

THE ASIAN AGE

NEW DELHI SATURDAY 26 DECEMBER 2020



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Admin, police facilitating horse-trading after DDC poll results, claims Omar

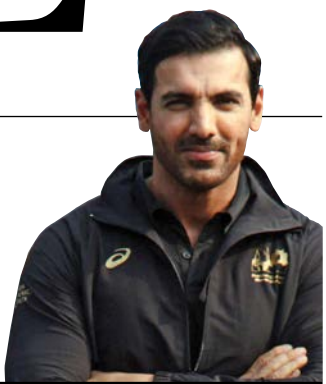


SPORT | 6

Michael Jackson's Neverland ranch sold to billionaire for \$22m

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John Abraham suffers injury while shooting for an action scene in *Satyameva Jayate 2*



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WINDOWS



Actors Ranbir Kapoor and Alia Bhatt arrive for a Christmas brunch in Mumbai. — PTI

Rajini admitted to hospital in Hyd for BP fluctuations

Hyderabad: Superstar Rajinikanth was admitted to Apollo Hospitals as he was suffering from severe blood pressure fluctuations. He was shooting for a movie here for the past 10 days and had isolated himself and is being monitored closely after a few people on the sets tested Covid-19 positive. The actor, however, tested negative. He will be investigated and monitored closely in the hospital till his BP settles down. Full report on Page 9

Covid -ve must for flyers from UK: US

Washington: The US will require all airline passengers arriving from the United Kingdom to test negative for Covid-19 within 72 hours of departure starting Monday. The decision follows the emergence of a new coronavirus variant in Britain that has prompted many countries to shut their borders to travellers from there. — AFP

'Job scenario back to pre-Covid levels'

Chennai: Building on an impressive recovery in the second quarter, employment at the end of the December quarter has almost reached pre-Covid levels. Before lockdown, India had jobs of 406 million or 40.6 crore. Full report on Page 4

COUNTERPOINT



Not personal, it's political... the wife and husband are from different parties!

WEATHER

Max: 22.4°C
Min: 4.6°C
RH: 94%
Rain: NIL

Forecast: Moderate Fog

ASTROGUIDE

Sarvari: Dakshinayana
Tithi: Margasira Shuddha Dwadasi till 4.17 am (Sunday)
Star: Bharani till 10.33 am
Variyam: 11.54 pm to 1.41 am (Sunday)
Durmuhurtam: 6.47 am to 8.15 am
Rahukalam: 9 am to 10.30 am

SUNSET TODAY 5.32 PM
SUNRISE TOMORROW 7.32 AM
MOONRISE TOMORROW 02.16 PM
MOONSET TODAY 3.36 AM

■ Let's talk, reiterates Modi; releases over ₹18,000cr to farmers

PM blames those with political agenda for agri laws deadlock

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 25

Amid intensifying farmers agitation against three new farm laws, the Prime Minister on Friday squarely blamed those with political agenda for the deadlock in the government's talks with protesting farmers and said genuine apprehensions about minimum support price guarantee have got overshadowed by unrelated issues such as the release of those accused of violence and making highways toll-free.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in his address to farmers through video conferencing, put up a strong defence of the three new farm laws and said the Centre is willing to resume dialogue on all farmers-related issues, even with those staunchly opposed to his government as long as the talks are based on issues, facts and logic.

His address to farmers followed the release of over ₹18,000 crore to more than nine crore farmer families under the 'Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi' (PM-Kisan), an effort being seen to placate the agitating farmers.

The Prime Minister asserted that an overwhelming number of farmers across the country have welcomed the new laws and are already reaping the benefits, and listed out the Bharatiya Janata Party's victory in panchayat elections across states, in which farmers were the main voters, including in areas surrounding protest sites.

He said the parties rejected by the electorate are pushing their political agenda by misleading farmers.

Centre likely to buy more crops on MSP

New Delhi: In a major initiative aimed at breaking the ongoing deadlock with the agitating farmers, Centre could agree to procure some more agricultural products on MSP in addition to wheat and rice. The Centre could now agree to procure corn, cotton and some pulses on MSP and is even willing to give a written assurance to this effect.

■ More on Page 3

in between and started firing from the peasants' shoulders to push their own and unrelated demands.

"You would have seen that when the agitation started their demand was about MSP guarantee. They had genuine issues because they were farmers. But then those with political ideology took over," Mr Modi said.

"MSP, et cetera were pushed aside and now ₹

BATTLE FOR BENGAL

Modi says Mamata's 'ideology' destroyed Bengal, she hits back

RAJIB CHOWDHURI and ANIMESH SINGH
NEW DELHI/KOLKATA, DEC. 25

Amid escalating tensions between the BJP and the Trinamul Congress in West Bengal, which goes to polls in just four months, the Prime Minister on Friday directly targeted chief minister Mamata Banerjee, saying her ideology had "destroyed" the state and added that her government had blocked funds under a Central scheme meant for 70 lakh farmers in the state. Ms Banerjee responded to the attack by accusing Mr Modi of attempting to "mislead people with half-truths and distorted facts", adding that the Modi government had "done nothing" to help West Bengal.

Speaking at an event in which PM Narendra Modi distributed ₹18,000 crore to over nine crore farmers, he accused the West Bengal chief minister of "doing politics" by blocking the scheme to provide farmers ₹6,000 every year under "Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi" (PM-Kisan). "If you listen to a 15 year old speech of Mamta Ji, then you will know how much her ideology has ruined Bengal," he said.

"The public is watching those doing selfish politics very closely. The parties that do not speak on the benefit of farmers in



Prime Minister Narendra Modi pays tribute to former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on his birth anniversary at his memorial Sadaiv Atal in New Delhi. — PTI

Farmers intensify stir, say add repeal of laws to talks' agenda

SANJAY KAW
NEW DELHI, DEC. 25

A day after the Centre extended a fresh invite to farmer unions for talks, protesting farmers' on Friday intensified their ongoing agitation against the three agriculture laws not just around the protest sites but in various other parts of the country. While three Union ministers appealed to the protesting farmers to resume negotiations with the government, the farmers unions insisted that the scrapping of the three recent farm laws be put on

Neither MSP will end, nor anyone can snatch your land. I want to tell farmers that as long as Narendra Modi is the Prime Minister, no corporate cans snatch away your land, this is BJP's promise to you.

— Amit Shah, Union home minister

the agenda to resume parleys.

In Haryana, protesting farmers took over several

For once let this act (acts) be implemented, for a year or two... If you feel that this act (acts) is not in the interest of farmers, then I can say you this with conviction we will do all necessary amendments in it.

— Rajnath Singh, MoD

toll plazas to allow free movement of vehicles.

In Uttarakhand's ■ Turn to Page 2

Santa brings some cheer in Covid times



A man dressed as Santa Claus gives a gift to a Covid-19 patient during Christmas celebrations at a hospital in Noida on Friday. Christmas festivities began with hundreds of millions across the world under coronavirus restrictions celebrating a pared-down version of a holiday typically marked by travel and large gatherings. — PTI

■ With choir in hard hats, cathedral plays host to choral concert

Fire-ravaged Notre-Dame rings in Xmas

Paris, Dec. 25: For the first time since a fire that nearly destroyed it, the Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris played host to a Christmas Eve choral concert, an annual tradition in France.

In a concession to the fact that the Gothic cathedral is still being rebuilt, the choristers wore construction hard hats and boiler suits, and there was no audience. The concert was recorded at the cathedral earlier this month, and was broadcast on French television just before midnight on Thursday.

The choristers performed classical pieces by composers Mozart and Schubert, but also a more



Cello player Gautier Capucon and the Notre Dame Cathedral choir record a Christmas concert inside Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris on Saturday. — AP

light-hearted repertoire, including Jingle Bells. "It was very moving," said cellist Gautier Capucon, describing the experience of recording the concert. Along with an

organist, he provided the musical accompaniment for the choir.

"It was the first time we had all been back at Notre-Dame cathedral since the fire, so it was a

Shooter moves court against Smriti, 2 others

Sultanpur (UP), Dec. 25: International shooter Vartika Singh has moved a court here accusing Union minister Smriti Irani and two others for demanding money to make her a member of the central women's commission, days after she was herself named in a police complaint.

The MP-MLA court here has fixed January 2 for a hearing after which it will decide if the case falls under its jurisdiction, according to her lawyer.

The shooter alleged that people close to the minister issued her a fake letter, appointing her as a member of the ■ Turn to Page 2

■ With choir in hard hats, cathedral plays host to choral concert

Fire-ravaged Notre-Dame rings in Xmas

moment full of emotion," he said in an interview with television station franceinfo.

The cathedral, a landmark of Gothic architecture dating to the 13th century and a major tourist attraction, caught fire on April 15, 2019. The blaze destroyed the spire and roof.

French President Emmanuel Macron undertook to restore the cathedral within five years.

But to date, most work on the site has focused on making the building safe, including clearing up toxic lead from the roof and spire that melted in the fire. — Reuters

SHORT TAKES

Moderate fog in Delhi-NCR, cold wave continues

New Delhi: Cold and foggy weather persisted in the national capital on Friday as the minimum temperature remained below five degrees Celsius for the third consecutive day, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) said. The Safdarjung Observatory, which provides representative data for the city, recorded a minimum of 4.6 degrees Celsius, three notches below the normal. "Moderate" fog reduced visibility to 201 metres at Safdarjung. "Shallow" fog was recorded in the Palam area, Kuldeep Srivastava, the head of the IMD's regional forecasting centre, said. According to the weather department, "very dense" fog is when visibility is between 0 and 50 metres. In case of "dense" fog, visibility is between 51 and 200 metres, "moderate" 201 and 500 metres, and "shallow" 501 and 1,000 metres. Cold wave conditions are predicted in parts of Delhi on Saturday. The temperatures will increase slightly on Sunday and Monday under the influence of a fresh western disturbance affecting the upper reaches of the Himalayas. Moderate fog is likely during this period, Srivastava said. — *PTI*

Farmers say add repeal of laws to talks' agenda

■ **Continued from Page 1**
Udham Singh Nagar district, farmers clashed with the police with the demonstrators running a tractor over a barricade as dozens of policemen tried to hold them back. The cops were finally forced to get out of the way of the protesters. In Phagwara, Punjab, some BJP leaders had to slip out from the backdoor under police protection after farmers picketed the hotel where they were observing the birth anniversary of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The farmers' unions have not yet responded to the Centre's fresh letter urging them to decide a date and time for holding the next round of talks. In its new letter, the Centre on Thursday reiterated that it is ready to find a "logical solution" to the issues raised by protesting farmer unions. A section of the farmer unions have alleged that the government's latest letter for talks is nothing but propaganda against the peasants to create the impression that they are not interested in dialogue and asked that the scrapping of the three recent farm laws be put on the agenda to resume parleys. Terming the letter a "delaying tactic", farmer leader Shiv Kumar Kakka said, "The government should bring the repeal of the three farm laws in the agenda for a fresh round of dialogue." Bhartiya Kisan Union (Charuni) chief Gurnam Singh Charuni rejected the offer of Haryana deputy chief minister Dushyant Chautala to mediate between the Centre and the protesting farmers. He said that they don't need any mediator. In a video message, he, however, urged the farmers to hold protests peacefully and not indulge in any violence. Soon after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's virtual interaction with farmers on Friday, Union agriculture minister Narendra Singh Tomar said those misguiding farmers will be taught a lesson by the public in future.

Active Covid case load slips further

■ **Continued from Page 1**
disease transmission. The mock drill will include concurrent monitoring and review at the block and district levels, and preparation of feedback to be shared with the state and Union health ministry," officials said.

The National Expert Group on Vaccine Administration of Covid-19 (NEGVAC) has recommended three prioritised population groups, including healthcare workers (about 1 crore), frontline workers (about 2 crore), and prioritized age groups (about 27 crore).

India on Friday had 23,067 fresh cases of novel coronavirus which were 6.6 per cent lower than the day before. India's total cases so far stand at 1,014 crore while deaths due to Covid-19 have crossed 1.47 lakh out of which 336 fatalities were in the last one day. However, India's active case-load has further slipped and comprises merely 2.78 per cent of the total cases and the recovery rate has improved to 95.77 per cent.

Not a single benefit in farm laws, lot of harms: Kejriwal

'Farmers will have to sell their produce at half the price'

New Delhi, Dec. 25: Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal on Friday claimed the Centre's new agricultural reform laws will not benefit farmers in any way and do a lot of harm.

According to the BJP, Kejriwal said, the laws will enable farmers to sell their produce outside mandis. But they only get half the price for their crop outside mandis so how is that a benefit.

Farmers from various parts of the country have been camping at different border points of Delhi for four weeks now to demand repeal of the three agri laws, which were voted through in Parliament in September amid strong protests by opposition parties.

Kejriwal and his Aam Aadmi Party have come out strongly in support of protesting farmers. Earlier this month, Kejriwal had visited Singhu border, one of the protest sites, and reviewed arrangements made for



farmers by the city government. "BJP says that these laws will not benefit farmers," he said. "What is their benefit? They say that now the farmers will be able to sell their crop anywhere outside the market. But outside the market, the crop is sold at half the price. How is this a benefit? The truth is that these laws will do a lot of harm and don't have a single benefit," Kejriwal tweeted in Hindi.

The three farm laws have been projected by the Central government as major reforms in the agriculture sector that will remove the middlemen and allow farmers to sell their produce anywhere in the country.

However, protesting farmers have expressed apprehension that these laws would pave the way for eliminating the safety cushion of minimum support price (MSP) and do

away with mandis that ensure income, leaving them at the mercy of big corporates.

They have repeatedly rejected a government offer to amend the farm laws and give a "written assurance" on continuing the MSP system and stuck to their demand for the repeal of the legislations — the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, Farmers Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act.

Earlier in the day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi squarely blamed those with political agenda for the deadlock in the government's talks with protesting farmers and said genuine apprehensions about MSP guarantee have got overshadowed by unrelated issues such as the release of those accused of violence and making highways toll-free.

India's 1st tiger reserve hot air balloon safari launched



The first hot air balloon wildlife safari in a tiger reserve was launched on Friday in the world famous Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve by Madhya Pradesh forest minister Vijay Shah. Tourists can watch tigers, leopards, sloth bear and other wild animals from a height, said Shah. — *PTI*

Leave MP or I will bury you all alive, crusader 'mama' Shivraj warns mafia

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY
BHOPAL, DEC. 25

Madhya Pradesh chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Friday sought to project him as a crusader against mafia by threatening to bury them alive if they did not mend their ways. Opposition Congress however dared him to 'walk the talk'.

Addressing a farmers' meet at Hosangabad, nearly 120 km from here, Mr Chouhan roared that "Mama (as he identifies him) is in full form now. Mafias have no place in Madhya Pradesh.

They have to leave the state, or I will bury them (alive)".

The chief minister recounted the anti-mafia drive being undertaken by his government in which the encroachments of government lands by musclemen have been freed and buildings constructed illegally were razed to ground.

"The anti-mafia drive will continue till the state is free of goon culture. I am in a dangerous mood now-a-days. The mafias have to pack up now or they will get buried alive", he thundered.

Mr Chouhan said his gov-

ernment has decided to act tough against sand mafias, mining mafias, hooch mafia and land mafias and anti-social elements in the state as part of his good governance measure.

Hundreds of acres of government lands have been retrieved from encroachers in several cities such as Bhopal, Indore and Jabalpur as part of an anti-mafia drive in the state launched a couple of months ago.

Even influential god man Namdeo Das Tyagi alias Computer Baba was not spared.

His sprawling ashram built

on the 'government lands' on the outskirts of Indore city was demolished recently.

Opposition Congress however dared the chief minister to 'walk the talk' to end the mafia menace in the state, saying that the goons always become active during BJP rule.

"The mafias were reined in completely during the Kamal Nath government. They however have become active when BJP returned to power in the state", Congress spokesman here Narendra Singh Saluja said.

Setback to Nitish as 6 JD-U MLAs join BJP in Arunachal

■ **Continued from Page 1**
Talem Taboh from Rumong Assembly Constituency, Hayang Mangfi, Jikke Tako, Dorjee Wangdi Kharmar, Dongru Siongju and Kangsong Taku from Mariyang-Geku constituency, the bulletin issued by the Arunachal Pradesh state Assembly said.

The development comes a day ahead of the announcement of the Panchayat and municipal results in Arunachal Pradesh.

The JD(U) had, on November 26, issued show-cause notices to Mr Siongju, Mr Kharmar and Mr Taku for their involvement in anti-party activities and suspended them. Meanwhile, the Opposition RJD on Friday took a dig at the JD(U). In a tweet, the RJD said that "the BJP gave Christmas gift to the JD(U) by inducting six of its MLAs into the party".

'Pokhran test in '98 Vajpayee's most enduring contribution'

SRIDHAR KUMARASWAMI
NEW DELHI, DEC. 25

India's decision to carry out the Pokhran nuclear explosions in 1998 will remain then prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's "most enduring contribution", external affairs minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar said on Friday, even as President of the US-India Business Council and former US State Department official Nisha Biswal said Mr. Vajpayee foresaw the "potential dangers posed by a rising and unchecked China".

In an indication of the almost certain increased focus on human rights and democratic values by the forthcoming Biden Presidency, she also said that the Indo-US strategic convergence "needs to be buttressed with a broader focus on our shared democratic values".

Ms. Biswal was delivering the A.B. Vajpayee Memorial Lecture, an annual lecture series begun by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on the occasion of the former PM's 96th birth anniversary.

Ms. Biswal, who previ-



S. Jaishankar

ously served as US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia during the Obama Administration, said in her Address, "Prime Minister Vajpayee was able to foresee what many others failed to see, he saw the potential dangers posed by a rising and unchecked China. And he saw the importance of a US-India partnership, built on the foundation of our democratic values, to advance a rules-based order that would enable a more peaceful, prosperous and pluralistic Asia."

She further said, "The last several years have seen a more aggressive and assertive China that

sought to leverage its growing economic clout to advance its strategic ambitions, often at the expense of its neighbors. The words of Prime Minister Vajpayee, some 20 years ago, foreshadowed the challenges that we are seeing play out across the Indo-Pacific. And in the face of these destabilising actions, the United States and India have forged a closer partnership and cooperation."

Ms. Biswal added, "With the incoming Biden-Harris Administration, there will be a renewed focus on restoring our global alliances and strengthening our global institutions. And the advances of the past four years and the strategic convergence which we have seen deepened in the current administration will continue but they need to be buttressed with a broader focus on our shared democratic values."

In her Address, Ms. Biswal, significantly, did not mention India's 1998 Pokhran nuclear explosions that had then led to imposition of sanctions by the US on India.

Woman thrown out of train after sexual assault in Mumbai

SHAHAB ANSARI
MUMBAI, DEC. 25

In a shocking incident, a young woman was thrown out of a running train after she was sexually assaulted by an unknown person in Navi Mumbai. The victim has been admitted to state-run J.J. Hospital where she is battling for her life.

The victim has been identified as a 20-year-old

resident of Titwala area. According to police sources, the victim worked as house help in Powai and used to visit her house once a week. As per her routine, after a day's stay at her house she left for her work but didn't contact her family for two days. On Friday morning, she was found in an unconscious state next to railway tracks on Vashi railway bridge.

The police have claimed that a motorman of a local train spotted her lying unconscious next to tracks and he informed the authorities following which the Vashi government railway police rushed to the spot and immediately took her to Vashi municipal hospital. The Vashi railway police sources have stated that the victim had multiple injury marks.

Launched 5 months ago, 'Lokvaani' brings Baghel closer to C'garh people

AGE CORRESPONDENT
BHOPAL, DEC. 25

"Lokvaani", a monthly interactive programme launched by Chhattisgarh chief minister Bhupesh Baghel 5 months ago to get feedbacks on issues facing the people of the state and implementation of various welfare schemes being implemented by his government has brought him closer to the common men.

This was indicated by the growing and enthusiastic response the programme

has evoked from the people in the last 13 episodes. "I learnt about various schemes launched by the Chhattisgarh government for economic empowerment of women from Lokvaani. It is good to know that intervention by the government has helped SHGs fetch good prices of their products in the market", Rita Sahu, a member of a SHG in Chhattisgarh, said.

Lokvaani, a half-an-hour programme broadcasted on second Sunday of every

month simultaneously both on various FM channels and regional TV news channels, covers wide ranging topics like agriculture, rural development, education, health, urban development, tribal development, and inclusive development. Mr Baghel directly connects with people through the programme.

He replies to questions from the participants besides getting feedback from them on the implementation of various welfare schemes.

20-yr-old gets new lease of life after heart transplant at AIIMS

New Delhi, Dec. 25: A youth suffering from a rare cardiac anomaly got a new lease of life at the AIIMS, New Delhi, on Thursday after the heart of a 17-year-old brain-dead girl in Vadodara was flown to the national capital and transplanted in him. This was the third heart transplant at the AIIMS here this year. The other two were conducted in mid-february and early march, before the COVID-19 lockdown was imposed.

The 20-year-old youth, a resident of West Delhi, suffered from congenital heart defect, a condition known as Ebstein's anomaly. Because of this, his heart had become very weak and its right section was not able to pump blood.

He had been visiting AIIMS for almost four years for treatment.

"In the last six months, his condition deteriorated. He had become very sick and bed-ridden and urgently needed a heart transplant," Dr Millind Hote, a professor in the Department of Cardiothoracic and Vascular Surgery, said.

"We received information from National Organ and Tissue Transplant Organisation about the availability of a donor heart from Gujarat," Dr Hote said.

An AIIMS team went to Vadodara on Thursday morning, retrieved the heart and flew back to Delhi by afternoon. It was then transplanted in the youth following a nearly 7-hour-long surgery. — *PTI*

Shooter moves court against Smriti, 2 others

■ **Continued from Page 1**
Central Women's Commission, a possible reference to the National Commission for Women.

She alleged that Vijay Gupta and Rajnish Singh, the two aides of the Union minister, initially demanded ₹1 crore from her and then brought the amount down to ₹25 lakh.

She also alleged that one of the men talked to her in an obscene manner.

On November 23, however, Gupta had lodged a complaint against the shooter and another person at Musafirkhana police station in Amethi district, accusing them of levelling unfounded charges against him and trying to spoil his image.

Based on the complaint, police had lodged an FIR against her.

Vartika Singh, however, claimed that the complaint was lodged after she threatened to expose corruption. — *PTI*

PM blames those with political agenda for agri laws deadlock

■ **Continued from Page 1**
what is happening. They are demanding release from jail of those accused of violence... They want highways toll-free. Why have they shifted from farmer's issues to new demands," he said.

"Despite that, farmers across the country have wholeheartedly welcomed agriculture reforms. I assure you that I will not let you down," he said.

Though the prime minister did not name any particular group, he made several references that appeared aimed at Left-affiliated outfits and other Opposition parties.

IN BRIEFS

Thiruvananthapuram gets 21-yr-old mayor

Thiruvananthapuram: The CPI(M), which weathered anti-incumbency factor in the local body elections by roping in the youth in large numbers, has picked the youngest member in the Thiruvananthapuram municipal corporation council to be the mayor of the capital city, and perhaps the youngest mayor in the country. Arya Rajendran, the 21-year-old B.Sc mathematics student of All Saints College here, representing Mudavannmugal ward, will be elected formally when the corporation council meets next. The party's district secretariat took the decision on Friday. The CPI(M) -led Left Democratic Front won 53 seats in the 100-member Thiruvananthapuram corporation council in the recent election. Arya Rajendran, a CPI(M) branch member, at present heads Balasamgham, the children's organisation affiliated to the party. Daughter of an electrician and an LIC agent, Arya told media that her priority would be women's issues.

Minister Prasad's mom dies in Patna

Patna: Union minister Ravi Shankar Prasad's mother Bimala Prasad died after a prolonged illness, it was disclosed by the senior BJP leader on Friday. Mr Prasad shared the news on his Twitter handle.

"My mother Bimala Prasad left for her heavenly abode last night. She was ailing for some time. My mother was a deeply pious lady and a woman of great conviction. She had been supporting the party right from the beginning. She actively participated in the JP movement of Bihar as woman volunteer", said the Union minister in a series of tweets, sharing pictures of himself taken along with his mother while she was alive.

"I recall leaders like Atal ji, Deendayal ji, (and) Nanaji Deshmukh relished food and hospitality by her during their visit to Patna. She was a source of my inspiration and all my achievements in life are because of her blessings. May her soul rest in peace," Mr Prasad added. — PTI

64-year-old Odisha man clears Neet

Bhubaneswar: Age can never be an impediment to achieve a dream. This is what a 64-year-old man hailing from Odisha's Bargarh district has proved. Jay Kishore Pradhan of Attabira has qualified National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test to get enrolled into the Veer Surendra Sai Institute of Medical Science and Research, popularly known as VIMSAR Medical College and Hospital, at Burla in Odisha's Sambalpur district for MBBS courses. A

banker by profession, Pradhan worked with the SBI for a major chunk of his life. As per his own admission, when he first appeared for the medical entrance test in 1974, he could not make the cut. Disheartened, Pradhan decided to abandon his dream and join a bank instead. However, once his father was bedridden owing to urinal ulcer, his buried desire to don the stethoscope and serve humanity started germinating again. "In 1974, I made my first attempt to make it to an MBBS course. However, after meeting with failure, I joined B.Sc courses in Physics (honours). Following graduation, I worked in the telecom sector for four years. Then, I worked in the Indian Bank for a year, before finally joining the SBI in 1983," he said.

Season of joy



A man dressed as Santa Claus distributes candies among children on the occasion of Christmas in Howrah on Friday. The pandemic cast a shadow on the celebrations this year as people followed strict protocols and celebrated the holiday in a low-key manner across the country. — PTI

‘Try farm laws, amendments will be made if not found beneficial’

Modi govt will never do anything which is not in interest of farmers, assures Rajnath

New Delhi, Dec. 25: Union minister Rajnath Singh on Friday appealed to farmers to try the three new farm laws as an "experiment" for a year or two and in case they are found not beneficial for the farming community, the government will do all necessary amendments.

Describing the protesting farmers as his own people, Mr Singh said, "Those who are sitting on dharna are farmers and are born to farmers' families. We have a lot of respect for them."

Thousands of farmers, mainly from Punjab, Haryana and parts of Uttar Pradesh, are camping on Delhi borders for almost a month in protest against the three laws enacted in September.

Addressing a rally at Dwarka in the national capital, Mr Singh said himself is a farmers' son and assured that the Modi government "will never do anything which is not in the interest of the farmers".

"People are trying to mislead farmers about these farm laws that they are not in their interest. I am the son of a farmer and have worked in farms. I want to assure you that there is not a single provision in these laws which is against farmers," Mr Singh said at the rally organised as part of the ruling BJP's massive outreach programme for the farm laws.

He reiterated that the MSP will continue and some people are trying to create a misconception that it will end. Requesting farmers to try the new agri laws for a year or two as an experiment, the former BJP president said if these are not found beneficial, the government would bring all necessary amendments.

"For once let this act (acts) be implemented, for



Police intervene after a mild altercation between BJP supporters and a section of protesters, who were agitating against the new farm laws, in Bathinda on Friday. — PTI

No corporate can snatch farmers' land, says Shah

New Delhi, Dec. 25: No corporate can snatch away a farmer's land as long as Narendra Modi is the Prime Minister of the country, Union home minister Amit Shah said on Friday and asserted that the provision of MSP will continue and mandis will not be shut down.

Addressing a gathering in Kishanganh village in the national capital, Shah said if farmer organisations felt that any provision of the three new farm laws was against their

interests, the Modi government was ready to discuss and consider it with an open mind. The opposition is crying hoarse over the farm laws, he said assuring farmers that the three agricultural reform laws were in their interest and do not cause any harm to them. "Neither MSP will end, nor anyone can snatch your land. I want to tell farmers that as long as Narendra Modi is the Prime Minister, no corporate can snatch away your

amendments in it," Mr Singh said.

Underlining that all problems can be resolved through dialogue, Mr Singh said the PM wants the talks with farmers to continue, and therefore, the government has extended

an invitation to them.

Mr Singh appealed to all protesting farmers to come forward for discussions on the farm laws and if they want to rope in experts for discussions, the government is ready for that as well. — PTI

RAHUL LYING, MISLEADING FARMERS: IRANI

Amethi (UP), Dec. 25: Union minister Smriti Irani launched a scathing attack on Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Friday, accusing him of "lying and misleading" farmers over the Centre's recent farm laws.

Addressing a farmers' rally in her parliamentary constituency Amethi, Irani said, "Rahul Gandhi is telling lies and misleading farmers. He is shedding crocodile tears for farmers and misleading them, his own *jija* (brother-in-law) has encroached upon the land of farmers." Irani's attack on Gandhi comes amid protests by farmers on various border points of Delhi against the Centre's recent farm laws.

Throwing a challenge at Gandhi for a debate on farmer issues, Irani asked him to come in the midst of farmers here and claimed that she would expose him for every single sin committed by him. The Union minister addressed the rally in Singhpur block in Tiloi as part of a mega exercise undertaken by the BJP to reach out to farmers as Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday released over ₹18,000 crore under the 'Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi' (PM-KISAN).

Irani said Gandhi, whom she defeated in the last parliamentary election, is showing sympathy for farmers now, but he himself has "grabbed" the land of farmers. Irani alleged that the Gandhi family did not think about the development of Amethi after winning elections. — PTI

Govt may procure more crops at MSP amid farmers' stir

AGE CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 25

In a major initiative aimed at breaking the deadlock with the agitating farmers, the Centre could procure some more agricultural products on Minimum Support Price (MSP).

Besides wheat and rice, the Central government could now agree to procure corn, cotton and some pulses also on MSP and is even willing to give a written assurance to this effect, top government sources said. As of now though the government announced the MSP on 23 products, it only procures wheat and rice on MSP and that too largely in Punjab and Haryana. Agitating farmers are now demanding a law to guarantee MSP.

There has been a complete deadlock between the protesting farmers and the Government as the farmer unions are demanding a complete withdrawal of the three contentious farm Bills. Farmers are also demanding that the Government should formulate a new law guaranteeing the MSP on all the 23 products.

However, the Centre has already stated it was willing to give a written assurance that the MSP will continue despite the three farm laws. Now as another major concession Centre is willing to give another written assurance that it will procure some other products on the MSP.

"Government is willing to give some other major concessions also so that the farmers withdraw their agitation as they are facing a lot of hardships sitting on protest in the harsh winter. We have sent feelers to the farmer leaders regarding the MSP issues also in addition to a formal letter that has already been sent to them inviting them for talks. We sincerely hope that farmers will take a positive view of the Government's initiative and return to the table for a dialogue," a senior government functionary said.

Farmers gherao BJP leaders in hotel in Punjab

Phagwara, Dec. 25: Bharti Kisan Union (Doaba) activists gheraoed local BJP leaders who had gathered at a hotel here to observe the birth anniversary of former PM Atal Behari Vajpayee, forcing them to slip out from the backdoor under police protection.

The protesters claimed that the hotel was owned by a BJP activist who also ran a company supplying cattle and chicken feed. They said they will boycott its products.

Led by Union's vice-president Kirpal Singh Mussapur, a number of activists held a protest outside the hotel and gheraoed those BJP leaders and workers who had managed to get inside before farmers started their demonstration.

They did not allow several BJP activists, including Bharati Sharma, district president of BJP's Mahila Wing, to go inside the hotel. — PTI

Admin, cops aiding horse-trading after DDC polls: Omar

Srinagar, Dec. 25: National Conference president Omar Abdullah on Friday accused the police and the administration in Jammu and Kashmir of facilitating horse-trading and defections following the announcement of DDC election results and alleged that some parties were using money, muscle and government coercion to make up the numbers.

Omar's remarks came after Jammu and Kashmir Apni Party led by former finance minister Altaf Bukhari announced that Yasmeena Jan — the District Development Council (DDC) member from Imam Sahib-I, in south Kashmir's Shopian district — has joined the party here earlier in the day.

Ms Jan had contested the polls on the National Conference (NC) mandate.

"This explains why our leaders in Shopian district are being put under 'preventive arrest' by the police. J&K police & the administration are facilitating horse trading & defections. The woman shown here joining the BJP's B-team contested & won elections on an NC mandate," Omar said on Twitter.



Omar Abdullah

The NC vice president said it was shameful for the administration to play "partisan politics". "Shame on this administration for playing partisan politics to curry favour with the ruling party & their stooges. These parties couldn't win seats so now they are using money/muscle/threats & government coercion to make up the numbers. So much for "democracy has won!" He said in another tweet.

The results of the DDC elections were announced on Tuesday. — PTI

South actor Nedumangad drowns in Malankara dam

Idukki, Dec. 25: Malayalam actor Anil Nedumangadu, best known for his role as a police officer in the critically acclaimed *Ayyappannum Koshiyum*, drowned while bathing near the Malankara dam site Friday evening, police said.

The actor was in Thodupuzha in connection with a film shoot of his new movie *Peace* starring Joju George and had gone to bathe with friends during a break when the mishap occurred.

Anil, 48, began his career in Malayalam television channels as an anchor and went on to don the grease paint in various films, including *Njan*



Anil Nedumangadu

Steve Lopez, Pavada, Kammatti Padam, Kismat, Porinju Mariam Jose besides Ayyappannum Koshiyum.

The actor had penned a touching Facebook post about *Ayyappannum Koshiyum* director K.R. Sachidanandan (Sachi), who passed away six

months ago.

Today was Sachidanandan's birthday. The tragedy comes close on the heels of the death of 37-year-old Malayalam film director Shahnava Naranipuzha, who died of heart attack two days ago.

Shahnava's *Sufiyum Sujatayum* with Bollywood actor Aditi Rao Hydari and Jayasurya in the lead role, was the first Malayalam film to be released on OTT platform due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Actors Prithviraj, Dulquer Salmaan, Biju Menon and Suraj Venjaramudra, took to social media to mourn the death of Anil. — PTI

BILATERAL ISSUES

BGB raises concern over cross-border illegal smuggling

Bangla refutes illegal immigration claim

MANOJ ANAND
GUWAHATI, DEC. 25

After five-days long deliberations on bilateral issues, Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) on Friday claimed that no illegal immigration is taking place into India from the neighbouring country, but expressed concern over rising incidents of smuggling across the border.

However, Border Security Forces pointed out that they have apprehended 3,204 persons this year for illegally entering India from Bangladesh and 60 of them, whose

nationalities were established, were handed over to BGB.

Addressing a joint press conference with Border Security Force (BSF) director-general Rakesh Asthana, BGB director-general Maj Gen Md Shafeenul Islam told reporters that at least 86 Bangladeshi nationals were killed on the Indian side in the last three years for their alleged criminal activities.

Discussing various issues concerning the border during the ongoing five-day 51st DG-level talks between the BSF and BGB that started on December

22, the two forces also signed a Joint Accord of Discussion and decided to increase coordinated night patrolling to prevent illegal activities across the international border.

The BGB chief while justifying the reason that has stopped immigration to India from Bangladesh said, "The GDP of Bangladesh is on a steady upward trend. There is no reason for any citizen to come to India for jobs or any other reason. People have come with valid documents only for medical purposes."

He, however, admitted that many families in border areas have their relatives on the other side and they keep visiting them during festivals or other occasions, but with only valid travel documents.

The BGB DG also denied the reports that some people have crossed over to his nation from Assam as they did not find their names in the National Register of Citizens (NRC).

The top officers of the two forces, however, expressed concerns over the illegal movement of Rohingyas and said BSF and BGB are taking measures to control it by regularly apprehending such

people on both sides of the border.

Both of them also accepted that criminal activities, mostly smuggling of various items, are on the rise. "We are concerned about cross-border illegal trade. These syndicates are mainly dealing with narcotics and cattle smuggling. We are constantly monitoring them and have increased our vigil along the border," said Asthana.

On rising incidents of cattle smuggling, Mr Islam said it is affecting the local cattle farms in Bangladesh as the country is self-sufficient in cattle production.

quick BITES

INDICATORS		%
Sensex	46,973.54	1.14
Nifty 50	13,749.25	1.09
S&P 500*	3,700.86	0.29
Dollar (₹)	73.54	0.30
Pound Sterling (₹)	100.01	-1.04
Euro (₹)	89.66	0.29
Gold (10gm)* (₹)	50,030▼119	0.24
Brent crude (\$/bbl)*	51.10	-0.10
IN 10-Yr bond yield	5.929	-0.003
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	0.936	-0.019

* As of 9:30 PM IST

3.97cr ITRs filed for 2019-20 fiscal till December 24

As many as 3.97 crore taxpayers have already filed their income tax returns for assessment year (AY) 2020-21 (fiscal year 2019-20) till December 24, the Income Tax Department said on Friday. “Over 3.97 crore Income Tax Returns have already been filed till 24th of December, 2020. Have you filed yours as yet? If not, please do it TODAY! File your Return of Income Tax & ...Relax!,” the department tweeted.

Experts want Centre to pursue FTA with UK, EU



With European Union and the United Kingdom clinching a post-Brexit trade pact, India should now aggressively pursue free trade agreements (FTAs) separately with both the regions, according to experts. Although it is premature to assess the gains for India from the agreement between EU and the UK, Indian goods would not get much benefit from this pact, the experts said.

SJVN gets 3 hydel power projects in Himachal Pradesh

State-owned power producer SJVN Ltd has been awarded three hydroelectric power projects totaling 501 megawatts (MW) by the Himachal Pradesh government. The three projects are to be developed in the Chenab river basin in Himachal Pradesh, SJVN said in a statement. With the latest allocation, the company said it now has six projects with a total capacity of 1,279 MW in the basin.

Aavas Financiers to raise ₹100 cr through bonds

Aavas Financiers on Friday said its board of directors has approved raising ₹100 crore by issuing bonds on a private placement basis. The executive Committee of the board at its meeting held on Friday approved the issuance of rated, listed, senior, secured, redeemable, non-convertible debentures aggregating to ₹100 crore, the company said. The bonds will be issued on a private placement basis, it said.

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Job scenario inches closer to pre-Covid levels in Q3

SANGEETHA G CHENNAI, DEC. 25

Building on an impressive recovery in the second quarter, employment at the end of the December quarter has almost reached pre-Covid levels.

Before the world’s toughest lockdown was announced in India to control the spread of coronavirus, India had jobs of 406 million or 40.6 crore. The employment plummeted after the lockdown had brought the economic activity across the country to a standstill.

In the September quarter, employment had recovered to 39.49 crore from the low of 32.06 crore in the June quarter.

According to data from private think tank CMIE,



the third quarter of fiscal 2019-20 would end with employment of 39.5 crore, which is shy of just one crore jobs to reach the pre-Covid level.

The initial gains were large as self-employed persons got back to their trade when the economy

opened up and desperation drove daily wage labourers to accept any form of employment even at lower wage rates. Soon these options were exhausted and the pace of recovery slowed down during the second quarter. However, employment in

each month of the second quarter was higher than it was in its preceding month.

The recovery was progressing fairly well, as per the data from private think tank CMIE.

At 393.6 million in November, employment was still about 10 million short of what it was in the March 2020 quarter, finds CMIE.

Weekly estimates for the first three weeks of December indicate an improvement in aggregate employment compared to November.

“It is likely that employment could close at 394 million in December. The third quarter of fiscal 2019-20 would end with employment of 395 million,” estimates CMIE.

SIAC appoints panel on Future row

SANGEETHA G. CHENNAI, DEC. 25

In the Amazon-Future Retail case, Singapore International Arbitration Centre will be setting up a tribunal of arbitrators before January 23 as the 90-day period to set up tribunal ends by then.

In the last week of October, Amazon had received an interim award that put on hold the Future Group’s sale of its retail business to Reliance Industries. SIAC usually gives a 90-day period to respond to the interim award and suggest the names of their arbitrators.

Amazon had suggested Brussels-based Albert Jan van den Berg, a founding partner of law firm Hanotiau & van den Berg, and the Future Group has nominated Swedish arbitration veteran and Three Crowns LLP founding partner Jan Paulsson. However, Future Retail has not responded yet. SIAC will finalise the members of the panel, which will also include an independent arbitrator.

Once the panel is finalised, the proceedings are likely to start at the earliest. “Usually, the proceedings are likely to get completed in five to six months,” sources said.

According to sources privy to the case, Future Retail will have to respond to SIAC as the Delhi High Court too has validated the award of Emergency Arbitrator. Even if the HC had not validated the arbitrator, it would not have had a bearing on the proceedings of the SIAC.

“India is on a quest to become the hub of arbitration, given the fact that we have so many global transactions. Increasingly all players in the judicial system are becoming more conscious about the need to make arbitration successful in our country. Everyone is working toward this common goal.

In this context, it was very unlikely that the High Court would not validate it. If it had not validated the EA, the order would set a very bad precedent and send a wrong signal to foreign investors about the sanctity of contracts as well as the ease of doing business in India,” said Gopal Jain, senior advocate, Supreme Court of India.

“This case will become a landmark case wherein it will be established once and for all that contract enforcement is of paramount importance in the Indian business ecosystem,” the Supreme Court lawyer added.

COMMERCE MIN PUSHES FOR LEVY ON CARBON BLACK IMPORTS

New Delhi, Dec. 25: The commerce ministry has recommended for extension of anti-dumping duty for five years on carbon black used in the rubber and tyre industry from China and Russia, with a view to guard domestic players from cheap imports from these two countries.

In a notification, the ministry’s investigation arm Directorate General of Trade Remedies (DGTR) has said there is a “positive” evidence of likelihood of dumping of ‘carbon black used in rubber applications’ and injury to the domestic industry if the existing anti-dumping duty would be removed. “The authority considers it necessary to recommend continuation of definitive anti-dumping duty” on all imports from China and Russia for a “further period of five years”, it has said. The Directorate has recommended two duties, \$494 per tonne for imports coming from China and \$36.17 per tonne from Russia.

The finance ministry takes the final decision to impose this duty. — PTI

Reliance to buy out IMG Global

New Delhi, Dec. 25: Billionaire Mukesh Ambani’s Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL) has agreed to buy out IMG Worldwide LLC from their sports management joint venture for ₹52.08 crore.

The nation’s biggest company by market value, in a stock exchange filing, said it will buy IMG Worldwide’s 50 per cent stake in IMG-Reliance Ltd (IMG-R) for no more than ₹52.08 crore in cash. RIL will rebrand the company after the closure of the deal.

RIL had formed an equal joint venture with IMG Worldwide, an international sports marketing and management company, in 2010 to develop, market and manage sports and entertainment in India.

IMG is a global leader in sports, fashion, events and media, operating in more than 30 countries, and is a part of the Endeavor network.

IMG-R is engaged in the business of creation, management, implementation and commercialisation of sporting, fashion and entertainment events in India.

The company has entered into definitive agreements to acquire the



shares held by IMG Singapore Pte Ltd in IMG-R, for a cash consideration not exceeding ₹52.08 crore,” the filing said. IMG Singapore Pte Ltd, a wholly-owned subsidiary of IMG, holds 50 per cent of the share capital of IMG-R.

“Post completion of acquisition, IMG-R will become a wholly-owned subsidiary of the company and will be rebranded by the company,” RIL said.

IMG-R had a turnover of ₹181.70 crore (including GST of ₹25.79 crore) and a net profit of ₹16.35 crore in FY20. “No governmental or regulatory approvals are required for the aforesaid acquisition and the acquisition is expected to be completed during this calendar year,” said Reliance Industries in the statement.

— PTI

Govt. initiatives catapult real estate to recovery

DC CORRESPONDENT HYDERABAD, DEC. 25

While developers helped the real estate sector recover by bringing on several schemes and benefits for property buyers, much of the credit for the revival goes to the government which came through with proactive regulatory changes, according to Anarock Property Consultants CEO Shajai Jacob.

“One of the government’s first major initiatives was the formation of a Special Window for Affordable and Mid Income Housing (SWAMIH) fund to aid projects which are stuck in the last mile of construction. As this fund evaluated projects and then began disbursing the monies, market sentiment saw a gradual uptick as many previously stuck projects could get back on track for delivery,” Jacob said.

The primary intention behind these initiatives, he said, was to ensure that more unsold inventories get liquidated at the earliest, bringing



much needed cash flow into the sector.

According to Jacob, the SWAMIH fund is driven by transparency, with strict control mechanisms to mitigate the risk of fund diversion. It also underscores that, on the developer, regulatory bodies and the government, accountability for project delivery is sacrosanct.

This fund, the Anarock CEO said, heralds a new mindset for the Indian real estate sector — developer cannot launch

projects, take monies from retail investors, and then not build the project, as has happened in multiple instances in the past.

“The recovery from the setbacks caused by the Covid-19 has been rather stellar for the Indian real estate. There has been a surge in investments, both from domestic and NRI buyers, causing all prominent micro-markets to register strong sales across budget segments in Q3 FY 20-21,” said Jacob.

A more recent initiative with a significant impact on sales was the reduction of stamp duty in Maharashtra and Karnataka.

Another big move was an increase in the difference between circle rate and agreement value from 10 per cent to 20 per cent. This move can get additional price flexibility for the investors from developers.

Direct price reduction as well as savings on the tax paid on such transactions will add to the overall value brought on by this scheme.

billion in March 2013, there have been two cycles of spikes to record highs, followed by drawdowns of more than 80 per cent. Each of those cycles were preceded by a halving of the block reward. The first cycle could be dismissed as an anomaly, the second as a coincidence. But a halving again occurred in May, and the cycle is repeating before our eyes with the cryptocurrency coming within a whisker of the all-time peak last week. To ignore it now is to dismiss the evidence of history.

Like social networks, cryptocurrencies derive their value from the number of users. I could build

a platform with the exact qualities of, and even some improvements over, Facebook, but achieving critical mass is another matter.

The cryptocurrency remains a speculative asset and more needs to happen to secure its claim to preserve wealth over time. Volatility would have to decline, and a reliable link to inflation would have to emerge. But to bet against Bitcoin recovering from the next crash is to bet against experience. And its sheer, bloody-minded survival is what gives it the best chance at eventually becoming the ultimate store of value.

— Bloomberg

Manufacturing sector is in recovery mode: RBI

Mumbai, Dec. 25: Demand conditions in the manufacturing sector returned to the recovery mode with a softer contraction of 4.3 per cent on year-on-year basis in the second quarter of this fiscal in terms of nominal sales after shrinking 41.1 per cent in the previous quarter that was hit by countrywide lockdowns due to Covid-19, according to RBI data.

The recovery was led by iron and steel, food products, cement, automobile and pharmaceuticals companies, showed the data on the performance of the private corporate sector during the second quarter of 2020-21.

Manufacturing companies reported sales of ₹5,99,479 crore in the second quarter, compared to ₹3,97,233 crore in April-June of FY 2020-21.

The data has been drawn from abridged quarterly financial results of 2,637 listed non-government non-financial (NGNF) companies, the RBI said.

Nominal sales of non-IT services sector also registered lower contraction of 14.5 per cent (Y-o-Y) led by expansion in sales of telecommunication and real estate companies.

Sales growth of IT sector companies remained steady at 3.6 per cent (Y-o-Y) in Q2 FY 2020-21.

As per the data, sales of non-IT firms and IT firms during the second quarter stood at ₹80,842 crore and ₹1,01,353 crore, respectively. “Operating profits of manufacturing companies increased on the back of savings in expenditure; operating profits of services (both IT and non-IT) companies also increased in Q2:2020-21,” the RBI

Bank deposits register double-digit growth

FC BANKING BUREAU MUMBAI, DEC. 25

Banks have witnessed a 11.3 per cent growth during the last two fortnights as compared to 10.3 per cent in the year ago period.

Additionally, the banking system liquidity is expected to remain in a surplus position aided by sustained growth in bank deposits as against slower growth in the bank credit.

Time deposits accounted for 89 per cent of aggregate deposits compared to 89.5 per cent share as on December 06, 2019, grew at a slower pace compared to demand deposits which account for the balance 11 per cent (10.5 per cent share as on December 06,

2019). The credit investments of schedule commercial banks rose by 9.9 per cent in September, 2020 compared with the year-ago period aided by LTRO, TLTRO, partial credit guarantee schemes of RBI/government of India.

Within bonds and debentures, private corporate bonds and debentures accounted for 52.8 per cent share of bonds/debentures; the public sector accounted for 21.5 per cent and the balance 25.7 per cent is made up by others.

In the first half of the financial year 2020-21, total corporate bond issuances amounted to ₹4.43 lakh crores, 33 per cent higher than ₹3.33 lakh crores in the year-ago period.

said in a statement.

On expenditure, it said input cost pressure from raw materials remained subdued for manufacturing sector in the July-September quarter of the fiscal.

Meanwhile, staff cost growth (Y-o-Y) decelerated for IT companies in the second quarter, whereas it remained in contraction zone for the manufacturing and non-IT services sectors.

As per the data, with rise in profits, interest coverage ratio (ICR) of manufacturing companies improved to 4.6 in the sec-

ond quarter of 2020-21 from 2.4 in the previous three-month period. The ICR of non-IT services companies remained below one.

Also, profit margins improved across manufacturing and services companies on account of rise in profit from cost saving.

The coverage of companies in different quarters varies, depending on the date of declaration of results. This is, however, not expected to significantly alter the aggregate position, the Reserve Bank said.

— PTI

TELCOs SEE ACTIVE SUBSCRIBERS TALLY RISE BY 25L IN OCT

New Delhi, Dec. 25: The telecom industry’s ‘active’ subscriber base rose by nearly 2.5 million in October 2020 to touch about 961 million, and user additions benefited from vanishing impact of SIM consolidation triggered from tariff hike, according to a latest report.

ICICI Securities, in its report crunching Trai’s telecom subscription data, said Bharti Airtel’s active subscribers rose about three million to reach nearly 320 million in October 2020, “most of which was driven by total subscriber net adds, thus indicating improving quality of subscriber addition”.

According to the ICICI Securities’ report, Jio’s active subscribers rose 1.1 million to 319 million in October.

It added that Vodafone Idea Ltd’s (VIL) active subscriber numbers continued to decline, but at a lower pace.

— PTI

AIRTEL, VODA IDEA SUBMIT OFFER DETAILS TO TRAI

New Delhi, Dec. 25: Airtel and Vodafone Idea have submitted to Trai the details of segmented or concessional offers that were made to subscribers, and the regulator is in the process of examining the information, sources said.

The move assumes significance as Trai, in early December, had directed the telcos to submit various details of ‘segmented’ offers made to users, after the Supreme Court asked the operators to disclose details of such special tariffs to the sector regulator.

The sources said Airtel and Vodafone Idea have now submitted the requisite details to the regulator, which is in the process of examining the information. Segmented offers are the promotions and discounts dished out to customers showing an inclination towards shifting to other telecom operators.

— PTI

THE ASIAN AGE

26 DECEMBER 2020

A thorough policy debate is Cong’s need of the hour

After the December 19 meeting between the Congress leadership, in effect the Gandhis, and a clutch of so-called dissenters (the G-23), neither side appears to have come away with satisfaction. It is necessary to maintain form and not be carried away by noise, especially in the media whose fundamental purpose these days appears to be to discomfit the opponents of the ruling dispensation. And yet, what have the Gandhis done?

As usual, they do not speak to the people. They have eagerly embraced the vice of non-communication, which in politics is like popping the cyanide pill. They do not take the country into confidence about what they think of the current state of the Congress, the goings-on in the party, possible plans for its rejuvenation, and plans for the country.

It is said the process is on to elect the party president after about 20 years. But what’s happening on that front? No one seems to know. Isn’t the matter of interest to India? Angry tweets or two-line criticisms of the Prime Minister or

The mere creation of a parliamentary board or election authority, as the G-23 demand, is of little value

the BJP government made by some of the Gandhis, even when valid, have failed to enthuse because these lack gravitas. These are not efforts in a wider ecosystem of consciously working toward building a political and an ideological momentum by the Opposition to take on the ruling dispensation.

The Congress may well be the only all-India challenger to the ruling dispensation, if that is by now not a hyperbole, considering how few the elected representatives of the party are in the country. But does the party deserve that tag

when it does not let on how it proposes to go about the task of challenging?

And what of the G-23? In the main, these appear to be a bunch of time-servers who whine because, when the party is in the Opposition, they cannot get to high-sounding posts. They have been out of power six years and fear the worst in the next election. So, they seem to be angling to throw Rahul and Priyanka out of the equation and get to be in positions of decision-making themselves. Barring Kapil Sibal, none amongst them raised the question of party elections and inner-party democracy when the Congress was in power and the gravy train chugged along. Most of them are a liberal, educated lot. But not many amongst them, barring Shashi Tharoor and possibly Manish Tewari, can hope to clear the field in any election where there would be lakhs of voters.

The G-23 grumble about leadership. Everyone does, or should, when there have been no elections for two decades. But few among them are likely to make the cut when proper polls are held because most lack mass appeal and do not have much appeal within the party either. In any case, will better electoral results flow just because the Gandhis step away?

But harping on leadership alone begs the real question: What does the Congress stand for today? If anyone has the answer, let them come to the debate with those propositions. Let them demand a party conclave of the AICC variety where party policies regarding the poor and the middle classes, about industry and agriculture, and above all about secularism, casteism and communalism, are debated threadbare. The mere creation of a parliamentary board or election authority, as the G-23 demand, is of little value.

Brexit deal: Relief for UK

The United Kingdom may be exulting over its post-Brexit trade deal with the 27-nation EU as negotiators pulled out a “get out of jail” card in the nick of time. It will, however, be entering a world that is far different from the day the referendum delivered its narrow verdict for the Brexiteers in June 2016. The trade barriers in place today are real even as globalism has been forced to take a back seat with supply chains having to be closer home ideally for all countries thanks to the restricted movement of people and goods in the new normal of Covid-ridden reality. Also, the highly charged post-pandemic political environment is unlikely to be conducive for anyone to cut trade deals with China, still a very important economic powerhouse.

Notwithstanding all the uncertainties, Boris Johnson must seem a heroic figure once again for having achieved what seemed impossible during 11 months of tortuous negotiations for a non-tariff, non-quota free trade agreement with UK’s biggest trading partner. The devil may lie in the details, even so this is nothing but a messy divorce that the more insular parts sought while leaving at least Scotland quite sore about the “sweet sorrow” of separation. How a Joe Biden-led USA views the finality of Brexit will determine the larger economic outcome and analysts are already forecasting a contraction of one per cent in the immediate term and as much as four per cent in the 2020s.

Johnson’s gamble in picking the side of the “Leavers” has paid off handsomely. He might see liberation from the shackles of Brussels’ bureaucracy bringing greater gains than sovereignty, which may not achieve much in terms of trade even if it was an emotive issue he exploited at the hustings. India should sense an opportunity in dealing afresh with the UK as it can expect to collaborate on AI and other futuristic tech that the UK is eyeing to build upon in its new innings as a wholly sovereign nation with free trade agreements on its mind.

THE ASIAN AGE

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Farrukh Dhondy
Cabbages & Kings



“Sing a song of six pice
A sauce pan full of Dhanya
Your mother was an Estonian
Your father was a Banyan.

When the curry was sizzling
The mirch began to bite
Wasn’t that a dainty dish
To serve on Holi night?”

— From **Song Of The Sindhi Sopranos** (Duet Aria by Thanni Ravani and Getthy Minoani)
Translated from the Canadian by Bachchoo

Of creativity in a plague year...
gadget fixing & dosa repair!

No surprise that this has been the year of plague reportage, of hospital admissions, fatality statistics, government bulletins restricting this and that and dissenters who want this unrestricted or that enforced. This Christmas periodicals have taken to offering us Covid-era stories and columns with annals of this plague year.

I have myself been exploring the idea that enforced idleness may be the chief better of creative genius. A recent TV satire had Shakespeare, stuck in an Elizabethan dwelling

during London’s plague year, writing *Macbeth*. I thought it was *King Lear*, but perhaps it was both.

A writer friend in Mumbai boasts of writing two books over the period with a couple more to complete. You see? It could become a Latin proverb — “Idlo Ergo Creato” — or some such.

In support of which, gentle reader, I can add my own experiences.

Fed up of the repeated American video jokes and musical clips endlessly, tediously posted on WhatsApp groups I have haplessly become part of, I have taken to switching on my phone only when I wish to call out. It is nobler to call than to receive (hah! another proverb gestating! — *Ed*. Get the f— on with it. We don’t pay you to fill space! — *Ed*.)

Well, in the main, I have perfected my Parsi-fusion recipes, leading with *Cleopatra ni machchi*, an Egypto-Parsi concoction, and then *Lagan noo Last Stand Custer*, an invention for Zoroastrian Thanksgiving.

Apart from these inventions, I have been attending to eternally recurring emergencies. As everyone

knows, fate has decreed that you wake up with the most excruciating toothache on the night before a bank holiday shuts down every dentist’s *dookaan*. Just so, domestic appliances break down just when the Christmas or Diwali holidays are being observed by plumbers, electricians, washing-machine repair-wallas and the experts we rely on when fate deals us these irritating hands.

In this Covid period every emergency seems to occur on that bank holiday or Christmas, which it now is. Let’s say, as did happen, that the box that directs signals from the cable to your TV set is suddenly no longer operative. You call, just for example, Virgin Media, who has supplied your cable network after searching for the right number through your very haphazard filing system. The Internet has, in tandem, stopped working with your smart-TV box so you can’t ask it for the connection. You use your mobile to call.

After attempting to remember the password you gave them three years ago and failing, the voice tells you that you can fill in a new password in a link they will send you on your

phone. All done and back on the call, you are told to go to the website because the call centre is flooded and it will take upto an hour or more to get an operator. You’ve already tried the website and got nowhere, so you try the phone line again. You resolve to hang on and they play you music while you hold which has the single purpose of making you terminate the call.

In one of my books, a character says that if he is on death row and is given a last wish, he would want to be played Ravi Shankar for six hours — at the end of which he would have lost the will to live. For me, substitute poor genius Ravi Shankar with Robindro Shongeth or call centre musak. You may have guessed by now that the call was never answered, and the problem left for yours truly to solve.

Reinforced call centres should be provided in these trying times to deal with such technicalities. But what about other little problems?

In attempting to cook dosas from a packet mix the other day, I diligently followed the instructions. Yet the first dosa — and the next and the next one — cracked in the pan,

resembling the old W.H. Auden’s canalled features. I poured more mixture on the cracks and the dosas, refusing to obey, as the perfect pancakes I cook do, began developing large holes. I gave up.

It occurred to me that the international India-packet-food company may have a helpline. I could call it. But could the masala potatoes I had separately cooked wait? And anyway. I’d probably get some Australian call centre with the respondent Barry pretending his name was Vardarajan or something and telling me to use moose fat instead of ghee.

I know, I know, he would know all about dosa repair. I was once researching a film on Indian call centres when the instructor was telling a class of trainee operators about British culture and chit chat. He asked the class if they knew what a pie was. A lad answered saying it was 22 over 7, or 3.142. No, no, protested the instructor, he meant the comestible. A young lady put her hand up and said: “Pie is meat concealed under biskoat”.

Yes, the Australian would possibly know how to repair dosas!

Subhani



Little cheer at Xmas time, hope for a healthier 2021



Shobhaa De

The whole world loves Xmas and celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ without necessarily belonging to the Christian faith. What matters is an almost universal spirit of good cheer and bonhomie as people gear themselves for a brand new year and say goodbye to the one that is ending. Well... 2020 has changed everything! It is as if it never happened! Most of us will look back at a blur and wonder — where did the months go? Into one big black hole of sorrow — that’s where. For the first time in memory, this is going to be a Blank Xmas, as opposed to the more traditional White Xmas. It feels so eerie and weird here in Mumbai, where Xmas Eve was one of the biggest, most looked forward to party nights on the calendar. Maharashtra chief minister Uddhav Thackeray has imposed a night curfew, which effectively means that nobody can ring in Christmas at midnight, except in the privacy of their homes. All public festivities (even those which strictly observe the Covid protocols) stand cancelled. The streets are dark, depressing and deserted, and I feel really bad for the cheerful urchins who used to make quick money accosting motorists and pedestrians with Santa caps, masks and other paraphernalia. I passed a few last night and their glum expressions broke my heart — there they were, the familiar cheeky little kids, standing in clumps, clutching unsold bright red felt caps and reindeer hair bands. I wondered what they’d do with the dozens of red topis once

this gloomy day/year is over.

There has been a great deal of debate over the Maharashtra government’s bold decision to impose a night curfew at a time when the city is reeling under a crippling economic slowdown. Health over all else is the right way forward and all that, but at this point we know very little about the behaviour of the latest mutant strain. By all means take every precaution, but why a night curfew? It feels like surrender — a sense of defeat — at a time when everything was looking up and our collective hopes were pinned on the vaccine being made available within a month or so. This fresh development (the mutant strain) has raised a number of new questions and taken us totally off guard. A young man who came over for some work, mentioned the plight of his cousin, who is indefinitely stuck in London and has no idea when he can get back home. He has been informed that as a tourist he will only be able to leave London after he takes the vaccine. Again, as a tourist, he is at the bottom of the vaccine ladder — he will have to wait till all the other groups (front-line workers, doctors, senior citizens) get vaccinated first. This means he could be stuck

There has been a great deal of debate over the Maharashtra government’s bold decision to impose a night curfew at a time when the city is reeling under a crippling economic slowdown

Dinners have become sundowners, while others are quickly rejigging their eggnog-turkey-Xmas pudding-mulled wine dinner menus and hosting long brunches instead

inside his obliging relative’s home till March 2021! What a dismal prospect! There he is, this young fellow from Mumbai, staring out of his window at a grey sky outside. Food deliveries are erratic, most grocery stores shut shop by 5 pm. Oxford Street is dead, as are all the other streets, parks and restaurants. His business schedule has gone for a toss, and soon his relative will want him out! What then?

Closer to home, we are trying not to let the pall of gloom and doom affect us by distracting ourselves the best we can. People who had planned elaborate Xmas and New Year’s Eve parties have hastily switched over to other programmes. Dinners have become sundowners, while others are quickly rejigging their eggnog-turkey-Xmas pudding-mulled wine dinner menus and hosting long brunches instead. Human beings are so resilient and brilliant! I love the optimism of people with an indestructible “never-say-die spirit” — *khao-pee-o-jyo*. Why not? While in Pune recently, sipping tea inside a spacious lounge at the swankiest property in India (the Ritz Carlton), I watched with my jaw dropping to the floor as not one, not two, but three *baraats* of extremely well-heeled families arrived simultaneously! Three heavily decorated white mares, with three overdressed *dulhas* atop each and three sets of garishly clad *baraatis*, added to the mayhem, as guests scurried around, wondering which of the three huge weddings they’d been invited to! Every posh five-star hotel in Pune is fully booked up with lavish shaadis taking place at all available venues. A young jeweller proudly showed me a dazzling diamond set he had created for a local bride — it was priced at more than one crore rupees!

Chatting with the family of one of the beautiful brides, her father told me how he had reallocated funds meant for a five-day international extravaganza for his beloved *beti* and invested the funds in a fancy penthouse for the couple. As he put it: “Instead of feeding one thousand guests over five days and hosting multiple functions, we thought this was a better option. It is one way to secure our daughter, plus, it’s a solid investment which will appreciate down the line.” If there is something like a “silver lining” to the pandemic, maybe it is this — that people are being more sensible about money matters and looking at the future more realistically. “Have money, will spend” has changed to “Have money, will save”.

Dear readers... yup... the times have been bad... in fact, terrible. But you are alive... and so am I! As the lucky survivors of this deadly scourge, let us raise a glass to a better, healthier, saner future! See you on the other side! Here’s to a Covid-free 2021!

Readers can send feedback to www.shobhaade.blogspot.com

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LETTERS

RARE INTEGRITY

A thief who stole betel nut, coconuts, etc., for a poor living became the key figure in the 28-year-old Sister Abhaya murder case. He saw the priests entering the convent at midnight. Now this thief stood by his testimony despite crores having been offered to him. He never concealed his occupation, because that had made him stay alive and support his family. He overlooked easy money and threats to his life. That is why the court accepted his testimony.

M.R. Jayanthy
Muringatherry, Kerala

TAKE DIDI ON BOARD

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS indeed. The Congress and the Left, who are otherwise at each other’s throats, as in Kerala, for instance, have now joined hands for the forthcoming West Bengal Assembly polls. However, that alone will not serve their purpose of keeping the BJP away from power; unless they take on board their arch rival, the formidable regional force of the Mamata Didi-led Trinamul Congress. Else, a triangular fight will hand over on a platter the reins of power at the Writers’ Buildings to the BJP.

Arun Malankar
Mumbai

TRACE AND CONTAIN

IT IS HEARTENING that several states have stepped up efforts to trace and test persons who have flown in or transited from the United Kingdom between November 25 and December 23, for a more infective version of the Covid-19 virus. The efforts are in line with a health ministry directive. Over 6,000 passengers have been traced so far, even as flights between India and the UK remain suspended till year-end. Living up to its reputation of sending conflicting signals to the pandemic, the Karnataka government withdrew night curfew, hours before it was to kick in.

N.J. Ravi Chander
Bengaluru

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

SHORT TAKES

BUS CRASH IN WESTERN RUSSIA KILLS 4, 11 HURT

Moscow, Dec. 25: An intercity bus veered off a road in western Russia, killing four people and injuring another 11, authorities said on Friday.

The bus driving from Moscow to Volgograd veered into a ditch and overturned in the Ryazan region, about 250 kilometers (155 miles) south of Moscow.

At least four people, including the bus driver, died and at least 11, including several children, were hospitalized with injuries after the overnight crash, authorities said. Police said the driver may have lost control of the bus after falling asleep.

HK 'SPEEDBOAT FUGITIVES' TO FACE TRIAL IN CHINA

Beijing, Dec. 25: Ten of 12 Hong Kong pro-democracy activists arrested as they tried to flee the territory by speedboat to Taiwan will face trial in mainland China on December 28, campaigners and family members said on Friday.

Relatives of the detainees have been told by Chinese government-appointed lawyers that a video hearing will take place Monday afternoon at Yantian District People's Court in the southern city of Shenzhen, according to the Save 12 HK Youths campaign.

China has a history of putting on trial dissidents around the Christmas and New Year period to avoid Western scrutiny.

In a video hearing, defendants appear from the detention centre instead of going to court, explained Lu Siwei, a mainland Chinese human rights lawyer working on the case despite a ban and threats from the authorities.

INDIAN HELD IN CANADA OVER TELEPHONE SCAMS

Toronto, Dec. 25: A 25-year-old Indian-origin man in Canada has been arrested for his alleged involvement in a series of transnational telephone scams, wherein he was recruited by overseas scammers to process and launder locally-received money, police said.

Abhinav Bector, who lives in Brampton, Ontario, has been charged with fraud of over \$5,000, possession of the proceeds of crime and money laundering, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) said in a press statement on Wednesday. The arrest came following an investigation, named Project OCTAVIA, initiated by the RCMP in October 2018 to combat telephone scams and other interrelated frauds. "To date, 10 individuals have been charged with respect to this investigation," the statement said.

"These telephone fraudsters, operating from overseas, have been targeting the Canadian public since 2014. Despite a number of police raids on illegal call centres in India, and arrests in Canada, these fraudsters continue to modify their deceitful pitch and target Canadians," it said.

RUSSIAN PROF. SENT TO JAIL FOR KILLING STUDENT

St Petersburg, Dec. 25: A court in St Petersburg on Friday convicted a prominent history professor on charges of murdering and dismembering a female student and sentenced him to 12 1/2 years in prison.

The court found 64-year-old Oleg Sokolov, who taught at St. Petersburg State University, guilty of shooting and killing 24-year-old doctoral student Anastasia Yeshchenko at his apartment in November 2019. Sokolov was detained after being pulled from the Moika River outside his St. Petersburg apartment with a backpack with two severed arms inside.

The limbs were identified as Yeshchenko's, and investigators found other body parts in the river and in Sokolov's apartment in the historic part of St. Petersburg, less than a mile from the Hermitage Museum.

During the trial, Sokolov testified that he and Yeshchenko had a romantic relationship and that he shot her during a quarrel. Prosecutors have requested a 15-year sentence. Sokolov was known for his books about the Napoleonic era and his enthusiastic participation in reenactments of historic battles, and his case attracted broad attention in Russia.



Participants sporting Santa Claus costumes jump into the water during the 111th edition of the Copa Nadal (Christmas Cup) swimming race in Barcelona's Port Vell on Friday. The traditional 200-meter Christmas swimming race gathered around 300 participants on Barcelona's Port Vell (old harbour). — AFP

Covid shadows Christmas joy

Mass, traditionally held at midnight, was moved forward to meet Italy's curfew

Vatican City, Dec. 25: Christmas festivities began on Friday, with hundreds of millions across the world under Coronavirus restrictions celebrating a pared-down version of a holiday typically marked by travel and large gatherings.

The battle to halt the pandemic, which has claimed more than 1.7 million lives, is far from over despite the launching of mass vaccine campaigns that offer the promise of an eventual return to normalcy.

Churches across South Korea stood largely empty, with worshippers congregating online as the country reported a new daily caseload record.

"It really is heartbreaking to see," said Park Jae-woo, a member of the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul which would usually expect up to 10,000 worshippers, but on Friday was only able to welcome 15 staff and choir members.

And in Catholic-majority Philippines, services were rocked when a 6.3-magnitude earthquake struck the country, capping off a troubled yuletide already muted by bans on parties and carol singing.

"Sad, very sad. Seeing everyone in masks, even the priest and altar servers, reminded me that the world as I know it is not the same," said Manila resident Kyen Quimpo Mallonga after watching Christmas Eve mass on television instead of

Boko Haram kills 11 on Christmas eve attack

Kano, Nigeria, Dec. 25: Boko Haram jihadists killed at least 11 people, burnt a church and seized a priest on Christmas Eve in Nigeria's restive north-east, local sources said on Friday.

Security agencies had in recent days warned of an increased risk of attack during the holiday season.

Fighters in trucks and motorcycles stormed Pemi, a predominantly Christian village in Borno state on Thursday, shooting "indiscriminately" and setting buildings on fire, said Abwaku Kabu, a

militia leader. In many parts of Nigeria, communities have resorted to armed vigilantes or militias, who work alongside the army, for self-defence.

"The terrorists killed seven people, burnt 10 homes and looted food supplies that were meant to be distributed to residents to celebrate Christmas," Kabu said.

"Four more dead bodies have been found in the nearby bushes by search and rescue volunteers," local community leader Ayuba Alamson said Friday. "This has moved

the death toll to 11." The number of dead could rise as villagers fled to the bush and some people are still unaccounted for.

The assailants, who drove from the group's nearby Sambisa forest enclave, looted medical supplies from a hospital before setting it ablaze, the militia leader said, adding they also burnt a church and abducted a priest.

The village is located only 20 kilometres (12 miles) from Chibok, where Boko Haram kidnapped more than 200 schoolgirls six years ago. — AFP

The Christmas Eve mass commemorates the birth of Jesus of Nazareth in Bethlehem.

In his homily, the Argentine pope stressed that the birth of a child reminds us not to spend our days "lamenting our lots, but soothing the tears of those who suffer", serving "the poor".

Francis, who just celebrated his 84th birthday, will give his eighth Christmas message "Urbi et orbi" ("to the city and the world") Friday by video from the apostolic palace, to prevent a crowd from gathering in St Peter's Square. — AFP

Federal investigators from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives were also on the scene.

The FBI is the primary law enforcement agency responsible for investigating federal crimes, such as explosives violations and acts of terrorism.

Investigators from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and

Explosives were also on the scene. Black smoke and flames were seen early Friday billowing from the area, which is packed with bars, restaurants and other retail establishments and is known as the heart of downtown Nashville's tourist scene.

Buildings shook in the immediate area and beyond after a loud boom was heard. Buck McCoy, who lives near the area, posted videos on Facebook that show water pouring down the ceiling of his home. Alarms blare in the background and cries of people in great distress ring in the background. A fire is visible in the street outside. McCoy said the windows of his home were entirely blown out. — AP

Casey Goodson Jr, 23, was shot several times on December 4 while returning home. His family has said he was holding a sandwich which law enforcement mistook

for a gun. Several dozen protesters gathered on Thursday, waving Black Lives Matter signs and calling for justice for people killed in police shootings.

The killings in Columbus come after a summer in which the US was rocked by historic protests against racial injustice and police brutality, sparked by the May killing of African-American man George Floyd.

Floyd, also unarmed, suffocated beneath the knee of a white police officer in Minneapolis. Horrified passers-by filmed his death, with the footage swiftly going viral.

"Once again officers see a person of colour and conclude that he's criminal and dangerous," said lawyer Ben Crump, who defends several families of police brutality victims including Floyd's, on Wednesday. — AFP

GODADDY SORRY FOR FAKE BONUS EMAIL

Washington, Dec. 25: US web company GoDaddy apologised on Thursday after an email that promised employees a Christmas bonus in the midst of the economic crisis turned out to be a computer security test.

"GoDaddy takes the security of our platform extremely seriously. We understand some employees were upset by the phishing attempt and felt it was insensitive, for which we have apologised," a spokesman for GoDaddy, the largest internet domain management company in the world, said in a statement.

"While the test mimicked real attempts in play today, we need to do better and be more sensitive to our employees," added the Arizona-based company.

In December, around 500 employees clicked on an email from the company offering a Christmas bonus of \$650 and asking them to fill out a form with their personal details.

Two days later, a different message appeared in their inboxes. "You are receiving this email because you failed our recent phishing test," the email from GoDaddy's security chief read, according to Arizona's Copper Courier newspaper. — AFP

Quinlan announced on Thursday that he was moving to fire the officer, Adam Coy, on allegations of "critical misconduct".

"We have an officer who violated his oath to comply with the rules and policies of the Columbus Division of Police," Quinlan said in a statement.

"This violation cost an innocent man his life." According to local media reports, Coy had previously received complaints of excessive force.

Coy and his colleague waited several minutes before approaching Hill, who was still alive, but died later.

Hill, the second African-American killed by police in Columbus in less than three weeks, was not carrying a weapon.

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Britain faces major Brexit challenges

London, Dec. 25: Britain is set for a new chapter on Friday after securing a hard-fought post-Brexit trade deal with the European Union as EU envoys gathered to discuss an accord reached only after months of tortuous negotiations.

The country will now not tumble off a trade "cliff-edge" come January 1, avoiding a mountain of harmful tariffs and quotas. But major changes are inevitable as Britain definitively quits the EU's single market and free movement with the bloc comes to an end after nearly half a century of integration.

"We shouldn't underestimate the economic shock Britain will experience," one European diplomat said. Britain had been in a standstill transition period still subject to the bloc's rules since formally leaving the EU on January 31.

Standing in front of a Downing Street Christmas tree in a video message late Thursday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson vaunted the hundreds of pages of text as "a 'good deal for the whole of Europe' and a 'present' for Britain.

— AFP

US: Fresh outrage over POC's death

Columbus, Dec. 25: The fatal shooting of an unarmed person of colour by police in Columbus, Ohio — the US city's second such killing this month — sparked a fresh wave of protests on Thursday against racial injustice and police brutality in the country.

Andre Maurice Hill, 47, was in the garage of a house on Monday night when he was shot several times by a police officer who had been called to the scene for a minor incident.

Seconds before the gunfire, bodycam footage shows Hill walking towards the policeman holding a cell phone in his left hand, while his other hand cannot be seen.

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Explosion rocks downtown Nashville

Nashville (US), Dec. 25: An explosion shook the largely deserted streets of downtown Nashville early Christmas morning, shattering windows, damaging buildings and wounding three people.

Authorities said they believed the blast was intentional.

The FBI is leading the investigation. Police spokesman Don Aaron

said the 6:30 am explosion was believed to be "an intentional act." Police earlier said they believe a vehicle was involved in the explosion.

Aaron said three people were taken to area hospitals for treatment, although none were in critical condition. The FBI will be taking the lead in the investigation, said spokesman Joel Siskovic.

where Jackson invited children to visit and sleep over, and where he was accused of molesting young boys. It was rebranded after Jackson's 2009 death as Sycamore Valley Ranch.

Burke, a Montana-based businessman with investments ranging from supermarkets to the entertainment industry, purchased the ranch "as a land banking opportunity," his spokesman said.

The \$22 million price tag reported by the Wall Street Journal — and confirmed to AFP as roughly

accurate, by a source familiar with the deal — would mark a dramatic

decline from the ranch's \$100 million asking price in 2015.

That lofty fee, dubbed "optimistic" by realtors even at the time, was

Property sold for \$22 million to Ron Burkle, King of Pop had paid \$19.5 million in 1980s

Jackson's Neverland ranch sold to billionaire

Los Angeles, Dec. 25: Michael Jackson's former Neverland Ranch in California has sold to US billionaire Ron Burkle, his spokesman said on Thursday, reportedly at a steeply discounted price of around \$22 million.

The late "King of Pop" famously converted his sprawling, gated home into a fairytale-themed retreat — complete with toy railroad, Ferris wheel and orangutans — and penned some of his top hits on the ranch.

But Neverland was also the infamous location

slashed to \$31 million last year, but the ranch still did not sell and was taken off the market.

Burkle was flying in the region recently to scout a neighboring property as a possible new branch of his Soho House private club network when he spotted the ranch and called its owner, according to the spokesman.

Jackson reportedly paid \$19.5 million for the property in the 1980s.

Thomas Barrack Jr's Colony Capital investment firm purchased the ranch from the heavily indebted

singer for \$22.5 million the year before his death.

Burkle previously worked as an adviser for the singer on business matters, including resolving debts incurred by his lavish lifestyle in the years before his death.

The 2,700-acre (1,100-hectare) estate located 40 miles (65 kilometers) from Santa Barbara features a main house with six bedrooms along with three guest houses, a four-acre lake with a waterfall, tennis courts, several barns and animal shelter facilities. — AFP



This file photo shows an aerial view of singer Michael Jackson's Neverland Valley Ranch in Santa Ynez, CA. — AFP

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SHORT TAKES

Unadkat to lead Saurashtra squad

Rajkot: Seasoned speedster Jaydev Unadkat will lead a 20-member Saurashtra squad at the Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy National T20 Championships, which will kick off the 2020-21 domestic season next month. Saurashtra are the reigning Ranji Trophy champions. The Saurashtra Cricket Association (SCA) on Friday announced the squad through a media release after its senior selection committee held an online meeting. All the regulars — Prerak Mankad, Chirag Jani, left-handed batsman Arpit Vasavada, wicket-keeper-batsman Harvik Desai — have been named in the squad. The bowling attack also has left-arm pacer Chetan Sakariya and slow-left arm orthodox bowler Dharmendrasinh Jadeja. The tournament begins from January 10 and Saurashtra is placed in Elite Group 'D' along with Services, Vidarbha, Goa, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. The league matches will be played at Indore. — *PTI*

Former Eng player Edrich dies at 83

London: England's former "fearless" opening batsman John Edrich has died at the age of 83, the England and Wales Cricket Board announced on Friday. Diagnosed with leukaemia in 2000 the left-hander who played for county side Surrey scored 103 first-class centuries. He played 77 Tests, scoring 5,138 runs at an average of 43.54. Former England great Ian Botham wrote on *Twitter*: "Very sad news today to wake up on Christmas Day and to be told that John Edrich has passed away!! "A wonderful man who I was lucky enough to spend some quality time with...RIP" ECB CEO Tom Harrison said: "With John's passing, we've lost a prolific and fearless batsman — one of the select few who have scored more than 5,000 runs for England. "His duels with some of the world's best fast bowlers were legendary," he added. — *AFP*

NZ set sights on World Test final

Mount Maunganui, New Zealand: New Zealand start their last push to make the World Test championship final on Saturday in the first Test against an injury-hit Pakistan at Bay Oval in Mount Maunganui. The Black Caps are full of confidence coming off a comprehensive 2-0 series win against the West Indies, and need to produce a similar result in the two Pakistan Tests. India and Australia head New Zealand on the Test championship ladder, but if India continue to struggle and New Zealand sweep the series against an under-strength Pakistan, it could be enough to see the Black Caps at Lord's for the final in June. Pakistan rank seventh in the world while Williamson-less New Zealand are equal on points with Australia at the top. — *AFP*

40-day Hungary training for Vinesh

New Delhi: The central government has sanctioned a 40-day training camp for champion wrestler Vinesh Phogat along with her personal coach Woller Akos, sparring partner Priyanka Phogat and physiotherapist Poornima Raman Ngomdir for a total cost of ₹15.51 lakh. The camp, which will take place from December 28 to January 24, was sanctioned under the government's Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS). — *PTI*

Live on TV

CRICKET

India vs Australia: Second Test — Day 2 from 5 am (Sunday) on Sony Ten 1, 3, Sony Six, HD

Big Bash League: Sydney Thunder vs Melbourne Renegades from 12.40 pm on Sony Ten 2, HD

FOOTBALL

Indian Super League: Chennaiyin FC vs East Bengal from 7.20 pm on Star Sports 2, 3

Premier League: Leicester City vs Manchester Utd from 6 pm; Arsenal vs Chelsea from 11 pm on Star Sports Select 1, HD

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GLOVES ARE OFF

Bruised India look to fight back in Boxing Day Test

Melbourne, Dec. 25: A few bruised egos will eye redemption when India square off against Australia in the second Test here from Saturday, ready to bounce back in skipper Ajinkya Rahane's hour of reckoning after hitting the 'nadir' of '36'.

Seldom has an Indian outfit been at such difficult crossroads in recent years as it is in the aftermath of the humiliating defeat in Adelaide and Virat Kohli's departure for the birth of his child.

But the good thing is that star-in-waiting, Shubman Gill, is ready to honour his team's leap of faith in him when he makes his Test debut at the imposing Melbourne Cricket Ground.

Likewise, young work-horse Mohammed Siraj will step in temporarily to fill the void created by crafty Mohammed Shami's injury and it will be about how Rahane, touted as a bowler's captain, handles him.

It's not about the defeat but the manner of capitulation which can come back to haunt a side that's not short on quality. The next few days will be a test of real character and it's only fair that a strategic shift was on the cards.

A couple of forced and an equal number of tactical changes was always on cards for the visitors as they take on Tim Paine's confident men, spending Christmas without their families.

Gill's languid approach and that extra second while facing fast bowlers, coupled with a way tighter technique than Prithvi Shaw, might just give the dressing room the confidence required in testing times.

He will have the company of Mayank Agarwal, who would be wanting to do an encore, if not better, of his performance at a venue where he made his Test debut.

Similarly, Rishabh Pant is expected to play his fearless brand of cricket which is the need of the hour.

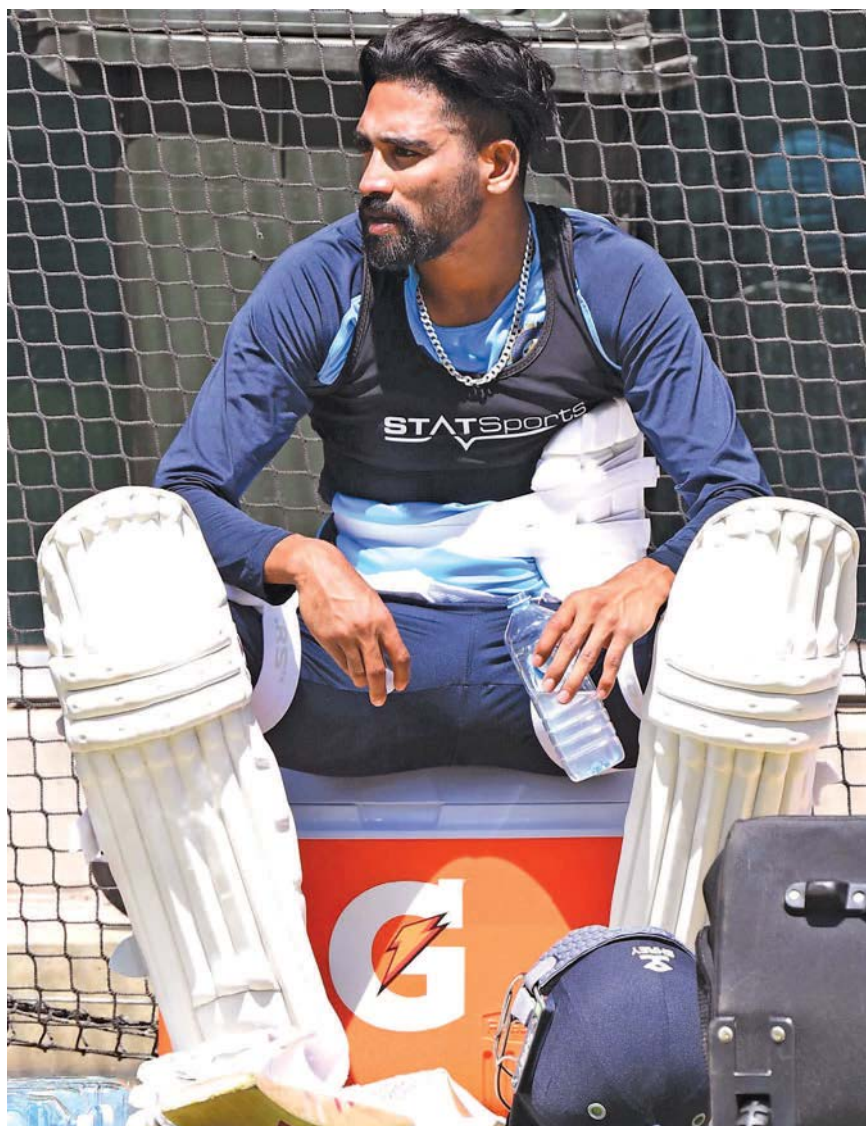
However, the Indians would like to take that big front-foot stride forward while facing Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood not only physically but also figuratively. — *PTI*

Taylor talks up India's chances

Melbourne, Dec. 25: Former Australia captain Mark Taylor reckons India's best chance to bounce back from the Adelaide humiliation is to bat first and score plenty of runs in the Boxing Day Test starting here on Saturday.

India were bundled out for their lowest-ever Test score of 36 in their second innings as Australia claimed an eight-wicket win in the pink-ball Test to take a 1-0 lead in the Border-Gavaskar trophy.

"India's best chance is to put runs on the board. They've still got some very fine players. Obviously (Virat) Kohli leaves a big hole in terms of batting and leadership, but they've still got (Cheteshwar) Pujara and



India pacer Mohammed Siraj who will make his Test debut on Saturday takes a break during a training session in Melbourne. — *AFP*

PLAYING XI

INDIA

● Ajinkya Rahane (captain), Mayank Agarwal, Shubman Gill, Cheteshwar Pujara, Hanuma Vihari, Rishabh Pant (wicket keeper), Ravindra Jadeja, Ravichandran Ashwin, Umesh Yadav, Jasprit Bumrah, Mohammed Siraj.

FOR THE RECORD

100TH TEST BETWEEN INDIA & AUSTRALIA

● It will be the 100th Test between India and Australia. Australia have won 43, lost 28 and drawn 28, including a tied match



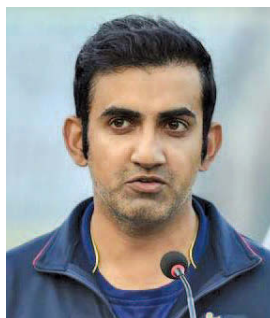
Australia coach Justin Langer (centre) watches his players with Steve Smith (left) and Marcus Harris during a training session in Melbourne on Friday. — *AFP*

Decision to rotate Saha & Pant is unfair, says Gauti

New Delhi, Dec. 25: The Indian team management has made players "insecure" and the decision to rotate between Wriddhiman Saha and Rishabh Pant has been "unfair" on both the wicketkeepers, feels former opener Gautam Gambhir. Saha was on Friday dropped from the Boxing Day Test due to his poor batting form in the opening game and Gambhir asked whether the team's think-tank will do the same with Pant if he falls in the next two games.

"It's unfortunate and Wriddhiman Saha has played just one Test match in this series and he hasn't done well and gets dropped."

"Imagine what happens to Pant if he doesn't do



Gautam Gambhir

well in this Test or the third Test. What do you do then? Would you go back to Wriddhiman Saha," Gambhir questioned on *Sports Today*.

For Gambhir, it's not lip-service but actions that makes players secure, something that this current regime has failed,

INDIA WON'T ROLL OVER AT MCG: PAINE

Melbourne, Dec. 25: Australian captain Tim Paine on Friday said a "proud" cricketing nation like India is not going to roll over like Adelaide, in the Boxing Day Test here and singled out KL Rahul and Rishabh Pant as potential threats.

India are heading into the second Test, starting at the MCG from Saturday, on the back of a humiliating defeat in the series-opener in Adelaide. But Paine is in no mood to take it easy against their battered opponents who collapsed to their record lowest Test score of 36 last week.

"Well, we can't pay any attention to mental scars or whatever thing they're talking about," the skipper, who was named Man of the Match in the first Test, said during a virtual press conference.

"We know India is a proud cricket country, an extremely talented Test match side with lots of dangerous players," he added. Paine, who has led Australia in 20 Tests so far, recalled the Ashes last year when England bounced back in the fifth Test to level the series after being 1-2 down.

— *PTI*



India's stand-in captain Ajinkya Rahane (left) is all ears to coach Ravi Shastri during a training session in Melbourne on Friday. — *AFP*

Rahane wary of Oz mind games

Melbourne, Dec. 25: India's stand-in captain Ajinkya Rahane on Friday said he would rather focus on his team than worrying about Australia's "mind games" ahead of the 'Boxing Day' Test starting here on Saturday.

Australia coach Justin Langer had on Thursday said he would be "happy" if the Indian team is under a bit of stress after the humiliating defeat in the first Test and would like to put pressure on Rahane, who is taking charge in absence of regular skipper Virat Kohli.

"Australia are very good at playing mind games and I will let them do that. We are focussing on ourselves, what we want to do as a unit and we are going to back our every individuals," Rahane said on the eve of the match.

Not as expressive or eloquent as Kohli, Rahane repeated his answers in a loop which was all about "playing to your strengths and backing each other".

"It is a proud moment for me leading India, obviously it is a great opportunity, responsibility as well but I don't want to take any pressure," said the depend-

able middle-order batsman.

"I think what I want to do is back my team. So focus is not on me, it is all about team and how we want to do well as a team. We are focussing on that," he added.

Even skipper Kohli, before leaving for India for the birth of his child, urged Rahane to be himself and play fearless cricket.

"Yeah, Virat spoke to all of us, before leaving. We had our team dinner in Adelaide, so he spoke to all of us about staying in the moment, playing for each other and yeah enjoying each other's success and help each other out on the field," he further added.

Rahane said one hour of poor cricket on the third morning in Adelaide doesn't define this team.

"Talking about last Test match, see comparatively we had two good days, just one bad hour, where we actually lost it completely," he said.

"The chat was all about backing myself as an individual and as team, play to our strengths and whatever we have planned in the first Test match just stick to that," he added. — *PTI*

I SAID SORRY TO VIRAT AFTER RUN OUT: AJINKYA

Melbourne, Dec. 25: Ajinkya Rahane on Friday said he had apologised to Virat Kohli after his horrible mix-up with him led to the India captain's game-changing run out in the first Test against Australia in Adelaide.

Kohli was looking solid before the suicidal run out for 74 on the opening day at Adelaide Oval. Upon realising that there was no run in it, Rahane decided to send back Kohli but it was too late by then.

What followed was an inexplicable batting collapse, due to which the visitors crumbled to their lowest Test score of 36 in their second innings.

"After the end of day's play I went and said sorry to him (Kohli) but he was all okay, he was okay about it," Rahane said on the eve of the second Test here.

"We both understood that the situation we were in, we were going well at that point, but such things happen in cricket, you got to respect that and you got to move forward," he added.

Stand-in skipper Rahane admitted that the run out handed Australia the momentum as they recorded an eight-wicket win inside two and half days. — *PTI*

Chennaiyin brace for EB challenge

Vasco, Dec. 25: A victory over FC Goa boosting their confidence, two-time champions Chennaiyin FC would look for another positive result when they take on a winless SC East Bengal in their Indian Super League match here on Saturday.

Chennaiyin are meeting the Kolkata side for the first time ever and they would hope to continue the momentum after beating a strong FC Goa on December 19. A win would propel CFC into the top half of the standings.

SC East Bengal, on the other hand, are still searching for a win after six matches. They have scored just three goals and conceded 11.

Also, luck has not been on their side though their performance has improved in the last two games.

Coach Robbie Fowler will be hoping that his men will come up with a better performance and notch up a win.

He insisted that his players had put behind the disappointment of allowing Kerala Blasters to snatch a draw with a late equaliser in their last match.

CFC will be wary of the threat SC East Bengal poses as the Kolkata team motivated to get its first win. Three former Chennaiyin FC strikers are now part of SC East Bengal — Jeje Lalpekhlua, Balwant Singh and CK Vineeth. And, they will be keen to do their best in an important game.

Chennaiyin will be hoping that skipper Rafael Crivellaro and India international Anirudh Thapa will continue their good work in the game against FC Goa. — *PTI*

Proteas seek revenge against Lanka

Pretoria, Dec. 25: South Africa return to the test arena for the first time in 11 months on Saturday hoping to arrest a dismal slide in the five-day game and with revenge on their minds as they host Sri Lanka in the first of a two-test series at Centurion Park.

They have lost eight of their last nine tests, a run that began in February 2019 with a shock 2-0 home defeat by Sri Lanka who became the first Asian side to win a series in the country.

They have slipped to number six in the world, behind fifth-placed Sri Lanka, and have a host of

questions to answer, not least around a brittle top six and the balance of the side.

"We've got a young team," captain Quinton de Kock said this week. "We need our younger guys to come through and learn fast so we can have a structured team."

"That's what I would hope for from this season, for the new guys to come in and start scoring runs and putting up their hands," he added.

They start the first test without key fast bowler Kagiso Rabada, who has a groin problem, but will be buoyed by the fact both matches will be played on



South Africa pacer Anrich Nortje during a training session ahead of Sri Lanka Test series.

fast, bouncy Highveld pitches.

Left-arm seamer Beuran Hendricks has been withdrawn from the squad along with batsman Keegan Petersen. Neither player entered the tour bubble when the players gathered on Saturday, after two positive COVID-19 results were detected last week.

Hendricks' absence means Glenton Stuurman is almost certain to make his test debut at the age of 29, with his ability to move the ball both ways off the pitch and his excellent recent domestic form putting him ahead of rivals. Wiaan Mulder or

Dwaine Pretorius are likely to play in an all-rounder role.

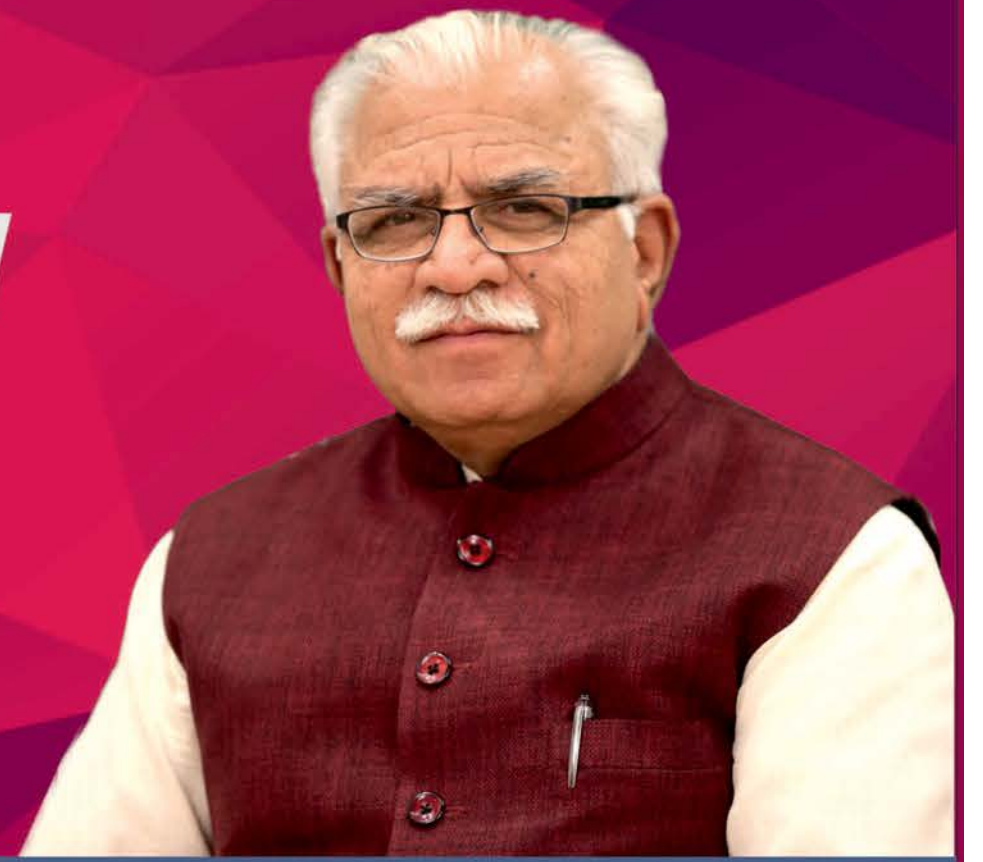
The make-up of Sri Lanka's side is much harder to predict after they brought a squad of 21 players "to cover all positions", according to coach Mickey Arthur.

They are missing injured stalwart Angelo Mathews and Oshada Fernando in their top-six batting lineup, but Arthur is upbeat about their ability to cope with South Africa's quicks.

Sri Lanka have not played any tests since a victorious tour to Zimbabwe that ended in late January. — *Agencies*



On the Occasion of Good Governance Day (25 December, 2020) **Sh. Manohar Lal** Chief Minister, Haryana unveiled



New Announcements

'Sooksham Sinchai Se Har Khet Me Pani'

Scheme to provide canal-based water and sewerage treated water to farmers in their fields through Micro Irrigation Project, it will be implemented from January 1, 2021.

'Mukhyamantri Bagwani Bima Yojana'

20 horticultural crops included in this scheme to compensate for the losses due to natural calamities.

'One Time Registration for Application'

- Applicants of Haryana Staff Selection Commission and Haryana Public Service Commission will have to fill personal details only once.
- Application form will be linked to the Parivar Pehchan-Patra and applicant will not have to deposit the fee again and again.

'Haryana Credit Guarantee Scheme'

- Under the Credit Guarantee Scheme for the students studying in the higher educational institutions of the State.
- Higher education loan will be available at lower interest rate.

Registration facility in any Tehsil of the District

Facility will be started from April 1, 2021. Online process for property registration already started in September 2020.

CLUs Will Be Online Completely

- Online facility of land use change system (CLU) in the State.
- All the CLUs will be available online and permission will be available within 30 days.

Facilities to Employees

Deemed ACP will be provided to Government employees in case of delay of 3 months on ACP due to any reason.

Enhancement in Honorarium for the Sports Awardees of the State from January 1, 2021

- Monthly honorarium of Arjuna, Dronacharya & Dhyan Chand awardees increased from Rs.5,000 to Rs.20,000.
- Monthly honorarium of Rs.20,000 to the winners of Tenzing Norga National Adventure Award and Rs.5,000 monthly to Bhim awardees started.

Launch / Expansion of New Schemes

Winners of Atal Bihari Vajpayee Good Governance Award - 2020

Digital Project	Name and Department
e-Kharid Portal	Sh. PK DAS, IAS, Sh. V Umashankar, IAS, Sh. Chander Shekhar Khare, IAS, Sh. Rajiv Rattan, IAS, Sh. Munish Chandan & Team (Food Supplies and Consumer Affairs & Information Technology Electronics and Communication Department)
Online Release Orders & Billing System (ERP) Software	Mrs. Dheera Khandelwal, IAS, Mr. P.C. Meena, IAS, Mrs. Varsha Khangwal, HCS, Mr. Pardeep Kaushal & Team (Information, Public Relations and Languages Department)
Encouragement to Diversification and agriculture growth	Mr. Devender Singh, IAS, Dr. Arjun Singh Saini & Team (Horticulture Department)
Agriculture growth through enhanced water supply by ground water recharging through abandoned river beds	Mr. Devender Singh, IAS, Mr. Satbir Singh Kadian & Team (Irrigation and Water Resources Department)
Asha app to cover door to door covid-19 survey	Mr. Rajeev Arora, IAS, Dr. Prabhjot Singh, IAS, Dr. V.K. Bansal & Team (Health Department)
Implementation of eSanjeevani OPD teleconsultation services	Mr. Rajeev Arora, IAS, Dr. Prabhjot Singh, IAS, Mr. Suraj Bhan Kamboj & Team (Health Department)
Ayushman Bharat	Mr. Rajeev Arora, IAS, Mr. Ashok Kumar Meena, IAS, Ms. Amneet P Kumar, IAS & Team (Health Department)
Achieving immunization for all under universal immunization programme	Mr. Rajeev Arora, IAS, Dr. Prabhjot Singh, IAS & Team (Health Department)
Antyodaya-saral	Mr. V. Umashankar, IAS, Dr. Rakesh Gupta, IAS, Mr. Deepak Bansal & Team (Department of Information Technology Electronics and Communication)
Jansahayak mobile app.	Mr. Vijayendra Kumar, IAS, Mr. Yashpal, IAS & Team (General Administration Department)

Integration of Parivar Pehchan Patra with the Services being provided on Saral Platform

Various services and benefits of schemes will be available to the citizens at their doorstep.

e-Office Launched in all District Offices

Initiative to ensure accountability and transparency and to perform paperless work.

Bharat Bill Payment System (BBPS)

Payment of water and sewerage bills started through this system.

Portal for Horticultural Products

Portal started in Hindi for online sale of horticultural products/vegetable plants.

Digital Public Library

More than 6 crore e-Books and other study material will be available on e-Granthkosh.

Haryana Forest Management Information System

- Various applicants of forest department integrated under this scheme.
- Size wise information of nurseries and species wise information of plants will be available for the people.

Distribution of Title Deeds under Svamitva Scheme

On Good Governance Day title deeds provided to 18,323 beneficiaries of 81 villages of 12 districts.

More Villages included under Mhara Gaon Jagmag Gaon

From 25 December 2020, 24-hours power supply to 202 more villages of the state, along with more than 5,000 villages.

Passport facility for students

Passport distribution for college students started under the scheme.

