

SHORT TAKE

Centre interfering in Bengal, alleges Kejri; supports Mamata

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 18

Delhi chief minister and AAP convener Arvind Kejriwal on Friday extended his support to the West Bengal government and alleged the Centre of blatantly interfering in the West Bengal administration, saying its move to transfer police officers in the state was an "assault" on federalism. The TMC government in Bengal led by Mamata Banerjee is strongly opposing the Centre's move to send three IPS officers, who were involved in the security of BJP chief JP Nadda during his recent visit to West Bengal, on central deputation. "I condemn the Centre's blatant interference in the Bengal administration. Encroaching on the rights of states by attempting to transfer police officers to Centre just before elections, is an assault on federalism and an attempt to destabilize," Mr Kejriwal tweeted. The three IPS officers were responsible for the security of Nadda whose convoy was attacked during his recent visit to the state scheduled for Assembly polls in 2021. The Centre wants them shifted on account of alleged dereliction of duty that led to the attack on Nadda's convoy in Diamond Harbour constituency of TMC MP and Banerjee's nephew Abhishek Banerjee. The West Bengal chief minister has slammed the Centre saying the move, particularly before the elections is against the basic tenets of the federal structure. It's "unconstitutional" and completely unacceptable, she has said. The BJP and TMC are engaged in a war-of-words after the BJP-ruled central government asked three IPS officers from West Bengal to be sent to the Centre on deputation.

Fire kills 2 minor brothers in Delhi

New Delhi: Two minor brothers were killed in a fire at a footwear sole storeroom in southwest Delhi's Sagarpur area on Friday, officials said. The deceased have been identified as Aayush (5) and Shriansh (6), whose father deals in footwear sole and had stored the material in a room at their rented accommodation, they said. Police suspects that an electric short-circuit triggered the fire. A call about the fire was received at 2.44 pm after which three fire tenders were rushed to the spot, a fire official said. According to the Delhi Fire Services, the fire was doused by 4 pm. The brothers were rushed to a nearby hospital where doctors declared them dead on arrival, Delhi Fire Services Director Atul Garg said. A senior police officer said that as per doctors, it appears that the two children choked to death due to smoke. The bodies will be handed over to the family after post-mortem on Saturday. Local police and a team of the Forensic Science Laboratory visited the spot to ascertain the cause of the fire. According to the police, the family of the deceased moved to the ground floor house on December 1. Those living on other floors of the building were rescued by the police with the help of some locals. — PTI

Noida: 9 more 'land mafia' identified

Noida: The Gautam Buddha Nagar administration on Friday listed nine more people as "land mafia" and officials said action would be taken against them soon. The names were added during a review meeting chaired by District Magistrate Suhas L Y. An FIR would be lodged against these people soon so that the police can initiate action, the officials said. Those identified as "land mafia" are Pratap, Chaman Singh, Utkarsh Goyal, Rajpal Singh and his son Sooraj Singh, Dheeraj Kumar, Padam, Rajpal and Vijay, according to Additional DM Diwakar Singh. These people have either encroached government land in the district or carried out construction on illegally acquired plots, the ADM said in a report. "As per the instructions of the DM, the details of these people would be uploaded on the land mafia portal of the district and FIRs lodged against them so that police can initiate action against them," Singh said. — PTI

₹2.5Kcr MCD scam: Delhi House demands CBI probe

Resolution passed, Opp. BJP terms allegation 'baseless'

SUNIL THAPLIYAL
NEW DELHI, DEC. 18

Hitting out at the BJP-led three municipal corporations in the national capital over corruption, the Delhi Assembly, on Friday, passed a resolution by voice vote demanding a CBI inquiry into the alleged ₹2,500 crore scam in these three municipal corporations. AAP MLA Saurabh Bhardwaj initiated a discussion on the issue following which the resolution was passed.

"Scams come up regularly in BJP-ruled corporations. The new councillors have broken the record of their predecessors in corruption," he claimed.

"The MCD is like a daughter of Delhi which was given to the BJP that has acted as a mother-in-law. BJP is acting the same by demanding ₹13,000 crore from the AAP. In the 2017 municipal polls, BJP changed all its sitting councillors because people were unhappy with them," Mr Bhardwaj said.

The AAP MLA alleged that the scam runs into thousands of crores of rupees.

"The building department of corporations is known for corruption and for demanding bribes. A BJP councillor was caught red-handed by the CBI for

AAP MLA Saurabh Bhardwaj initiated a discussion on the issue following which the resolution was passed. "Scams come up regularly in BJP-ruled corporations. The new councillors have broken the record of their predecessors in corruption," he claimed.

taking ₹10 lakh for construction of a building," he added.

However, Leader of Opposition in the Assembly Ramvir Singh Bidhuri termed the allegations of misappropriation of funds worth ₹2,500 crore as "baseless."

Meanwhile, BJP MLA O.P. Sharma boycotted the House when he was not allowed to speak in the debate. The party legislators displayed placards at their seats, demanding the release of financial dues of ₹13,000 crore to the civic bodies.

Earlier in the day, AAP MLAs trooped into the well of the House raising slogans against the BJP-ruled MCDs as soon as the session started. Speaker Ram Niwas Goel had adjourned the House for 15 minutes as the party MLAs continued to wave placards and raise slogans despite his attempts to bring order and continue the proceedings.

Scam in MCDs bigger than 2010 CWG fraud: Kejriwal

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 18

Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal on Friday said the alleged scam of ₹2,500 crore in the BJP-ruled municipal corporations was even bigger than the Commonwealth Games scam.

Addressing a special session of the Delhi Assembly, he claimed that scams of ₹5,000-10,000 crore happen every year in municipal corporations while giving required per-



Arvind Kejriwal

missions for buildings. "It's a very painful day as we are discussing the biggest scam in MCD. ₹2,500 crore scam is bigger than the Commonwealth Games scam. Even people on the street say there is corruption in MCD and the same people say the Delhi gov-

ernment is honest," he said.

"₹2,500 crore could have been used to pay salaries of sanitation workers, doctors and other employees of corporations. It could have been used to make 12,500 hospital beds or 7,500 Mohalla Clinics," Kejriwal added.

The AAP national convener asked Leader of Opposition in the Assembly Ramvir Singh Bidhuri to push for a CBI probe into the alleged scam.



SDMC deputy chairperson Maya Bisht is attended to after she fell sick during her hungerstrike outside Delhi CM's residence in New Delhi on Friday. — PTI

3 women BJP councillors fall sick during hungerstrike

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 18

Three women councillors, including a former mayor, who are on hungerstrike demanding the release of due funds to the three civic bodies, were admitted at the Hindu Rao Hospital after their health condition worsened. The indefinite hunger strike by the city's three mayors and senior BJP councillors demanding release of funds to the three BJP-run civic bodies entered the second day on Friday.

North Delhi Mayor Jai Prakash, South Delhi mayor Anamika Mithlesh, and East Delhi mayor Nirmal Jain have been leading an indefinite sit-in protest outside chief minister Arvind Kejriwal's residence since December 7 and on indefi-

nite hunger strike since Thursday.

According to Mr Prakash, on the second day of the indefinite hunger strike, former mayor of South Delhi Sunita Kangra, chairperson of health committee in East Delhi Municipal Corporation (EDMC) Kanchan Maheshwari, and deputy chairperson of South Zone ward committee in SDMC Maya Bisht had to be admitted to the Hindu Rao Hospital of North Corporation due to low blood sugar.

"We are seating on dharna for the last 12 days and on indefinite hunger strike since Thursday outside the residence of the chief minister demanding release of the outstanding dues of ₹13,000 crores of all three corporations. But the chief minister neither tried to meet us nor is he

ready to listen to us," said Mr Prakash.

Former Union minister and senior BJP leader Vijay Goel, on Friday, met the mayors and party councillors at the protest site outside the chief minister's residence to support them.

"The three mayors of Delhi have been sitting on dharna for the last 12 days and on indefinite hunger strike for two days. They are fighting for the rights of 2 lakh employees working in the municipal corporations. Citizens are standing with the mayors in this fight," said Mr Goel.

Mr Prakash said that until Mr Kejriwal does not clear the dues of the corporations, they will continue to sit on the dharna and be on indefinite hunger strike outside his residence.



A vendor selling break-fast warms his hands from the fire of his stove on a cart during a cold winter morning in the old quarters of New Delhi on Friday. The minimum temperature dropped below the three degrees Celsius-mark in parts of Delhi on Friday as frosty winds from snow-covered Western Himalayas continue to sweep the national capital, the India Meteorological Department said. — AFP

Music teacher held for harassing, molesting 23-year-old student

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 18

A music teacher has been arrested for allegedly harassing and molesting his 23-year-old student, police said on Friday.

The arrest was made after the victim, who was doing her Diploma Honour in Kathak at a centre in Chanakyapuri, accused the 52-year-old teacher of harassing her, they said.

According to the complainant, the accused — a 'pakhawaj' (rhythm instrument) teacher at the centre — molested the victim of touching her inappropriately and also harassed her by sending

obscene messages on WhatsApp.

The matter came to light on December 14 when the girl along with her mother approached officials of the Chanakyapuri police station to register a complaint him, police said.

In her complaint, the victim stated that the accused touched her inappropriately during a training session and sent her obscene messages. On December 14, he again molested by putting his hands on the waist and kissing her on the forehead. He also tried to kiss on her face, she alleged.

Deputy commissioner of police (New Delhi) Eish

Singhal said based on the statement of the victim, a case was registered under section 354 (assault or criminal force to woman with intent to outrage her modesty), 354 A (sexual harassment and punishment for sexual harassment) and 509 (word, gesture or act intended to insult the modesty of a woman) of the Indian Penal Code and the accused has been arrested.

The accused, a resident of Dilshad Garden, is currently in judicial custody. The statements of other students are also being recorded, police said, adding that further investigation is underway.

Delhi records 1,418 Covid-19 cases, positivity rate at 1.6%

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 18

The Covid-19 positivity rate remained below two per cent for the fourth consecutive day in the national capital. Delhi recorded 1,418 new Covid-19 cases on Friday with over 88,000 tests conducted, with a positivity rate of 1.60 per cent. With 37 new fatalities, the death count climbed to 10,219.

According to Delhi health department data, these 1,418 new cases came out of 88,400 tests conducted the previous day, including 48,180 RT-PCR tests and 40,220 rapid antigen tests. Yesterday with 1,363 fresh cases the city recorded its lowest cases since August 31. The city had recorded 1,358 cases on August 31.

The positivity rate from December 3 to December 7 had successively dipped to 4.96 per cent, 4.78 per cent, 4.2 per cent, 3.68 per cent and 3.15 per cent respectively.

On December 8, however, it had risen again to 4.23 per cent, but fell to 3.42 per cent on December 9 and 2.46 per cent on December 10. It had risen to 3.33 per cent again on December 11 and fell again to 2.64 per cent on December 12, and rose marginally again to 2.74 on December 13 but fell to 2.15 per cent on December 14.

On December 15 and 16, the positivity rates were 1.9 per cent and 1.96 per cent respectively. On December 17, the city reported a positivity rate of 1.51 per cent.

The active cases tally on Friday dropped to 11,419 from 12,198 on the previous day. The bulletin said that the total number of cases has climbed to 6,14,775.

Uttar Pradesh's Gautam Buddha Nagar recorded 42 new Covid-19 cases that pushed the district's infection tally to 24,424 on Friday, official data showed.

Active cases in the district came down further to 717 from 759 the previous day, while the recovery rate reached 96.71 per cent, according to the data released by the UP Health Department for a 24-hour period.



Delhi deputy CM Manish Sisodia offers 'Ganga Puja' in Haridwar on Friday. — PTI

Man arrested for ₹300cr loan misappropriation

New Delhi, Dec. 18: A 31-year-old man was arrested for allegedly misappropriating funds to the tune of ₹300 crore availed as loans and credit facilities from various banks and financial institutions, the police said on Friday.

Vaibhav Sharma, the chief finance officer (CFO) of a Gurgaon-based company engaged in car dealership, was arrested on Thursday in connection with a 2018 case registered against him and the other directors of the firm

charge-sheeted, it added. According to the complainant bank, the accused persons had approached their branch at Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg in Delhi for financial assistance in 2007. The alleged company engaged in dealership of Audi cars had been availing cash credit facility, trade advances, etc. for demo cars from the bank since 2007. It had also availed term loan, cash credit facility, and bank guarantee since 2013 onwards, the police said.

Till March 2018, the alleged company had been performing as per the terms and conditions but defaulted later. In June 2018, during an inspection at the showroom of the alleged company, only 29 cars were found against

200 cars, said O.P. Mishra, the joint commissioner of police (EOW).

"During the investigation, it further emerged that the accused persons had submitted that their company had availed the financial assistance of ₹130 crore from other financial institutions including the complainant bank. Vaibhav Sharma had submitted a forged bank statement of J-K Bank for the period between June 1, 2018, and June 19, 2018, wherein the alleged company had availed the OD of ₹11.64 crore.

"During investigation of the bank records, it was found that the alleged company had actually availed the OD of ₹49.51 crore," he said.

The officials of the alleged company have misappropriated the amount to the tune of about ₹102 crore and accused Sharma had told the complainant bank that the company was in losses during the past four years while the balance sheet of the company showed profits, Mr Mishra said. — PTI

NORTHERN RAILWAY

No. CIID/SLR/Tender/2020 (Part IV)

TENDER NOTICE

Date : 18.12.2020

The Senior Divisional Commercial Manager /Freight, Northern Railway, New Delhi invites E-tender for the contract of leasing of SLR/SLRD space in the following special trains originating from various stations over Delhi Division:-

Tender Opening Date : 11.01.2021

S. No.	Train No.	From	To	Comptt.	CC	Freq.	RP (in Rs.)	EMD (In Rs.)	Tender Cost (Including GST @ 18% in Rs.)	Tender No.
1	02463	DEE (Delhi Sarai Rohilla)	JU (Jodhpur)	FI	4	3	10711	100000	1180	SLR-FI-02463-Dec20
2	02463	DEE (Delhi Sarai Rohilla)	JU (Jodhpur)	FII	4	3	10711	100000	1180	SLR-FII-02463-Dec20
3	02463	DEE (Delhi Sarai Rohilla)	JU (Jodhpur)	RI	4	3	10711	100000	1180	SLR-RI-02463-Dec20
4	02618	NZM (Hazrat Nizamuddin)	ERS (Ernakulam Jn.)	FI	4	7	37665	100000	1180	SLR-FI-02618-Dec20
5	02618	NZM (Hazrat Nizamuddin)	ERS (Ernakulam Jn.)	FII	4	7	37665	100000	1180	SLR-FII-02618-Dec20
6	02284	NZM (Hazrat Nizamuddin)	ERS(Ernakulam Jn.)	FSLR	3.9	1	44491	100000	1180	SLR-FSLR-02284-Dec20
7	02414	NZM (Hazrat Nizamuddin)	MAO (Madgaon)	FSLR	3.9	2	35621	100000	1180	SLR-FSLR-02414-Dec20
8	02963	NZM (Hazrat Nizamuddin)	UDZ (Udaipur)	FI	4	7	12716	100000	1180	SLR-FI-02963-Dec20
9	02963	NZM (Hazrat Nizamuddin)	UDZ (Udaipur)	RI	4	7	12716	100000	1180	SLR-RI-02963-Dec20
10	04739	DEE (Delhi Sarai Rohilla)	BKN (Bikaner Jn.)	FI	4	3	11790	100000	1180	SLR-FI-04739-Dec20
11	04739	DEE (Delhi Sarai Rohilla)	BKN (Bikaner Jn.)	RI	4	3	11790	100000	1180	SLR-RI-04739-Dec20
12	04014	ANVT (Anand Vihar Terminal)	SLN (Sultanpur)	FI	4	2	11052	100000	1180	SLR-FI-04014-Dec20
13	14208	DLI (Delhi Jn.)	PBH (Partapgarh Jn.)	FII	4	7	11368	100000	1180	SLR-FII-14208-Dec20
14	14208	DLI (Delhi Jn.)	PBH (Partapgarh Jn.)	RI	4	7	11368	100000	1180	SLR-RI-14208-Dec20
15	14206	DLI (Delhi Jn.)	FD (Faizabad Jn.)	FI	4	7	10711	100000	1180	SLR-FI-14206-Dec20
16	14206	DLI (Delhi Jn.)	FD (Faizabad Jn.)	FII	4	7	10711	100000	1180	SLR-FII-14206-Dec20

Interested bidders may please visit official website for e-tendering i.e. www.ireps.gov.in for further details and submitting tender.

Important note:-

- Bidders, who wish to participate in the E-tendering will have to procure class-3 valid digital security certificate (DSC) as per Information Technology Act, 2000. Bidders can procure this certificate from any of the certifying authority of Controller of Certifying Authorities (CCA) Government of India. Details of certifying authorities can be obtained from www.cca.gov.in
- Bidders, who want to participate in this E-tender will be required to register on Indian Railways website www.ireps.gov.in through a valid class-3 Digital Security Certificate (DSC), if not registered earlier. All information related to bidder registration and participation in this E-tender is available on the official website of Indian Railways www.ireps.gov.in.
- Railway Administration reserves the full and absolute rights to short terminate these tenders/contracts at any point of time (or for taking any decision regarding the discontinuation/continuation of these tenders/contracts with modified/additional terms and conditions) depending upon the continuation/discontinuation of these special trains or commencements of correspondence regular train services.
- Kindly carefully read and follow the 'General Instructions, Instructions to tenderers and "Terms and Conditions" (including certain new modified instructions/ conditions) given in the Tender Document before submitting the ONLINE BID.

SERVING CUSTOMERS WITH A SMILE

2823/2020

SHORT TAKES

Speeding Merc kills delivery boy, 20

Mumbai: In an accident that took place in the wee hours of Friday, a speeding Mercedes knocked down a two wheeler in Oshiwara, killing a 20-year-old Zomato delivery boy. The police later arrested the 19-year-old teenager who was behind the wheels and are probing the incident. The deceased was identified as Satish Parasnath Gupta, who was on his way to make a food delivery, when the accident took place around 2.30 am. The preliminary probe revealed that the car jumped a divider and rammed into the bike crushing the rider to death immediately. The accused fled from the spot and was apprehended later. While the family of the deceased claimed that the teenager was drunk and demanded justice, the officials said that the probe is underway. The police is probing the sequence of incidents to ascertain the place from where the accused left and where he was headed and if he was drunk.

3 youths arrested for waving pistol

Bulandshahr, UP: Three men were arrested here on Friday after a video went viral of some youths apparently waving a pistol while riding a motorcycle, police said. One of the youths in the video — Golu alias Lalit Chaudhry — is said to be a soldier in the Army and is on leave from service. The youths were arrested with two revolvers, cartridges and a motorcycle recovered from them. It is not yet known if the revolvers belonged to the soldier or others. The arrested men were identified as Sandeep, Sachin and Akash, all residents of Janipur in Shikarpur police station area. Senior superintendent of police Santosh Kumar Singh said a video went viral on social media in which two youths are sitting on three motorcycles. One youth sitting at the back of a motorcycle is seen waving a pistol in his hands. — PTI

FM promises ‘never before’ like Budget

New Delhi: Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman promised a “never before” like Budget as the government looks to steer the pandemic-battered economy and push growth. While investment in health, medical R&D and developing greater skills to handle telemedicine is going to be critical, livelihood challenges would have to be seen in a newer canvas with newer perspective on vocational training and skill development. “Send me your inputs so that we can see a Budget which is a Budget like never before, in a way, 100 years of India wouldn’t have seen a Budget being made post pandemic like this. And that is not going to be possible unless I get your inputs and wish list, clear observation of what has put you through the challenge...,” she said while addressing the CII Partnership Summit 2020. — PTI

PM ready to discuss ‘all issues’

■ **Continued from Pag 1**
lag behind the women in facilities. “Today I want to expose those who have absolutely no care or genuine concern for you — our annadaata (farmers). I want to caution all those who are being misled, instigated in the name of these farm laws,” he added. Mr Modi said the “three biggest lies” spread by the Opposition parties were that the new farm laws would pave way for discontinuance of the

More leaders quit TMC

■ **Continued from Pag 1**
member of the party. Thus, I request you to accept my resignation and oblige.” Mr Datta, who won as a TMC candidate from Barrackpore in North 24 Parganas in two consecutive terms, did not, however, resign as an MLA. He will join the BJP on Saturday, said Barrackpore MP Arjun Singh, without giving any details about the venue of his induction. On Mr Datta’s step, TMC minister Firhad Hakim said: “He was not supposed to survive. He underwent surgery with active support from Ms Banerjee. He had a rebirth with her blessings. It is really unfortunate that he later quit our party over a mere tiff, not

CBI says Hathras girl was gangraped, killed

CBI files chargesheet against 4 men, leaves top UP officials red-faced

New Delhi, Dec. 18: The CBI on Friday filed a chargesheet against the four men accused of the gangrape and murder of a 19-year-old dalit woman in a village in Hathras district of Uttar Pradesh, officials said. After nearly two months of probe, the agency concluded in its final report that the accused — Sandeep, Ravi, Luv Kush and Ramu — allegedly gangraped and murdered the woman when she had gone to the fields to collect fodder on September 14 in her village Bhulgarhi, they said. In its findings submitted before the competent court in Hathras, the agency has slapped IPC Sections pertaining to rape, murder and gangrape apart from those under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act against the four accused men from the village, they said. The maximum sentence in the above charges is

capital punishment. The agency has based its findings on the dying statement of the woman in which she is understood to have named the accused, besides scientific and forensic evidence collected by the CBI and statements of witnesses and the victim’s family members recorded by it. The findings submitted by the CBI have left red faced the top officials of Uttar Pradesh Police who had claimed that no evidence of rape was found in forensic tests. UP’s additional director-general (law and order) Prashant Kumar had said, “The report of the FSL has come. It says clearly that samples did not contain semen. It makes clear that there was no rape or gangrape.” The ADG had also claimed that the woman in her statement to police “did not mention rape but talked about “maar-pee” (beating) only”. An embar-

■ **AFTER NEARLY** two months of probe, the agency concluded in its final report that the accused — Sandeep, Ravi, Luv Kush and Ramu — allegedly gangraped and murdered the woman when she had gone to the fields to collect fodder on September 14 in her village Bhulgarhi rassed Uttar Pradesh government had to hand over the case to the CBI after the incident triggered massive public outrage and a political slugfest. Coming close on the heels of Unnao rape case in which Kuldeep Singh Sengar, a former BJP MLA, was sentenced life imprisonment for raping a minor girl in 2017, the gruesome Hathras incident snowballed into a political storm with members of the Congress, Aam Admi Party, Trinamul Congress and other Opposition leaders of the

state from SP and RLD staging massive protests. The Allahabad high court took suo motu cognisance of the victim’s late night cremation by the state police and had some terse remarks for senior officials, warning them against character assassination of the victim and urging restraint by the officials, political parties and the media. It also pulled up additional DG (law and order) Prashant Kumar and Hathras district magistrate Praveen Kumar Laxkar for suggesting on the basis of absence of semen mentioned in the forensic report that the woman was not raped. The division bench of Justices Pankaj Mithal and Rajan Roy reminded the officials about the definition of rape, as legally the presence of semen is not necessarily required to establish that the said offence has taken place. — PTI

‘Truth prevailed, charges raise serious questions on UP govt’



Priyanka Gandhi Vadra

New Delhi, Dec. 18: With the CBI filing its chargesheet in the case of gangrape and murder of a 19-year-old dalit woman in Hathras, Congress leader Priyanka Gandhi Vadra on Friday said truth has prevailed and the development raises serious questions on the Yogi Adityanath government in Uttar Pradesh. Reacting to the development, Priyanka Gandhi said the truth has prevailed once again. “The CBI charge sheet filed today against four accused in the Hathras case has stated that the 19-year old victim was brutally gangraped and murdered,” the Congress general secretary in-charge UP said in a statement. This development raises serious questions on the Adityanath government

in Uttar Pradesh, UP police, ADG law and order, district magistrate of Hathras and senior functionaries of the state administration, Ms Gandhi alleged. “The state left no stone unturned to deny the victim dignity — in life and death. She was cremated without her family’s consent in the middle of the night. Senior police officers and bureaucrats outrightly denied any rape,

intimidated her family and indulged in blatant shaming of the victim. Sections of media that dared to report the truth were manhandled,” she alleged. However, the entire might of the Uttar Pradesh government and police could not suppress the truth, Priyanka asserted. “I cannot forget the anguish of the 19-year-old’s mother, who couldn’t even bid her daughter goodbye. All that her family sought was justice for their child,” she said. “I am heartened to see that an important step towards providing that justice has been taken by the CBI and hope that it will bring the victim’s family some comfort amidst the immense suffering that they have so courageously endured,” she said. — PTI

■ It will be tit for tat answer to BJP’s opposition to Metro car shed in Mumbai Sena may oppose Modi’s Maha pet projects

PRASAD PATIL
MUMBAI, DEC. 18

The Shiv Sena, rattled by the Bombay High Court’s stay on the construction of Metro car shed at salt pan land in Mumbai, is preparing for direct confrontation with the Union government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party. The HC stayed the Metro car shed work after the Centre’s salt pan department challenged the state’s decision in the court. Now, as part of its strate-

gy to take on its erstwhile alliance partner head-on, the Uddhav Thackeray-led party has decided to oppose the proposed port in Palghar district. The ₹65,000 crore project was opposing the Narendra Modi government in February this year. The Maharashtra government is also considering moving the Metro car shed to a site earmarked for the Mumbai Ahmedabad bullet train project — another pet project of PM Modi. The locals are opposing

the Vadhvan port project, which is part of Centre’s Sagarmala initiative, in Palghar district. According to reports, the chief minister Uddhav Thackeray met groups opposing the Vadhvan port as well Mumbai-Ahmedabad Bullet Train project — another pet project of PM Modi — and assured them that he will not allow any project against the wishes of locals. Shiv Sena leader and Lok Sabha MP Rajendra Gavit confirmed that the local

citizen groups have approached the CM seeking his intervention to scrap Vadhvan port as well as the Bullet Train projects. “Both these projects are being opposed by the locals as they are detrimental to the local tribal population in Palghar district. The port will adversely impact biodiversity of the coast. The government is also forcibly taking tribal lands for the Bullet Train, which must stop immediately,” he said. Senior Shiv Sena minister Eknath Shinde said, “The

chief minister has issued directives on Thursday itself to start a survey of the Bandra-Kurla-Complex plot for Metro car shed. The HC has stayed the work on salt pan land and we cannot preempt how much time the court will take. The decision to consider the BKC plot for the car shed has been taken so that the Metro project is not delayed.” BJP leader Devendra Fadnavis said that the talks of shifting the car shed to BKC are “childish and immature”.

RJD veteran urges Sonia to give up ‘putra moh’

Patna, Dec. 18: Senior RJD leader and veteran Bihar socialist Shivanand Tiwary on Friday called Rahul Gandhi a “reluctant and uninspiring” leader and urged Congress president Sonia Gandhi to overcome “putra moh” (weakness for her son) in deciding her political successor. Mr Tiwary made the explosive statement with the remark that he was aware that he could “irk the leadership of the very party of which I am at present a member.” “But, I have reached a stage where I do not always care about party diktats and choose to speak my mind....Sonia Gandhi is going to hold an important meeting tomorrow. I wonder if it is going to yield any result,” the former Bihar minister said in his statement. The Congress president is scheduled to interact

with a host of party leaders, including the “letter writers”, a term currently in vogue to describe those who had written to her recently stressing on the demand for an overhaul of the party structure. Mr Tiwary expressed his admiration for the “spirit of sacrifice” demonstrated by Gandhi in 2004 when she chose not to become the Prime Minister despite having the mandate. “I had a chance to meet her first when Lalu was a member of the Union cabinet. I was struck by the serenity on her face. She had revived her party

which was left by Sitaram Kesri in a bad shape. Her foreign origin had become a point of contention within her own party, what to speak of the BJP,” Mr Tiwary said. “Even a tall leader like Sharad Pawar severed his ties on the issue of foreign origin. But Sonia took it all in her stride. Today, however, she appears to be dragging herself....managing the party affairs despite poor health,” he added. “The choice before Sonia Gandhi today is not between her son and the party but her son and democracy itself. The Congress, which even now is more potent than any regional party is capable of taking on a hegemonic BJP. “But Rahul Gandhi has always come across as an *anichhuk* (reluctant) leader. He simply cannot inspire his supporters,” Mr Tiwary said. — PTI

Diggy’s loyalists sweep Youth Cong elections

RABINDRA NATH
CHOUDHURY
BHOPAL, DEC. 18

Loyalists of veteran Congress leader and former chief minister Digvijay Singh have swept the youth Congress elections in Madhya Pradesh, results of which were declared on Friday. While former Union minister and sitting Congress MLA Kantilal Bhuria’s son Vikrant has been elected president of state youth Congress, senior Congress leader Premchand Guddu’s son Ajit Boursai has been elected one of the 4 vice-presidents of the outfit. Both Kantilal Bhuria and Premchand Guddu are considered staunch loyalists of Mr Singh. Sanjay Singh Yadav, Pratima Mudgal and

Vipin Wankhde who have been elected vice-presidents of state youth Congress are also said to be enjoying Mr Singh’s confidence. Vivek Tripathy, Javed Mohammad and Sidharth Kushwaha have been elected secretaries of state youth Congress. Mr Tripathy and Mr Mohammad were said to have Mr Singh’s blessings. Interestingly, other factional leaders in Congress in MP such as Ajey Singh, Arun Yadav, Suresh Pachouri, and Sajjan Singh Verma have shown little interest in fielding their candidates in the youth Congress elections. The polling for the president and other organisational posts concluded on December 12.

Tomar ‘hopes’ for solution

■ **Continued from Pag 1**
have even threatened to step up the agitation and have said they are prepared to celebrate Republic Day next year with a tractor rally on Delhi’s borders. Farmers at the Singhu border have started making further arrangements to face the increasing cold weather conditions. “We’re preparing for a longer stay as our fight against the black laws will continue. It is getting colder, so we’re putting up more tents,” said a protester. The protesting farmers also faced action in Uttar Pradesh. The Sambhal district administration has issued notices to six farmers’ leaders asking them to submit personal bonds of ₹50,000 each, as a police report has warned of a breach of the peace during the protests. The six farmers who were served notices include Bharatiya Kisan Union (Asli) district chief Rajpal Singh Yadav and Jaiveer Singh, Brahmachari Yadav, Satendra Yadav, Raudas and Veer Singh. They have been organising protests in the district. The notices were issued under Section 111 CrPC (magistrate’s order against any person

who is likely to commit breach of the peace) on the basis of a report submitted by the police. “We’ll not fill the bonds come what may,” BKU (Asli) leader Rajpal Singh Yadav said. “They can hang us or send us to jail. We’re fighting for the rights of farmers.” BKU (Asli) division president Sanjeev Gandhi said none of them or their family members had signed the bonds. “We’re doing peaceful protests, not any crime,” he added. Earlier, the DMK-led Opposition in Tamil Nadu started a day-long hunger-strike in support of the farmers. DMK president M.K. Stalin led the fast at Valluvar Kottam, while Puducherry CM V. Narayanasamy led the agitation in the Union territory. Chipko movement leader Sundarlal Bahuguna also extended support to the farmers. Support for the farmers has also been coming from Bollywood. Swara Bhasker on Friday joined the league of Bollywood stars and Punjabi artistes who have come out in their support. The actress shared a few pictures from the protest site on Twitter: “A humbling day, to see the grit, resolve and

determination of protesting farmers and the elderly at #SinghuBorder #FarmersProtests,” she tweeted alongside the photos. Earlier, Punjabi singer and actor Diljit Dosanjh, who set the Internet on fire with his Twitter fight with Kangana Ranaut, had flown back from the US and had gone straight to the Singhu border to express solidarity with the farmers. Diljit was joined by other Punjabi singers, including Gurshabad Singh Kular and Harf Cheema, who sang songs at the protest site. The ongoing protests has badly hit vehicular movement in the Delhi-NCR region. After it was closed for several days, the Delhi traffic police on Friday opened the Delhi-Noida carriageway on the Chilla border. Other Delhi-UP border points like Tikri and Dhansa remain shut for traffic. Several of Delhi’s borders with Haryana are also shut. “The Singhu, Auchandi, Piau Maniyari, Sabholi and Mangesh borders are closed. Please take alternate routes via Lampur, Safiaband and Singhu school toll tax borders,” the traffic police tweeted.

150 shops gutted in N. Bengal fire

Jalpaiguri (West Bengal), Dec. 18: A major fire broke out at a market in West Bengal’s Jalpaiguri district in the early hours of Friday, gutting at least 150 shops, officials said. The flames were spotted around 3 am at the Dhupguri market by a shopkeeper, they said. Six fire tenders were rushed to the spot but the firefighting operations could not be started for some time as there were no water bodies nearby, officials said. Finally, water was fetched from the Kumlai nullah, while several shops were gutted in the meantime. “It was very difficult to get water to fight the fire as there are no water bodies near the market,” district fire officer Pradip Sarkar said. Four more fire tenders were brought in from Dinhat in Coochbehar district, Toofanganj and other areas to douse the flames, officials said. The blaze was brought under control around 6 am, they said. No one was injured in the incident, they said. North Bengal development minister Rabinranath Ghosh visited the area and spoke to officials. Local MLA Mitali Roy of the Trinamul Congress was also at the spot. “I have come here on the instructions of chief minister Mamata Banerjee,” Mr Ghosh said. He also briefed urban development minister Firhad Hakim about the situation and urged him to take steps to hand over the market to Dhupguri Municipality. At present, it is in the jurisdiction of the zilla parishad. “Around 150 shops were gutted in the fire,” the minister said. The state government will extend all possible help to the shopkeepers at this time of crisis, he said, adding that the gutted shops will be reconstructed. Environmentalists alleged rampant filling up of water bodies in the area, leading to the crisis for water. — PTI

THE ASIAN AGE

19 DECEMBER 2020

Kerala: Big triumph for LDF, Cong rudderless

The brilliant show put up by the Left Democratic Front (LDF) in Kerala in the elections to the local bodies is sure to offer the ruling front a solid base to prepare for the state Assembly elections hardly four months away while raising the bar higher for the Opposition, United Democratic Front (UDF), to win the race. The LDF has won 11 of the 14 district panchayat councils, 108 of the 152 block panchayats (the state has 140 assembly seats), 42 of the 86 municipalities and five of the six municipal corporations. Among the gram panchayats, the leftists won 514 of the 941, leaving 375 to the UDF and 23 to the National Democratic Alliance (BJP).

That the LDF has improved its own tally of 2015 local bodies elections when it was in the Opposition indicates that it faces little anti-incumbency threat in a state which alternates its ruling dispensation in every election without fail ever since 1977. While the Pinarayi Vijayan government's creditable performance in fighting virus attacks, first by Nipah in 2018 and by the coronavirus in 2020, its successful handling of two successive floods in 2018 and 2019, its focus on improving infrastructure especially in education and healthcare, its determined efforts to push through mega projects which includes the natural gas pipeline and the national highway project gave it the image of a government that works, its focus on welfare measures, which includes the construction of 2.5 lakh homes for the poor, the timely distribution of enhanced welfare pensions for the elderly and food kits during the pandemic, Covid-19, convinced the people that it is a government that cares.

This image, coupled with the failure of the central investigation agencies to come up with a credible case against people associated with the government vis-a-vis gold smuggling, has helped the LDF keep its head above water. The smart political manoeuvring with which it got a section of the Kerala Congress which held sway in central Kerala to its side has paid rich dividends for the LDF while denting the prospects of the UDF of which the regional party was a major part for the last 50 years.

The Congress, which leads the UDF, has party machinery that covers the entire spectrum, starting from the booths but a rudderless leadership squandered them all away, thinking that the relentless and one-sided media scrutiny of the government will carry the day for them. The UDF, which recorded a spectacular victory in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections on the back of the entry of then Congress president Rahul Gandhi from Wayanad constituency and the Sabarimala issue which put the LDF in a dock, was a house divided this time. It would take enormous efforts on the part of the leadership to put it in order and take on the resurgent LDF if it were to keep its hope of returning to power. As for the NDA, its hopes replacing the Congress after decimating it lie shattered with the poor showing, especially in the capital Thiruvananthapuram. The party needs to cover a lot of ground before it gains a critical mass to emerge a major force in the state politics.

‘Punishing’ a state

While it is not yet clear what elements attacked the car convoy of BJP president J. P. Nadda at Diamond Harbour near Kolkata recently — one theory points the finger at hooligans sponsored by the ruling Trinamul Congress and the other says it is an internal BJP job to discredit the Mamata Banerjee government as an excuse for punitive action — the Union government brought the hammer down on three IPS officers of the West Bengal cadre. Their services have been compulsorily requisitioned by the Union home ministry.

Chief minister Mamata Banerjee has responded with fury. She has threatened to take recourse to legal action. Ordinarily, the Centre requests a state to release a particular officer when there is special need since an officer of the IAS or the IPS is assigned to a state on being selected.

There may be scope for emergency procedures if a particular officer is badly needed with the Centre. But here the Union home ministry is forcing three IPS officers out of the state in one go. Is this dictatorial? Is it a “colourable” exercise of power, as the CM has observed? How the judiciary deals with the issue will be keenly watched if Ms Banerjee goes to court. It will be a precedent-setting order and will have a bearing on the broader question of Centre-state relations.

Before the 2019 Lok Sabha election, there was an instance of violence at a poll rally of then BJP party chief Amit Shah in Kolkata. The police commissioner was relieved of his charge by the Election Commission and subsequently asked by the state to report to the Centre. The officer who replaced him was also changed, along with three other IPS officers. These were not decisions of the Union home ministry as in the present instance, but of the EC. And yet it is the bulk nature of transfers, which makes these cases look like punishment.

Political antagonism between the Centre and a particular state government has probably not gone in this direction before and it is not a good sign for federalism, “cooperative” or otherwise, although Prime Minister has made renewed avowals of cooperative federalism.

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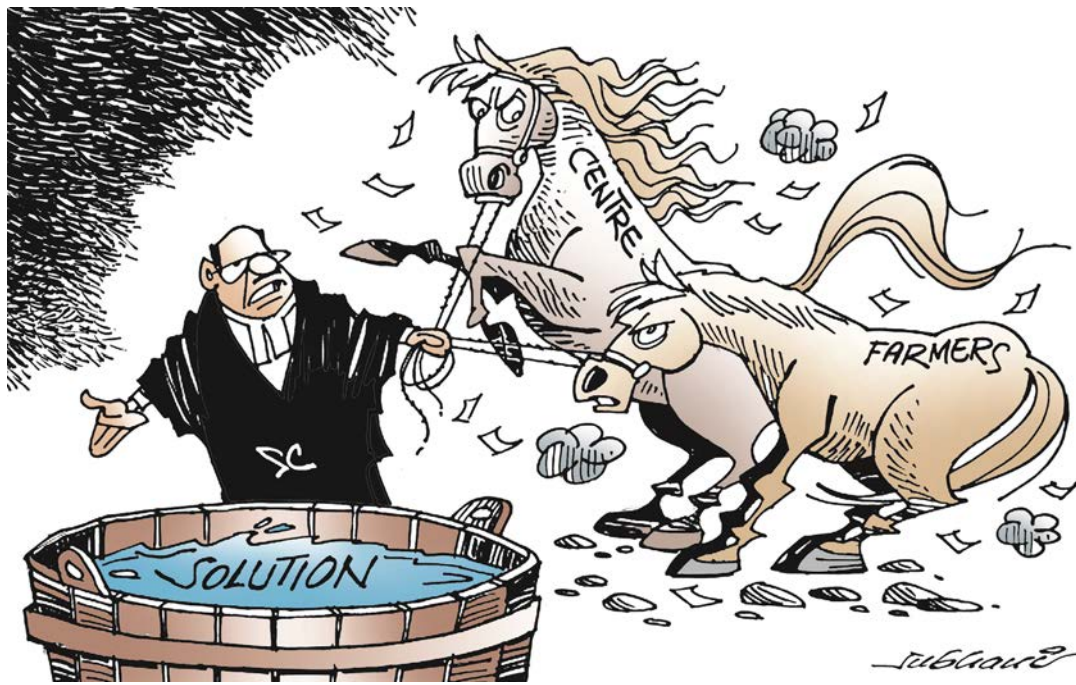
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Subhani



As schools reopen, try to bridge digital divide



Rukmini Banerji

The digital divide is layered on to existing divisions in our society

By January 2021, schools will have been closed for almost 300 days. Even when school systems reopen, it will take time for parents to feel comfortable in sending children daily to school. The longer schools stay shut and the more uncertain we are about the next steps, concern grows about the impact and implications of what looks like a year-long closure.

Starting 2005, every year in mid-January India sees the release of the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER). From 2005 to 2014, the ASER report tracked the status of schooling and provided estimates of basic reading and arithmetic skills. After 2014, the nationwide ASER report is done every other year and in the gap year we look in depth at a specific age group. For example, ASER 2017 focused on the 14-18 age group, while ASER 2019 dealt with the 4-8 age group. The year 2020 would have seen the regular country-wide report. But given the Covid crisis, it was appropriate to change the focus and timing of ASER to explore what children were doing while the schools were closed.

There are several key features of the ASER architecture that are worth highlighting. ASER has always been a rural survey with information collected from households. The children's sample is representative at the district and state levels. During Covid-19, where the only way to reach families was through phone calls, and it was essential to maintain the representativeness of the sample. Luckily, as part of the usual ASER process, phone numbers are collected from each surveyed household. In a normal year, this information is

used for monitoring and cross-checking. For ASER 2020, the 2018 sample was used as the frame. To rely on numbers, the sampling process must be scientific and rigorous. Despite the Covid-19 challenges, ASER even in this difficult year remains based on a meticulous sampling process.

Timing-wise, September seemed the right time to do the ASER 2020 survey. Many schools have summer holidays in April-May-June-July. This year, July and August was used by state governments to plan and implement their Covid response. By September, school systems across India had settled into providing whatever support they could to their students.

ASER 2020 Wave 1 was anchored around a set of interconnected questions. These included: what resources did families have, who in the family was able to help children, what inputs and learning opportunities did children receive and what were children able to do with respect to learning. Many of these questions were designed not only to explore how families dealt with the Covid crisis on the education front, but also to provide inputs into thinking about opportunities that could be leveraged beyond the crisis. Close to 120,000 households were sampled. Approximately 58 per cent households were reached, of which 75.8 per cent completed the survey. Thus, the ASER 2020 Wave 1 survey obtained information for about 60,000 children.

Here are some of the highlights. First, the availability of ASER 2018 data allowed comparisons to be made. For example, the proportion of households who own televisions or motorised vehicles remained similar from 2018 to 2020, but a sharp

increase in smartphone ownership is visible across states. Nationally, in 2018, 29.6 per cent families whose children went to government schools owned smartphones. This number rose to 56.4 per cent by 2018. For families who send their children to private schools, the figure in 2018 was 49.9 per cent, which increased to 74.2 per cent in 2020. A significant rise in access to smartphones in rural families is a striking feature of the last two years.

Overall, households reported that about 75 per cent children get some help at home in terms of learning support, and despite the crisis, close to 30 per cent children continued to attend paid tuition classes. Obviously, in families where parents have more education, they are able to help children more. However, even in families where both parents have less than five years of schooling, close to 25 per cent parents help children. Significant help in low education families also comes from siblings (in households where both parents have not even studied up to Class 5, 23.2 per cent children get help from older brothers and sisters.)

In the reference week before the survey in September, about a third of all children reported receiving learning materials and activities from their school. 67 per cent families whose children go to government schools and 87 per cent of those whose children go to private schools reported receiving materials via WhatsApp. Interestingly, 31.8 per cent of government school children's families also added that materials came via visits (either to the school by parents or by teachers to the child's home).

Interestingly, 80 per cent of all children in the sample had textbooks of their current grade. This number was slightly higher for

government school children. State governments across India made extensive efforts to deliver textbooks to children, and this statistic is testament to these endeavours. Asked about where children were learning at home during the reference week, 70 per cent families said their children did some learning activities in that week. While a majority of these activities were with traditional materials like textbooks and worksheets, fewer children (usually below 20 per cent) accessed learning programmes on television, radio or online.

Five major takeaways from this year's ASER exercise: First, the situation is likely to remain fluid for some months. With the clear inequities in our society, it is essential to track who is getting what opportunities and to assess what kind of learning loss is experienced. Second, ASER 2020 gives clear evidence of parental engagement and willingness to support children's learning. This family support must be leveraged by the school system in a systematic way. Third, traditional teaching-learning methods should be combined effectively with newer ways of reaching/learning. Fourth, in-depth assessments of “what works and how” is needed to improve digital content and delivery for the future. Just because families have devices and connectivity doesn't automatically mean learning is happening effectively. Finally, the digital divide is layered on to existing divisions in our society. Mechanisms to reach and teach children who are on the dark side of the divide must be worked out so their educational disadvantage can be ameliorated over time.

ASER 2020 completed the first wave in September. It's likely that a follow-up wave may be planned later in the current school year to track how children's learning journeys are progressing.

Rukmini Banerji is the CEO of Pratham Education Foundation

LETTERS

SHARED HERITAGE

If our national anthem needs to be tweaked as Sindh does not exist physically on the Indian map anymore, will we then discard Surya Sen and his brave Chittagong comrades who had sacrificed their lives for Indian Independence just because that area falls in present day Bangladesh? Will we then discard chapters of Mohenjodaro and Harappa from our history text books just because those ancient Indus valley sites are today located in Pakistan! How can Subramanian Swamy desire to excise Sindh from our national anthem and psyche? It is the region which forms the very genesis of the word, “India”!

Kajal Chatterjee
Kolkata

CALL A SESSION

THIS REFERS TO the editorial “Covid not a good reason to scrap Winter Session” (Dec. 18). Stopping the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic is indeed a bogus reason forwarded by the government. With this, the Centre has indeed been exposed for its incompetence and presumably does not want to face tough questions. It is high time it calls a short session to discuss the farmers' stir and other burning issues.

Bhagwan Thadani
Mumbai

SAFEGUARD INTEREST

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, “Post-pandemic bonding” (Dec. 18). British foreign secretary Dominic Raab's Delhi visit was to prepare the way for Prime Minister Johnson's India visit as the chief guest on Republic Day, and to invite PM Modi to the UK to the G-7 and the Climate Change (COP26) summits next year. But a new chapter in their relationship would necessarily entail the UK being more sensitive towards India's concerns.

Sankar Paul
Chakdaha, West Bengal

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

Farrukh Dhondy
Cabbages & Kings



“If our hands bent both ways
There'd be lines marked on the back.
We'd call them life, fate and fortune
Predicting ruin and rack.

With our palms already foretelling
It'd be a sort of heads and tails
And palmists would be confounded
Not knowing which fortune prevails.”

— From Come, Say ‘Come’
by Bachchoo

Researching Wikipedia on the origins of toxic words

Idle days, my friend, idle days in terms of worldly commerce, but busy as a woodpecker tapping the imagined computer keys of a tree-trunk. And as random questions occur, sometimes pertaining to work. Sometimes thoughtful wanderings from questions about how one dodges British tax by registering companies in Nassau, to the origins of phrases one has used and never stopped to etymologise.

Praise be to Ahura Mazda for inspiring the founders and conspirators of Wikipedia. And yes, I do contribute small sums to their coffers now and then. We must all will their incredibly comprehensive and by-

and-large-accurate encyclopaedia(e) as the world has never known, to continue — till time and ingenuity replace the ethereal store of knowledge with some other scientifically invented miracle.

The triviality of what I resort to Wiki for will or may, gentle reader, prompt you to judge me harshly. Today it occurred to me that I had never investigated the origins of the phrase “oopsy daisy”! I am now fairly knowledgeable about the meanings of certain nursery rhymes such as Humpty Dumpty which wasn't an egg as mistakenly portrayed by cartoonists, but a cannon in the service of His Majesty's artillery. I also proudly know that ring-a-ring-a-roses is about the plague that swept Britain and nothing to do with necklaces of blossoms as I had imagined when we played holding hands and forming a ring, at the age of three in the joyous hours of infant birthday parties.

And now Wikipedia corrects my lifelong notions and says the phrase is “Whoopsy Daisy”. There are several notes on the origin of the phrase, and they contradict each other and still leave the attribution of alarm, at an accidental slip, or as an encour-

agement to a child as you fling it into the air, mysterious. The appearance of this Daisy, presumably a girl and not a flower, doesn't figure in the explanations.

And in my idle researches I find that there are places where Wikipedia doesn't fear to tread. It very bravely, if casually, tells the literal meaning of the “F” word while incorporating the various expressions which use the single syllable without in any sense invoking its literal meaning. It is, as Bagwash Shri Ragwort noted in one of his rambles, used to express dismissal, disdain, disappointment and other “d”s, not to mention the moods and utterances whose descriptions begin with other letters of the alphabet.

And so, with other words which we, in our graciously inoffensive era, shorten to their first letters. And in that context, after a few minutes of research in these idle hours, I have discovered, gentle reader, that Wikipedia gives us definitions and connotations of very many common Hindi or Urdu swear words, including those which the victims of the abuse may object to as “going on mothers/sisters”.

One stereotype for us Parsis is that

we punctuate our sentences with the MC and BC words. I sincerely protest that my family and their acquaintances never fell into the particular linguistic habit, but a friend in college was universally known as Adi “MC” Manekshaw. He would freely use the expletives and was famous for his expression of surprise or disbelief, which was “Good Lord MC!” — (the mouth-filling words not just initials).

The intriguing word, which I grew up hearing in the Parsi and wider Indian community, was “saala”. The word literally means brother-in-law, and of course can mean that the speaker had carnal relations with the sister of the one to whom the word is directed. That could be provoking and insulting, but in my hearing, it was often used as an endearment. How in such discourse has its negativity turned into its opposite? (All answers to this newspaper's letters page! — *fd*. Sub-editors: Delete this line, we have enough unprintable nonsense stimulated by his columns anyway — *Ed*).

And wandering outside the possible remit of Wikipedia, I have taken to wondering whether the Parsi surname Siganporia, based on an associ-

ation with place, as with Adenwalla and Billimoria, should really be “Singaporía”. It is easy to see how the eastern tongue twists the sound of “x” or “ks” into “sk”, as in the transformation of Alexander to Sikander, or as boys in school would say “I'll aks my bro”!

And so with the word signal, again in English two consonants “g” and “n” thrown together and rendered very often by the general Indian public as “singal”. Which is why I suspect, as there is no place in Gujarat called Siganpor, that the surname derives from some ancestor who pursued the opium trade, banking or some such in the far eastern colony.

Again, in idle intellectual mode, I wonder why my grandmother demonised the vegetable which we call “brinjal” and Europeans refer to as aubergine or eggplant, by characterising anyone who fell ill with the phrase “vengna khaddha”, meaning “ate brinjals”. In my short and happy life, I have never known the vegetable to be toxic or poisonous.

Where are the Parsi etymologists and phraseological historians when you need them? Come back, all is forgiven.

SHORT TAKES

15 KIDS KILLED
IN AFGHANISTAN
BOMB BLAST

Ghazni, Dec. 18: At least 15 children were killed when a motorbike laden with explosives blew up near a religious gathering in eastern Afghanistan on Friday, officials said.

The children had gathered at a home in Ghazni province to recite *Quran* verses, a regular activity on the Islamic holy day of Friday, when the blast happened. "Unfortunately, as a result of this incident 15 people, all children, were martyred," said Wahedullah Jumazada, spokesman for the province's governor.

Ghazni police confirmed the blast and that all victims were children. Twenty other people, including some children, were wounded.

Interior ministry spokesman Tariq Arian earlier said the group had gathered in Gilan district to recite the *Quran*.

SUPER CYCLONE
YASA FLATTENS
VILLAGES IN FIJI

Suva, Fiji, Dec. 18: Super cyclone Yasa flattened entire villages as it tore through Fiji, aid agencies said on Friday, with a baby among two confirmed deaths and rescue workers racing to the worst-hit communities.

Yasa made landfall at the Pacific Island nation late Thursday as a top-of-the-scale Category Five cyclone, lashing Fiji's second-largest island, Vanua Levu.

The storm triggered floods, landslides and blackouts before moving out to sea early Friday, where it rapidly weakened to a Category Three system.

Zalim Hussein of Savusavu, a small town of a few thousand people on Vanua Levu, said he feared for his life sheltering at home in the dark as screeching winds ripped apart houses around him.

"I could hear roofs of neighbouring houses flying, trees falling and branches breaking outside and big waves crushing on the shore," he said.

UN SAYS 'DEEPLY
TROUBLED' OVER
THAI DETENTIONS

Geneva, Dec. 18: The UN human rights body expressed alarm on Friday over Thailand's detentions of democracy activists, including a minor of 16 years, under royal defamation laws.

"We are deeply troubled by the move by Thai authorities to charge at least 35 protesters in recent weeks, including a 16-year old student protester, under Article 112 — the lese majeste provision of Thailand's criminal code," the UN Human Rights Committee said in a statement.

The activists are facing charges for headlining recent demonstrations demanding reforms to the monarchy and more scrutiny of the royal family's financial arrangements. The kingdom's lese majeste laws shield the super wealthy King Maha Vajiralongkorn and the royal family from criticism.

"The offence carries sentences of between three and 15 years' imprisonment for defaming, insulting or threatening the country's royal family," the committee's spokeswoman, Ravina Shamdasani said.

MEGHAN SETTLES
CASE OVER
ARCHIE PHOTOS

London, Dec. 18: Meghan Markle has settled a claim against a news agency which took photographs of her and her young son Archie in a Canadian park, the High Court in London was told on Friday.

The Duchess of Sussex brought privacy and data protection claims against the Splash News and Picture Agency in March over the long-lens photographs.

A lawyer for the American former television actress, who married Prince Harry in 2018, said Splash UK went into administration after the claim was issued and served. Judge Matthew Nicklin told the hearing: "In light of the administration, the parties have agreed to settle the claim against Splash UK."

"The administrators of Splash UK have undertaken that, should the entity come out of administration, Splash UK will not take any photographs of the duke and duchess or their son in the future." The photographs were taken on January 20 this year, showing Markle walking with Archie in a baby sling, and her two dogs, in North Hill Regional Park on Vancouver Island.

Pence gets Covid jab on live TV, Trump sparks confusion

Don jumps gun on FDA, says Moderna vaccine 'overwhelmingly approved'

Washington, Dec. 18: The US vice president received a Covid-19 vaccine shot live on television on Friday in a public display designed to boost national confidence in the drug even as President Donald Trump sparked confusion over approval for a second anti-Covid drug.

"Building confidence in the vaccine is what brings us here this morning," VP Mike Pence said after being injected at the White House, quipping: "I didn't feel a thing." Pence, his wife Karen and the lead public health official in the country, Surgeon General Jerome Adams, were all given the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine in the annex to the White House.

Signalling the importance given to the event, top infectious diseases Anthony Fauci and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention director Robert Redfield were also in the room.

The notable absence was Trump himself. He has sent mixed messages about the seriousness of Covid-19 throughout the crisis, even as the US death toll topped 3,00,000 this month.

However, he has been keen to take credit for the historic speed of vaccine development. Early Friday he tweeted that a second drug made by Moderna had been "overwhelmingly approved" and that "distribution to start immediately." This sparked some confusion — while an advisory panel recommended emergency use approval for Moderna's vaccine on Thursday, the Food and Drug Administration has yet to give the final verdict allowing distribution — expected later Friday.

US President-elect Joe Biden's incoming White House senior advisor, congressman Cedric Richmond, has tested positive for Covid-19 after having open-air "interactions" with Biden, the transition team said on Thursday.

Richmond traveled independently to the state of Georgia to campaign Tuesday with Biden for a pair of Democrats in tight runoff elections against



Sao Paulo Governor Joao Doria, state health secretary Jean Gorinchteyn and Butantan Institute director Dimas Covas pose for photographs holding doses of the CoronaVac vaccine against Covid-19 next to a container unloaded from a cargo plane that arrived from China at Guarulhos International Airport in Guarulhos, Sao Paulo state, Brazil, on Friday. Brazil on Thursday recorded more than 1,000 deaths from Covid-19 over a 24-hour period for the first time since September, according to a government tally.

Macron rides out virus, fever at Versailles retreat

Paris, Dec. 18: As French President Emmanuel Macron rides out the Coronavirus in a presidential retreat at Versailles, French doctors are warning families who are heading for the holidays to remain cautious because of an uptick in infections — especially at the dinner table.

While Macron routinely wears a mask and adheres to social distancing rules, he hosted or took part in multiple group meals in

the days before testing positive on Thursday.

Critics say that's a bad example for compatriots advised to keep their gatherings to six people. Macron is suffering from fever, cough and fatigue, officials with the presidency said on Friday.

They wouldn't provide details of his treatment. He is staying at the presidential residence of La Lanterne in the former royal city of Versailles. Macron's positive test

incumbent Republican senators.

Biden, 78, tested negative for Covid-19 on Thursday, his team said.

The head of the World Health Organisation said on Friday that the UN health agency's pro-

gramme to help get Covid-19 vaccines to all countries in need, whether rich or poor, has gained access to nearly 2 billion doses of several "promising" vaccine candidates.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom

comes as French health authorities are again seeing a rise in infections and warning of more as French families prepare to get together for Christmas and New Year festivities.

France reported another 18,254 new infections on Thursday and its death toll is just under 60,000. France's Pasteur Institute released a study on Friday suggesting that meal times at home and in public are a major source of contamination. — AP

Ghebreyesus said the agreements mean that some 190 countries and economies taking part in the COVAX initiative will have access to vaccines "during the first half of next year." — AFP/AP

LOCKDOWN LOOMS
OVER CHRISTMAS
IN BETHLEHEM

Ramallah (West Bank), Dec. 18: The Palestinian prime minister announced a two-week lockdown in the West Bank that appears certain to curtail Christmas celebrations in the town of Jesus' birth.

Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh said that with a Coronavirus outbreak raging, there will be a nighttime curfew from 7 pm to 6 am throughout the West Bank.

On Fridays and Saturdays, the local weekend, the lockdown will be around the clock. The restrictions, which are to be in effect through January 2, will greatly restrict travel throughout the West Bank. Most businesses, with the exception of pharmacies and bakeries, will be forced to close during the curfews, Shtayyeh said. — AP

Biden backs son Hunter after tax probe revealed

Washington, Dec. 18: US President-elect Joe Biden has expressed full confidence in his son Hunter, a frequent target of Republican attacks, after it was revealed last week that he was under a federal tax investigation.

During his unsuccessful re-election campaign, President Donald Trump launched repeated accusations against Hunter and said the Bidens were a "corrupt" family and a "criminal enterprise." "We have great confidence in our son," Biden said, sitting next to his wife Jill, in an interview on "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert," which aired Thursday on CBS.

"I am not concerned about any accusations that have been made against him. It used to get to me. I think it's kind of foul play but... as long as he's good, we're good," he said in his first full remarks on the issue since the tax probe became public.

Trump and his allies have regularly assailed Hunter for his business dealings in Ukraine and China.

From 2014 to 2019, while his father was vice president, Hunter, a lawyer and lobbyist, served on the board of Burisma, a Ukrainian gas company.

Trump has accused Biden of seeking the removal of Ukraine's top prosecutor to protect Burisma — and his son — from a corruption investigation.

Hunter, 50, now an artist based in Los Angeles, has admitted to displaying "poor judgment" in some of his business dealings, but denied any wrongdoing.

BIDEN NAMES 1st
NATIVE AMERICAN
TO CABINET

Washington, Dec. 18: US President-elect Joe Biden unveiled his environment team on Thursday, choosing congresswoman Deb Haaland to serve as the first Native American interior secretary and Jennifer Granholm, a former Michigan governor, as energy secretary.

He also nominated Michael Regan, a North Carolina environmental regulator who is Black and brokered the nation's largest coal ash cleanup, to be administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency.

The choices fit with Biden's much-publicised pledge to form the most diverse White House cabinet in history.

"This brilliant, tested, trailblazing team will be ready on day one to confront the existential threat of climate change with a unified national response rooted in science and equity," Biden said in a statement. — AFP

Colbert asked Biden if there was anything he could "sincerely" thank Trump for accomplishing during his time in the White House.

After a short pause, Biden responded: "There are some things... Getting the vaccine moving has been positive, but by and large, he has been a president who's decided that the way he succeeds is by dividing us." — AFP

Human error
behind oil spill
in Mauritius

Tokyo, Dec. 18: The Japanese operator of a bulk carrier that struck a coral reef and caused an extensive oil spill off the coast of Mauritius said Friday that the accident occurred after the ship shifted its course two miles (3.2 kilometers) closer to shore than planned so its crewmembers could get cellphone signals.

Mitsui O.S.K. Lines said its investigation showed the accident was caused by human error, including inadequate nautical charts, navigation systems and risk awareness, and a lack of supervision and safety monitoring. The company said the tanker's nautical chart provided little information about depth and other necessary information.

Crewmembers on duty also failed to conduct safety checks visually or by radar, it said. The captain and crewmembers were also using their cellphones while on duty, the company said. It said it will invest about 500 million yen (\$4.8 million) to provide electronic nautical charts, training to strengthen safety culture and other systems to

enhance safety. The environmental disaster began July 25 when the ship MV *Wakashio* strayed off course and struck a coral reef a mile (1.6 kilometers) offshore. After being pounded by heavy surf for nearly two weeks, the ship's hull cracked and on Aug. 6 began leaking fuel into a lagoon, polluting a protected wetlands area and a bird and wildlife sanctuary.

The company apologised for the damage and in September offered 1 billion yen (\$9 million) to fund environmental projects and support the local fishing community in Mauritius. More than 1,000 tons of oil spilled into the coastal waters. About 3,000 tons that remained on the ship was pumped into barges before the *Wakashio* broke in two several days later. — AP

INNOVATION | HONOUR

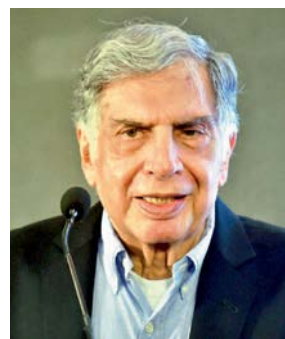
Virtual ceremony will be attended by senior officials from Israel, India, UAE on Dec. 21

Israeli peace, sustainability award for Ratan Tata

Jerusalem, Dec. 18: Veteran industrialist Ratan Tata will be honoured by the Indo-Israel Chambers of Commerce for promoting innovation that supports sustainability and peace in the region, including with the Palestinians.

The chairman emeritus of the Tata group will be honoured with 'Global Visionary of Sustainable Business and Peace' award during the launch of the Federation of Indo-Israel Chamber of Commerce's international chapter in Dubai on December 21.

The virtual ceremony will be attended by senior officials from Israel, India and UAE. "Tata has done a lot for India-Israel ties. He has generously contributed towards promoting innovation that supports sustainability and has been a promoter of peace in the region, including with the Palestinians. He has visited Israel a few times which has been extremely beneficial in promoting ties between the two countries. He very well deserves this honour," Raviv Byron, President of Israel-India Chamber of



Ratan Tata

Commerce, said. The 82-year-old industrialist and philanthropist is the recipient of two of

India's highest civilian awards — Padma Vibhushan and Padma Bhushan. The opening of the Federation of Indo-Israel Chamber of Commerce's international chapter in Dubai is the first such initiative aiming at tapping business opportunities together in other countries, and developing trilateral collaborations.

This is expected to pave the way for several other such international chapters for the bilateral Chamber in other parts of the world, Byron noted. "There is a large presence

of Indian diaspora in the UAE and Bahrain which includes top professionals who are well established and respected. Given the close ties between Israel and India, we can definitely work together to develop a framework for trilateral cooperation in the Gulf", he added.

The Tata Group has invested millions of dollars in Tel Aviv University's (TAU) Technology Innovation Momentum Fund. As the lead investor in the fund, Tatas have the right of first opportunity to negotiate licence agreement on areas that have

been defined as start-up fields like automotive, point of care for medical devices, cleantech, etc.

In 2018, TAU and Tata Trusts announced the launching of the Indian Centre for Agri & Allied Tech (I-CAT) that would facilitate bringing Israeli know-how and innovation to the farmers of the state of Andhra Pradesh, initially, and was to be later extended to all the other parts of India.

The initiative, supported by the Government of Andhra Pradesh, includes creating an advanced R&D centre, as well as

promoting activities of agricultural experts in villages and farms — aiming to overcome various technological, agronomic and economic barriers, and promote sustainable agriculture and food security.

During his visit to Israel in 2013, Tata had signed an agreement with Israel Aerospace Industry (IAI) to jointly develop, manufacture and support a wide range of defence and aerospace products including missiles, UAVs, radars, electronic warfare systems and homeland security systems. — PTI

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	46,960.69	0.15
Nifty 50	13,760.55	0.14
S&P 500*	3,699.28	-0.62
Dollar (₹)	73.56	0.04
Pound Sterling (₹)	99.31	0.66
Euro (₹)	90.10	-0.13
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	49,644.21	0.042
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	52.17	0.67
IN 10-Yr bond yield	5.959	0.007
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	0.926	-0.004

* As of 8:30 PM IST

India Inc's FY21 FDI outflow at \$12.25 billion

Indian firms have committed overseas investments worth \$12.25 billion between April and November this year. Of this actual outflow would be \$6.35-2.97 bn through equity and \$3.38 bn in loan commitments. The rest, \$5.90 bn, would be in guarantees. Main investors are OVL (\$1852 million), JSW Steel (\$865 mn), Haldia Petro-chem (\$599 mn), HCL Tech (\$587 mn), M&M (\$551 mn) and Adani Properties (\$391 mn), Care Ratings said.

No cane price cut; Goyal asks mills to be efficient



Food minister Piyush Goyal said the government cannot reduce the fair and remunerative price (FRP), the minimum price at which sugar mills buy cane from farmers, and asked the industry to be efficient, profitable and diversify product portfolio with less dependency on the central subsidy. Addressing Isma, Goyal said the central subsidy of Rs 3,500 crore for exports will help in liquidating surplus sugar stocks.

Bank credit rises 5.73%, deposits move up 11.34%

Bank credit grew by 5.73 per cent to Rs 105.04 lakh crore while deposits increased by 11.34 per cent to Rs 145.92 lakh crore in the fortnight ended Dec. 4, RBI data showed. In the fortnight ended Dec. 6, 2019, bank credit had stood at Rs 99.35 lakh crore and deposits at Rs 131.06 lakh crore. In the previous fortnight ended Nov. 20, credit grew by 5.82 per cent to Rs 104.34 lakh crore and deposits by 10.89 per cent.

Forex reserves down by \$778 mn to \$578.56 bn

The country's foreign exchange reserves declined by \$778 million to \$578.568 billion in the week to Dec. 11, RBI data showed. In the previous week, the reserves had touched a lifetime high of \$579.346 bn after increasing by \$4.525 bn. Foreign currency assets dropped by \$1.042 bn to \$536.344 bn. The gold reserves rose by \$284 mn to \$306.12 bn. The SDRs with IMF dipped by \$3 mn to \$1.503 bn.

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Instructed to clear goods fast, credit drawback in 3 days Customs asked to behave

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, DEC. 18

In a major relief to exporters and importers, customs officials have been asked to credit duty drawback to the exporter in three days. They have also been asked to reduce unnecessary delays and arbitrary practices during the custom clearance of imported goods.

The Action Plan of CBIC 2020- 21 directs officials that at least 90 per cent of the duty drawback should be credited within three days. Further, the refund may be deposited into the customer account in T+2 days.

"The government's instruction to further reduce the timeline for crediting at least 90 per cent of the duty drawback claims to the exporters from seven days to three days, will definitely help



improve the cash flow of various industry players involved in exporting goods out of India, especially in these Covid times when a large number of businesses are still facing liquidity crunch," said Abhishek Jain, tax partner, EY.

Moreover all the remaining duty drawback claims should be positively disposed of by March 31, 2021 and while doing so the target of disposing of draw-

back in seven days should be achieved, said Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs (CBIC).

A major cause of worry for importers has been the delay in clearances.

Exports, after a positive growth in September, once again started de-growing in October and November. Delays in the clearance of goods at the customs department have been one among the various reasons for this. "Most of the

imports from Free Trade economies have been receiving queries and were getting delayed for days as well as months," said the Federation of Indian Exporters Association.

The customs officials have now been advised to ensure judicious application of Carotar 2020, which are rules pertaining to country of origin, without causing disruption to the supply chain. They were also advised to review the function of customs ports to ensure that unnecessary delays and arbitrary practices are not being resorted to during custom clearance of goods.

The CBIC observed that importers are often asked to directly seek clarifications of the exporting country on country of origin verifications. "Officers under your charge may also be sensitised to ensure that enquiry on origin of

imported goods is initiated only where there are sufficient grounds to suspect origin of a good, or where the same has been identified as a risk by the Risk Management System. They should be suitably supervised to ensure that unnecessary queries are not raised on account of goods origin," said CBIC.

"In order to resolve industry concerns around the Carotar 2020, CBIC has issued instructions to ensure that queries under the said rules are issued only when sufficient grounds to question the origin of goods are present. This is a smart move on the part of the government and will be much appreciated by the industry, as this, while preventing revenue leakage, will ensure that the shipments are not unnecessary delayed at customs ports," said Jain.

Logistics' competitiveness gap may cost \$500 bn by 2030

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, DEC. 18

With the supply chain inefficiencies remaining high, the competitiveness gap of the Indian logistics sector is expected to go up from \$180 billion to \$500 billion in 2030.

The logistics cost in India stands at 14 per cent of GDP, compared to the global average of about 8 per cent, creating a competitiveness gap of \$180 billion and this could increase to \$500 billion by 2030, finds a report by global management consultancy Arthur D. Little.

India's supply chain and logistics sector is valued at \$215 billion and is growing at a CAGR of 10.5 per cent. It is marred by an unbalanced logistics modal mix, high indirect costs, poor infrastructure,

fragmented networks and lack of technology adoption. The pandemic further accentuated supply chain weaknesses.

Indirect logistics costs in India are four times the average of those in developed countries. The main reasons are excessive layers in distribution channels and inventory mismanagement. Inadequate demand forecasting due to lack of technology adoption leads to inventory mismanagement. It also leads to high inventory carrying costs, which include costs for holding and storing unsold goods. These costs alone amount to 15-25 per cent of inventory costs or \$120 to \$180 billion.

Transportation by road is at the root of the unwarranted logistics costs. Transportation represents

about 40 per cent of logistics costs, and heavy dependence on the road networks, combined with poor transportation infrastructure, makes transportation costs balloon. India's rail and sea network are highly under-utilised due to lack of supporting infrastructure.

Failing to address India's competitiveness gap of \$180 billion could expand it to \$500 billion by 2030. Greenfield manufacturing will not be viable because high logistics costs are a barrier to entry. High logistics costs will continue to impede local manufacturing and reduce demand for Indian products in the global markets.

"To bridge the current competitiveness gap of \$180 billion, India needs to halve logistics cost from 14 per cent of GDP to 7 per cent,"

said Barnik Chitran Maitra, managing partner of Arthur D. Little India and South Asia.

The study finds that India will have to optimise the logistics modal mix to global benchmarks, with roads constituting 25-30 per cent, railways comprising 50-55 per cent and waterways accounting for 20-25 per cent of transportation modes. It will have to reduce indirect or "hidden" costs to 20-25 per cent through efficient inventory management and monitoring. In addition, turnaround time should be optimised to 700-800 km per day, with the target of increasing truck trips by 50 per cent. The throughput of the road network has to be raised with better quality roads and a higher proportion national highways in the road network.

World's richest banker Kotak made \$16 bn after a brush with death

SUVASHREE GHOSH & ANTO ANTONY DEC. 18

If it weren't for a cricket accident that almost killed him, Uday Kotak probably wouldn't be the world's richest banker.

A ball that hit him in the head and led to an emergency surgery pushed a 20-year-old Kotak to abandon his dream of becoming a professional player. After a brief stint at the family's cotton-trading business, he went on to pursue his MBA at the prestigious Jamnalal Bajaj Institute of Management Studies in Mumbai before starting out in finance in 1985 at the age of 26.

Kotak, now 61, has a fortune estimated at around \$16 billion, according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index.

While India has been grappling with a shadow-lending crisis, his Kotak Mahindra Bank Ltd has been able to rise through the crowd, gaining investors' trust by starting to slow lending to riskier sectors more than two years ago and keeping good corporate governance. When the coronavirus pandemic added to the industry's woes by eroding borrowers' ability to repay, the firm was one of the first to raise capital to fortify its balance sheet, helping boost investors' confidence.

The strategy paid off: Kotak Mahindra Bank shares are up 17 per cent



this year, the most among Indian peers, and Kotak just gained an extension to his chief executive officer term for another three years. A representative at the firm didn't respond to requests for comment.

"As far as I'm concerned, becoming the world's richest banker is only a proxy for Uday being one of the world's smartest bankers," said Anand Mahindra, the chairman of Mahindra Group in Mumbai, whose tie-up with Kotak back in 1986 led to the firm's name. "More importantly, he's understood that what makes a bank sustainable and durable is not just smart strategies but unsailable governance."

Kotak's company stands out in a country where lenders have some of the worst bad-loan ratios in the world. While its bad-loan ratio has risen in 2020, it ranked as the second lowest among peers, with its capital-adequacy score being the highest. The nation's second-largest lender by market value reported an unex-

pected 27 per cent profit surge in the September quarter.

The firm got another boost last month, when the central bank proposed increasing the ownership limit for founders, effectively reducing the risk that Kotak will be forced to dilute his 26 per cent stake in the lender as previously demanded by the Reserve Bank of India.

Kotak, a native of Gujarat, set up an investment company in 1985 with a Rs 30 lakh (\$41,000) loan from family and friends and partnered with Mahindra the following year. The firm, which started off discounting bills, later expanded its loan portfolio, got into stock brokering, investment banking, insurance and mutual funds. It converted into a lender in 2003 after getting the RBI's nod.

He has been Kotak Mahindra Bank's CEO since its beginning and gained more control of it in 2006 by ending a partnership of more than a

decade with Goldman Sachs Group Inc. Kotak rose through the ranks by keeping strong underwriting practices and avoiding lending to riskier sectors, focusing instead on expanding collateral-backed loans for farm equipment, mortgages and vehicles, according to Deepak Jasani, head of retail research at HDFC Securities Ltd.

While the RBI just approved the extension of Kotak's CEO term investors are starting to wonder what will happen after he hands over the reins.

Unlike many family-owned enterprises in India, Kotak has avoided enrolling family members into the lender's board or at top executive positions. That helped maintain investors' and depositors' confidence in a country where the lack of corporate governance and transparency has already brought down three banks and pushed two shadow lenders to bankruptcy in less than two years.

"It's been all Uday," said Ananth Narayan, a former banker and now an associate professor of finance at the S.P. Jain Institute of Management & Research in Mumbai. "There are a lot of good people under him, but frankly, they are all overshadowed by Uday. Anybody who has to step into Uday's shoes has a tough job because he is an institution by himself."

—Bloomberg

Sensex hits 47000 in opening trade



RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, DEC. 18

The Sensex breached the 47000-mark for the first time ever on Friday in opening trade, led by gains in the IT sector stocks post-Accenture's strong first quarter performance and US Federal Reserve's decision to keep rates unchanged.

The unrelenting bull run is now seen taking the benchmark index closer to 50000 points, the target set by some brokerages.

The index opened at 47026 as against the previous close at 46,890.34. But it closed below 47000 at 46,960.69, up 70 points or 0.15 per cent, as the market turned volatile post the big opening move and touched a low of 46,630.31.

The Nifty-50 also closed at a new all-time high of 13,760.55, gaining 0.14 per cent, or 19.85 points.

Recently BNP Paribas set a target of 50500 for 2021, earlier Morgan Stanley had said that the Sensex would cross 50000 by December 2021.

Who knows it may come even earlier by March 2021, going by the pace of index movement.

At the same time risks are increasing as the foreign money pouring into the equity market is large-

ly short-term funds, which could fly out on monetary policy tightening by global central banks like the US Fed.

Large-scale foreign buying continued, with Rs 2,720.95 crore net purchase reported by the exchanges on Friday.

"The Fed's decision to keep rates unchanged will help FIIs to maintain a positive view on emerging markets like India," said Vinod Nair, head of research, Geojit Financial Services.

Strong first quarter FY21 performance by IT major Accenture led to a rally in Indian IT stocks.

The BSE IT index gained 1.70 per cent, led by gains for Infosys (2.64 per cent), Wipro (1.89 per cent), HCL Technologies (1.32 per cent) and TCS (0.87 per cent).

"Accenture's Q1 performance and guidance came in well ahead of expectations largely due to continued strong demand in outsourcing and recovery in the consulting business," said Emkay Global Financial Services. "A broad-based demand recovery and sustained healthy growth momentum in revenue/order booking of the outsourcing business augur well for Indian IT peers."

MG TO ROLL OUT 7-SEATER HECTOR PLUS IN JANUARY

MICHAEL GONSALVES PUNE, DEC. 18

MG Motor, the British car brand now owned by the Chinese giant SAIC Motor, plans to introduce the much-awaited MG Hector Plus 7-seater version in January to boost sales in the fiercely competitive Indian car market.

The Hector Plus range rivals the upcoming next-generation Mahindra XUV500, the Tata Gravitas, as well as the three-row version of the Hyundai Creta.

The biggest difference between this new model and the three-row, six-seat Hector Plus, launched in July this year, is that the seven-seater version will get a bench instead of captain seats in the second row.

With the price likely to be close to the six-seater Hector Plus (Rs 13.74 lakh-Rs 19.69 lakh), expect a few cosmetic changes inside and out to differentiate between the six-seater and seven-seater versions of the Hector Plus.



Copper tops \$8,000 as Goldman points to commodities super-cycle

Dec. 18: Copper topped \$8,000 a tonne for the first time in more than seven years, with Goldman Sachs Group Inc and BlackRock Inc pointing to the start of a new long-term bull market as supply lags an expected demand boom.

The market is witnessing the sharpest rally in more than a decade, with China's appetite for commodities and supply snags early on in the Covid-19 pandemic

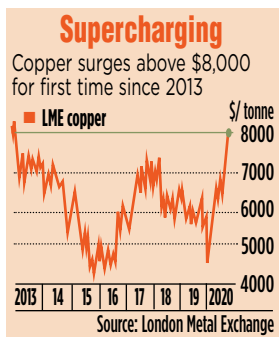
lifting copper about 80 per cent from its March lows.

Expectations for a deficit, the weaker dollar, and its role in green technology have also fuelled gains. Some banks and investors are now drawing comparisons to the spike in the early 2000s, when a jump in Chinese orders ushered in the last super-cycle for commodities.

"You have all the tell-tale signs of a super-cycle," Jeff

Currie, head of commodities research at Goldman Sachs, told Bloomberg TV. He cited metals hitting multiyear highs, the weaker dollar, crude oil reaching \$50, and rising global liquidity.

Copper spiked to \$8,028 a tonne, the highest price since 2013, on Thursday, on the London Metal Exchange. Most other metals also gained, with aluminum rising 0.5 per cent.



Singapore iron ore futures pushed above \$160 a tonne, hitting the highest level since trading began in 2013.

Goldman pointed to the start of a positive feedback loop between commodities, the dollar and emerging-market growth that has driven past structural bull markets. At the centre is strong, synchronized, policy-driven demand focused on wealth redistribution

and renewables and, with commodity supply-side spending outside of renewables still at very low levels, this demand growth should keep markets tight for the foreseeable future, it said in a December 17 note.

BlackRock expects copper to hit new all-time highs in the upswing of the cycle, Evy Hambro, the firm's global head of thematic investing, said.

China's success at containing the pandemic and optimism about global economic growth next year is fuelling gains across industrial commodities from iron ore to oil. It's been a remarkable turnaround for copper, which fell more than 50 per cent from a record high in 2011, trading below \$5,000 a tonne during a slump in 2015-16 and again earlier this year.

—Bloomberg

SHORT TAKES

Rooney's son Kai signs for Man U

London: Wayne Rooney's son Kai has followed in his father's footsteps by signing for Manchester United. United's record goalscorer posted a picture on social media of the 11-year-old, the oldest of Rooney's four sons, signing a contract at his father's former club. Rooney accompanied the image with the caption: "Proud day. Kai signing for @manchestertunited. Keep up the hard work son." Rooney, 38, now in interim charge of Championship club Derby, joined United from Everton in 2004 as a teenager. The former England striker had a glittering 13-year career at Old Trafford, scoring 253 times in 559 appearances and breaking Bobby Charlton's long-standing goals record in January 2017. — *AFP*

NBA keeps coach challenge rule

New York: The NBA is keeping the replay rule allowing coaches one challenge of certain officiating decisions per game, the league said Thursday. The coach's challenge was introduced last season on a one-year trial basis. The league said Thursday that the board of governors had approved a recommendation from the competition committee to retain the challenge going forward. "Our coaches were receptive to the pilot version of the Coach's Challenge, increasing usage and becoming more comfortable with the concept and strategic aspects as the season progressed," Byron Spruell, NBA President of League Operations, said in a statement. During the 2019-20 season, NBA head coaches challenged 633 calls in the regular season and 67 in the playoffs. — *AFP*

Smith gears up for Alvarez bout

Los Angeles: Britain's Callum Smith will be out to prove that size does matter on Saturday when he defends his World Boxing Association super-middleweight crown against pound-for-pound king Saul "Canelo" Alvarez in Texas. The unbeaten Smith (27-0, 19 knockouts) will take sizeable height and reach advantages into the ring at the Alamodome in San Antonio against the naturally smaller Alvarez (53-1-2, 36 KOs). Alvarez, who has not fought since he jumped up to light-heavyweight to score an 11th round knockout of Sergey Kovalev in November 2019, starts as favourite for Saturday's bout where he will once again move up in class. — *AFP*

Aniket scores as Jamshedpur win

Vasco: NorthEast United FC slumped to their first defeat in the ongoing Indian Super League as they went down 0-1 to Jamshedpur FC, here on Friday. Aniket Jadhav's strike (53rs minute) was the difference between the two sides in what was the 500th game of the ISL. T. P. Rehresh also pulled off a terrific penalty save in the second-half to keep Jamshedpur's unbeaten streak against NorthEast intact. Both sides were unable to break the deadlock in the first half as they managed to cancel out each other's threat. As a result, no shots on target were registered. — *PTI*

Live on TV

CRICKET

Australia vs India: First Test — Day Three from 9.30 am on Sony Ten 1, 3, Sony Six, HD

FOOTBALL

English Premier League: Crystal Palace vs Liverpool from 6 pm; Southampton vs Manchester City from 8.30 pm; Everton vs Arsenal from 11 pm; Newcastle vs Fulham from 1.30 am (Sunday) on Star Sports Select 1, HD

Indian Super League: Goa vs Chennaiyin from 7.20 pm on Star Sports 2, 3

Italian League: Fiorentina vs Verona from 7.30 pm; Sampdoria vs Crotone from 10.30 pm; Parma vs Juventus from 1.15 am (Sunday) on Sony Ten 2, HD

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ASHWIN ON FIRE

Spinner takes four to tie Aussies in knots on Day 2

Adelaide, Dec. 18: Ravi Ashwin bagged four wickets as a dominant India held a 62-run lead at stumps on day two of the Adelaide day-night Test after Australian captain Tim Paine ran out of batting partners.

Paine was left stranded on 73 not out when the Australian innings ended at 191 to trail India's 244 by 53 runs.

Ashwin had figures of 4-55 while Umesh Yadav took 3-40.

At stumps, India in their second innings were one down for nine with Mayank Agarwal on five and nightwatchman Jasprit Bumrah yet to score. The under-pressure Prithvi Shaw, who was out for a duck in the first innings, was bowled by Pat Cummins for four.

Fifteen wickets fell on the day which started when Cummins and Mitchell Starc took just 25 deliveries to knock off the final four India batsmen.

Australia in turn struggled to make headway as Bumrah, Ashwin and Yadav worked their way through the batting order.

Even with India spilling five chances, they never allowed Australia to settle apart from a determined Paine who plugged on to his eighth half century, aided in part by being dropped by Agarwal on 26.

It was Paine's only misstep and he brought up his 50 off 68 deliveries with an assured cut to the boundary.

As his confidence grew he produced a reverse sweep to move into the 60s with a four off Ashwin.

After Australia took 28 balls to get their first runs on the board, Bumrah stepped up to remove Matthew Wade and the out-of-form Joe Burns for eight each before dinner.

Ashwin's spin captured the wickets of Steve Smith, Travis Head and debutant Cameron Green between dinner and tea.

— *AFP*



Ravichandran Ashwin (second from left) of India celebrates with teammates after dismissing Australia's Steve Smith during their second day of the first Test in Adelaide on Friday.

SCORECARD

India 1st Innings: (overnight 233 for 6): Saha c Paine b Starc 9, Ashwin c Paine b Cummins 15, Yadav c Wade b Starc 6, Bumrah not out 4, Shami c Head b Cummins 0. Extras (B-2, LB-8, NB-7, WD-1) 18. **Total (all out in 93.1 overs) 244.**
FoW: 1-0, 2-3, 3-100, 4-188, 5-196, 6-206, 7-233, 8-235, 9-240, 10-244. **Bowling:** Starc 21-5-53-4, Hazlewood 20-6-47-1, Cummins 21-7-48-3, Green 9-2-15-0, Nathan Lyon 21-2-68-1, Marnus Labuschagne 1-0-3-0.
Australia 1st Innings: Wade lbw b Bumrah 8, Burns lbw b Bumrah 8, Labuschagne lbw b Yadav 47, Smith c Rahane b Ashwin 1, Head c&b Ashwin 7, Green c Kohli b Ashwin 11, Paine not out 73, Cummins c Rahane b Yadav 0, Starc not out 15, Lyon c Kohli b Ashwin 10, Hazlewood c Pujara b Yadav 8. Extras (LB-3) 3. **Total (all out in 72.1 overs) 191.**
FoW: 1-16, 2-29, 3-45, 4-65, 5-79, 6-111, 7-111, 8-139, 9-167, 10-191. **Bowling:** Yadav 16.1-5-40-3, Bumrah 21-7-52-2, Shami 17-4-41-0, Ashwin 18-3-55-4.
India 2nd Innings: Prithvi b Cummins 4, Mayank not out 5, Bumrah not out 0. **Total (for 1 wicket in 6 overs) 9.**
FoW: 1-7. **Bowling:** Starc 3-1-3-0, Cummins 3-2-6-1.

NUMBERS GAME

R. ASHWIN'S BEST BOWLING IN AUSTRALIA:

- Ravichandran Ashwin recorded the best bowling performance in Australia by taking four for 55 off 18 overs. It was only second time when this off-spinner took four wickets in an innings in Australia. His previous best in Australia was four for 105 off 19 overs at Sydney in January 2015. The 34-year old's best bowling against Australia is seven for 103 at Chennai in February 2013.
- Ravichandran Ashwin also became the third highest wicket taker for India against Australia in Tests after Anil Kumble (111 wickets in 38 innings of 20 Tests) and Harbhajan Singh (95 wickets in 35 innings of 18 Tests). He took 81 wickets at an average of 31.00 in 29 innings of 16 Tests by end of the Australian first innings.
- Steven Smith made just one run off 29 balls in 45 minutes. It was his fourth single in 132 innings of 74 Tests. His previous slowest single was against England at Lord's in July 18, 2013, off 14 balls in 19 minutes.
- Tim Paine's unbeaten 73 was fifth half century in 31 innings of 20 Tests as skipper. Overall, it was his eighth fifty in 51 innings of 32 Tests.

— *S. PERVEZ QAISER*

SYDNEY TEST STILL ON CARD, ASSERTS CA

Melbourne, Dec. 18: Cricket Australia on Friday asserted that the third Test of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy against India is not threatened by a fresh Covid-19 outbreak in Sydney even though the situation is being closely monitored.

Australian cricket officials were put on alert after the number of cases in the northern beaches outbreak in Sydney reached 28 on Friday. The third Test between India and Australia at the SCG is scheduled to get underway on January 7.

"There's been lots of discussion and meetings of our medical experts, but this is the reason why throughout the summer we've had our players in bubbles in the hub," CA's interim chief executive Nick Hockley said.

"We're monitoring the situation; we're not panicking at all, staying calm. It's really watch, wait and see and I think the governments around the country have handled the pandemic so well, so we'll watch, learn and stay in touch," he added. — *PTI*

Duffy, Seifert down Pak in one-sided T20 opener

Auckland, Dec. 18: New Zealand cruised to a five-wicket win over Pakistan in the first Twenty20 international at Auckland's Eden Park on Friday.

The Black Caps ended on 156 for five with seven balls to spare after losing the toss and being set a target of 154.

Tim Seifert top-scored for the hosts with 57, while debutant paceman Jacob Duffy took four for 33.

Pakistan never recovered from a slow start, despite a fighting 42 from stand-in captain Shadab Khan.

Haris Rauf was the tourists' best bowler, taking three for 29.

Pakistan had a rocky preparation for the match when 10 of their touring party tested positive for Covid-19 during quarantine after arriving in New Zealand.

In contrast, New Zealand were coming off a 2-0 series win over the West Indies and playing in home conditions.

Man of the match Duffy made a sensational start,



New Zealand's Tim Seifert plays a shot against Pakistan during their first T20 match at Eden Park in Auckland on Friday.

dismissing opener Abdullah Shafique for a duck in his first over.

He then claimed the scalps of Mohammad Rizwan and Mohammad Hafeez in his second over.

Khan tried to rescue his side's innings, smashing

42 from 32 balls before Duffy coaxed a top edge to Sodhi.

Brief scores: Pakistan 153/9 in 20 overs (Shadab Khan 42; Jacob Duffy 4/33) lost to New Zealand 156/5 in 18.5 overs (Tim Seifert 57; Haris Rauf 3/29).

BIG SQUADS TO FIGHT BUBBLE FATIGUE: IAN

London, Dec. 18: Former Australia captain Ian Chappell believes teams such as India will need increasingly large squads to help them combat "bubble fatigue" as they press ahead with extensive touring schedules amid the Coronavirus pandemic.

Leading Indian players have been in a series of bio-secure bubbles since September, initially while taking part in an Indian Premier League moved to the United Arab Emirates on health grounds.

Travelling to Australia, they again underwent quarantine ahead of the ongoing Test series.

"I have never experienced anything like this, and I am not surprised some players have started to talk about bubble fatigue," Chappell said.

"We had a couple of England players who have already pulled out of the BBL for that reason."

"If you look at what India have got coming up, they are going to need a huge squad of players," the cricket great further added. — *AFP*

Man Utd ride on Rashford's brace

Sheffield (United Kingdom), Dec. 18: Manchester United mounted yet another rescue mission on Thursday, beating Sheffield United 3-2 to maintain their perfect away record in the Premier League this season.

Ole Gunnar Solskjaer's Jekyll-and-Hyde team now have 18 points from six matches on the road — coming from behind to win each one of them.

Two goals from Marcus Rashford and an Anthony Martial strike lifted United to sixth in the table, five points behind leaders Liverpool with a game in hand.

But Sheffield United are staring into the abyss — with just one point to their name, Chris Wilder's side have fewer points after their first 13 games of a league season than any other team in English top-flight history.

The visitors outclassed Sheffield United for long periods at Bramall Lane but faced a nervy final few minutes before celebrating their 10th consecutive away victory in the league.

Sheffield United started brightly as Manchester United struggled to find their rhythm and it was no surprise when they scored just their sixth league goal of the season in the fifth minute.

United appeared to be in cruise control but McGoldrick headed home from a corner in the 87th minute to make life uncomfortable and Henderson

THE RESULTS

Manchester United (Rashford 26, 51, Martial 33)	3
Sheffield United (McGoldrick 5, 87)	2
Aston Villa	0
Burnley	0

had to dive to his right to keep out a powerful shot by substitute Lys Mousset. But the visitors clung on for the win.

VILLA HELD BY BURNLEY

Aston Villa squandered multiple chances as they were held to a frustrating 0-0 draw by battling Burnley on Thursday.

The hosts dominated without being at their best but were thwarted by the Claret, who climbed out of the Premier League relegation zone.

Anwar El Ghazi and Kortney Hause hit the woodwork while Matt Lowton cleared a deflected strike from Ahmed Elmohamady off the line.

Burnley's threat was limited — Chris Wood had their best chance saved — but Sean Dyche's side are now unbeaten in three games after a tricky run against Everton, Arsenal and Villa.

Burnley rode their luck as Villa missed the chance to make serious ground on the Premier League's pace-setters. They remain 11th, four points adrift of fifth.

— *AFP*



Players of Manchester United and Sheffield United eye the ball during their English Premier League match at the Bramall Lane Stadium in Sheffield, England, on Thursday. Manchester United won 3-2.

— *AP*

Roma rout Torino in Italian league

Milan, Dec. 18: Roma moved level on points with champions Juventus in third place in Italian League on Thursday with a 3-1 win over 10-man Torino.

Torino had a mountain to climb after Wilfried Singo was sent off after 14 minutes in Rome following two yellow cards in seven minutes.

Roma followed on from their 5-1 win over Bologna last weekend and are level on 24 points with Juventus — four points adrift of leaders AC Milan.

After Singo's dismissal the hosts piled on the pressure and it paid off with Mkhitarayan opening the scoring after 27 minutes in the Stadio Olimpico.

Torino goalkeeper Vanja Milinkovic-Savic had pushed out a Gianluca

Mancini long-range effort, but Leonardo Spinazzola sent the ball back with Mkhitarayan's follow-up hitting the post and bouncing into the net.

Jordan Veretout converted a penalty before the break after a foul on Edin Dzeko.

Simone Edera rattled the woodwork for Torino after an hour but the visitors hopes diminished when Lorenzo Pellegrini added a third after 68 minutes.

Torino captain Andrea Belotti pulled a goal back after 73 minutes with substitute Federico Bonazzoli sending the ball wide minutes later.

Torino fell to their eighth defeat this season, as they sit second bottom of the table with 30 goals conceded in 12 games. — *AFP*

POLISH LEWANDOWSKI IS BEST MEN'S PLAYER

Geneva, Dec. 18: Robert Lewandowski won his biggest personal prize, showing that a forward not named Messi or Ronaldo can be voted the world's best football player.

The Poland captain was named the FIFA Best Men's Player for 2020 after his 55-goal season lifted Bayern Munich to a sweep of international and domestic trophies. Lewandowski topped a three-player shortlist that included Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo. Voting was by a global jury of national team captains and coaches, plus selected journalists and fans.

Lewandowski joined Luka Modric, the Croatia and Real Madrid midfielder who won in 2018, as the only players in the past 13 years to deny both Messi and Ronaldo the victory.

Lucy Bronze was voted the best women's player to give England its first individual victory at the FIFA awards. A Champions League winner with Lyon, she has since joined Manchester City. — *Agencies*