

NEW DELHI TUESDAY 16 MARCH 2021



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DELHI AGE | 16

The mahurat of Akshay starrer *Ram Setu* will be held in Ayodhya Thursday

And so it's been absolutely amazing to just be alongside all that, to feel that energy," Dua Lipa, who won best pop vocal album, said backstage. Swift won the top prize

SHORT TAKES

Delhi records 368 coronavirus cases

New Delhi: Delhi on Monday recorded 368 new Covid cases, while the positivity rate stood at 0.59 per cent, according to data shared by the health department. On Sunday, the daily fresh cases tally had crossed the 400-mark for the fourth consecutive day. Delhi on Saturday had recorded 419 Covid cases while the positivity rate stood at 0.56 per cent. On Sunday, the city reported 407 cases and the positivity rate was 0.60 per cent. On Friday, Delhi had recorded 431 cases, the highest in over two months, and the count on Thursday was 409. The Covid death climbed to 10,944 on Monday with three more fatalities being reported in the national capital, as per the bulletin. A total of 585 cases were reported on January 1 and 424 on January 3. The daily count had dropped to 306 on January 11 and risen again to 386 on January 12, according to official figures.

— PTI

City police official's handbag snatched

New Delhi: Unidentified men snatched the handbag of a police official in southwest Delhi's Vasant Kunj area, officials said on Monday. The incident took place on March 10 outside Vasant Square Mall, they said. The official, who is an assistant commissioner of police in traffic unit of the Delhi Police, was in civil uniform when the incident happened, a senior police officer said. She had cards, some cash and other documents in the bag, police said. A case under relevant sections has been registered and efforts are being made to arrest the accused. Police are checking CCTV footage in the area to identify the accused, they added.

Duta holds march over salary dues

New Delhi: Thousands of Delhi University teachers took to streets on Monday to protest non-payment of salaries to the staff of 12 Delhi government-funded colleges of the DU. Led by Delhi University Teachers' Association (DUTA), the "Adhikar rally" was held from Delhi University's V-C office to the chief minister's office against the Delhi government's "arbitrary and unreasonable" stance towards the 12 DU colleges. "For more than a year now, employees have not been paid salaries and pensions on time, as grants have not been released on time for one or the other reason," the DUTA said in a statement. The DUTA also alleged that the Delhi government has given the charge of the 12 colleges to senior accounts officers (Sr AOs), replacing the principals through an earlier order of the Finance Division. A delegation of DUTA and Delhi University Principals' Association (DUPA) office bearers also met acting vice chancellor P C Joshi and Dean, colleges Balaram Pani, urging them for action against the February 17 order of the Finance Division.

BJP NOT SERIOUS ABOUT TACKLING POLLUTION: AAP

New Delhi: The BJP is not serious about tackling pollution in Delhi which is evident from the fact that the Centre allowed the Commission for Air Quality Management Ordinance to lapse, the AAP claimed on Monday. Addressing a press conference here, AAP spokesperson Atishi questioned the Central government over the ordinance getting lapsed. "The Central government had taken one step towards controlling pollution and allowed even that to fall through. Their seriousness towards the health and wellbeing of Delhi residents is for everyone to see," she said. "With the ordinance for bringing in the Commission for Air Quality Management having lapsed, who will take action against the errant," she asked. She further said that since the Centre did not table the Commission for Air Quality Management Bill in the Parliament session, it is clear that they don't care about the health of the people of Delhi. Responding to the charges, Delhi BJP Spokesperson Praveen Kapoor said that every Delhi government and AAP leaders had been even little serious.

BJP seeks to curtail powers of govt: CM

Bill defining L-G's role, constitutionally dangerous: Sisodia

AGE CORRESPONDENT with agency inputs
NEW DELHI, MARCH 15

Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal on Monday accused the BJP of seeking to drastically curtail the powers of his elected government through a new bill in the Lok Sabha.

He also said that the bill is contrary to Constitution Bench judgements.

The National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill, 2021, that seeks to give more powers to the Delhi lieutenant-governor (L-G), will be introduced in the Lower House on Monday. In a tweet, the AAP national convenor said he strongly condemns "Bharatiya Janata Party's unconstitutional and anti-democracy" move.

"After being rejected by ppl of Delhi (8 seats in Assembly, 0 in MCD bypolls), Bharatiya Janata Party seeks to drastically curtail powers of elected government through a bill in LS today. Bill is contrary to Constitution Bench judgements. We strongly condemn BJP's unconstitutional and anti-democracy move," Mr Kejriwal tweeted.

"The bill says: 1. For Delhi, govt will mean lieutenant-governor then what will elected govt do? 2. All files will go to lieutenant-governor. This is against 4.7.18 Constitution Bench



Arvind Kejriwal

DEPUTY CHIEF minister Manish Sisodia also said that the Centre's bill that seeks to define certain role and powers of the lieutenant-governor of Delhi is democratically and constitutionally 'dangerous' on Monday and accused the BJP of trying to rule the national capital from the 'backdoor'

judgements which said that files will not be sent to lieutenant-governor, elected govt will take all decisions and send copy of decision to lieutenant-governor," he said in another tweet.

Meanwhile, deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia also said that the Centre's bill that seeks to define certain role and powers of the lieutenant-governor of Delhi is democratically and constitutionally "dangerous", on Monday, and accused the BJP of trying to rule the national capital from the "backdoor".

His remarks came after the Centre introduced the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill,

After being rejected by people of Delhi (8 seats in Assembly, 0 in MCD bypolls), Bharatiya Janata Party seeks to drastically curtail powers of elected government through a bill in Lok Sabha today. Bill is contrary to Constitution Bench judgements. We strongly condemn BJP's unconstitutional and anti-democracy move.

2021 in the Lok Sabha on Monday.

"It's a very dangerous amendment democratically and constitutionally. It will render the elections and elected government in Delhi meaningless," Mr Sisodia said at a press conference.

The deputy chief minister said the Delhi government will look into the matter and explore options after consulting legal experts.

"This amendment by the Bharatiya Janata Party and its government at the Centre upturns the decision of the Supreme Court and thus the Constitution. After badly losing elections in Delhi and getting zero seat (in municipal bypoll), the Bharatiya Janata Party is now trying to rule Delhi from the backdoor," Mr Sisodia said.

The Supreme Court has decided that the elected government in Delhi has executive powers over matters except public order, police and land. The amendment provides for sending all the files to the lieutenant-governor, he said.



Delhi deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia addresses a press conference in New Delhi on Monday.

— PTI

Cong opposes bill, says it'll 'snatch' powers of people

New Delhi, March 15: The Congress' city unit opposed the government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill, 2021 introduced in the Lok Sabha on Monday, saying it will "snatch away" the powers of the people of Delhi.

With the objective of giving a proper "interpretation" of a Supreme Court ruling, the government on Monday introduced the Bill that seeks to define certain role and powers of the lieutenant-governor of Delhi.

If the Bill is passed, it will be a "Black Day" for Delhi, and "murder of democracy", charged Congress leader Anil

THE CONGRESS will strongly oppose 'back-seat' driving of Delhi by the lieutenant-governor, Congress leader Anil Bhardwaj said, adding a demonstration against the Bill will be held at the Jantar Mantar on Wednesday

Bhardwaj in a press conference.

The Congress will strongly oppose "back-seat" driving of Delhi by the lieutenant-governor, Mr Bhardwaj said, adding a demonstration against the Bill will be held at the Jantar Mantar on Wednesday.

"The Bill will not only

considerably dilute the powers of the Delhi government, but also make a direct assault on the powers of the people of Delhi, who elect the government of their choice through a democratic process of ballots," Mr Bhardwaj said.

"If the Bill becomes an Act, the Bharatiya Janata Party will resort to "back-seat driving" of Delhi through the lieutenant-governor. The Delhi government would have to get the permission of the lieutenant-governor for each and every administrative action, making it virtually redundant," the Delhi Congress leader said.

— PTI

Give copies of chargesheet to Kanhaiya: Court to cops

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 15

A court here, on Monday, directed the Delhi police to give copies of chargesheets to former Jawaharlal Nehru University Students' Union (JNUSU) president Kanhaiya Kumar and nine others in a 2016 sedition case.

Chief metropolitan magistrate (CMM) Pankaj Sharma put up the matter for April 7 to scrutinise documents in the case and also granted bail to seven accused who were not arrested in the case earlier.

The seven accused include Kashmiri students Aquib Hussain, Mujeeb Hussain, Umar Gul, Rayees Rasool, Basharat Ali, Bashir Bhat, and Khalid Basheer who were not arrested before filing of charge sheet. Some of them were then studying in JNU, Aligarh Muslim University, and Jamia Millia Islamia.

They moved bail applications after which the court granted them bail on a personal bond of ₹25,000 and a surety of a like amount.

Kumar, Umar Khalid (who is already in custody in the Delhi riots case), Anirban, and seven others were present in the court in pursuance to the summons issued by the court after taking cognisance of the charge sheet.

13-yr-old wait over: Slain cop's wife on death penalty to Batla House accused

BJP welcomes court verdict, demands apology from Opp.

New Delhi, March 15: Maya Sharma, wife of slain Delhi Police inspector who was killed in the Batla House encounter, heaved a sigh of relief following her "13-year-old struggle of wait and watch" after a Delhi Court awarded death penalty to the accused on Monday.

The court awarded death penalty to Ariz Khan for the murder of decorated Delhi Police Inspector Mohan Chand Sharma in connection with the sensational 2008 Batla House encounter case, saying the offence fell under the "rarest of the rare category" warranting the maximum sentence.

"I want to thank the judiciary. We have got a huge

New Delhi, March 15: The Delhi BJP Monday welcomed a city court's verdict in the Batla House encounter case and demanded apologies from the Congress and the AAP for calling the incident "a fake encounter".

A Delhi court Monday awarded death penalty to Ariz Khan for the murder of decorated Delhi Police Inspector Mohan Chand

Sharma in connection with the sensational 2008 Batla House encounter case, saying the offence fell under the "rarest of the rare category" warranting the maximum sentence. Delhi BJP president Adesh Gupta said Congress and AAP leaders had insulted "the martyrdom of the policemen" killed in the encounter by terming it fake.

— PTI

has done justice to us. Until now, we were in a position of wait and watch," the slain inspec-

tor's wife, Maya told PTI.

Mohan Chand Sharma of the special cell was killed during the Batla House encounter between the police and alleged terrorists in south Delhi's Jamia Nagar following serial bomb blasts in the national capital in which 39 people died and 159 were injured.

Sharma had led a seven-member team to the Batla House on September 19, 2008 on a tip-off that suspected terrorists, involved in the serial blasts in the capital, were there. He had succumbed to the bullet injuries sustained during the gun battle. He was also awarded the highest gallantry award, the Ashok Chakra.

— PTI

NH-24 carriageway from Delhi to Ghaziabad opens

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 15

The carriageway of NH-24 going towards Ghaziabad from Delhi, which was closed since January 26, was reopened for commuters on Monday, police said.

The carriageway from Ghaziabad towards Delhi, however, remains closed, they said.

In view of the prevailing law and order situation at the Ghazipur border and keeping in mind the aspect of public convenience, the carriageway of

NH-24 going towards Ghaziabad from Delhi has been opened in due consultation with the police officials of the district, a senior official said.

The stretch had been closed since January 26, when violence broke out in the national capital during a tractor parade by farmers.

The carriageway was briefly opened on March 2.

The Tikri and the Singhu borders continue to be closed due to the farmers' agitation.

Thousands of farmers,

mostly from Punjab, Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, have been camping at Delhi's border points — Singhu, Tikri and Ghazipur — for over three months, demanding a repeal of the three farm laws and a legal guarantee on the minimum support price for their crops.

The protesting farmers have expressed apprehension that these laws would pave the way for the dismantling of the minimum support price (MSP) system, leaving them at the "mercy" of big corporations.

Centre brings Bill to give more powers to Delhi L-G

■ **Continued from Page 1** of its business which is inconsistent with the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in the Parliament of India.

Expressing his anger over the Bill, Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal accused the BJP of seeking to drastically curtail the powers of an elected government in the national capital, which he said was contrary to the judgement by a constitution bench of the apex court. He tweeted, "After being rejected by ppl (people) of Delhi (8 seats in Assembly, 0 in MCD bypolls), BJP seeks to drastically curtail powers of elected government through a Bill in LS today. Bill is contrary to the Constitution Bench judgement. We strongly con-

demn BJP's unconstitutional and anti-democracy move."

According to the proposed amendments, Section 21 of the Act — dealing with restrictions on laws passed by the Legislative Assembly with respect to certain matters — is sought to be revised to clarify that the expression "government" referred to in any law to be made by the Legislative Assembly shall mean the "Lieutenant Governor".

A sub-section shall be inserted to this effect in Section 21. In section 24 of the Principal Act — which requires a Bill passed by the Delhi Legislative Assembly to be presented to the LG who may assent, withhold or reserve it for consideration of the

President — an additional clause will be inserted to cover any of the matters that fall outside the purview of the powers conferred on the Legislative Assembly.

In Section 33 of the Principal Act, in Sub-section (1) after the words "conduct of its business", the words "which shall not be inconsistent with the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in House of People" shall be inserted.

Also, in the proviso, for the words "Provided that", the following shall be substituted, "Provided that the Legislative Assembly shall not make any rule to enable itself or its Committees to consider the matters of the day-to-day administration of the

Capital or conduct inquiries in relation to the administrative decisions, and any of the rule made in contravention of this proviso, before the commencement of the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Act, 2021, shall be void".

In Section 44 of the Principal Act dealing with powers to makes rules for the conduct of business, in sub-section (2) — which states that as otherwise provided in this Act, all executive action of the Lieutenant Governor, whether taken on the advice of his ministers or otherwise, shall be expressed to be taken in the name of the Lieutenant Governor — the following proviso shall

be inserted, namely "Provided that before taking any executive action in pursuance of the decision of the council of ministers or a minister, to exercise powers of government, state government, appropriate government, lieutenant governor, administrator or chief commissioner, as the case may be, under any law in force in the capital, the opinion of lieutenant governor in term of the proviso to Clause (4) of Article 239AA of the Constitution shall be obtained on all such matters as may be specified, by a general or special order, by the lieutenant-governor".

According to the statement of objects and reasons of the bill, the original bill was enacted to sup-

plement the provisions of the Constitution relating to the legislative assembly and a council of ministers for Delhi and for matters connected therewith.

"Section 44 of the act deals with the conduct of business and there is no structural mechanism provided in the act for effective time-bound implementation of said section. Further, there is no clarity as to what proposal or matters are required to be submitted to the LG before issuing order thereon," it said. It said that to give effect to the interpretation made by the Supreme Court which had ruled that the city government need not obtain the lieutenant governor's "concurrence" of every issue of day-to-day governance, the bill

National capital deserves to be full state, says Omar Abdullah

Srinagar, March 15: National Conference leader Omar Abdullah on Monday said Delhi deserves to be a full state with all powers exercised by the elected government, throwing his weight behind the Arvind Kejriwal dispensation in the national capital notwithstanding the Aam Aadmi Party supporting "dismemberment and downgrading" of Jammu and Kashmir in 2019.

Abdullah's remarks come after chief minister Kejriwal accused the BJP of seeking to drastically curtail the powers of his elected government in Delhi through a new bill in the Lok Sabha.

"In spite of AAP's support for the dismemberment & downgrading of J&K in 2019, we still condemn this assault on the powers of the elected government of Delhi. Delhi deserves to be a full state with all powers exercised by the elected government & not a nominated LG," Abdullah tweeted.

The National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill, 2021, that seeks to give more powers to the Lieutenant Governor of Delhi, was introduced in the Lok Sabha on Monday.

The Centre had in August 2019 ended the special status of J&K and downgraded it as a union territory. The AAP had supported the central government's decision.

— PTI

NIA conducts searches in Delhi K'taka, Kerala in ISIS module case

New Delhi, March 15: The National Investigation Agency (NIA) Monday arrested three persons as it conducted simultaneous searches at 11 locations in Kerala, Karnataka and Delhi in connection with terror activities of a group propagating the violent ideology of the ISIS terror group, an official said.

An NIA spokesperson said the searches were carried out by the premier anti-terror probe agency with local police units at 11 locations — eight in Kerala's Kannur, Mallapuram, Kollam and Kasargod districts, two in Bengaluru and one in Delhi.

The case pertains to the terrorist activities of a group led by one Mohammed Ameen of

Kerala, the official said. Three people — Ameen and his associated Muhsab Anuvur and Dr Rahees Rashid — were arrested after preliminary examination, the NIA official said.

The group has been running various ISIS propaganda channels on different social media platforms such as Telegram, Hoop and Instagram for propagating the violent Jihad ideology of ISIS, and radicalising and recruiting new members to the module, the NIA official said.

The NIA had registered a case against seven known and other unnamed persons under relevant sections of the Indian Penal Code and the UA (P) Act on March 5, 2021.

— PTI



107-year-old Kewal Krishan receives his first dose of Covid vaccine at a hospital in Delhi on Monday.

— PTI

SHORT TAKES

Shah targets Cong over AIUDF alliance

Guwahati: Hitting out at the Congress over its poll alliance with the AIUDF in Assam, Union home minister Amit Shah on Monday said the Grand Old Party is “shamelessly” talking of secularism and culture preservation even as it has Badruddin Ajmal’s outfit “seated on its lap”. Mr Shah, after launching the BJP’s social media campaign “Selfie with development”, said the saffron camp will bank on five pillars to fight the Assembly polls — “*Suraksha aur Samman*” (protection and respect), “*Samridhhi aur Judao*” (prosperity and connection), “*Sanskriti aur Sahyata*” (culture and civilisation), “*Shanti aur Samvad*” (peace and dialogue) and “*Swanirbharta aur Atmanirbharta*” (self-reliance). “Assam pollss will not just ensure that the BJP stays in power, but will also guarantee preservation of the state’s culture, traditions and civilisation,” he stated. The Union minister urged the saffron party’s social media volunteers to act as “margadarshaks” (guide). — *PTI*

Mufti revamps PDP structure

Srinagar: Peoples Democratic Party president Mehbooba Mufti on Monday revamped the party’s organisational structure and named new office bearers as well as members of the political affairs committee. She nominated senior leader senior leader Abdul Rehman Veeri as the party vice-president whereas G.N. Lone Hanjura, Surinder Choudhary, Amreek Singh Reen and Arshid Malik have been nominated as the party general secretaries, a PDP spokesman said. “PDP president Mehbooba Mufti revamped the organisational structure of the party after being unanimously re-elected as the party chief last month,” he said. Mehbooba also constituted a 15-member political affairs committee (PAC) of the party. — *PTI*

BSP will contest in 3 states, UT on its own

Lucknow: BSP president Mayawati announced on Monday that the party would contest the assembly elections in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry on its own, saying it had a “bitter experience” of aligning with other parties in the past. Ms Mayawati also stated that her party would go alone in the Uttar Pradesh Assembly election next year. “We are working internally on the elections. We do not reveal our strategy,” Ms Mayawati told reporters at an event to pay tributes to BSP founder Kanshi Ram on his 87th birth anniversary. “The BSP will contest on all the 403 Assembly seats in UP and will perform well. The performance of the party will be good in the panchayat elections in Uttar Pradesh,” she said. — *PTI*

SC SEEKS GOVT, EC’s RESPONSE OVER NOTA ISSUE

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 15

The Supreme Court on Monday sought response from the Centre and the Election Commission on a plea that the election result be nullified and fresh polls be conducted if the maximum votes are for NOTA (none of the above candidates) than the winning candidate in a constituency. Issuing the notice, Chief Justice Sharad A. Bobde, heading a bench also comprising Justice A.S. Bopanna and Justice V. Ramasubramanian, appeared apprehensive over the plea saying, “If a political party due to its influence have candidates rejected, then seats will remain unfilled in Parliament. What will happen then? The right to reject and elect a new candidate will give power to the people to express their discontent. If voters are dissatisfied with the background or performance of the contesting candidate, they will opt for NOTA to reject such candidate and elect a new candidate,” said the petition by Delhi BJP leader Ashwini Kumar Upadhyay. The plea further seeks direction to the Election Commission not to allow the candidates and their political parties, whose election is nullified, from taking part in the fresh polls.



Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam president M.K. Stalin arrives to file his nomination papers in Chennai on Monday, ahead of the upcoming Tamil Nadu Assembly polls. — *PTI*

MHA offers Didi special commandos after ‘attack’

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 15

The Union home ministry has offered a team of specialised commandos from central forces for protecting Mamata Banerjee. Sources said the Election Commission and the home ministry discussed the issue of alleged attack on Mamata in a meeting last week during which the ministry made the offer.

Ms Banerjee was injured during a roadshow in Nandigram last Wednesday but she had alleged that a group of some unidentified men had attacked her. However, the Election Commission had ruled out this in a detailed report on Sunday saying this was a mere accident.

But since the entire law and order machinery of Bengal was placed under the EC the day the poll schedule was announced.



► **CENTRAL FORCES** like the CRPF, CISF and ITBP are providing ‘Z’ and ‘Y’ category security cover to a number of BJP leaders in Bengal

► **THE SAME** facility, sources added, was offered by the MHA to West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee if the EC gives the directions

So the commission, during one of the meetings last week, discussed the issue of the accident involving the West Bengal CM.

Sources said during the discussion the home ministry offered that in case the Election Commission wants to deploy a team of “specialised and professional commandos from the Central paramilitary forces”, it can be deployed to protect the chief minister of West Bengal.

Central forces like the CRPF, CISF and ITBP are providing “Z” and “Y” category security cover to a

number of BJP leaders in Bengal. The same facility, sources added, was offered by the MHA to Ms Banerjee if the EC gives the directions. Following the incident, the EC had transferred three senior IPS officers, including one involved with managing her security.

Sources said as of now the EC was satisfied with security arrangements being made by the state police. However, if required the Election Commission could ask for Central protection for Ms Banerjee.

Pinarayi files papers from Dharmadom

AGE CORRESPONDENT
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, MARCH 15

Kerala chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan on Monday filed his nomination papers from the Dharmadom Assembly constituency at the Collectorate in Kannur.

The chief minister, who is contesting for the second time from Dharmadom, took all Covid safety measures including face shield, mask and gloves, while filing the nomination papers. He was accompanied by senior CPM leaders.

Mr Vijayan was elected from Dharmadom constituency in the 2016 Assembly polls with a big margin of 36,905 votes. While he secured 87329 votes, his nearest Congress rival Mambaram Divakaran bagged 50,424 votes.

Kerala: Cong leaders to mollify those denied tickets

Kochi, March 15: The Congress-led UDF in Kerala started a fire-fighting exercise on Monday to mollify protesting party leaders who were denied tickets for the April 6 polls to the state Assembly.

Party sources said senior leaders have been deputed to various districts, including Wayanad, Kannur and Palakkad, where party leaders and workers have come out openly against the leadership over denial of tickets to “deserving persons”.

Soon after the candidates’ list was announced on Sunday, infighting erupted in Irikur Assembly constituency in Kannur over giving ticket to Sajeev Joseph of the “I” group in the state Congress, led by senior leader Ramesh Chennithala.

The seat had been held by K.C. Joseph, a senior leader associated with the “A” group led by Oommen Chandy, since long. Mr Joseph, a veteran former minister, is not contesting the polls this time.

The protesting “A” group wanted their leader Sony Sebastian as the party candidate in Irikur, a Congress stronghold in north Kerala.

The two groups have been active in the state unit of Congress since the period of veteran leader and late K. Karunakaran and senior leader A.K. Antony. Congress sources said the party has deputed K.C. Joseph and UDF convenor M.M. Hassan to Irikur to placate the agitating “A” group workers and leaders.

The party strongman in Kannur, K. Sudhakaram, MP, also expressed displeasure over the way Congress handled the Irikur issue and hoped the KPCC will “rectify” its mistake. — *PTI*

■ Debashree Roy, 2-time MLA from Raidighi, quits Trinamul TMC continues to bleed in Bengal

RAJIB CHOWDHURI
KOLKATA, MARCH 15

West Bengal’s ruling Trinamul Congress continues to bleed by desertions as another heavy-weight MLA — Debashree Roy — on Monday quit chief minister Mamata Banerjee’s party while keeping the door ajar for her switch to the BJP at a time when the saffron party is also hit by a revolt within, mostly over the distribution of tickets to TMC turncoats.

Sending her resignation letter to TMC president Subrata Bakshi, the two-time legislator from Raidighi in South 24 Parganas later alleged, “I had many complaints which were ignored. So I quit. If the BJP approaches me, I will look into the possibility.” The actor-turned-politician’s exit from the TMC comes a day after former

Suvendu seeks cancellation of Didi’s nomination

Kolkata, March 15: Suvendu Adhikari, the BJP candidate against Mamata Banerjee in Nandigram, on Monday said he has sought rejection of the nomination of the West Bengal chief minister for not declaring six criminal cases against her while filing her papers.



In his complaint to the Election Commission, Mr Adhikari, a former confidante of Ms Banerjee, claimed she suppressed the information about five cases filed against her in Assam and another

lodge by the CBI in West Bengal.

He said he has mentioned the case numbers in his complaint but did not elaborate on the offences allegedly committed by the TMC supreme, sources in the office of the state’s Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) said. — *PTI*

Kolkata mayor and a TMC turncoat, Sovan Chatterjee, whom she was earlier very close to, quit the BJP along with Baishakhi Banerjee, his present close friend, for not getting a ticket.

In fact, Ms Roy tried to enter the BJP when Mr Chatterjee and Baishakhi went to join the party in August 2019. But her chance diminished as Mr

Chatterjee, prompted by Baishakhi, strongly objected to her induction to the BJP and made it clear to the saffron party that they would not join if Ms Roy was inducted.

During the day, BJP workers laid a siege at their election office in Hastings of South Kolkata, protesting against the distribution of tickets to TMC turncoats

Rajib Banerjee at Domjur and his aide Mohit Ghati at Panchla. They broke barricades and demonstrated in front of BJP national vice-president Mukul Roy and Barrackpore MP Arjun Singh. At Uttarpara in Hooghly where another TMC turncoat Prabir Ghoshal got a ticket, BJP supporters circulated posters against him.

BJP MP ‘fakes’ his vaccination for ‘photoshoot’

AGE CORRESPONDENT
BHOPAL, MARCH 15

BJP MP from Indore Shankar Lalwani has stirred up a controversy by “faking” his vaccination against Covid-19 for “photoshoot”.

A video showing the nurse of a hospital in Indore just touching Mr Lalwani’s arm with the injection needle and then removing it without administering the vaccine dose has gone viral, landing him in a controversy.

The Congress on Monday took a jibe at him for “faking” being vaccinated. “Mr Lalwani has hurt the sentiments of people as well as PM Narendra Modi... This is an unnecessary publicity stunt by him to derive political mileage,” Madhya Pradesh PCC general secretary Rakesh Singh Yadav said on Monday.

Titans of TN politics file their nominations

More than 100 candidates submit papers for April 6 polls

AGE CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI, MARCH 15

The heavy rush for filing of nominations on Monday, an auspicious day in the Hindu calendar, saw more than 100 candidates for the April 6 Assembly elections submitting their papers with their respective returning officers across Tamil Nadu, including all the chief ministerial candidates.

CM Edappadi K. Palaniswami (Edapadi), DMK president M.K. Stalin (Kolathur), AMMK general secretary T.T.V. Dhinakaran (Kovilpatti), Naam Thamizhar Katchi founder Seeman (Thiruvottiyur) and Makkal Neethi Maiaam president Kamal Haasan (Coimbatore South) were among the hordes of candidates who filed their papers.

Speaker Dhanapal, BJP state chief L. Murugan, DMK youth wing secretary Udhayanidhi Stalin, BJP national women’s wing president Vanathi Seenivasan also did not miss out on the auspicious day. Soon after filing his nomination to contest from Kolathur constituency in Chennai, Mr Stalin



left for Thiruvavur to launch his campaign from the birth place of his father the late M. Karunanidhi. He took a chartered flight to Trichy to reach Thiruvavur.

Kamal Haasan, too, took a chartered flight to Coimbatore, where he landed on Monday morning by a helicopter.

For DMK general secretary Duraimurugan, who filed his paper to contest the election from Katpadi constituency, this was the 12 attempt to enter the Assembly. In past 11 elections since 1971, two of them from Ranipet constituency and 9 from Katpadi, he had won nine times, losing in 1984 and 1991 from Katpadi.

Trouble for UDF: Ex-Mahila Cong chief will contest as Independent

GILVESTER ASSARY
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, MARCH 15

Lathika Subhash, who resigned as Mahila Congress state president of Kerala and from the party on Sunday, has decided to contest as an Independent candidate from Ettumanoor Assembly constituency in Kottayam district.

Ms Lathika made the announcement at a meeting of her supporters in Ettumanoor on Monday. She said her decision to

contest as an Independent candidate was in protest against the treatment meted out to the women workers of the party.

She said the Congress leaders had not asked her to contest from any other seat. The Kerala Congress (Joseph) to which the seat has been allotted had actually not insisted much on getting Ettumanoor. It was the Congress leaders who seemed quite keen to offer the seat to the Kerala Congress (Joseph) for reasons best known to them.

Rift in MP Cong wide open; AICC member, Diggy loyalist expelled

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY
Bhopal, March 15



Manak Agrawal

AICC member Manak Agrawal, who had recently criticised head of Madhya Pradesh Congress Kamal Nath for inducting a “supporter” of Mahatma Gandhi’s assassin Nathuram Godse in the party, was on Monday expelled from the Congress on charges of “anti-party activities” and indiscipline.

The development has brought to the fore the “growing rift” between Mr Nath and Congress veteran Divvijay Singh since Mr Agrawal is considered a staunch loyalist of the latter.

The disciplinary committee of the Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC), which met in Bhopal on Monday, decided to expel Mr Agrawal from the primary membership of the party for 6 years, a statement issued by PCC vice-president Chandrabhas Sekhar said.

Mr Agrawal, however, cried foul saying that the PCC was not empowered to take action against him since he was an AICC mem-

ber. He, however, said he had done nothing wrong in disapproving the party leadership’s decision to induct Godse’s supporter Babul Chourasia, a leader of Hindu Mahasabha, in the Congress.

Congress spokesman N.S. Saluja, however, indicated that Mr Agrawal was removed from the party for indulging in anti-party activities in the 2018 Assembly elections in MP.

He added that the disciplinary action taken against Mr Agrawal by the party leadership has nothing to do with his opposition to Mr Chourasia’s induction in the party.

The development has brought into open the simmering rivalry between Mr Nath and Mr Singh, who were said to be at loggerheads ever since Congress suffered setback in the recently held byelections to the 28 Assembly constituencies in Madhya Pradesh, sources said.

NORTHERN RAILWAY Notice Inviting Tender (NIT)

1. TENDER NOTIFICATION	
Name of work: Minor Repair and Replacement of Fans and Fan switches in MEMU coaches at MEMU Car Shed, Saharanpur.	
Tender Notice No.: 15/2020-21	
1.1. General: UMB division of Northern Railway invites Open tender through E-tendering system from eligible agencies who fulfill qualification criteria as stipulated in tender document for “Minor Repair and Replacement of Fans and Fan switches in MEMU coaches at MEMU Car Shed, Saharanpur.”	
1.2 The key details are as follows:	
Open Tender No.	30-EL-MEMU-T-15-20-21
Name of Works	Minor Repair and Replacement of Fans and Fan switches in MEMU coaches at MEMU Car Shed, Saharanpur.
Approximate Cost	Rs. 2,12,500/-
Earnest Money	Nil
Completion Period	06 months from the date of issue of the letter of acceptance.
Validity of offer	45 days.
Date of closing/opening	07.04.2021 at 10.30 Hrs./thereafter
Cost of tender document	Free
NOTE:-	
1. Public procure order 2017 issued by Rly. board vide L.No. 2015/RS(G)/779/5 Dt. 16.03.2018 shall be followed.	
2. The tender can be seen or upload on website as under: Website portal: https://www.treps.gov.in	
Serving Customers with a Smile	

SHORT TAKES

6 Lt. Col.-ranked officers booked

New Delhi: The CBI booked six lieutenant colonel-ranked officers along with some others for the alleged corruption in the recruitment of Army officers through Service Selection Board (SSB) centres. According to sources, immediately after registering the case, the agency conducted searches at 30 locations across the country. Searches were conducted at Base Hospital, several Army establishments, civilian areas covering 13 cities, including Kapurthala, Bhatinda, Delhi, Kaithal, Palwal, Lucknow, Bareilly, Gorakhpur, Vishakhapatnam, Jaipur, Guwahati, Jorhat and Chirangon. "The agency recovered several incriminating documents during searches," sources said. "MCSNA Bhagwan of the Army Air Defence Corps, the alleged mastermind of the recruitment racket, is among those booked," the sources added.

India targets Pak at UN over Baloch

New Delhi: Pakistan's troubled Balochistan province has now come to be known as the "land of the disappeared", India told the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) at Geneva, adding that tens of thousands of people have disappeared from the restive province in the past two decades as a result of Pakistan's human rights abuses there. New Delhi made the remarks during a general debate while exercising its right of reply, as it blasted Pakistan for disinformation campaign against India on the Kashmir issue. New Delhi also spoke about the increased risk of "enforced disappearances" in Pakistan's another western border province Khyber Pakhtunkhwa after an ordinance that gives the security agencies "vast abusive powers". New Delhi also spoke about the atrocities on Shia Muslims in Pakistan.

Pregnant dolphin found dead in UP

Bahrach, UP: A pregnant Gangetic river dolphin was found dead in Girijapuri barrage under the Katarniyaghat Wildlife Sanctuary here, an official said on Monday. The dolphin was aged around 11 years, divisional forest officer Yashwant Singh said. According to Singh, a team of veterinary doctors conducted a post-mortem of the dead dolphin and a fetus was found in its uterus. Mr Singh said the dolphin was cremated according to rules. The Gangetic river dolphins, a species of freshwater dolphins primarily found in the Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers and their tributaries in India, Bangladesh and Nepal, were declared national aquatic species in 2010.

— PTI

INDIA DESIRES NORMAL TIES WITH PAK: FS

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 15

India "desires good neighbourly relations with Pakistan and is committed to addressing issues, if any, bilaterally and peacefully," foreign secretary (FS) Harsh Vardhan Shringla said on Monday, adding however that "any meaningful dialogue can only be held in a conducive atmosphere and the onus is on Pakistan to create such an atmosphere". He was addressing a think-tank in the Capital on India's neighbourhood policy. With civilian deaths being reported in India's another neighbour Myanmar in firing by the ruling military junta there that seized power last month, the FS said the "recent developments in Myanmar are a matter of deep concern" and added that India "remains concerned that the gains made by Myanmar over the last decades on the path towards democracy, should not be undermined". The FS said, "We have always been steadfast in our support to the process of democratic transition in Myanmar for it to emerge as a stable democratic federal union. Our developmental and humanitarian efforts in Myanmar have been aimed at the socio-economic development of the country. We need to continue with these efforts in the interest of the people of Myanmar."

'India's arms imports dip by 33%

Drop due to complex procurement processes, bid to cut dependence on Russian arms: Report

PAWAN BALI
NEW DELHI, MARCH 15

India's arms import decreased by 33 per cent between 2011-15 and 2016-20, according to a report by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) on Monday.

Russia was the most affected supplier, although India's imports of US arms also fell, by 46 per cent. "The drop in Indian arms imports seems to have been mainly due to its complex procurement processes, combined with an attempt to reduce its dependence on Russian arms," said SIPRI report. It said India is planning large-scale arms imports in the coming years from several suppliers.

In 2011-15, the US was the second largest arms supplier to India, but in 2016-20 India's arms imports from the US were 46 per cent lower than in the previous five-year period, making the US the fourth largest supplier to India in 2016-20.

France and Israel were the second and third largest arms suppliers to India in 2016-20.

India's arms imports from France increased by 709 per cent while those from Israel rose by 82 per cent.

Globally, the United States remained the largest arms exporter, increasing its global share of arms exports from 32 to 37 per cent between 2011-15 and 2016-20. "The drop in

RUSSIA WAS the most affected supplier, although India's imports of US arms also fell, by 46%

INDIA'S ARMS imports from France increased by 709% while those from Israel rose by 82%

India's arms imports seems to have been mainly due to its complex procurement processes, combined with an attempt to reduce its dependence on Russian arms," said the report. It added that India is planning large-scale arms imports in the coming years from several suppliers.

Based on its outstanding deliveries of combat air-

craft, air defence systems, ships and submarines, India's arms imports are expected to increase over the coming five years.

Russia and China both saw their exports declining.

The arms exports by Russia, which accounted for 20 per cent of all exports of major arms in 2016-20, dropped by 22 per cent (to roughly the same level as in 2006-10). "The bulk — around 90 per cent — of this decrease was attributable to a 53 per cent fall in its arms exports to India," said the report.

"Russia substantially increased its arms transfers to China, Algeria and Egypt between 2011-15 and 2016-20, but this did not offset the large drop in its

arms exports to India," said Alexandra Kuimova, Researcher with the SIPRI Arms and Military Expenditure Programme. "Although Russia has recently signed new large arms deals with several states and its exports will probably gradually increase again in the coming years, it faces strong competition from the USA in most regions."

Exports by China, the world's fifth largest arms exporter in 2016-20, decreased by 7.8 per cent between 2011-15 and 2016-20. Chinese arms exports accounted for 5.2 per cent of total arms exports in 2016-20. Pakistan, Bangladesh and Algeria were the largest recipients of Chinese arms.

Over 45 lakh people from 98 nations reached India: MEA

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, MARCH 15

The Vande Bharat Mission was the "largest repatriation exercise in the history of the world" carried out by India and saw the return home of over 45 lakh people from 98 countries, external affairs minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar informed both Houses of Parliament on Monday.

Making statements in both Houses of Parliament pertaining to the welfare abroad of Indians, NRIs and PIOs, he said the welfare of students studying abroad has been the particular reason of concern for the government amid the coronavirus pandemic.

The EAM said this huge exercise "could not have happened without the goodwill and cooperation of partner governments. And if that was so forth-

VANDE BHARAT MISSION

coming, it is because of the enormous efforts of this government's diplomacy, starting from the Prime Minister personally."

"A total of 45,82,043 people from 98 countries have returned to India under the aegis of the Vande Bharat Mission. The vast majority came through flights, though there were also some who came by ship and across land crossings. Kerala received the maximum returnees, followed by Delhi, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. UAE was the country from where the maximum number of stranded Indians returned, followed by Saudi Arabia, USA and Qatar," he said.

He said that among the states, Kerala received the

maximum returnees, followed by Delhi, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. The EAM also said that India has "reason to expect" that "partner governments in the Gulf would be helpful in facilitating the early return of many who were compelled to go back because of the pandemic".

He said Vande Bharat Mission to bring back countrymen and women home was carried out on the directions of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The mnister also said that 39 per cent of the returnees were workers, another 39 per cent were professionals, 6 per cent were students, 8 per cent were visitors and 4.7 per cent were stranded tourists, adding that "the vast majority came through flights, though there were also some who came by ship and across land crossings".

Man, his son held for fire Odisha forest

AKSHAYA KUMAR SAHOO
BHUBANESWAR, MARCH 15

A man and his son were on Monday arrested for allegedly setting a forest ablaze at Madhapur in Odisha's Boudh district. The accused — Asan Majhi and his son Shyamghan — were caught red-handed while setting dry leaves on fire in Mundeswar reserve forest under Madhapur range.

Saroj Mishra, the local Madhapur range officer, said the forest department personnel found smoke emanating from four to five places Mundeswar reserve forest during patrolling.

"Our personnel immediately rushed to the spot where the accused father and son were setting the forest afire. When they saw us, the duo started running to escape the forest patrolling team. Our squad chased them and arrested the father, son-duo. Later, they were produced before a court," said Mr Mishra.

Pledges to 'facilitate meaningful debate' Twitter announces plan to tackle polls-linked rumours

New Delhi, March 15: Ahead of Assembly elections, Twitter on Monday announced a slew of initiatives in a bid to protect public conversation and tackle poll-related misinformation. Announcing the multilingual initiatives, the microblogging platform pledged its commitment to "facilitating meaningful political debate, driving civic participation during elections", in real-time.

"With the #AssemblyElections2021 taking place in Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and Puducherry, Twitter announced a series of initiatives focused on encouraging informed and healthy conversations between candidates, political parties, citizens, media, and society," it said in a statement.

The measures include an information search prompt with the Election Commission of India (@ECISVEEP) and State Election Commissions to provide reliable informa-

tion around the elections, a custom emoji to encourage participation, a series of pre-bunks and debunks to tackle election-related misinformation, and a youth discussion series titled #DemocracyAdda aimed at voter literacy and civic participation among young Indians for the upcoming elections.

These will be activated across six languages including English, Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, Assamese and Malayalam, in order to cater to audiences across India. Additionally, to put a focus on women in Indian politics, the service would be bringing back #HerPolitical Journey, a video series where women political leaders share their personal stories with leading women news journalists.

It is pertinent to mention here that voting for five assembly elections will begin on March 27, with West Bengal hosting eight phases over a month. Counting of votes in the four states and one

Suspended cop Vaze moves HC against arrest

Plea says he was made 'scapegoat'

SHAHAB ANSARI
MUMBAI, MARCH 15

Assistant police inspector Sachin Vaze, who has been arrested in connection with a bomb scare near

Industrialist Mukesh Ambani's residence, on Monday filed a "habeas corpus" petition in the Bombay high court, challenging his arrest by the NIA claiming that his arrest is illegal. Meanwhile, the Mumbai police on Monday suspended the officer.

Mr Vaze's brother has filed the habeas corpus petition (a procedure to have a person brought before a court to enquire into the lawfulness of that person's detention) before the high court.

The petition claimed that Mr Vaze (49) was made a "scapegoat" by "certain political powers".

According to the petition, his arrest by NIA is illegal as a proper procedure was not followed to arrest him. He has been arrested for allegedly placing an explosive-laden car near Mukesh Ambani's residence and murder of Mansukh Hiren, the person who was possessing the SUV involved in this matter.

In a petition filed on Monday under Article 266, his brother Sudharm states that there were several lapses and violations of CrPC provisions in Mr Vaze's arrest. He was not served with a 41(A) notice under the CrPC, a copy of the FIR wasn't given, neither were the reasons for arresting him explained, it claims. The brother has alleged "ulterior motives" and "political agenda" for Mr Vaze's



THE PETITION alleges that Vaze was arrested following certain 'false', 'frivolous' and 'concocted' allegations by Vimla Hiren that he was responsible for her husband, Mansukh Hiren's death

arrest by the central agency.

The petition alleges that Mr Vaze was arrested following certain "false," "frivolous" and "concocted" allegations by Vimla Hiren that he was responsible for her husband, Mansukh Hiren's death.

Meanwhile, the police department suspended him for the second time following his arrest by the NIA. Earlier, Mr Vaze was suspended for his alleged role in the custodial death and disappearance of Khwaja Yunus, who was arrested for his alleged involvement in the December 2002 Ghatkoper bomb blast case.

During his suspension, Mr Vaze joined Shiv Sena and despite an order of the high court against his reinstatement into police force, he was reinstated on the ground that there was shortage of manpower during Covid pandemic.

Mr Vaze has been arrested in connection with the case of the recovery of a Scorpio containing 20 gelatin sticks near Ambani's house 'Antilia' in south Mumbai on February 25.

Actor booked for flouting Covid-19 rules

AGE CORRESPONDENT
MUMBAI, MARCH 15

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation on Monday said it has filed a police case against Gauhar Khan for allegedly violating Covid guidelines. The civic body in a release said despite being infected by the coronavirus, the actor moved out in public places and took part in shootings. She has been quarantined.

Without naming the actress the civic body BMC tweeted, "No Compromise On City's Safety! BMC has filed an FIR against a Bollywood actor for non-compliance to Covid guidelines on testing positive. The rules apply to all alike and we urge citizens to follow all guidelines and help the city beat the virus."

Assistant municipal commissioner of K-west ward Vishwas Mote said that when his staff had visited Ms Khan's home on March 11, she gave an undertaking that she would not step outside the house.

— PTI

Jaishankar...

■ Continued from Page 1

EAM Jaishankar then said, "From the land of Mahatma Gandhi, we can never turn our eyes away from racism wherever it is, particularly so when it is in a country where we have such a large diaspora. As a friend of the UK, we also have concerns about its reputational impact. We have strong ties with the UK. We take up such matters with great candour when required. We monitor these developments very very closely. We will raise it when required. We will always champion the fight against racism and other forms of intolerance."

It may be recalled that just last week, in a stinging rebuke against the recent discussion in the British Parliament on the ongoing farmers' protests, India had summoned and issued a demarche to British High Commissioner Alex Ellis to "strongly oppose the unwarranted and tendentious discussion on agricultural reforms in India in the British Parliament" on the grounds that "this represented a gross interference in the politics of another democratic country". In a message dripping with sarcasm, New Delhi had also "advised British MPs to refrain from practising vote bank politics by misrepresenting events".

Shah mocks Didi

■ Continued from Page 1

party workers who were killed in her politics of violence or not while she feels the pain of her leg injury. Weren't the victims someone's father or son or brother or husband? Didn't they feel pain while dying? People of Bengal will give her their reply in votes this time. I pray to God for your quick recovery. But it would have been better if you felt pain for the 130 slain."

Mr Shah was replying to TMC's question on his silence to the "attack" on its chief. Keeping the BJP's command on the tribal votebank in the state's western belt in his mind, he then tried to woo SC/ST communities with sop which he claimed would be either in the manifesto of the saffron party or would

be empowered if it comes to power.

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi wants to give the Adivasis their rights on the forest land. But the TMC goons are not letting that happen. If you vote BJP to power, government officers will be at your doors to help you avail the benefits of the Forest Rights Act. You would not have to pay anyone for it. We will also underline in our manifesto that 49 forest products would be procured at minimum support price from the tribal women who make it," Mr Shah assured the crowd.

He also talked of the BJP's plan to build Eklavya School in the Jangalmahal and introduce the seventh pay commission for the state employees.

Death penalty to Batla House convict

■ Continued from Page 1

accomplices with common intention obstructed inspector Sharma in discharging public function," the court had said.

"Khan, along with his accomplices, also fired gunshots at head constables Balwant and Balvir Singh," the court had said.

During the encounter in Batla House at Jamia Nagar in south Delhi on September 19, 2008, two suspected terrorists, identified as Atif Amin and Mohammed Sajid, were killed while inspector Sharma of special cell received gun shot during the encounter and later died. Two other terrorists — Ariz Khan and Shahzad — escaped while Mohammad Saif surrendered.

The encounter had taken place within a week of 2008 Delhi serial blasts that had killed 30 people. Blasts had taken place at Karol Bagh, Connaught Place, Greater Kailash and India Gate. The Delhi police received intelligence about terrorists hiding at L-18 flat in Batla House locality.

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Changing her stand on the

Later, Shahzad Ahmed was also arrested in 2010 and a trial court in July 2013 had sentenced him to life imprisonment in connection with the case.

Khan, a native of Azamgarh in Uttar Pradesh, was arrested by the Delhi police's special cell in February 2018.

The multiple bombings that rocked cities like Jaipur and Ahmedabad, apart from the national capital itself, in 2008, saw 165 people losing their lives and over 500 injured in all.

fence-sitters in her party whom she used to ask at her rallies before March 10 to leave for the BJP, the TMC chief called upon them to shrug off their "sentiments" and make a comeback to the mainstream of the party. "Those who have turned sentimental and are still sitting idle, come out. During war, sitting idle out of sentiment is not sought after," she said.

THE ASIAN AGE

16 MARCH 2021

Why does SC need relook at Places of Worship Act?

The Supreme Court's decision to seek the opinion of the Union government on a public interest litigation petition (PIL) challenging the validity of certain provisions of the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act 1991 appears to be a legitimate legal procedure but one that calls for meticulous handling by all stakeholders.

The petition contends that Sections 2, 3 and 4 of the Act create an "arbitrary and irrational retrospective cut-off date" for retaining the character of the places of worship or pilgrimage. Section 3 of the Act bars conversion of any place of worship of any religious denomination into a place of worship of a different section of the same religious denomination or of a different religious denomination; Section 4(e) says any legal proceeding with respect to the conversion of the religious character of a place of worship shall abate and that no such proceedings shall lie on or after such commencement in any court, tribunal or other authority. In effect, the religious character of all religious places in India is fixed as per their character on the day of Independence and no person can alter it, nor can a court entertain a petition seeking an alteration. The Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute was the only exception the law mentions.

Going by the petitioner, the law has closed the legal options of Hindus, Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs against illegal encroachment on their places of worship and pilgrimage. Interestingly, the petitioner, a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader, raises the point that the law is ultra vires several key Articles of the Constitution which deal with equality, discrimination based on religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, protection of life and personal liberty, freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion, freedom to manage religious affairs and protection of interests of minorities. Moreover, the PIL argues, it violates the principles of secularism, which is an integral part of the Preamble and the basic structure of the Constitution.

From the looks of it, the PIL is an innocent demand for justice but in fact it stands logic and the Constitution on their heads. Parliament had passed the law in the backdrop of the demolition of the Babri Masjid by a group of religious fundamentalists and vandals (who were last year absolved of their crime by the trial court). The P.V. Narasimha Rao government, that was accused of being a silent spectator to one of the most barbaric acts Independent India has witnessed, enacted the law to prevent a repeat of the same. This was because the same elements which brought down the Babri Masjid, showing scant regard for the basic concepts of democracy such as respect for the rule of law and the sanctity of judicial orders were targeting other such structures as well.

Civilisations survive and thrive not by going back to history and righting everything that went wrong. After all, the scale changes with time. India definitely doesn't have the luxury to engage its several future generations on issues religious with a scale that surpasses time, ignoring poverty, ignorance and disease. The Supreme Court will do justice to itself, and to the people, by remembering this simple point.

Jagan is South's big star

From being a political upstart who intrepidly challenged the mighty Sonia Gandhi at the height of the United Progressive Alliance's stint in power at the Centre to the latest founder of a powerful regional party in the South, to one of India's youngest chief ministers, Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy has traversed an exciting and peerless journey, lickety-split, with remarkable ease.

With a sweeping win even before his first term as chief minister reaches its mid-point, reducing the Opposition Telugu Desam led by an experienced political giant of another era, N. Chandrababu Naidu, to rubble, Mr Reddy is now the undisputed political czar of Andhra Pradesh. But is he actually more than just that?

A cursory scan of South India's political map — read hot in parts because of the ongoing Assembly election campaigns — will find the answer is yes. At a time when several incumbent CMs and their challengers are fighting to etch the next episode of their career and destiny, Mr Reddy is sitting pretty on his people-gifted throne.

Karnataka's B.S. Yediyurappa is past his prime and Telangana chief minister K. Chandrashekar Rao is battling intense anti-incumbency and an exceptional political challenge from the BJP. Kerala's incumbent chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan may be on the verge of making history as a rare instance of a front retaining power in that state, but as part of a political party and ideology without any larger national salience or relevance, he will remain a state-level leader.

In Tamil Nadu, M.K. Stalin's long wait may finally be over and his tryst with power may bring upon him the status of being a new icon in national politics from the south. But a big "if" stands between Mr Stalin and the results on May 2. In the context, Mr Reddy is now bigger and more than just the chief of the YSR Congress or the CM of Andhra Pradesh; he is the most powerful political leader in South India. He's also the creator of a new brand of politics whose best times may still be ahead: far, far ahead.

THE ASIAN AGE

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Subhani



As Afghan mess grows, India must be cautious



Anand Sahay

Far & Near

It is becoming apparent that the Americans are finding it hard to orchestrate their plan to get out of the Afghan quagmire. The way things are going, an outcome satisfactory to all is unlikely from the set of ideas that Washington has lately advanced.

In these circumstances, India must learn to do its own sums even as it seeks to be collegial. Its abiding interests in the Afghan theatre are self-evident. Its best bet is to align with the people of Afghanistan at a crucial juncture, and to develop working relations with key constituencies, banking on the goodwill it has earned.

The Biden administration's ideas were projected in a letter by secretary of state Antony Blinken to President Ashraf Ghani, and the so-called draft peace proposals canvassed by Zalmay Khalilzad, the US special envoy for Afghan Reconciliation, to enable constitution-making afresh (in a new order), shape post-US governance through an interim government to start with and pave the way for a comprehensive ceasefire.

Practically rejecting this line, President Ghani declared on March 6: "Transfer of power through elections is a non-negotiable principle for us." He said that he was ready to discuss free and fair elections "under the auspices of the international community".

"We can also talk about the date of elections and reach a conclusion," the Afghan President added, showing readiness to forgo more than half his term. His words were pitifully reaffirmed by vice-president Amrullah Saleh, a redoubtable former intelligence chief, suggesting that this is a deliberated position — indeed, the articulation of an alternative formulation to America's.

While the response of the key Afghan political elites like former President Hamid Karzai, chairman of the country's reconciliation process Abdullah Abdullah, and others to the US proposals isn't developed yet, President Ghani's interjection can leave little doubt that the US plan is facing rough weather inside Afghanistan.

There are indications that the Karzai group gives little credence to guarantees for peace the regional powers may offer at America's behest at the proposed UN-led conference in Turkey. Also, it is not enamoured of the idea of an unelected "guidance council", or shura of theologians, to exist alongside government structures in the US scheme — virtually a vetoing authority that may give the Taliban a further edge.

After Mr Ghani's public stance, taken in the Afghan Parliament, on March 8, a US state department spokesman was quoted as saying that it was "too early to say how the peace process is going". This seemed a dose of realism after Mr Blinken's hectoring letter.

President Ghani is neither widely popular, nor known to be a consensus-builder, but he does represent the current Afghan Constitution which the US had helped fashion (along with then interim President Hamid Karzai) in 2004, and which New Delhi had gone to considerable lengths to back. The gains arising from this Constitution at the popular level are backed by the new generation of Afghans, the largest constituency.

The Blinken epistle favours a UN-routed conference in Turkey (a "Bonn 2" of sorts) of leading countries that ring Afghanistan (India included, though it doesn't have a border with that coun-

try), presumably to get them to agree to a "unified approach" on Afghanistan's future.

This is not only wispy, it is self-serving. Does the US seriously believe that Pakistan, China, Russia, Iran and India, besides America itself (the six countries Mr Blinken envisages will be at the table), can project a "unified approach" as "these countries share an abiding common interest in a stable Afghanistan"?

While Pakistan and China may be expected to be favourable to the Taliban outright, what the US is perhaps really saying is that Iran, India (and Russia) should lump it and accept the Taliban's hegemony in Afghanistan once the remaining American troops have exited. Even if India or Iran can develop a functional relationship with the Taliban in time, how realistic is this prospect in the immediate future?

The US of course already accepts the Taliban as the hegemon. That indeed was the basis for the earlier Trump administration to reach the Doha agreement with this Pakistan-nurtured politico-military outfit in February 2020, and the reason why the Biden administration is being openly solicitous of the group which continues to rain violence on the Afghan people.

In the American scheme, half of all official positions will go to the Taliban in the envisaged interim government. Not to put too fine a point on it, the logic of things suggests that so long as the last US soldier exits unharmed, it will matter little to Washington if the Taliban (with Pakistan's and China's support this time) seeks to

bludgeon the country into submission yet again.

Disregarding the promises it had given the US of a negotiated peace with the Afghan government, as a condition for the final withdrawal of American troops under the Doha agreement, the Taliban went on a spree of violence, killing thousands in the course of the past year, along with targeted assassinations.

This was to project its military prowess to strengthen its negotiating stance vis-a-vis fellow Afghans, and to suitably impress the Americans further. And yet, astonishingly, Mr Blinken's letter to President Ghani speaks of a "revised proposal" for a 90-day "reduction in violence" — not "ceasefire" — to pre-empt the Taliban's "spring offensive", an annual feature, presumably so that peace parleys (to aid the US) are not prejudiced.

The question to ask is whether the Doha accord survives as an instrument of any merit after a year of bloody Taliban violence. If not, are there lessons in this for the future? But uninterested, the US is headed for "Bonn 2", probably on March 27. Besides, with the participation of the US, Russia, China and Pakistan, and invitations to senior Afghan figures, including government leaders, an earlier "peace" conference is due on March 18, hosted by Moscow. There is unseemly hurry.

Negotiated settlement or not, a May 1 withdrawal agreed by the former US President is not off the table. On the first anniversary of the Doha accord, the Taliban threatened that "any attempt against the agreement" will end in "failure of talks". The thought must terrify the Americans. Equally, Afghan national security adviser Hamdullah Mohib has said that Kabul was against "imposing" the Doha accord on the people. Completely split perspectives.

Afghanistan is said to be the graveyard of empires, but it is also proving to be the breeding ground of ironies. Trophies are sought to be handed out to the most violent.

LETTERS

RALLYING POINT

The move by onetime bureaucrat Yashwant Sinha, who served as finance and external affairs minister in Atal Behari Vajpayee's government, to join the Trinamul Congress is politically significant. Mr Sinha quit the BJP over differences with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He has also rallied behind the farmers in recent times. His decision makes it evident that it is the Trinamul Congress, not the Congress, that has emerged as the rallying point for anti-BJP Opposition forces. What next? If the TMC wins in West Bengal, will it attract the Congress' G-23 leaders?

Priyanka Mathur
Kolkata

SOCIAL CONTROL

A VIDEO of a young man thrashing a child for drinking water in a temple has been posted on the social media by none other than the abuser himself. The man, who belongs to the Yadav community and hails from Ghaziabad, believed he had done the right thing as the child had broken caste taboos. He has been arrested, but it makes one wonder what kind of society we are living in. Can't the mechanisms of social control be now repurposed to check such errant behaviour?

Gautam S.R.
Bhopal

AFGHAN JOURNEY

KUDOS TO Hashmatullah Shahidi for scripting history by becoming the first Afghan batsman to score a double century in Test cricket. After being accorded Test status by the International Cricket Council in June 2017 and playing their debut match against India in June 2018, the Afghanistan team has been performing consistently well in the format. From learning to play in the refugee camps and enduring war to the fickle policies of the cricket administration, the team's journey has been inspirational. It will be interesting to witness it performing against world-class nations in the coming years.

Tushar Anand
Patna

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

Aakar Patel



BJP has never spelt out what 'parivartan' it hopes to bring

In 2019, the BJP won 18 of the 42 Lok Sabha seats in West Bengal. It is hard to see why it will not win the Assembly elections now because it has so much more resources than the rest (more than 90 per cent of electoral bond money, which is the anonymous but legal funding by corporates to political parties, according to RTI reports) and also the power of the Central administration. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has promised he will bring real change to West Bengal. Perhaps he will. The interesting thing to me is that his party has never defined what this "change" is.

Formed in 1951, the Jan Sangh/BJP manifestos move effortlessly back and forth from grand and formless expression like "national rejuvenation yagna" directly to things like running more trains with third-class compartments as opposed to air-conditioned ones, pushing the benefits of cow manure and asking linguists to introduce technical and scientific terms based on Sanskrit to replace English.

The party's ideologue, Deen Dayal Upadhyaya, did not want the states to exist. In his Integral Humanism lectures, he had said: "According to the

first para of the Constitution: 'India that is Bharat will be a federation of states', that is Bihar Mata, Banga Mata, Punjab Mata, Kannada Mata, Tamil Mata, all put together make Bharat Mata. This is ridiculous." He did not tell us that if we removed the states, what mechanism of administration would come between the Union government and the village.

In the first manifesto, the party identified blackmarketing, profiteering and nepotism as the country's key problems. Over time, the Jan Sangh dropped all references to these problems without saying whether they had been solved or had become less relevant to the party.

On agriculture, the party was for "encouragement of the use of mechanical appliances in agriculture". However, later it said that "tractors will be used only to break virgin soil. Their use for normal ploughing purposes will be discouraged". (1954). This was because it was trying to protect oxen from slaughter.

In 1971, the Jan Sangh resolved to limit the maximum income of all citizens to ₹2,000 per month and the minimum to ₹100, maintaining a 20:1 ratio. It would continue working on reduc-

ing this gap till it reached 10:1, which was the ideal gap and all Indians could only have incomes inside this range based on their position. Additional income earned by individuals over this limit would be taken by the government. Residential houses in cities would be on plots that did not exceed 1,000 square yards.

In 1954, the party said that it would repeal the Constitution's first amendment that curbed freedom of speech by imposing "reasonable restrictions". However, after 1954, this demand disappeared from the manifestos.

Interestingly, the Jan Sangh also said that it would repeal preventive detention laws which it said were absolutely in contradiction to individual liberty. This promise was made repeatedly in the 1950s. In time, both the Jan Sangh and the BJP became the most enthusiastic champions of preventive detention and laws like UAPA.

Even though the idols were smuggled into the mosque in December 1949, there was no reference to Ayodhya or a Ram temple there in any manifesto from 1951 to 1980.

In defence policy, it wanted compulsory military training for all boys and girls, removal of licences for possess-

ing muzzle-loading guns (an eighteenth century weapon) and expansion of the National Cadet Corps.

Like "Atma Nirbhar Bharat", the Jan Sangh's swadeshi meant giving subsidies to local industries and tariff protection. Import of consumer goods and luxury goods would be discouraged. Labour rights, including strikes and lockouts, would be discouraged.

Culturally, the party was against alcohol consumption and called for nationwide prohibition. It wanted English to be abolished and replaced in all spheres by local languages, and especially Hindi.

There is no comment whether positive or negative on the Constitution, which was adopted months before the first Jan Sangh manifesto, or even about the ideals it represents. Dr B.R. Ambedkar had proposed modest changes to Hindu personal law, especially on the question of inheritance for women. He identified two dominant forms of traditional inheritance law and modified one of them to make inheritance fairer for women. In its 1951 manifesto, the Jan Sangh opposed this reform.

While it signals anti-Muslim intent, the Jan Sangh did not have the trans-

parency of the BJP and its open dislike of Muslims. The Jan Sangh was unable to express its majoritarianism as clearly and in as full-throated a fashion as the BJP was later able to.

This was because it lacked a specific programme on the back of which to mobilise anti-Muslim sentiment, such as the campaign against the Babri Masjid. It was not important as an issue all this time. The lack of a mass-mobilisation issue meant that the Jan Sangh remained a minor player, getting only a few seats in each election. In the last election it contested under its own name, in 1971, the Jan Sangh won 22 seats and seven per cent of the vote, making it only the fourth largest party in Parliament. It was only under Lal Krishna Advani, and then especially under Narendra Modi, that the BJP became the mass-based electoral force it has become, from the cadre-based party that was the Jan Sangh. It is remarkable that this should have been achieved in the absence of a coherent, consistent ideology and even a definition of what "parivartan" it stood for and would bring.

The writer is a columnist and a senior journalist

SHORT TAKES

JUSTICE FOR WOMEN: AUSSIES RALLY AT PARL

Canberra, March 15: Australians rallied in the capital and other cities Monday demanding justice for women and calling out misogyny and dangerous workplace cultures as the government reels from two rape allegations.

Outside Parliament House in Canberra, the crowd of hundreds was mostly female and most wore black. They carried placards, including "Justice for Women" and "Men, Own Your Guilt." Prime Minister Scott Morrison refused organisers' demand that he address the crowd. He agreed to meet a delegation of protesters in his office, but a meeting didn't take place.

ASTRAZENECA VAX: FRANCE STOPS USING IT

Paris, March 15: French President Emmanuel Macron says that France is suspending the use of the AstraZeneca Coronavirus vaccine out of precaution. Macron told a news conference Monday that French authorities have decided to suspend shots at least until Tuesday afternoon, when the European Medicines Agency will issue its recommendation over the vaccine. He didn't elaborate on the reasons for the decision. He said France hopes to be able to vaccine again with AstraZeneca shots "soon." Other countries, including Germany, on Monday said it would temporarily halt its use as a precaution amid reports that some people developed blood clots after receiving the shot. AstraZeneca and global health authorities insist the shot is safe.

WOMAN REJECTS MASK AT BANK, TO BE NABBED

Galveston (US), March 15: An arrest warrant was issued for a woman who refused to wear a mask at a Texas bank, saying to a police officer: "What are you going to do, arrest me?" Police have issued a warrant for the arrest of Terry Wright, 65, of Grants Pass, Oregon. The incident on Thursday at a Bank of America in Galveston was captured by the officer's body camera. Police say they've obtained an arrest warrant on resisting arrest and criminal trespassing charges. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott on Wednesday ended statewide orders requiring people to wear face masks in public places, declaring that businesses should decide for themselves what Covid-19 precautions to take on their properties.

SANDSTORM IN CHINA: FLIGHTS CANCELLED

Beijing, March 15: China's capital and a wide swath of the country's north were enveloped Monday in the worst sandstorm in a decade, leading to the cancellation of hundreds of flights. Skyscrapers in the centre of Beijing appeared to drop from sight amid the dust and sand. Traffic was snarled and more than 400 flights out of the capital's two main airports were cancelled before noon. Such storms used to occur regularly in the springtime as sand from western deserts blew eastwards, affecting areas as far as northern Japan. Massive planting of trees and bushes in fragile areas has reduced the storms' intensity, but the expansion of cities and industries has put constant pressure on the environment.

PRACHANDA TO DROP PARTY'S 'MAOIST CENTRE'

Kathmandu, March 15: Chief of Nepal's CPN-Maoist Centre (MC) Pushpa Kamal Dahal "Prachanda" has proposed to drop "Maoist Centre" from the party's name to make it acceptable for communist forces in the country, who do not like Maoism, to join it, according to a media report on Monday. CPN-MC member Shiv Kumar Mandal said that Prachanda was always in favour of unity among all communist forces of the country and suggested that if dropping "Maoist Centre" from the party's name could unite these forces, then the party should be ready for that. The proposal came as CPN-MC faces the heat after the Supreme Court nullified its merger with CPN-UML led by PM K.P. Sharma Oli.

Martial law in 6 Yangon townships

Security forces have killed dozens in crackdown on resistance to last month's military coup

Yangon, March 15: Myanmar's ruling junta has declared martial law in six townships in the country's largest city, as security forces killed dozens of protesters over the weekend in an increasingly lethal crackdown on resistance to last month's military coup.

State broadcaster MRTV said Monday that the Yangon townships of North Dagon, South Dagon, Dagon Seikkan and North Okkalapa have been put under martial law. An initial announcement was made late Sunday saying two other townships Hlaing Thar Yar and neighbouring Shwepyitha were being placed under martial law.

At least 38 people were killed Sunday and dozens were injured in one of the deadliest days of the crackdown on anti-coup protesters, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, or AAPP, an independent group tracking the toll of the violence. Several estimates from other sources gave higher figures.

Complicating efforts to organise new protests as well as media coverage of the crisis, mobile internet service has been cut, though access is still available through fixed broadband connections. Mobile data service has been used to stream live video coverage of protests, often showing security forces attacking demonstrators.

It had been turned off only from 1 am to 9 am for



Anti-coup protesters display cards and shout slogan as they protest against the military coup in Mandalay, Myanmar, on Monday.

several weeks, with no official explanation.

The blockage of internet service forced postponement of a court hearing in the capital, Natogyi, for Myanmar's detained leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who was supposed to take part via a video conference, said her lawyer Khin Maung Zaw.

Suu Kyi and President Win Myint were detained during the February 1 military takeover, and have been charged with several criminal offences that their

supporters believe are politically motivated to keep them locked up.

Since the takeover six weeks ago, Myanmar has been under a nationwide state of emergency, with its civilian leaders ousted and detained, and military leaders in charge of all government. But Sunday's announcement was the first use of martial law since the coup and suggested more direct military control of security, instead of local police.

The announcement said

that the State Administrative Council acted to enhance security and restore law and order, and that the Yangon regional commander has been entrusted with administrative, judicial and military powers in the area under his command. The orders cover six of Yangon's 33 townships, all of which suffered major violence in recent days.

Thirty-four of the deaths were in Yangon. Video from Hlaing Thar Yar township showed people running away after gun-

fire was heard at night-time. Those fleeing carried one injured person and tried to revive two others, one who seemed to be dead or dying, the footage from independent Democratic Voice of Burma showed.

Hlaing Thar Yar was the location of 22 civilian deaths Sunday, according to the AAPP, which said more than a dozen civilians were wounded and described a large number of junta forces engaged in the township.

— AP

383 FROM MYANMAR HAVE ENTERED INDIA

Aizawl, March 15: At least 383 Myanmar nationals, including women and children, have so far sneaked into Mizoram seeking refuge since late February following military coup and subsequent crackdown on pro-democracy movement in the neighbouring country, a state home department official said on Monday.

He said about 98 per cent of the Myanmar nationals entering Mizoram claimed that they belonged to police force and fire service. But, they don't have documentary proofs in support of the claim, the official said.

Of the 383 foreign nationals, 297 have been already verified while 86 are yet to be verified or confirmed, the official said. "As per the state home department record as on Monday, 383 people from Myanmar have already entered five Mizoram districts and 86 of them are yet to be confirmed," the official told PTI on condition of anonymity.

Six Mizoram districts share a 510 km long porous international border with Myanmar's Chin state.

— PTI

IRAN OPENS UNDERGROUND MISSILE FACILITY

Tehran, March 15: Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard on Monday inaugurated a new underground facility designated for missile storage, the country's state TV reported.

The report quotes Guard commander Gen. Hossein Salami as saying that cruise and ballistic missiles will empower the force's navy even more. The TV report showed footage of scores of missiles in an enclosed space resembling an underground corridor. It did not say where the facility is located nor how many missiles are stored there.

Since 2011, Iran has boasted of underground facilities across the country as well as along the southern coast near the strategic Strait of Hormuz. Iran claims to have missiles that can travel 2,000 kilometres (1,200 miles), placing much of the Middle East, including Israel, within range.

The US and its Western allies see Iran's missile programme as a threat, along with the country's nuclear programme — particularly after Tehran gradually breached its commitments to the 2015 nuclear deal with world powers.

— AP



Andrew Cuomo

BIDEN DECLINES TO CALL FOR CUOMO TO QUIT

Washington, March 15: President Joe Biden on Sunday passed up an opportunity to join other Democrats calling for the resignation of New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who is under investigation after multiple allegations of sexual harassment.

Asked by a reporter if Cuomo should resign, Biden responded, "I think the investigation is underway and we should see what it brings us." Biden, who made the comments upon returning to the White House from a weekend at his home in Delaware, had not previously spoken publicly about the allegations against Cuomo.

However, his comments reflect the wait-and-see position the White House has taken regarding Cuomo's future. White House press secretary Jen Psaki would not say whether Biden believes Cuomo should resign. She said every woman who has come forward "deserves to have her voice heard, should be treated with respect and should be able to tell her story." She has said that the president supports the investigation. Several prominent New York Democrats, including Sens. Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand, have called on Cuomo to step down.

— AP

Major EU nations suspend use of AstraZeneca vaccine

FRANK JORDANS
BERLIN, MARCH 15

Germany, France, Italy and Spain became the latest countries Monday to suspend use of AstraZeneca's Covid-19 vaccine over reports of dangerous blood clots in some recipients, though the company and European regulators have said there is no evidence the shot is to blame.

AstraZeneca's is just one of three vaccines in use on the continent. But the cascading number of nations raising the alarm amounts to another setback for the European Union's vaccination drive, which has been plagued by shortages and other hurdles and is lagging well behind the campaigns in Britain and the US.

The EU drug regulatory

● **THE DRUGMAKER** said there is no evidence the vaccine carries an increased risk of clots

● **THE WHO** and the European Medicines Agency have also said that the data does not suggest the vaccine caused the clots and that people should continue to be immunised

agency called a meeting for Thursday to review experts' findings on the AstraZeneca vaccine and decide whether action needs to be taken.

The furore comes as much of Europe is tightening restrictions on schools and businesses amid surging cases of Covid-19.

Germany's health minister said the decision to suspend AstraZeneca shots was taken on the advice of the country's vaccine regulator, the Paul Ehrlich Institute,

which called for further investigation into seven cases of clots in the brains of people who had been vaccinated.

Today's decision is a purely precautionary measure, Jens Spahn said.

French President Emmanuel Macron said his country will likewise suspend shots until at least Tuesday afternoon. Italy's drug regulator announced a temporary ban, less than 24 hours after saying the "alarm over the vaccine wasn't justified. And Spain said it

will stop using the vaccine for two weeks while experts review its safety.

AstraZeneca said there have been 37 reports of blood clots out of more than 17 million people vaccinated in the 27-country European Union and Britain. The drugmaker said there is no evidence the vaccine carries an increased risk of clots.

In fact, it said the incidence of clots is much lower than would be expected to occur naturally in a general population of this size and is similar to that of other licensed Covid-19 vaccines.

The World Health Organisation and the EU's European Medicines Agency have also said that the data does not suggest the vaccine caused the clots and that people should continue to be immunised.

— AP

US, Japan in China-centric talks

Tokyo, March 15: Shared worry about China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific region will take centre stage when President Joe Biden's defence chief and secretary of state visit Japan for their first in-person talks with their Japanese counterparts.

US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin arrived Monday, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken to join him later in Tokyo for meetings meant to reaffirm America's commitment to the region and to the two nations' alliance following former President

Donald Trump's more confrontational approach.

The two secretaries are holding so-called "two plus two" diplomatic and security talks on Tuesday with their Japanese counterparts, Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi and Defence Minister Nobuo Kishi. "The United States is now making a big push to revitalize our ties with friends and partners — both in one-to-one relationships and in multilateral institutions — and to recommit to our shared goals, values, and responsibilities," Blinken and Austin

said in a piece published Monday in *The Washington Post*.

The US and others share the values and principles of keeping an open Indo-Pacific region, but China is "all too willing to use coercion to get its way," the two ministers said. "Here again, we see how working with our allies is critical."

The United States will lead with diplomacy, maintain America's military might "and renew our alliances and ensure they're fit for purpose to address the threats and

opportunities of our time," Blinken and Austin wrote.

Together they can hold China accountable for its human rights abuses and other problems in Xinjiang, Tibet, as well as Hong Kong and Taiwan, they said. In a move meant to signal his intention for the US to return to the Asia-Pacific region, Biden on Friday held a first summit of the leaders from Australia, Japan, India and the US known as the "Quad" virtually and emphasised Washington's commitment to the region.

— AP

FORMAL | RESPONSE

Catholic teaching holds that marriage is intended for the sake of creating new life

Vatican bars gay union blessing, says God 'can't bless sin'

Rome, March 15: The Vatican decreed Monday that the Catholic Church cannot bless same-sex unions since God "cannot bless sin". The Vatican's orthodox office, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, issued a formal response Monday to a question about whether Catholic clergy can bless gay unions. The answer, contained in a two-page explanation published in seven languages and approved by Pope Francis, was "negative". The decree distinguished between the church's welcoming and blessing of gay people, which it upheld, but not

their unions since any such sacramental recognition would be confused with marriage.

The Vatican holds that gay people must be treated with dignity and respect, but that gay sex is "intrinsically disordered." Catholic teaching holds that marriage, a lifelong union between a man and woman, is part of God's plan and is intended for the sake of creating new life. Since gay unions are not intended to be part of that plan, they cannot be blessed by the church, the document said.

"The presence in such relationships of positive

● **POPE FRANCIS** has endorsed providing gay couples with legal protections in same-sex unions, but that is in reference to the civil sphere, not within the church.

elements, which are in themselves to be valued and appreciated, cannot justify these relationships and render them legitimate objects of an ecclesial blessing, since the positive elements exist within the context of a union not ordered to the Creator's plan," the response said. God "does not and cannot

bless sin: He blesses sinful man, so that he may recognise that he is part of his plan of love and allow himself to be changed by him," it said. Francis has endorsed providing gay couples with legal protections in same-sex unions, but that is in reference to the civil sphere, not within the church.

Those comments were made during an interview with a Mexican broadcaster, *Televisa*, in 2019, but were cut by the Vatican until they appeared in a documentary last year. While the documentary fudged the context, Francis was referring to the posi-

on he took when he was archbishop of Buenos Aires and the country's lawmakers were considering approving gay marriage, which he and the Catholic Church opposed.

Then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio instead supported providing legal protections for gay people in stable unions through a so-called "law of civil cohabitation." Francis told *Televisa*: "Homosexual people have the right to be in a family. They are children of God." Speaking of families with gay children, he said: "You can't kick someone out of a family, nor make their life miserable

for this. What we have to have is a civil union law; that way they are legally covered." In the new document and an accompanying unsigned article, the Vatican said questions had been raised about whether the church should bless same-sex unions in a sacramental way in recent years, and after Francis had insisted on the need to better welcome and accompany gay people in the church. In the article, the Vatican stressed the "fundamental and decisive distinction" between gay individuals and gay unions, noting that "the negative judgment on the blessing

of unions of persons of the same sex does not imply a judgment on persons."

But it explained the rationale for forbidding a blessing of such unions, noting that any union that involves sexual activity outside of marriage cannot be blessed because it is not in a state of grace, or "ordered to both receive and express the good that is pronounced and given by the blessing."

And it added that blessing a same-sex union could give the impression of a sort of sacramental equivalence to marriage.

— AP

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	50395.08	-0.78
Nifty 50	14929.50	-0.68
S&P 500*	3,940.39	-0.07
Dollar (₹)	72.47	0.45
Pound Sterling (₹)	101.11	0.14
Euro (₹)	86.68	0.05
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	44,364▲61	0.13
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	68.56	-0.95
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.201	0.00
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	1.607	-0.028

* As of 8:30 PM IST

WPI inflation rises to 4.17% on costlier food, fuel

The wholesale price-based inflation rose for the second consecutive month to a 27-month high of 4.17 per cent in February, as food, fuel and power prices spiked. The WPI inflation was 2.03 per cent in January and 2.26 per cent in February last year. After witnessing months of softening of prices, the food articles in February saw 1.36 per cent inflation. In January it was (-) 2.80 per cent.

₹2,000 notes not printed in last 2 years: Govt in LS



The Rs 2,000 currency notes have not been printed in the last two years even as the quantum of the note has come down, the Lok Sabha was informed. In a written reply, minister of state for finance Anurag Singh Thakur said 3,362 million currency notes of Rs 2,000 denomination were in circulation on March 30, 2018, constituting 3.27 per cent and 37.26 per cent of the currency in terms of volume and trade respectively.

Kia Motors names Hardeep Singh Brar as sale head

Kia Motors India said it has appointed Hardeep Singh Brar (48) as national head of sales and marketing, with immediate effect. Prior to joining Kia, Brar had served at Great Wall Motors, Maruti Suzuki, Volkswagen, General Motors and Nissan. He is a mechanical engineer.



Hardeep Singh

UAE-listed firms must have one female director

Listed companies in the United Arab Emirates must have at least one woman on their board of directors, the Securities and Commodities Authority said. The move, an amendment of a previous decision by the authority's board, is "in the context of keenness to empower Emirati women and encourage them to play a greater role in the boards of directors of listed companies," the SCA said.

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■ Sector set to see PE/VC, FII interest Bill to hike insurance FDI cap placed in RS

FALAKNAAZ SYED MUMBAI, MARCH 15

In a move that would open further avenues for investors of insurance companies and attract considerable activity from private equity, venture capital firms and foreign institutional investors (FIIs), the finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Monday introduced a bill in the Rajya Sabha to increase the foreign direct investment (FDI) in the sector to 74 per cent from 49 per cent.

The Insurance Amendment Bill 2021 seeks to make changes in the Insurance Act 1938 to increase the permissible FDI limits. The bill has been cleared by the Union Cabinet on Wednesday.

Under the new structure, the majority of directors on the board and key management persons would be resident Indians, with at least 50 per cent of directors being independent directors, and a specified percentage of profits being retained as a general reserve.

Currently, most Indian promoters of insurance companies, namely public sector banks, NBFCs, corporates, need capital to fund their core businesses and would use the FDI opportunity to monetise their investments and sell their stakes to PEs, VCs or existing foreign joint venture partner.

In 2015, when the FDI limit was lifted from 26 per cent to 49 per cent, the



expectation was that the insurance sector would get fresh capital of Rs 25,000 crore, however, the actual infusion into the sector was just around Rs 5,400 crore, since the Indian promoters of existing companies monetised their investments by selling their stake to the foreign joint venture partners.

Also, the premise that higher FDI would increase insurance penetration appears faulty as despite 20 years of privatisation and raising the FDI limit, India's insurance penetration (life and non-life) languishes much below the world average. Life insurance premium as a percentage of GDP is 3.6 per cent in the country, way below the global average of 7.13 per cent, and in the case of general insurance, it is even worse at 0.94 per cent of GDP, against the world average of 2.88 per cent.

Karthik Srinivasan, senior vice president, group head-financial sector ratings, Icra said, "Instead of

promoters monetising their investments, if the capital is infused into insurance companies then that would help companies to scale up their business and increase insurance penetration.

"Barring a few companies, most other players have adequate regulatory capital as indicated by high solvency levels, but going forward since most are growing their protection business and with natural calamities and mortalities, pace of capital consumption can increase," added Srinivasan.

Ashvin Parekh, managing partner at Ashvin Parekh Advisory Services, said, "It is a long-awaited reform and should be welcomed as it would bring in about Rs 30,000 crore in the insurance sector over the next three years...Another important point is that since foreign capital can come in any form, we could also see activity from private equity, venture capital firms and FIIs."

MTAR TECH IPO INVESTORS STRIKE GOLD ON DAY 1



RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, MARCH 15

IPO investors in Hyderabad-based MTAR Technologies nearly doubled their investment on the company's market debut on Monday.

The company, which develops and manufactures precision components and critical assemblies for clean energy, nuclear, space and defence sectors, has raised Rs 597 crore in the public issue, between March 3 and March 5.

MTAR shares listed at 82 per cent premium at Rs 1,063.90 on the BSE and at Rs 1,050 on the NSE against the public issue price of Rs 575. Later the share price rose further to more than double to Rs 1,154 in the intra-day trade, as there is no upper circuit filter applied on the debut day on any listing of shares through the initial public offering.

Finally, MTAR shares closed at Rs 1,082.25 on the BSE and at Rs 1078.30 on the NSE, registering a gain of 88.22 per cent. At the market close, the company's market capitalisation stood at Rs 3,328.96 crore on the BSE. Shares worth Rs 1637.79 crore were traded and on the NSE.

No proposal to bring petrol, ATF under GST: FM

New Delhi, March 15: Amid record-high fuel prices, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Monday said there is no proposal before the government as of now to bring crude oil, petrol, diesel, jet fuel (ATF) and natural gas under the goods and services tax (GST).

When the GST was introduced on July 1, 2017, amalgamating over a dozen central and state levies, five commodities, crude oil, natural gas, petrol, diesel, and aviation turbine fuel (ATF) were kept out of its purview given the revenue dependence of the central and state governments on this sector.

This meant that the central government continued to levy excise duty on them while state governments charged VAT. These taxes, with excise duty, in particular, have been raised periodically.

While the taxes haven't come down, a spike in global oil prices on demand recovery has pushed petrol and diesel to an all-time high, leading to demand for them be brought under the GST.

"At present, there is no

PRIVATISATION TO UNLOCK REAL VALUE OF PSUs: SITHARAMAN

New Delhi, March 15: Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Monday said efficient management and use of the latest technology by the private sector will help unlock the real value of CPSEs undergoing strategic sale and bring much higher dividends for the economy.

She said Niti Aayog had been mandated to identify and recommend CPSEs — which are not in the 'priority sector' — for strategic disinvestment, based on the criteria of national security, sovereign functions at arm's length, and market imperfections and public purpose.

These CPSEs are reckoned as 'low priority' for the government notwithstanding that they may be



Nirmala Sitharaman

profit-making companies.

"The unlocking of real value through better/efficient management and use of latest technology by the private sector may bring much higher dividends for the economy as a whole in terms of growth, productivity and employment," Sitharaman said in the Lok Sabha.

—PTI

proposal to bring crude petroleum, petrol, diesel, ATF and natural gas under GST," Sitharaman said in a written reply to a question in the Lok Sabha.

She said the law prescribes that the GST Council shall recommend the date on which the GST be levied on petroleum crude, high-speed diesel, motor spirit (com-

monly known as petrol), natural gas and ATF.

"So far, the GST Council, in which the states are also represented, has not made any recommendation for inclusion of these goods under GST," she said.

The Council may consider the issue of inclusion of these five petroleum products at a time it considers appropriate keeping in view all the relevant factors, including revenue implication, she added.

Including oil products in GST will not just help companies set off tax that they paid on input but will also bring about uniformity in taxation on the fuels in the country.

Sitharaman has in recent weeks talked of inclusion of fuel under GST as well as Centre and states taking a joint call on cutting taxes to cushion consumers against the spike in retail prices.

To a separate question, her junior in the finance ministry, Anurag Singh Thakur said excise duty on petrol was Rs 19.98 per litre a year back and is Rs 32.9 now. Similarly, on diesel, the excise duty has been raised from Rs 15.83 to Rs 31.8.

—PTI

Market trims losses after sinking 1000 pts

RAVI RANJAN PRASAD MUMBAI, MARCH 15

The Sensex recovered from early blows partially after suffering close to 1000-points loss intra-day on poor domestic macro-economic data, surge in US bond yields and a sharp rise in Covid-19 cases in India.

The Sensex fell 993 points, drowning below the 50000 level to the day's low of 49,799.07, but later positive global cues from Asia and Europe helped in a pullback that helped the benchmark index to finally settle at 50,395.08, down by 397 points, or 0.78 per cent.

The Nifty-50 closed at 14,929.50, down by 101.45 points, or 0.67 per cent.

"Market was impacted adversely after February headline CPI inflation rose around 100 basis points to 5.03 per cent led by unfavourable base effect, higher vegetable



prices, higher energy and transportation prices and increase in core goods inflation," said Emkay Global Financial Services.

"Also the Index of Industrial Production lost momentum after rising for the previous two months, and in January 2021 contracted 1.6 per cent, dragged down by poor manufacturing activity and muted consumer demand."

Before the US Federal Reserve's Federal Open

Market Committee's scheduled meeting on March 16 and 17, the 10-year US treasury yield still ruled above 1.6 per cent, making equity investors cautious.

Both foreign portfolio investors and domestic institutions were net sellers of equities worth Rs 1,101.35 crore and Rs 749.71 crore, respectively.

"We saw selling pressure right from the word go and Nifty corrected sharply to breach 14,750 level during the day. The banking index was reeling under pressure and it seemed that bears have complete control today. However, the index started recovering gradually in the last couple of hours and managed to trim much of the intra-day losses and end well above 14,900," Ruchit Jain, senior analyst-technical and derivatives, Angel Broking said.

Govt to sell up to 16.12% in Tata Comm

New Delhi, March 15: The government on Monday said it will sell up to 16.12 per cent stake in Tata Communications Ltd (TCL) through an offer for sale (OFS) starting on Tuesday at the floor price of Rs 1,161 per equity share.

As part of its exit plan from Tata Communications (erstwhile VSNL), the government is initially offering to sell up to 2.85 crore equity shares representing up to 10 per cent of the total paid-up capital of the company.

The government may sell additionally over 1.74 crore equity shares representing 6.12 per cent of stake in Tata Communications as an over-subscription option.

The window for sale of shares for retail investors and for non-retail investors, including who choose to carry forward their unallocated bids, will be opened on March 17.

The government has reserved minimum of 25 per cent of the offer share for mutual funds and insurance companies sub-

ject to valid bids and 10 per cent for retail investors.

As per the shareholding pattern of TCL, the promoters hold 74.99 per cent in the company. Of this, the Government of India holds 26.12 per cent stake while Panatone Finvest holds 34.80 per cent and Tata Sons holds 14.07 per cent. The remaining 25.01 per cent is with the public.

The Department of Investment and Public Asset Management (Dipam) plans to sell its entire stake in TCL in the current fiscal. —PTI

Gail bifurcation plan dropped

New Delhi, March 15: The government is not considering any proposal to bifurcate state-owned gas utility Gail (India) Ltd, and the PSU is focused on building pipelines to connect gas sources to consumers to accelerate gas usage, oil minister Dharmendra Pradhan said on Monday.

Gail is India's biggest natural gas marketing and trading firm and owns 60 per cent of the country's 26,284-km gas pipeline network.

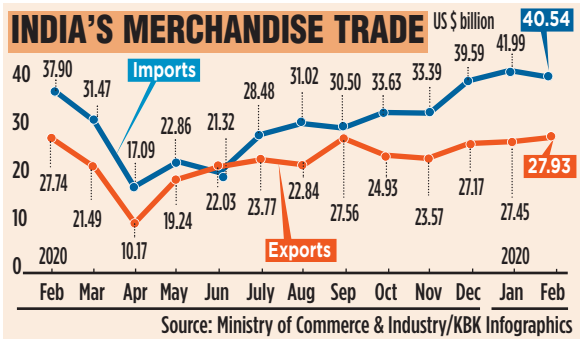
To resolve the conflict of a transporter also being the marketer, it was proposed that Gail's pipeline business should be hived

off into a separate entity. But the proposal has been dropped for now.

"There is no such proposal under consideration at present," Pradhan said in a written reply in the Lok Sabha. He said the share of natural gas in India's primary energy basket is targeted to be increased to 15 per cent by 2030 from the current 6.3 per cent.

For this, the government is promoting the expansion of natural gas infrastructure—pipelines, LNG import terminals and city gas distribution network.

"GAIL is executing projects related to the expansion of gas infrastructure," he said. —PTI



CAUGHT IN CROSSFIRE US whiskey industry faces 50% duties in EU from June

Jack Daniel's feels trade war hangover

ERIC MARTIN MARCH 15

American rum distillers and French winemakers celebrated this month when the US and European Union suspended tariffs on billions of dollars of each other's exports.

But for US whiskey producers, the detente brought no relief.

The products getting a reprieve on duties were part of a dispute over subsidies to the world's two biggest aircraft makers, Boeing Co. and Airbus SE.

The whiskey industry still faces 25 per cent duties that are the result of a still-unresolved, separate front in former President Donald Trump's transatlantic trade war. The tar-

iffs are set to double to 50 per cent on June 1.

The duties are hitting American distillers from Brown-Forman Corp— the maker of the iconic Jack Daniel's brand and Woodford Reserve bourbon—to hundreds of small craft producers. The pain is compounded by a plunge in demand from restaurants and bars due to the pandemic, and closures of tasting rooms due to social-distancing measures.

The duties show how unrelated industries get caught up in trade wars when countries look to maximise the political impact of reciprocal duties. The whiskey tariffs particularly hit Kentucky, the biggest bourbon-producing state and home of



then senate majority leader and Trump ally Mitch McConnell.

The whiskey tariffs are the EU's response to Trump's June 2018 steel and aluminum duties that are still in place. The UK, which came to its own reprieve in the aircraft-subsidy dispute with the US, has also kept the whiskey duties.

European alcohol and American spirits includ-

ing rum and vodka that saw tariffs suspended this month were part of \$11.5 billion in EU and US industrial, agricultural and consumer goods that got a temporary respite related to the Boeing-Airbus case. But whiskey is the largest US spirits export globally.

When the whiskey tariffs went into effect almost three years ago, Brown-Forman decided to absorb the cost, thinking that the duties wouldn't remain in place more than a few months, said Lawson E. Whiting, president and CEO of Louisville, Kentucky-based Brown-Forman. That has resulted in annual expenses of \$80 million, squeezing the company's profit margins and restraining hiring and

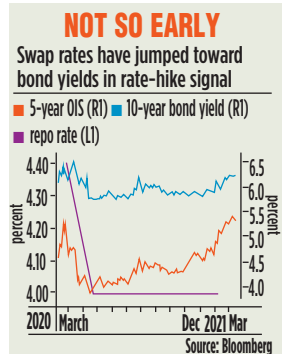
expansion, he said.

Brown-Forman—a global business with famous brands and more than \$3 billion in annual revenue —has been able to mostly maintain sales. But many smaller distillers have seen exports to Europe tumble.

Since the tariffs took effect in mid-2018, exports to Europe have fallen by about 60 per cent. While the company sells to 55 markets globally from Australia to Russia, and has continued to grow in the US, it put off plans to expand into eastern Europe. American whiskey sales to the EU, the US's largest export market, plunged 37 per cent to \$440 million since the tariffs went into effect in 2018.

—Bloomberg

Market wrong on RBI rate-hike bets: Birla Sun



RAHUL SATIJA MARCH 15

The growing market wagers about the most aggressive interest-rate tightening in India of any nation in Asia are wrong, according to Aditya Birla Sun Life AMC.

Five-year interest-rate swaps jumped to 5.42 per cent on March 8, the highest in more than a year, reflecting surging expectations of a tighter monetary policy, and were at 5.32 per cent on Monday. "Markets are mispricing quick rate hikes," said Maneesh Dangi, co-chief investment officer at Aditya Birla.

Dangi, who oversees Rs 1.8 lakh crore of debt assets (\$25 billion), expects the policy rates to remain low for longer as the central bank prioritises a nascent economic recovery over signs of perking inflation.

He also expects the Reserve Bank of India to keep the banking system awashed with liquidity to support the government's record borrowing programme.

The RBI's "compulsion is its inability to normalise its policy as markets have not adjusted to higher levels of government borrowings and are naturally demanding much higher term-premium than before," said Mumbai-based Dangi.

Rate-hike wagers are building around the world as expectations for growth and inflation gain ground. Swap rates are signalling India will see the most rapid tightening of any nation in Asia, according to Standard Chartered Plc.

—Bloomberg

SHORT TAKES

Kapil is now PGTI board member

New Delhi: Legendary cricketer Kapil Dev was on Monday inducted as one of the board members of the Professional Golf Tour of India (PGTI), the sports body said.

Dev, who captained India to World Cup glory in 1983, said he would work for the development of golf in the country. "I thank PGTI for allowing me to be a part of their board. I am extremely happy to be a part of PGTI and will do my best to promote golf as a sport that is doing well and has the potential to become one of the most coveted tours in sports," Dev said in a PGTI release.

"...It is up to all of us to promote other sports including golf. I wish PGTI good luck for the upcoming events." Meanwhile, the Delhi-NCR Open Golf Championship 2021, to be jointly organised by the TATA Steel PGTI and Prometheus School, Noida, will begin at the Golden Greens Golf Club in Gurugram on Tuesday. The Pro-Am event will be staged on March 20. — PTI

Police hunt for Angel's robbers

Paris: French prosecutors have launched an investigation into a robbery at the home of Angel Di Maria after thieves broke in while the Argentina winger was playing for Paris Saint-Germain.

Nanterre prosecutor's office secretary general Marion Chalaux told The Associated Press on Monday that the investigation is being handled by a special police unit dealing with armed robberies and serious burglaries.

The unit was already in charge of inquiries into similar cases linked to PSG players Mauro Icardi and Sergio Rico, whose houses were also burgled during matches this year.

Chalaux said intruders managed to sneak into Di Maria's home in the posh Parisian suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine on Sunday without being noticed.

According to *L'Equipe*, the thieves took watches and jewelry from a safe for an estimated loss of more than 500,000 euros (\$597,000). — AP

No fans at Oly torch relay start

Tokyo: Spectators will be barred from the start of the Tokyo Olympics torch relay, organisers said on Monday, announcing a pared-back launch as the countdown to the postponed Games begins in earnest.

Fans were told to stay away from next week's "simplified" starting ceremony and first leg of the nationwide relay, which was put on hold a year ago when the Olympics were delayed over the coronavirus.

"The grand start ceremony and the first section of the Fukushima torch relay... Will not be open to the public," organisers said in a statement, adding that the festivities would be broadcast live online.

The announcement comes ahead of a decision on whether fans from overseas will be allowed to enter Japan for the postponed Games, expected to be taken before the torch relay begins on March 25. — AFP

B'day boy Curry lifts Warriors

Los Angeles: Golden State star Stephen Curry celebrated his 33rd birthday Sunday with a 32-point performance that propelled the Warriors to a 131-119 victory over the NBA-leading Utah Jazz and snapped a four-game skid.

Curry got off to a sizzling start, connecting on 63 percent of his shots in a 14-point first quarter in which the Warriors seized a lead they wouldn't relinquish. He finished 10-of-20 from the field with six three-pointers. "It's like that ageing wine, right?" Curry said. — AFP

Live on TV

CRICKET

India vs England: Third T20 from 7.30 pm on Star Sports 1, HD

FOOTBALL

Champions League: Real Madrid vs Atalanta from 1.30 am (Wednesday) on Sony Ten 2; Manchester City vs Monchengladbach from 1.30 am (Wednesday) on Sony Ten 1

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ACTION REPLAY

Kohli & Co. look to take lead against England in 3rd T20

Ahmedabad, March 15: Their confidence soaring high after a resounding series-levelling win, India would look to build on their new approach of batting freely and fearlessly when they take on England in the third Twenty20, here on Tuesday.

The Men in Blue were off to a horrible start in the T20 series, suffering a demoralising eight-wicket loss in the opening match but turned the tables on England with a seven-wicket win in the second game.

In stark contrast from the first match, Virat Kohli and his men excelled in all departments.

The inclusion of Ishan Kishan, who made a sparkling debut with a 32-ball 56, allowed India to go ahead with their new approach that encourages batsmen to express themselves.

Despite losing K.L. Rahul in first over with no runs on the board, the 22-year attacked from the word go, smashing Jofra Archer for a boundary in the very first ball he faced.

The hosts will also gain confidence from Kohli unbeaten innings in the previous game as he took the side past the finish line, breaking a sequence of low scores.

The skipper did not have the best of times in the preceding Test series and also got out cheaply in the first T20. Both Kohli and Shreyas Iyer will target big scores.

The bowling department, which didn't have runs to defend in the opener, did a fabulous job to restrict England to 164. The biggest positive would be Hardik Pandya bowling four overs which allowed the hosts to go with an extra batsman.

The bowlers will look to replicate their good show from the last match where they found their rhythm.

What India would aspire is a better effort from Rishabh Pant, who has been promoted to number four ahead of Iyer. The big-hitting wicket-keeper has looked lethal in both outings but failed to capitalise on his starts.

India are unlikely to tinker with the winning combination save the return of star white-ball opener Rohit Sharma who is expected to be back in the side after being rested for a couple of games.

With Kishan faring well, Rahul, who looked out of sorts in both the outings, is expected to make way for Rohit.

The primary objective for India remains the same — to get an idea of the core group of players going into the ICC T20 World Cup in October.

England attack looked less threatening in the absence of Mark Wood, who missed the second T20 due to a bruised heel. However, skipper Eoin Morgan confirmed that the pacer will return in the next game. — PTI



India's K. L. Rahul at a practice session ahead of the third Twenty20 against England in Ahmedabad on Monday.

— AP

IPL stint made Kishan fearless

Ahmedabad, March 15: Young batsman Ishan Kishan says having faced the best pacers from across the world during the IPL had given him the confidence to play fearlessly against England on his India debut.

Kishan's blistering 56-run knock at the top laid the platform for India's comfortable and successful chase in the second Twenty20 on Sunday night.

The 22-year-old left-hander acknowledged the contribution, the IPL stint has made in his growth as a batsman.

"It obviously helped (to face the likes of Mumbai Indians teammates Trent Boult and Jasprit

Bumrah) in the nets. They are very pacy bowlers and to hit shots against them gives confidence," Kishan said at the post-match virtual press conference.

"In IPL you get to face quality bowlers from across the world and you start getting used to these bowlers. And I think that really helped me."

Kishan also said that the team management had backed him to play his natural game without feeling the pressure.

"Before the match I was told to go and open the innings and play freely the way I play in IPL. I was told not to take extra pressure. But it being my first game I was little nervous while going at the ground."

"But when you wear the jersey of your country that pressure simply goes away and you try to give your best."

The debutant was in awe of Virat Kohli during their 94-run stand and hopes to pick the brain of India skipper

KISHAN TOOK THE PRESSURE OFF KOHLI: ATHERTON

London, March 15: Former England captain Michael Atherton says debutant Ishan Kishan's aggressive batting at the top helped 'under-pressure' Virat Kohli settle down and play his natural game in the second T20 International.

Ishan smashed a 32-ball 56 on his first international outing and stitched a 94-run stand for the second wicket with Kohli (73 not out off 49 balls) to hand India a series-levelling seven-wicket win in the second T20 here on Sunday night.

Atherton said Kishan's fluent batting helped in taking some pressure off Kohli, who had registered three ducks in his previous five innings.

"I think Virat felt under a little bit of pressure in that first game because of what he'd said in the press conference about India playing a slightly more aggressive game," the former England skipper told Sky Sports.

"The problem in that first game, with the lineup that India had was that they had quite a lot of similar players in the top-order and I think Kohli felt pressured. I've talked the talk, let's walk it now' and it's not really his game."

"He's (Kohli) an elite player and scores very quickly but not like a (Rishabh) Pant or, indeed, an Ishan Kishan. So when that young man came in and played the way that he did, I think that just allowed Kohli to come in and play his natural game," he observed.

— PTI

Escape to victory, MP archers' style

Kolkata, March 15: The brave-hearted Madhya Pradesh junior archers "achieved the impossible" by winning four medals in the Nationals Championships after miraculously escaping the Shatabdi Express train inferno on their way to Dehradun, their head coach said on Monday.

With less than an hour to reach Dehradun on Saturday, the eight-member recurve men's and women's team experienced the horror of being chased by black thick smoke and fire as they jumped to safety to the adjacent bogey.

But they lost all their belongings, right from their equipment to original documents including Aadhaar Card and birth certificates after their coach C5 was charred near Kansrao.

Starting from scratch with a new set of equipment that arrived in the wee hours of Sunday, the archers without any pre-match day practice concluded their campaign with two silver and one bronze in the recurve category and a team silver in the compound category earlier.

Class X student Sonia Thakur, who won two silver medals in the ranking round, went one step up advancing into the Olympic round on Monday as she nearly bagged a third but only to go down to her Haryana rival in a tightly-contested bronze playoff that was decided in a tiebreaker.

● **Madhya Pradesh archers miraculously escaped the Shatabdi Express train fire on their way to the national championships and, without any pre-match day practice, won three silvers and one bronze medal at the event.**

"They have achieved something impossible. Miracles like this do happen in sport," MP head coach Richpal Singh said from Dehradun.

Singh, who had reached with the compound team ahead of the recurve archers, remembers Saturday's ordeal vividly when he first learnt about the horrific incident.

"They were slated to reach in Dehradun at 12.55pm and we were to go for practice after grabbing a quick bite. But there was no phone calls as I dropped a message in our WhatsApp group and learnt about the trauma."

"The first thing I asked them was 'Are you all safe?' After hearing that they all are safe, our first job was to boost their morale and ensure that they stay focus on the competition the next day."

With a combined support from the MP state administration and Archery Association of India, they managed to get a new set of equipment ordered from Patiala. — PTI

Ronaldo hits back at critics with hat-trick

Milan, March 15: Cristiano Ronaldo hit back at his critics with a quick-fire hat-trick as Juventus brushed aside Cagliari 3-1 on Sunday, five days after their Champions League elimination, while Inter Milan moved nine points clear at the Serie A summit.

Portuguese star Ronaldo bore the brunt of the criticism for Juve's latest European flop after failing to score in either leg of the last-16 defeat by Porto, while also being partly at fault for what proved to be the goal which knocked them out. But the 36-year-old scored a header in the 10th minute at the Sardegna Arena, added a second from the penalty spot 15 minutes later, and completed a 'perfect' treble on 31 minutes with a fine left-footed strike.

Defending champions Juventus are 10 points behind leaders Inter Milan, who beat Torino 2-1 earlier Sunday, but with a game in hand.

Andrea Pirlo's side pulled just one point behind second-placed AC Milan, whose title hopes took a big hit following a 1-0 home defeat to Napoli.

"Our approach was spot on and it was important to get off on the right foot after being knocked out the other night," said Pirlo.

"Ronaldo was angry like the rest of the team. He reacted like a true champion." — AFP

TON-UP BRAVO HELPS WINDIES SWEEP SERIES

North Sound (Antigua and Barbuda), March 15: Darren Bravo's fourth ODI century guided the West Indies to a five-wicket victory over Sri Lanka and a clean sweep of the three-match series here on Sunday.

Set another challenging target of 275, the home side's response was anchored by Bravo's innings of 102 off 132 balls highlighted by five fours and four sixes. He was the obvious choice as man of the match with Shai Hope the equally straightforward option as man of the series with the opener following earlier scores of 110 and 84 with an elegant 64 to set his team well on their way.

Sri Lanka, who made three changes to their team from the nail-biting loss in the second match two days earlier, fought to restrain a powerful West Indies batting line-up but in the end they were undone by the home side's wealth of talent and experience. — AFP

Brief scores: Sri Lanka 274/6 in 50 overs (W. Hasaranga 80 n.o.; A. Bandara 55 n.o.) lost to West Indies 276/5 in 48.3 overs (Bravo 102, Hope 64).

— PTI

India exposed our weakness: Eoin

Ahmedabad, March 15: India have exposed England's "weakness" in handling slow conditions but competing here will only prepare them well for the Twenty20 World Cup, feels skipper Eoin Morgan.

India drubbed England by seven wickets in the second T20 to level the five-match series 1-1 on Sunday night.

Morgan admitted they struggled to get used to the slow surface used for the second match.

"I suppose the difference was in the wicket we played and how we adapted. It was different wicket from the one we batted in the first game. The pitch was slow and low and one thing that does expose our weakness on these surfaces a little bit," said Morgan at the post-match virtual media interaction on Sunday night.

"We don't play a lot on slow, low wickets and the more that we can do that, the better. You only become better in these conditions by playing in them and making mistakes."

The English skipper, however, said playing in such tough conditions ahead of the ICC World T20 later this year in India, will only help



England captain Eoin Morgan in action during the second Twenty20 against India at the Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad on Sunday.

— AP

them. "I thought the other night, the pitch really suited us because it had more pace in it — similar to a wicket at home, a Cardiff wicket or somewhere like that, that was a little bit uneven and maybe stood up a little bit.

"But this took us out of our comfort zone and really was a typical Indian wicket that we would play on in an IPL game. Again, your accuracy has to be on," Morgan said.

"You tend to learn quicker if you're winning