing earlier in the week. Beijing is conducting testing on a limited scale in the neighbourhoods and workplaces where the cases were found. To contain any new outbreaks, the Beijing government cancelled big gatherings such as sports events and temple fairs. It says applications will be strictly reviewed for any major events. Venues such as cinemas, libraries and museums have to operate at 75% capacity. It also called on companies not to arrange business trips outside the city and abroad. Lunar New Year is on February 12. Separately, officials in the northeast-

ern port city of Dalian said Friday that they had tested over 4.75 million people for the Coronavirus after 24 confirmed infections this month.

Authorities have shut schools and all public spaces in five neighbourhood divisions in Dalian, and only essential workers can leave their compounds. — *AP*

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TOKYO CONFIRMS
RECORD HIGH OF
949 NEW CASES

Tokyo, Dec. 26: Tokyo has confirmed 949 new cases of the deadly novel Coronavirus, a new high for the Japanese capital, as the country struggles with an upsurge that is spreading nationwide.

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government said on Saturday that the additional cases bring the prefectural total to 55,851. Japan had 3,823 new cases on Friday for a national total of 213,547, with 3,155 deaths, the health ministry said.

Japan has not been able to slow the infections despite government requests for the people to avoid going out for dinner and parties before and during the holiday season. Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike has ordered bars to close early and urged residents to avoid nonessential outings.

But many people have continued commuting on crowded trains and going out for dinner and drinks. And now with a new virus variant from the United Kingdom reaching, there's danger: — *AP*

EU starts vaccine
rollout: Doses reach
Italy, Spain, France

Paris, Dec. 26: The European Union teed up a vaccine rollout Saturday, even as countries in the bloc were forced back into lockdown by a new strain of the virus, believed to be more infectious, that has spread from Britain to France and Spain and even as far as Japan.

The pandemic has claimed more than 1.7 million lives and is still running rampant in much of the world, but the recent launching of inoculation campaigns has boosted hopes that 2021 could bring a respite.

First doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine arrived in hard-hit Italy, Spain and France on Saturday morning ready for distribution to elderly care facilities and hospital staff.

"We'll get our freedom back, we'll be able to embrace again," Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio said as he urged Italians to get the shot.

Vaccinations in all 27 European Union countries will begin on Sunday, after regulators approved the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine on December 21.

Several countries including France, Spain, Japan, Denmark, Lebanon, Germany, Australia and the Netherlands have reported ca-

POC DOCTOR DIES
OF COVID AFTER
RACIST PLAINTS

Indianapolis, Dec. 26: A Black doctor who died battling Covid-19 complained of racist medical care in widely shared social media posts days before her death, prompting an Indiana hospital system to promise a "full external review" into her treatment.

Dr. Susan Moore, 52, tested positive for Covid-19 late last month and was admitted to IU Health North Hospital in Carmel, Indiana, according to a Facebook post. Acutely aware of her condition and medical procedures, the physician said had to repeatedly ask for medication, scans and routine checks while admitted at a hospital in Carmel. — *AP*

ses of the new strain, which has sent jitters through already overstretched health services. More than 25 million total infections have been recorded in Europe on Friday, and Russia on Saturday said it had topped three million. — *AFP*

Ahead of WHO
probe, China hails
handling of virus

Beijing, Dec. 26: China's ruling Communist Party leaders have congratulated themselves on their "extremely extraordinary" success in handling the Covid-19 outbreak domestically, ahead of a World Health Organisation probe into the disease's origins.

China faced a barrage of criticism at home and abroad over its initial handling of the virus, which emerged in the central city of Wuhan last December.

China's Politburo, the top decision-making body of the Communist Party, said late Friday that the party leadership "played a decisive role in leading ... China in prevailing over the rare risks and challenges this year." "At the critical moment ... the Party Central Committee took a long-term view ... achieving an extremely extraordinary glory in this extremely unusual year," state news agency *Xinhua* reported, citing a statement issued after the two-day meeting.

China has largely curbed the spread of the virus, and was one of the only major economies to report growth this year. But it has been accused of covering up the initial outbreak, and so contributing to the virus' spread internationally. At home, Beijing has attempted to stifle criticism by punishing at least eight whistleblowers. A Chinese citizen journalist who reported on Wuhan's outbreak, Zhang Zhan, has been detained since May and is expected to go on trial on Monday. — *AP*

TURKMENISTAN
PREZ: LICORICE
CAN CURE COVID

Ashgabat, Dec. 26: Well-known for his baffling botanical pronouncements, Turkmenistan's President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov claimed Saturday that licorice could cure Coronavirus, the latest supposed miracle cure in a country still claiming zero cases.

"Scientists from every country are looking for effective cures, running various studies, and one of them could be licorice root," the leader of the authoritarian ex-Soviet country told ministers.

Without citing any scientific evidence, former dentist Berdimukhamedov claimed that "Licorice stops the Coronavirus from developing" and "even a weak concentration of a water-based extract has a neutralising effect." — *AFP*

cism by punishing at least eight whistleblowers. A Chinese citizen journalist who reported on Wuhan's outbreak, Zhang Zhan, has been detained since May and is expected to go on trial on Monday. — *AP*

LOW-KEY | EVENT

Families that reunite for Christmas celebrated apart this yr

Services move online, people stay home

Rome, Dec. 26: Families that usually reunite on Christmas over a hearty, lingering meal celebrated apart Friday, services shifted online, and gift exchanges were low-key in one of the most unusual and subdued holiday seasons in decades.

The Coronavirus left almost no one unaffected. Patricia Hager, 60, delivered homemade caramel rolls for breakfast to family and friends in Bismarck, North Dakota, a state that didn't get hit until later in the pandemic but was struck hard.

It seemed every time she opened her door this holiday season, someone had left smoked salmon, baskets of nuts or cookies.

"This year Christmas love is expressed at the door," she said.

"I'm glad that people will probably be with us next year with the vaccines. I can give up anything for that." With a child due in February, Song Ju-hyeon of Paju, South Korea, near Seoul, said home is the only place she feels safe.

The government reported 1,241 new cases Friday, a new daily record for the country. "It doesn't feel like Christmas anyway, there's no carols being played on the streets," she said. "It's Christmask," the *Daily Nation* newspaper declared in Kenya, where a surge in cases led to doctors ending a brief strike Christmas Eve.

● **POPE FRANCIS delivered his Christmas blessing from inside the Vatican, breaking with his traditional speech from the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica to tens of thousands in St. Peter's Square.**

Celebrations were muted in the East African hub as a curfew prevented overnight church vigils.

Pope Francis delivered his Christmas blessing from inside the Vatican, breaking with his traditional speech from the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica to tens of thousands in St. Peter's Square. Tourism in Italy has virtually vanished and the government's

Coronavirus restrictions for the holidays foiled any plans by locals to flock to the square. Citing a cause for optimism, Francis said the development of Covid-19 vaccines shines "lights of hope" on the world.

In a passionate appeal to leaders, businesses and international organisations, he said they must ensure that the most vulnerable and needy in the pandemic be first in line to receive the vaccine. Bells rang out around Bethlehem as the traditional birthplace of Jesus celebrated.

But the closure of Israel's international airport to foreign tourists, along with Palestinian restrictions banning intercity travel in the are-

as they administer in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, kept visitors away.

In Beijing, official churches abruptly cancelled Mass after China's capital was put on high alert following two confirmed Covid-19 cases last week. Two new asymptomatic cases were reported Friday. With economies reeling around the world, it wasn't a year of lavish gifts.

Robin Sypniewski of Middlesex County, New Jersey, was furloughed twice from her job serving school lunches and is now on reduced hours as her husband retires next week as a trash collector and her daughter wrestles with student debt. — *AP*

DECCAN Chronicle

27 DECEMBER 2020



Shreya Sen-Handley

Off the beaten track

2020, the year I learn I am neurodivergent

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Subhani



Politics didn't limit the enigma that was Atalji



Pavan K. Varma

Chanakya's View

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

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

The thing about Atalji was that he was in politics but not — as with the current crop of BJP leaders — entirely limited by it. In that sense, he was both a participant in the paraphernalia of power, and transcendent of it. There was not a whiff of bigotry in his thinking. His spirit was eclectic, his patriotism transparent, and his worldview suffused with a rare idealism. But, in all of this, there was always that irrepressible humour. Once his foster daughter, Namita, told me that *Baapji* — as Atalji was fondly called — told her that it would be nice if I could write some of his written speeches. "But, perhaps, Pavanji is annoyed with my party,"

Atalji said. "Please tell him," he quickly quipped, "I am not happy with my party either!"

This disarming humour was reflective of a person who carried the burdens and pageantry of office lightly. The poet in him told him that all this was passing, a shadow play, a fleeting moment in the grand canvas of time. Behind it, ultimately, there was a loneliness that prompted a spontaneous sense of detachment, a *virakti*, a deliberate denial of ownership. It was this interplay between the participant, forever in battle for what he believed was right, and the observer, perpetually aware that for all the sound and fury, this was part of the overpowering transience of all human endeavour, that made Atalji the man he was. Only he, therefore, at the pinnacle of power could confess: "Sometimes I am overcome by the urge to leave it all behind and lose myself in books, writing and thought. But I have been unable to do that. I have lived over seven decades in this dilemma, and what is left of my life will probably be spent no differently."

I still remember that memorable evening, when I met Atalji at the PM's residence and he

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

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

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

*Dharmaraj has not overcome
His addiction to dice.
In every panchayat
Draupadi is robbed of her honour.
Without Krishna
Today
The Mahabharata will be fought,
No matter who claims the throne,
The poor will continue to suffer.*

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

*My Lord!
Never place me so high
That I cannot embrace
Those who are not my own.*

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

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

LETTERS

COVID VACCINE

To conduct dry run, a pilot mock drill for Covid vaccination in two districts each of four states is a good idea. The real vaccination programme is going to be humongous and a Herculean task with multiple challenges at multiple points. It needs meticulous planning, good number of trained personnel, logistics and fail-proof mechanisms. Given the large-scale requirements, greater demand and patently inadequate supply of vaccine, India, being second worst victim, cannot afford any failure.

Dr D.V.G. Sankararao
Vizianagaram

TUG OF WAR

Since pre-Independence days in India, every province had its own culture and traditions. Even during the Congress regime it never interfered with those as they felt the pride of their traditions. However, after the NDA (BJP) came to power, it is sad to watch the BJP interfering with every sphere of life and forcing the natives to forget them and follow the dictates of the BJP (*Farmers intensify stir, insist on repeal of laws for parleys, DC, Dec. 26*). For the success of any government at the Centre, it is always necessary to open-heartedly listen to demands of the main Opposition and come to an amicable solution.

N.S. Sharma
Visakhapatnam

ARROGANT CM

It is arrogance par excellence (*Shiuraj threatens mafia to bury alive, DC, Dec. 26*). Can he walk the talk? No? Then why does he roar? Politicians at the helm should learn to behave rationally while speaking in public.

K. Nehru Patnaik
Visakhapatnam

50 YEARS AGO IN

DECCAN Chronicle

Exploration of diamonds in state worthwhile

HYDERABAD, DEC. 26.

Preliminary investigation carried out by experts of Geological Survey of India beats out that further detailed exploration of diamonds is worth-while both in Banganapalli conglomerates and gravel area in Andhra Pradesh. The investigation report state: "As the study of the incidence of diamonds is the only method of exploration for locating promising areas for mining." The following programme of work is recommended by the investigator:— Drawing of bulk samples of conglomerates at favourable spots in Banganapalli, Munimadugu and Ramallaketa, followed by crushing screening and treatment to recover diamonds. If the tests yield encouraging results, further work can be commenced to block out areas, showing the incidence of diamonds, and to recommend the most prospective blocks for exploitation. "In view of the fact that the Srisaillam Hydro Electric Project on the Krishna river would submerge the areas upstream quicker action is called for to prospect the gravel patches between Kurnool and Bolarum," the report adds. The report points out: "...the gravel patches are somewhat inaccessible there being no road worth the name to reach the deposits."

Anita Katyal

Political Gup-Shup



Wait for RSS' pungent take on a Turkish drama series

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

which has been decried by moderate Muslims.

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

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

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

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

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

in key positions in the desert state.

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

Anita Katyal is a Delhi-based journalist

OUR CRITIC'S RATING

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

The burden of proof is hers alone

Criminal Justice: Behind Closed Doors

CAST: Kirti Kulhari, Pankaj Tripathi, Jisshu Sengupta, Adrija Sinha, Anupriya Goenka, Mita Vashisht, Ashish Vidyarthi, Deepthi Naval, Khushboo Atre, Kalyanee Mulay, Shilpa Shukla**DIRECTOR:** Rohan Sippy and Arjun Mukherjee**STREAMING ON:** Disney+ Hotstar**RATING:** ★★★

SUPARNA SHARMA

Murder is a crime against the Union of India and it is designed to rise to defend itself.

Marital sexual abuse is not a crime. Not in the eyes of the Union of India. It is trained not to react.

Criminal Justice: Behind Closed Doors is an eight-part series that conducts the forensic examination of our *purush-pradhan samaaj* and some of its institutions while it investigates a murder.

As the series goes about interrogating the accused, digs into the actions and personality of the victim, it lays bare the most horrific abuse that goes on in the privacy of homes, behind bedroom doors, where nightly assaults leave no scars.

Bikram Chandra (Jisshu Sengupta) is a well-regarded, well-heeled lawyer who fights the cases of the dispossessed. He is also a devoted husband to Anu Chandra (Kirti Kulhari) who is a quiet, even strange sort. She's forgetful, nervous, in constant need of reminders and calming pills.

Outwardly it seems like a straight-

forward crime involving a husband, a wife and an eyewitness.

But the series, sharply tuned to catch overt misogyny and micro sexism of the police force, the legal system and the family, takes us into confidence right at the beginning. It shows us the obsessive, controlling actions of one and the fear-stricken jitters of another, thus casting us in the role of a secret. But things are kept suitably ambiguous, everything is not made clear — his actions and hers, their motivations. This adds an element of desperate urgency for us to get to the truth.

Like us, Bikram and Anu's 13-year-old daughter Rhea (Adrija Sinha), an eyewitness to what happened that night and on several other nights, knows some things for sure but is confused about others.

Criminal Justice: Behind Closed Doors is in slow-burn mode. While it keeps its main focus on unravelling what happened, it spends a considerable amount of time on the tangents that spring from this one crime, and the tributaries that join it.

After the murder is reported and the wheels of the criminal justice system start to move, an ecosystem begins to take shape for several to feed off and benefit from.

Lawyers are either out to earn some money or to bolster their reputation while restoring the balance of patriarchy and earn kudos from brother lawyers.

Cops want to earn brownie points or make money.

Jail inmates need a friend or a foe. Family members and friends pick sides.

This entire ecosystem of criminal justice is pivoted on one inherent belief — of man's innate goodness. Running parallel to this is the belief that

women are evil. And

if they prove that they are not, then they are either wrong, misguided or mad.

Thus, the system is

designed to give the man the benefit of the doubt and make the woman carry the burden of proof, even when she is the victim.

Thankfully, *Criminal Justice* is not simple minded. Everything is layered here, everyone carries patches of grey. There is no innocent, blemish-free victim here.

There's the accused who doesn't speak, not even in her own defence, and like her lawyers — Madhav Mishra (Pankaj Tripathi), Nikhat Hussain (Anupriya Goenka) — her silence hassles us, especially because we know what happened. And then we are told that she is flawed.

Criminal Justice challenges us, makes us struggle to decide which side we are on even as we watch active misogyny at play that taints everything, from evidence collection and interrogation to what gets asked and how it gets presented in the media. We see whose character the system is interested in "exposing" and whose character it would rather not discuss.

The show ventures behind several closed doors, including those of several bedrooms, the jail and the chambers of powerful lawyers. Through three couples — cops Gauri (Kalyanee Mulay) and Pradhan (Ajeet Singh Palawat), and advocate Madhav and his adorable wife Ratna (Khushboo Atre), Nikhat's ammi and abbu — we see varying degrees of sexism.

But it's the marriage of the Chandras that shows us, in disturbing detail, how marital abuse works. How the perfect son, brother, lawyer, husband exorcises all his demons and complexes when bedroom doors are shut. How fine that crack between words and actions is.

"I love you, I will take care of you." *Criminal Justice* shows how these sweet, simple words get weaponised, disappointment, disapproval and

anger is used to cover abuse, and a woman's belief in herself, her abilities is shaken to the core, so much so that till the very end she thinks she deserved it.

The second season of *Criminal Justice*, which is based almost verbatim on the 2009 BBC series, carries along a few worthies from the first season — advocates Madhav Mishra, Nikhat Hussain (Anupriya Goenka), and Mandira Mathur (Mita Vashisht), the high-powered corporate lawyer.

That is partly because that's how it was in the BBC series but also because Pankaj Tripathi now has the power to make us smile everytime he is on screen. Here, however, he takes a courteous step back, letting the women around him shine.

Anupriya Goenka is efficient but Khushboo Atre, who plays his adorable wife, insistent on initiating conjugal ties, is very good. Kirti Kulhari's silent, stoic but also quaking and crying performance is the series' centrepiece. She deserves awards just for the litres of tears she has shed here.

Mita Vashisht has always had a powerful presence on screen. Though here she sometimes projects more than is required, as if she can't do light touch, she makes her presence felt as the mover-shaker. Matching her heavy footprint is the male lawyer she recruits, played by Ashish Vidyarthi.

Ajeet Singh Palawat, who plays the cop Pradhan, is excellent. Deepthi Naval brings a lot of class and manages to anchor this gritty crime-court room-jail drama.

Jisshu Sengupta has very few scenes and yet his presence lingers throughout. Much like the insidiousness of sexual abuse, long after a controlling partner is gone, his noose-like, suffocating grip remains.

An entertaining meta experience

AK vs AK

CAST: Anil Kapoor, Anurag Kashyap, Yogita Bihani, Sonam Kapoor, Harshvardhan Kapoor**DIRECTOR:** Vikramaditya Motwane**STREAMING ON:** Netflix**RATING:** ★★★

SUPARNA SHARMA

I have always worried, rather needlessly up until now, at having to use the word "meta". I have always sensed a distinctive pretentiousness to it and despite looking up its meaning a hundred times, it has never sat well with me.

Meta means being self-referential, having and showing explicit awareness of oneself. And there really is no other way to describe *AK vs AK* except as a major meta experience and experiment.

Thankfully, unlike the word, the film is not just hugely entertaining but is also a sharp commentary on our current voyeuristic state of being.

In *AK vs AK*, actor Anil Kapoor and director Anurag Kashyap are playing themselves, their "characters" generously and

wickedly embellished by their real-life professional glories and glitches, as well as their personality traits and reputations.

Kashyap is a director who is riding a high after some critically acclaimed films and moves around with a camera constantly filming him.

One Yogita is shooting a film school documentary on the best of Indian cinema and the first episode is on him. "*Mere baad sab gobbar hai*," he tells Anil Kapoor who is telling him that he is keen to work with him.

But Kashyap still cradles a 17-year-old grouse and reminds Kapoor how he turned down his dream project. And now, he tells Kapoor, "I have now moved on. And in any case, you are no longer hero material. You are playing grandfather in *Dil Dhadakne Do*." He says all this while texting. He's probably in the midst of another Twitter spat.

This being the mood before the two appear before an audience for a panel discussion, it takes just a few more insults and a glass of water to bring the two to a head-on collision.

A full-blown fight ensues and the industry takes sides. Anil Kapoor the star emerges as the winner and Kashyap sinks. And then he plots.

Kashyap barges into Anil Kapoor's set one day and then into his vanity van with the camera



lady in tow saying he is shooting a hostage thriller and Kapoor now has to look for his daughter, Sonam, who has been kidnapped.

He Facetimes a hooded man who has Sonam Kapoor bound, gagged and weeping.

Kashyap insists that Kapoor adhere to his rules if he wants to see his daughter alive, and that he has to find her by sunrise.

No cops, no outsiders, camera won't be switched off, all calls have to be on speaker mode and it's 14 hours to sunrise.

What follows are sequences that showcase how powerful and insidious reel life is — even when an actor wants to shed it, it won't

leave them.

Some of these scenes, like the one in a police station, are funny, while others, where Kapoor is asked to dance for a bit of information, are scathing.

The idea for *AK vs AK* and to pull off its script required both — megalomania and humility. So, perhaps, it is appropriate that it's written by Anurag Kashyap. The writing is sharp, political, funny, and the jokes are often on Kashyap himself.

While the dizzy, hand-held camera gives a reality *waali* feeling to *AK vs AK*, two interesting things happen simultaneously in the film — one

is entertainment that draws all its power, jokes and insults from the real lives of these two Bollywood personalities, and the other is us, the viewer, cringing at the gleeful voyeurism of people who don't see the reality and trauma of Kapoor, but treat it as an act, a performance.

The film recruits most of Anil Kapoor's family members and some of Kashyap's, but sometimes it is too made-up. This is because while the characters are real, Kapoor and Kashyap's silly fight, rivalry is not. It is not like, say, watching Rekha and Jaya fight over Amitabh Bachchan in *Silsila*.

There is a fakeness to it. And that is why, for a while in the middle, the film, which is mostly *fattu* fun, becomes a bit tedious and dull. But then a chase is thrown in, followed by a twist.

AK vs AK is a clever plot executed very well by director Vikramaditya Motwane and can be put down as a fun milestone of lockdown creativity.

Both Anurag and Anil Kapoor are very good and convincing. While Kashyap exudes a certain creepy vibe laced with arrogance, Kapoor again reminds us of how good he is. While he is obviously acting, he has to swing between "acting" and "reality", or be meta within meta. That requires swag. And he still has it.

In 'Copperfield,' Iannucci brings Dickens to life

JAKE COYLE

It's not hard to draw a straight line from Charles Dickens to Armando Iannucci. In each there's a passion for human frailty and absurdity, and, above all, a richness of people. Nobody filled pages with a vivid cast of characters like Dickens, so who better to take a shot at "David Copperfield" than the man behind the teeming ensembles of "*Veeep*," "*In the Loop*" and "*The Death of Stalin*"?

In his third film as director, following his farce of bumbling and bloody Kremlin power struggles, Iannucci has turned to Dickens' most quintessential and autobiographical novel with the same zeal he previously reserved for political parody: "*The Personal History of David Copperfield*" is one of the more lively, colorful and whimsical Victorian costume dramas you're likely to see. It's a movie flowing with fresh air, which isn't something normally said of adaptations of 700-something-page books.

Iannucci, famed for his improvisational style and expletive-laden barrages, clearly finds in Dickens a writer simpatico in fondness for language and taste for multitudes. In many ways, they make a good match, with Iannucci's more anarchic, free-wheeling style animating the wit and idiosyncrasies of Dickens' tome.

And just as in the absurdly deep bench of "*Veeep*," casting has made a difference. Dev Patel winningly plays Copperfield, once out of childhood (as a boy, he's played by compelling youngsters Jaiar Varsani and Ranveer Jaiswal), with wide-eyed wonder, always alive to the world around him, if generally

The Personal History of David Copperfield

CAST: Dev Patel, Aneurin Barnard, Peter Capaldi, Morfydd Clark, Daisy Mary Cooper, Rosalind Eleazar, Hugh Laurie, Tilda Swinton**DIRECTOR:** Armando Iannucci**Playing in theatres****RATING:** ★★★

rather mystified by it. Still, the film belongs largely to the overall cast, including Tilda Swinton, as David's aunt Betsey Trotwood; Hugh Laurie as the mentally ill, King Charles I-obsessed Mr. Dick; Peter Capaldi as the creditor-evading Wilkins Micawber; Rosalind Eleazar as the romantic interest Agnes Wickfield; Benedict Wong as the wine-swilling Mr. Wickfield; Ben Whishaw as the plotting Uriah Heep.

The performers, a distinctly multicultural cast, add considerably to the vibrancy of the film, collectively making a fairly irrefutable argument for colorblind casting, for anyone who needs one.

But while "*The Personal History of David Copperfield*" keeps a restless, brisk pace as it rushes through Copperfield's life, Iannucci and his co-writer Simon Blackwell arrange the film in such distinct chapters that the movie feels more like a litany of scenes than the dramatic evolution of a young man. Some sections are better than others. The episode with Laurie and Swinton at their country home, flying kites and chasing away donkeys, is so good that you want a whole film of them. —AP



Wonder Woman combats a huckster's rise in 1984

JAKE COYLE

If you're going to make a movie about wish fulfillment, 1980s America is about as good as you can do for a setting outside the Arabian Desert.

"*Wonder Woman 1984*," Patty Jenkins' time-traveling sequel to 2017's record-setting "*Wonder Woman*," shuttles Gal Gadot's warrior to the era of Regan economics, parachute pants and "Rio." All have their cameos in "*Wonder Woman 1984*," a superhero parable of greed and fanny packs with pointed references to today.

Two movies in, it's clear that Jenkins and DC Comics have a thankfully different concept for Wonder Woman as a film franchise. Like its predecessor, "*Wonder Woman 1984*" is spirited, purposeful and blessedly lacking in grandiosity. And both films place Wonder Woman not under the burdensome heft of world building or even universe saving — or at least Gadot comes across as too resplendently regal to ever seem weighed down. She's more a moral and muscular counterweight to ego-driven male misdirections, steering history through the repeating pitfalls of megalomaniacs intoxicated by power.

Last time, it was German and British military leaders under the sway of Ares, the god of war. This time, it's a struggling entre-

Wonder Woman 1984

CAST: Gal Gadot, Chris Pine, Kristen Wiig, Pedro Pascal, Robin Wright, Connie Nielsen**DIRECTOR:** Patty Jenkins**Playing in theatres****RATING:** ★★★★

preneur/TV personality who, in stealing an ancient gem — the "dream stone" — from the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. (where Gadot's Diana now works), gains the power to grant wishes. Max Lord (Pedro Pascal) goes from deadbeat dad to despot, turning into a conman of mythical dimensions. He's a diabolical genie without a bottle, or to paraphrase Robin Williams' Aladdin, he's got phenomenal cosmic powers sans the itty bitty living space.

A snake oil salesman who plagues cravings while stealing everything else is, you might say, a touch timely. "*Wonder Woman 1984*" plays up its Trump critique about as much as it does its '80s style. In one scene, Steve Trevor (Chris Pine), summoned from the grave by Diana's own wish while holding the gem, giddily tries on all the period-appropriate clothing like Ken's fashion show in "*Toy Story 3*." Best in the first "*Wonder Woman*" were the screwball fish-out-of-water scenes of Diana experiencing

London with Trevor; this time the roles are reversed, and the charm a little less.

What does Max's rise have to do with Wonder Woman? A huckster is a kind of perfect foil to Diana, conceived from the start as a force for truth. (Her lasso of truth was modeled after the polygraph, an invention of Wonder Woman creator William Moulton Marston.) Jenkins opens the film with an Amazonian flashback to an obstacle course race on the island of Themyscira where a young Diana learns the value of truth. "No true hero is born from lies," says Antiope (Robin Wright).

The dream stone transforms another, too: Barbara Minerva, a meek archeologist played by Kristen Wiig. Awkward in heels and most everything else, she mutters that she'd like to be more like Diana when holding the stone, setting off a metamorphosis that playfully remakes Wiig's typical screen presence, and creates another foe for Wonder Woman.

Just as in "*Wonder Woman*," I think Jenkins has left some opportunities on the table. The first film, despite being set in 1918 during WWI, omitted any real interaction with the era's then-flourishing women's rights movement — a vital source of inspiration to Marston. Likewise, "*Wonder Woman 1984*" — more focused on "greed is good" decade and its contemporary resonances — doesn't much pause to interro-

gate the 1980s' gender imbalances. Like the last movie, "*Wonder Woman 1984*" becomes consumed by its (admittedly quite good) antagonist. It drags in the third act in a messy White House battle and a prolonged finale.

But I still like these movies more than most superhero films. They feel both campier and more real than Marvel movies — more like the page-turning thrill of a comic book. The ambitions of "*Wonder Woman 1984*" may be just outside its grasp, but it seldom feels predestined or predictable — a precious rare commodity in the genre.

As its characters awaken to their powers, turning from recognizable people to monsters, the film keeps changing shape, enlarging as it goes. Jenkins' pop cinema craft is limber and lucid. Pascal's performance, more sweet than sinister, is scintillatingly over the top.

Premiering in theaters and on HBO Max in North America, "*Wonder Woman 1984*" will close out a year largely absent of superheroes in a release plan that has upended the film industry. It's a very big film heading primarily to the small screen, at a time when the pandemic has made the escapist, popcorn-eating moviegoing that superhero movies are made for impossible, or nearly so. That makes "*Wonder Woman 1984*" a nostalgia act in more ways than one.

—AP

SHORT TAKES

Dean remembered during MCG Test

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

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

Ex-Eng cricketer Jackman no more

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

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

De Silva hurt after leading SL revival

Centurion, South Africa: Dhananjaya de Silva and Dinesh Chandimal put Sri Lanka in a strong position on the first day of the first Test against South Africa in Centurion on Saturday. De Silva made 79 before retiring hurt and former captain Chandimal hit 85 as Sri Lanka reached 340 for six at the close. De Silva suffered what appeared to be a left hip injury while running between wickets and was taken off the field on a motorised stretcher. It was not clear whether he would be able to take any further part in the match.

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

BOWLERS' DAY OUT

Bumrah, Ashwin skittle Aussies out for 195 as India dominate

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

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

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

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

Bumrah (4/56 in 16 overs) and Ashwin (3/35 in 24 overs) were the stars but debutant Mohammed Siraj (2/40 in 15 overs) also did his bit repaying the faith shown in him with wickets of Marnus Labuschagne (48) and Cameron Green (12) with the old ball. However, the Test series is increasingly looking like Ashwin's paradise as he once again made the opposition's best batsman Steve Smith (0) look ordinary, exploiting the turn and bounce that the first day of the MCG track offered. The Indian team looked way more galvanised despite being without regular skipper Virat Kohli, who is on paternity leave.

SIRAJ FULFILLED LATE FATHER'S DREAM

Mohammed Siraj could not perform the last rites of his late father last month as he was in Australia with the national team but he made him proud by making India Test debut in Melbourne. His brother Ismail said it was his late father's dream to see Siraj play for the country in Tests and finally the dream was fulfilled on Saturday at the MCG. "It was my (late) father's dream that Siraj should represent India in Tests ... He always wanted to see him in blue and white jersey to represent the nation, so our dream got fulfilled," Ismail said. — PTI



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

SCORECARD

Australia 1st Innings: Joe Burns c Pant b Bumrah 0, Matthew Wade c Jadeja b Ashwin 30, Marnus Labuschagne c Shubman Gill b Mohammed Siraj 48, Steven Smith c Pujara b Ashwin 0, Travis Head c Rahane b Bumrah 38, Cameron Green lbw b Mohammed Siraj 12, Tim Paine c Vihari b Ashwin 13, Pat Cummins c Mohammed Siraj b Jadeja 9, Mitchell Starc c Mohammed Siraj b Bumrah 7, Nathan Lyon lbw b Bumrah 20, Josh Hazlewood not out 4. Extras (b-10, nb-3, w-1) 14. **Total (In 72.3 overs) 195.**
FoW: 1-10, 2-35, 3-38, 4-124, 5-134, 6-155, 7-155, 8-164, 9-191, 10-195.
Bowling: Jasprit Bumrah 16-4-56-4, Umesh Yadav 12-2-39-0, Ravichandran Ashwin 24-7-35-3, Ravindra Jadeja 5.3-1-15-1, Mohammed Siraj 15-4-40-2.
India 1st Innings: Mayank Agarwal lbw b Starc 0, Shubman Gill (batting) 28, Cheteshwar Pujara (batting) 7, Extras (nb-1) 1. **Total (For 1 wkt, in 11 overs) 36.**
FoW: 1-0.
Bowling: Mitchell Starc 4-2-14-1, Pat Cummins 4-1-14-0, Josh Hazlewood 2-0-2-0, Nathan Lyon 1-0-6-0.

Gavaskar refrains from praising leader Rahane

Melbourne, Dec. 26: Former India skipper Sunil Gavaskar is impressed by Ajinkya Rahane's field placements but said he will refrain from praising his captaincy as it is still "early days" and he does not want to be accused of backing a fellow Mumbaikar. Taking charge of the team in the absence of regular skipper Virat Kohli, Rahane marshalled his resources well as India dismissed

Australia for a sub-par 195 in 72.3 overs on the opening day of the second Test here.

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

"So I don't want to get into that because these are early days," the leg-

endary batsman said.

Gavaskar was impressed with Rahane's field placements as three Australian batsmen — Marnus Labuschagne, Steve Smith, and Travis Head — were all caught by fielders deployed at different positions.

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

FORMER STARS HAIL RAHANE'S LEADERSHIP

Melbourne, Dec. 26: India's stand-in skipper Ajinkya Rahane drew praise for his tactical acumen with former stars hailing his effective bowling changes that put the visitors in a dominating position in the second Test against Australia here on Saturday.

"Outstanding" bowling changes and really smart fielding placements from Rahane. And the bowlers delivered. Ashwin, Bumrah, Siraj were absolutely brilliant. Great effort to get Australia all out for 195 on the first day. Now for the batters to get a good first innings lead," Virender Sehwag tweeted.

"(Rahane's captaincy) has been brilliant so far. We were all a bit worried about how they were going to pick themselves up after Adelaide. I think they looked potentially better today," Ponting said.

"The Indian bowlers were outstanding too & very well lead (sic) by @ajinkyarahane88! Can India bat all day?," Warne tweeted. — PTI

Tanmay to lead Hyd T20 team

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, DEC. 26

Tanmay Agarwal will lead the Hyderabad cricket team in the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy — the BCCI's domestic Twenty20 tournament — to be held from January 10 to 31 next year.

B. Sandeep has been named vice-captain of the 20-member squad picked by selectors J. Shivaji Yadav, Ahmed Quadri and Abhinav Kumar in the Senior Selection Committee held on Saturday.

Hyderabad is in Elite 'B' group along with Assam, Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Jharkhand and Odisha in the tournament. They will open their campaign against Assam on January 10 in Kolkata.

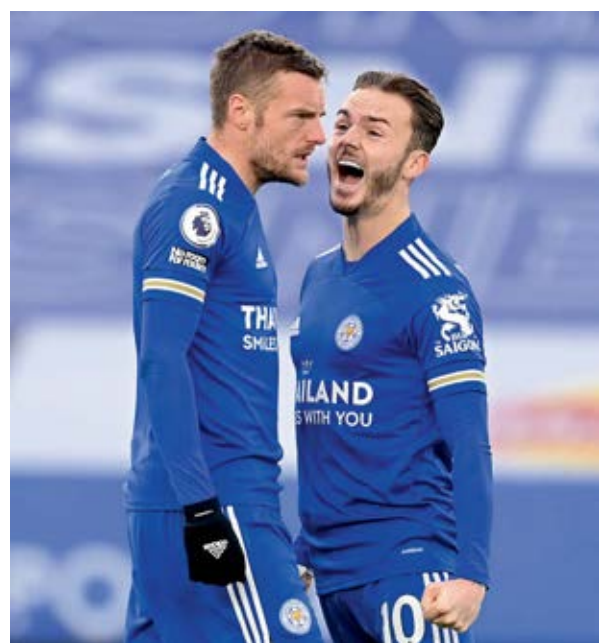
The team: Tanmay Agarwal (captain), B. Sandeep (vice-captain), Thakur Tilak Varma, Abhirath Reddy, Himalay

Agarwal, Buddhi Rahul, Sai Pragnay Reddy, Kolla Sumanth, C. V. Milind, T. Ravi Teja, Ajay Dev Goud, Yuthveer Singh, Tanay Thyagarajan, Mickil Jaiswal, Hitesh Yadav, Rakesh Yadav, Prateek Reddy, Rakshann Read, Kartikeya Kak, MSR Charan.

Standbys: Ashish Srivastav, Akash Bhandari, Shreyas Vala, Samhith Reddy.

Support staff: Zakir Hussain (coach), Shashank Nag (assistant coach), Bheesham Pratap Singh (physio), Rajamani (trainer), Sailesh Kumar (video analyst), Sajed Hussain (massuer), Chitti Sridhar (manager).

The players should report to manager Chitti Sridhar at Hotel Green Park on Sunday, December 27, at 10 am, according to a press release from the Hyderabad Cricket Association.



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

Late Foxes strike frustrate United

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

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

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

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

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

Davis, James pair to dump Dallas

Los Angeles, Dec. 26: Anthony Davis scored 28 points while LeBron James added 22 as the defending NBA champion Los Angeles Lakers routed Dallas 138-115 in Friday's feature game of a record-setting Christmas slate.

James had a game-high 10 assists and seven rebounds in 31 minutes, while Davis contributed eight rebounds, five assists and two steals and reserve Montrezl Harrell had 22 points for the Lakers, who played on the holiday for a 22nd consecutive year.

James, who turns 36 on Wednesday, rose to second on the NBA's all-time Christmas points list with 383, passing Oscar Robertson by six to pull within 12 of matching the late Kobe Bryant's career record.

It was the 10th Christmas victory in 15 holiday appearances by James, who equaled former Miami teammate Dwyane Wade for the

● **LeBron James scored 22 as Anthony Davis garnered 28 points to propel LA Lakers to a comfortable 138-115 victory over Dallas Mavericks.**

most career Christmas NBA wins.

Slovakian star guard Luka Doncic scored 27 points for Dallas, but the Mavericks were outscored in every quarter and outrebounded 53-27.

Brooklyn's Kyrie Irving and Miami's Duncan Robinson each matched an NBA Christmas record with seven 3-pointers, the Heat stretching their holiday win streak to eight games.

Irving scored 37 points, hitting 7-of-10 3-point attempts in his return to Boston, as the Nets ripped his former Celtics teammates 123-95. — AFP

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