


DECCAN Chronicle

THE LARGEST CIRCULATED ENGLISH DAILY IN SOUTH INDIA
VIJAYAWADA | SATURDAY | 26 DECEMBER 2020

WEATHER



Max: 31.0°C
Min: 16.0°C
RH: 81%
Rainfall: Nil
Forecast: Cloudy.
Max/Min temp. 31/16 °C



NATION | 4

**Pokhran Vajpayee's
'best call,' says EAM**



WORLD | 5

**Britain faces major
Brexit challenges**

CORONA COUNT

CASES

1,01,69,804

DEATHS

1,47,379

(+24,798)

(+282)

covid19india.org

STATE GOVT BULLETINS	TELANGANA	ANDHRA PRADESH
	(+518) 2,84,074	(+355) 8,80,430
	(+3) 1,527	(+2) 7,091

WORLD CONFIRMED CASES	8,00,21,233
DEATHS	17,54,191
COUNTRIES, AREAS WITH CASES	218

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RAJINI ADMITTED TO HOSPITAL AFTER HIGH BP

DC CORRESPONDENTS
WITH AGENCY INPUTS
HYDERABAD/CHENNAI DEC. 25

Actor-politician Rajinikanth was on Friday admitted to Apollo Hospitals in Hyderabad for severe blood pressure fluctuations and he was "stable", the hospital said.

Stating that he is "stable and resting", the hospital said the actor will stay here and undergo further investigations on Saturday.

Rajinikanth was shooting for the film *Annaathe* in the Film City in Hyderabad for 10 days but had isolated himself after at least four people on the sets tested Covid-19 positive.

The 70-year-old actor had tested negative.

It is too early to say when he would move to Chennai where he was to announce the name of his political party any day after *Sani Peyarchi* on December 27. While his party may be inaugurated in January, possibly on January 17, he was to make his party formation official before the end of the year in the state capital.

What happens now to his much-awaited political entry can only be speculation.

■ Page 2: Rajini was to announce party formation

Tirumala darshan



Chief Justice of India Sharad Arvind Bobde at the Dwajasthambham of the Lord Venkateswara temple at Tirumala on Friday. — BY ARRANGEMENT

Contact tracing is back in state

DC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, DEC. 25

After several months, it is back to basics of the Covid-19 management through tracing, testing and quarantining in Andhra Pradesh.

The AP government has succeeded in tracing 1,040 out of 1,148 persons who had returned from the United Kingdom during last one month.

Four of them have been found to be positive. Their

samples have been sent to National Institute of Virology in Pune and the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology in Hyderabad for further investigation to rule out the presence of a new strain of Coronavirus that was found in the United Kingdom. It will take about three days to get the result.

As many as 982 returnees have been put under quarantine. It has been found that 16 persons provided invalid or wrong addresses,

leaving the police on tenterhooks.

Health and family welfare commissioner Katamneni Bhaskar said efforts are on to trace 88 of the remaining returnees from within the state while 18 belong to other states.

The commissioner requested people not to panic, as the state government is taking all precautions, including organising a dry run of Covid vaccine at five locations in Krishna district.

MODI: POLITICAL AGENDA BEHIND FARMERS' STIR

DC CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, DEC. 25

Amid the intensifying farmers agitation against the three new farm laws, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday squarely blamed those with a 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.

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 PM-Kisan, an effort being seen to placate the agitating farmers.

He asserted that an overwhelming number of farmers across the country have welcomed the new laws and are already reaping the benefits.

Will build houses for beneficiaries: Jagan

Begins house site distribution in East Godavari

DC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, DEC. 25

Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy on Friday asserted that his government is quite firm on providing house sites as well as houses to homeless in urban and rural areas to all eligible families without considering caste, religion or political affiliations.

The Chief Minister said that if there are eligible people who do not have a house site, they can still apply.

House sites will be given to them within 90 days.

He maintained that due to evil designs of the "yellow brigade" (Telugu Desam), the government is facing several legal hurdles. However, the government is trying to clear all such legal hurdles, he maintained.

Jagan Mohan Reddy launched distribution of house sites to homeless poor in the state from Komaragiri village of U. Kothapalli mandal in East Godavari district on Friday.

■ Page 2: Beneficiaries have 3 options to choose



Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy reading the Bible at CSI Church, Pulivendula, on Christmas on Friday.

Will move SC to clear hurdles for houses: CM

DC CORRESPONDENT
KADAPA, DEC. 25


Chief Minister Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy on Friday said that the state government will approach the Supreme Court for getting stay on distribution of house sites vacated.

Speaking after participating in prayers at the CSI church in Pulivendula on occasion of Christmas, he said he is saddened that he is not able to distribute

house sites in his own constituency Pulivendula.

"Today is a good day. On one hand, it is Christmas. On the other, it is also Mukkoti Ekadashi. Yesterday, someone from Pulivendula went to court and got a stay on distribution of house sites," he said.


He said "the land allotted for the houses belonged to APIIC. But someone has gone to court and got a stay on distribution of the land."



Some asked,
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I said,
"By reaching out with love."

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ASTROGUIDE

Sarvati: Dakshinayana
Tithi: Margasira Shuddha Dwadasi till 4.17 am (Sunday)
Star: Bharani till 10.33 am
Varjyam: 11.54 pm to 1.41 am (Sunday)
Durmuhurtam: 6.47 am to 8.15 am
Rahukalam: 9 am to 10.30 am
HJRI CALENDAR
Jamadi-ul-Awwal 10, 1442 AH
PRAYERS
Fajar: 6.00 am
Zohar: 1.30 pm
Asar: 4.30 pm
Maghrib: 5.45 pm
Isha: 8.15 pm
SUNRISE TOMORROW 6.33 AM
SUNSET TODAY 5.42 PM
MOONRISE TODAY 2.51 PM
MOONSET TOMORROW 3.56 AM

COUNTER POINT



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

SHORT TAKES

CORONA VACCINE DRY RUN IN AP

DC CORRESPONDENT
 VIJAYAWADA, DEC. 25

For the first time in AP, a dry run will be conducted on Monday, December 28, with regard to distribution and administration of corona vaccine at five places in Krishna district. This is consequent on the Union government's decision to conduct Covid-19 vaccine dry run in Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Gujarat and Punjab states on December 28 and 29.

The dry run is aimed at providing hands-on experience to programme managers at various levels. This will also test cold storage and transport arrangements made for distribution of Covid-19 vaccine, apart from other issues like management of crowds. Results of the dry run will be reviewed to fine-tune distribution of the vaccine.

Krishna district medical and health officer Dr Suhasini said the dry run will be conducted at Government General Hospital (GGH), Prakashnagar Urban Primary Healthcare Centre, Poorna Hospital at Vijayawada, government school at Tadigadapa and the Primary Health Centre at Uppulur.

She maintained that the dry run will be in accordance with norms issued by Central government. Three rooms will be made available at each centre, where 25 health workers each will go through processes of registration, vaccination and observation respectively.

Dr Suhasini said persons from various categories, such as differently-abled, co-morbid, above 50 years and women, have been selected for the dry run.

● The dry run is aimed at providing hands-on experience to programme managers at various levels.

Beneficiaries have 3 options

“The faces of yellows turned red with anger” and they went to courts to stop distribution

FROM PAGE 1

Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy observed that when the government wanted to give house sites to poor, “the faces of yellows turned red with anger” and they went to courts to stop distribution of house sites. He charged that the opposition party is unable to bear the fact that the ruling party is giving house sites to all the poor.

The Chief Minister said despite hurdles, 30.75 lakh houses and 2.62 lakh flats constructed by TIDCO are being distributed on this day. He said the government is spending ₹50,940 crore on 28.30 lakh houses. All such YSR Colonies will have YSR Janata Bazaar, park, primary and high schools, community hall, anganwadi and YSR clinic, among others.

The CM pointed out that houses will be constructed by government and beneficiaries can opt for three choices. He said that the government will construct the houses collecting ₹1 from each beneficiary. Each house will contain a bed room, living room, kitchen, hall, two fans, two tube lights, two LEDs and other facilities. Or, if the beneficiary wants to construct the house, the government will give all material as also labour charges. He also said the beneficiary can build the house and the government will give the amount in three phases.

Mr Reddy said the area of each house has been increased to 340 s ft. If the beneficiary wants to have a house more than 430 feet, the government will bear 50 per cent of the house cost.

He said that the market value of house sites, including houses, will be increased to ₹13 lakh soon.

In Komaragiri layout, 16,000 beneficiaries are to be given house sites.

● If the beneficiary wants to have a house more than 430 feet, the government will bear 50 per cent of the house cost.



Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy hands over house site document to a beneficiary after launching the “Housing for poor people programme” at Komaragiri of U Kothapalli mandal in East Godavari district on Friday. — MANIKANTA KUMAR ALAPATI

House sites distribution transparent: Nani

DC CORRESPONDENT
 VIJAYAWADA, DEC. 25

Minister for transport Perni Venkataraniiah alias Nani alleged that Telugu Desam leaders could not digest transparent allotment of houses creating hurdles to stall the mega housing programme. Mr Nani with the minister for endowment Vellampalli Srinivas Rao, MLAs Malladi Vishnu and Vasantha Krishaprasad distributed house sites to beneficiaries at the housing layout at Gajulapeta in Ibrahimpatnam on Friday.

Mr Nani stated Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy provided house sites and houses free of cost by creating a new record offering house sites to 30 lakh women beneficiaries. He alleged that TD created many hurdles to stop house site distribution to poor people but CM Jagan with strong

will foiled all those efforts and offered house sites. He said that the government is spending ₹6,800 crore on basic amenities in the housing colonies for a modern living to beneficiaries and refuted allegations of TD about establishing slums without amenities.

MLA Krishnaprasad alleged that TD leaders harassed women for sanctioning house sites during the TD government, and added that the YSRC government was offering house sites without any recommendation in a transparent manner. He alleged that TD former minister Devineni Umamaheswara Rao cheated people in Mylavaram constituency in the name of house sites.

Krishna district collector A.M. Imtiaz said that house site pattas would be offered to 3,02,420 beneficiaries.

SPEAKER LAUDS CM ON HOUSING SCHEME

DC CORRESPONDENT
 SRIKAKULAM, DEC. 25

Assembly Speaker lauded Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy for providing houses and house site pattas to over 30 lakh people in the state.

Participating as the chief guest at the patta distribution programme held in Gajula Kollivalasa village of Amadalavalasa mandal in Srikakulam on Friday, the Speaker said it was a good gesture that the Jagan Mohan Reddy government is shouldering the financial burden of ₹4,287 crore for the housing scheme.

He said the YSR government had earmarked ₹50,940 crore for providing houses for all scheme in the state, which would be completed in two phases. In the first phase, 15,60

● CM to participate in distribution of pattas in Vizianagaram on Dec. 30

lakh houses would be provided incurring a cost of ₹28,080 crore and in the second phase and statewide 17,005 Jagannanna Colonies would be built.

The Speaker earlier cut a cake to mark Christmas celebration, and the chief minister's speech was telecast live.

In Visakhapatnam, minister for culture Muttamsetti Srinivasa Rao launched the scheme in Juttada village under Pendurthi mandal.

The Chief Minister Jagan Mohan Reddy would participate in the distribution of pattas in Vizianagaram on December 30.

RAJINI WAS TO ANNOUNCE PARTY FORMATION

FROM PAGE 1

Earlier, he had once hinted that his doctors had advised him not to get into the rough and tumble of full-time politics due to concerns over his health as he had undergone transplantation of a kidney a few years ago.

Later, he had come out and announced in a media conference held from his home that he had decided to take the plunge after meeting his party functionaries at the Raghavendra Kalyana Mandapam. The Tamil Nadu political scene, agog with his keenly awaited entry, is left guessing over his formal entry now with a party name, flag, office-bearers, etc.

Doctors said his blood pressure was fluctuating from 160 to 170mmHg and he was kept under observation since afternoon. “The reason for this could be over-exertion, lack of proper sleep, anxiety or not taking prescribed medicines on time. He's being treated for blood pressure for a long time. The kidney functioning is also being evaluated.”

The hospital release said the actor's condition was being closely monitored and the blood pressure being carefully titrated. He will undergo further tests on Saturday.

Rajinikanth's daughter is attending to him at the hospital. Family and the doctors have requested his fans to desist from visiting the hospital. No visitors are allowed.

Telangana state Governor Tamilisai Soundararajan and TD supremo N. Chandrababu Naidu wished the actor a speedy recovery. DMK chief M.K. Stalin spoke to him on the telephone and wished him a speedy recovery.

‘FARMERS CAN SELL PRODUCE IN 1,000 PLACES’

DC CORRESPONDENT
 VIJAYAWADA, DEC. 25

The BJP on Friday started its awareness meetings to clear “misconceptions” about the three new agriculture laws, claiming that they would be beneficial to the farming community. BJP MP G.V.L. Narasimha Rao stated that the new laws provide the opportunity for farmers to sell their produce in 1,000 market-places in the country. He alleged that the Opposition parties were trying to mislead the people about the new laws.

The interaction with farmers was held at the BJP office here on Friday. Narasimha Rao told the farmers that BJP government had resolved the shortage of urea. The government had increased agriculture budget sixfold and further provided irrigation water.

Ministers’ Xmas wishes at Tirumala kick up fresh row

DC CORRESPONDENT
 TIRUPATI, DEC. 25

AP Deputy Chief Minister K. Narayana Swamy and tourism minister Avanti Srinivas extending Christmas wishes to people through the media at Tirumala has stirred up a fresh controversy, with Telugu Desam leaders fumed demanding action against them.

The ministers had Vaikunta Dwara Darshanam at the Tirumala temple early on Friday. Speaking to media persons outside the temple, minister Srinivas wished the people of AP on the occasion of Vaikunta Ekadashi and Christmas. “It is a happy occasion that both the festivals

have fallen on the same day,” he said after extending Christmas and Vaikunta Ekadasi wishes to people.

Narayan Swamy, who is also excise minister, extended greetings on both festivals while speaking at Tirumala: “Vaikunta Ekadasi and Christmas have fallen on the same day. I prayed to Lord Venkateswara, Lord Jesus and Allah, to shower their blessings on Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy,” he said while mentioning that the AP CM and he himself have a lot of faith in Lord Venkateswara.

This incident has kicked up a political storm in the state with leaders from the opposition TD coming out all guns blazing.

Tirumla grandeur



On the occasion of Vaikunta Ekadasi, the processional deities of Lord Malayappa Swamy flanked by his consorts Sridevi and Bhudevi were seated on golden chariot and taken out on a procession along the four Mada streets at Tirumala on Friday.

New education policy can revive India's pride



Dr S. Pratap Reddy

Centuries ago, Lord Macaulay, in his address to the British Parliament, said, “I propose we replace her (India's) old and ancient education system, her culture; for if Indians think all that is foreign and English is good and greater than their own, they will lose their self-esteem, their native self-culture. They will become what we want, a truly dominated nation.

Indians will develop disdain towards their own culture, language, heritage and practices, and would all too easily accept the British as their overlords, and turn out to be cheap-clerk labour for us.”

Macaulay's policy ate into the vitals of India. Post Independence, Macaulayputras have done irreparable damage to our faith, philosophies, cultural ethos, principles and thought. We have been made to ignore our roots and forced to feel shameful of our forefathers. It is high time to revisit our past.

The New National Education Policy (NEP), as passed by the Narendra Modi government, aims at bringing transformational reforms in our education systems to reclaim our past glory.

Stages of education

The early childhood care

Power of multilingualism

The power of language

and education (ECCE), the foundational stage, will consist entirely of play or activity-based learning. The second level will introduce light textbooks, as part of the preparatory stage. The third stage would comprise introduction of specific subjects for learning. The fourth stage learning will be for four years at high school with a multidisciplinary study.

Holistic development

The new curricula will promote critical thinking, discovery-based analysis and discussion-oriented learning. The secondary school of education will have a holistic and wide choice of courses and offer flexibility. The NCERT, SCERT, schools and educators shall make concerted efforts through novel pedagogy and curriculum.

finds strong echo in the NEP, which seeks to promote multilingualism across schools and colleges. The mother tongue, a local language, and a national language will be taught up to standard five. Sanskrit can be learnt at school and higher levels.

Transforming assessment for student development

NEP proposes to promote learning and development skills like analysis, critical thinking and conceptual clarity, a big shift from summative to competency-based and formative assessment. A new standards-setting body will be established as the National Assessment Centre, or PARAKH (performance, assessment review and analyses of knowledge for holistic development) to assess core competencies of students.

Robust teacher recruitment and career path

NEP rescues teachers out of uninspiring job profiles, riddled with rampant exploitation and un-incentivised service conditions. A more transparent process of recruitment and merit-based promotions will be taken up. Teachers will be required to take teacher eligibility tests (TET's) and national test assessment (NTA) for hiring.

Teacher empowerment

A wonderful highlight of NEP is empowering teachers and investing in them to determine participation in setting school goals and policies to exercise professional judgement on what and how to teach. By reforming pedagogy, learning outcomes can be improved, recognised, documented and shared across the country.

Inclusive education

Socially and economically

disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) get a special focus in the new policy. In the current scenario, minorities are relatively under-represented in schools and colleges.

This policy acknowledges and recognises the need for intervention to promote education for minorities and children with special needs.

School accreditation

NEP aims to continually improve educational outcomes and empower teachers and schools with trust, so that they can strive for excellence. The state council of educational research and training (SCERT) will be reinvigorated to handle all academic standards and curriculum.

Building quality universities and colleges

New National Education Policy lays emphasis on

overhauling and re-energising higher education through high-quality, equitable and inclusive education. Faculty and institutional autonomy will be given in setting curricula and provide pedagogy support to students.

Ensuring universal access to education

NEP will be expanded to play a key role in increasing gross enrolment ratio (GER). There are other measures to be undertaken such as online courses, funding for research, digital repositories and credit-based recognition of MOOCs to ensure highest level of quality.

Conclusion

Students are forcefully and compulsorily taught in schools today. Students are controlled and forced to be taught as opposed to being self-educated. The Indian

education system has not been able to change with time. A lot of awareness has to be created to bring in a change to remain relevant to modern times.

Schools, known as temples of learning, have actually become prisons of fears, inferiority, regret, pressures and bullies. Fear drives most students, not love for learning in the current system.

New National Education Policy aims to transform our education with a multidisciplinary, flexible, holistic approach, aligned with requirements of 21st century and anchored to Indian culture and heritage.

— Dr S. Pratap Reddy is the former chairman of the Dhruva College of Management, a preminent educationist, and social entrepreneur with over four decades of standing.

OTHER STORIES

AP REGISTERS
355 NEW COVID
CASES, 2 DEATHSDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, DEC. 25

Andhra Pradesh has registered 355 new Covid-19 positive cases in the past 24 hours. Only two deaths, one each in Guntur and Krishna districts have been reported, increasing the total deaths to 7,091.

Total corona cases increased to 8,80,430. 354 patients have recovered from the disease on Thursday, which increased the total number of recoveries to 8,69,478.

As many as 56,409 samples have been tested in the past 24 hours, with total samples taken reaching 1,15,31,206 in the state.

Chittoor reported the highest single-day tally of 81 new infections among districts, followed by 53 in Guntur district, 49 in East Godavari, 43 in Krishna.

28 in Visakhapatnam, 24 in Nellore, 15 in Anantapur.

36 RED SANDERS
LOGS SEIZED,
ONE ARRESTEDDC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, DEC. 25

Red Sanders Anti-Smuggling Task Force has seized 36 logs and a mini truck used to smuggle the logs and also arrested one woodcutter during a raid held on Friday on Bakarapeta road near Kalyani dam close to Tirupati rural.

According to Task Force DSP K.C. Venkataiah, the task force team led by RSI Lingadhar, FBO Johnny Basha, Kodandam took up a combing operation in Bakarapeta forest area on Thursday morning. On observing strange sounds in the forest area near Kalyani dam in the early hours of Friday, the task force team rushed to the spot and encountered around 40 wood cutters carrying red sander logs.

On noticing the task force teams, the woodcutters fled from the scene, leaving behind the logs. The team, however, managed to arrest one woodcutter, who was identified as Kumar (25), hailing from Chengan Taluk under Tiruvannamalai in Tamil Nadu state.

The team also spotted a mini truck, kept ready near the forest area to transport the logs. The truck was laden with fertilisers to deceive the forces. The combing operation is still on to trace out the other woodcutters and smugglers, who fled deep into the forest. CI Subrahmanyam registered a case and investigation is on.

GUDIVADA SLAMS
TD FOR POLITICISING
EVERY INITIATIVEDC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, DEC. 25

Anakapalle MLA Gudivada Amarnath played the Telugu Desam for politicising every state initiative of the government and becoming a hindrance to the efforts to help the poor.

Addressing a press conference here on Friday, the MLA slammed TD leader Velagapudi Ramakrishna Babu for levelling false allegations against YSRC Rajya Sabha member MP V. Vijaya Sai Reddy and challenging the latter to come to the Saibaba temple in Visakhapatnam East to take the oath and speak.

The MLA challenged Ramakrishna Babu to come to the Sri Varahalakshmi Narasimha Swamy temple at Simhachalam and swear that he hasn't committed any crime or murder and had not amassed assets illegally.

The MLA pointed out that Ramakrishna Babu didn't condemn Vijayasai Reddy's statements on illegal assets of his benamis but just claimed that the were never registered to his name. Ramakrishana Babu came to Visakhapatnam after being accused in the murder of Vangaveeti Ranga and had later indulged in other illegal activities like supply of drugs, horse riding competitions, cock fights, liquor syndicate during the tenure of the previous TD government.

Amarnath asked the three-time MLA to explain how he came to possess such wealth in 30 years. He said the report of the Special Investigation Team on land encroachments in Vizag would be released in 10 days and the state government would file charges against everyone involved in the land scam. The MLA said Vijaya Sai Reddy has been relentlessly working for the development of North Andhra and it was due to his efforts that the government had taken back 171 acres which was encroached by the TD leaders.

Christmas celebrated on
a low key in N. Andhra

Sermons at churches were laced with Covid protocol

DC CORRESPONDENT
VISAKHAPATNAM, DEC. 25

People in north Andhra celebrated Christmas on a low key on Wednesday. But many flocked to tourist spots in Visakhapatnam, Sun Temple and Baruva beach in Srikakulam.

Being a long weekend, many came from Hyderabad, neighbouring Chhattisgarh and Odisha. Traffic was jammed on the Beach Road in Visakhapatnam and at many other places.

Tour operators said the footfall was good in Araku Valley and Lambasinghi and expected to be more during the next two days.

Tourism officials said around 5,500 people visited Borra Caves, Araku Valley and Ananthagiri.

Severe cold conditions and fear of old and new strain of virus kept many people indoors on Thursday's eve of Christmas. Even the crowds were small for Christmas prayers in the churches on Friday.

Many churches restricted the people to bare minimum and advised them to stay at home and celebrate the evening with family members and relatives.

Additional pastor of Vizag's most famous Trinity Lutheran Church Nelson Wesley said they restricted the people to two persons for each bench and limited the overall number to less than 200 people.

"We have sought the police help to control the crowd at midnight," Mr



Devotees offer prayers at St. Peter's Co Cathedral at One Town on the occasion of Christmas festival celebrations in Vijayawada on Friday. — C. NARAYANA RAO

Wesley told this correspondent. Trinity Church, located in the heart of the Visakhapatnam city and near Jagadamba Theatre, draws maximum crowds on Christmas and New Year eve.

He also said the chief pastor and other guests advised the people to maintain the Covid protocol to stay safe from the deadly virus. All the church heads have emphasised on the precautions to be taken against the virus in their sermons.

Small churches did not organise the Christmas eve masses due to adverse weather conditions and not expecting many people.

GRAND CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS
AT ALL CHURCHES IN KAKINADADC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, DEC. 25

Christmas was celebrated in all the churches and in Christian houses. All churches were decorated with lights and Santa Claus.

The Christians distributed cakes to the people of all faiths.

Large number of Christians went to the churches and offered prayers to Lord Jesus and rendered Keerthanas appreciating God.

Some of the Christians made 'Crib' a symbol of

love. They made it with locally available materials like grass, hay, wood, leaves, paper and recreated crib decorated with stars, balloons and festoons. Crib is a replica of the nativity scene of Birth of Jesus.

The citizens of Kakinada were attracted to a big manger about 30-feet crib made by Keralites and Psychologist Vinu and his wife Ginu. They say that they make this crib with all natural material and this crib is very famous in Kerala.

Theatres turn houseful;
faithful throng churchesDC CORRESPONDENT
VIJAYAWADA, DEC. 25

For the first time after nine months, religious places and cine theatres experienced mass frenzy on Friday, marking the season of festivals in the backdrop of a sharp drop in Covid-19 cases in Andhra Pradesh.

Theatres reopened by screening new Telugu movie *Solo Brathuke So Better* starring Sai Dharam Tej and Nabha Natesh as also other films. They followed Covid regulations while screening the movies while most have hung Housefull boards in the front much before the start of the show.

Christians wearing masks attended prayers at churches while Hindus thronged temples for the Uttara Dwara Darshan and pujas marking the Vaikuntha Ekadasi.

All churches in AP had remained close since late March, suspending all prayer services

including the weekly congregations on Sunday.

A few weeks ago, some churches started online weekly prayer services.

Notably, the state's Coronavirus positive cases dropped to below 2,000 a day two months ago. It further dropped to 500-600 per day three weeks ago, and the fall in infection rates is steady. The recovery rate rose to 98 per cent, adding to the optimism and confidence of the people.

Christians were enthused to come out and celebrate Christmas this time too. G. Samuel and D. Anand said the Coronavirus fears were thankfully subsiding by the time Christmas arrived. A majority of

the faithful attended church prayers, and they did so by wearing masks.

Pastor K. Bala Swamy said the wearing of masks and use of sanitisers were made mandatory at churches this time. Prayers were offered also for an early end to the pandemic's visitation on the Earth.

Vaishnavite temples were filled with devotees on Friday for the Uttara Dwara Darshan marking Vaikuntha Ekadasi. The Tirumala temple saw a huge rush and the Venkateswara temples across districts experienced the same.

BJP MP G.V.L. Narasimha Rao offered puja at the Venkateswara temple and minister for endowment Velampalli Srinivas Rao at Kotha Gullu in Vijayawada.

YSR Congress Alla Ramakrishna Reddy stood in a general line at the Panakala Lakshmi Narasimha temple in Mangalagiri with family and had a north-gate darshan.



novelty soon wears off and the ploddingly predictable story fails to sustain interest. While the narrative has a lot of potential, what's important in a love story is the emotional connect, and that's where the film is lacking.

Certain scenes, especially the episode when

Amrutha escapes her marriage, are funnily written; however, the lack of attention paid to the emotional connect lays the film waste. Vennela Kishore brings some laughter with his witty gestures and punchlines. But that's only briefly.

The film is far too plain and relies heavily on

Vaikunta Dwara Darshan
commences in advanceDC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, DEC. 25

The joy of devotees knew no bounds when the Vaikunta Dwara Darshan at the abode of Lord Venkateswara in Tirumala commenced one-and-a-half hours in advance than announced by the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams Board on Friday.

The auspicious Vaikunta Ekadasi was celebrated in a ceremonious way at Tirumala Hills, with the TTD making elaborate arrangements for the sake of devotees who thronged the hill town to have an opportunity to tread through the Vaikunta Dwaram which is widely believed to take devotees out of the cycle of rebirth.

Speaking to media persons, TTD additional EO A.V. Dharma Reddy said, "With the cooperation from VIPs, we have commenced the slotted Sarva Darshan much in advance than we planned earlier. The devotees expressed their immense satisfaction over the darshan and other arrangements made by TTD."

"For the first time we have also issued darshan for donors, virtual seva pilgrims and also 1,000 Srivani tickets offline for Vaikunta Dwara Darshan. All the pilgrims co-operated with the temple management and followed Covid-19 guidelines and had a peaceful darshan," Mr Reddy added.

Earlier, the proceedings at the temple began at 1.30 am, when the priests performed Dhanurmasa rituals and ceremoniously opened the Vaikunta Dwaram. Later, a host of VVIPs including judges, Union and state ministers, elected representatives, bureaucrats and celebrities offered prayers to Lord Venkateswara between 4 am and 7.45 am. Darshan for the common devotees began at 8 am and continued uninterrupted.

Meanwhile, all the local temples under TTD saw the devout turn out to mark Vaikunta Ekadasi. In Srinivasa Mangapuram, the Vaikunta Dwara Darshan commenced at 4 am and lasted till 7 pm, while at the Govindaraja Swamy temple, the temple activities began at 3.30 am and closed at 9 pm.

In other local temples including Sri Kodanda Rama Swamy temple,

Mukkoti Ekadasi
observed with fervorDC CORRESPONDENT
KURNOOL, DEC. 25

Mukkoti Ekadasi was celebrated across the district on Friday with religious fervour. Vaikunta Ekadasi is considered more auspicious by Vaishnavites than the Ekadasi day, which falls every month. On Mukkoti Vaikunta Ekadasi day people observe a fast.

In Ahobilam, devotees thronged the Sri Narasimha Swamy temple in the early hours to catch a glimpse of the Lord. Chants of 'Govinda Govinda' reverberated the air. Throughout the day, serpentine queues were witnessed in temples.

Endowment officer Mallikarjuna, Ahobila

mutt authorities made all arrangements to ensure hassle-free darshan for the devotees as per Covid norms. The auspicious day was observed at various temples in the district including the Sri Venkateswara Swami temple in Kurnool, Laxminarsimha temple is Veldurthi, and Chennakesava Perumal temples in Koilkuntla and Banaganapalle.

In Srisailam, thousands of devotees queued up at the Sri Brahmar Mallikarjuna Swami temple.

The temple executive officer K.S. Rama Rao said they have made available special arrangements to ensure trouble-free darshan for pilgrims as per Covid-19 guidelines.

VAISHNAVITE TEMPLES OVER CROWDED
WITH DEVOTEES ON VYKUNTA EKADASIDC CORRESPONDENT
KADAPA, DEC. 25

All the Vaishnavite temples were crowded on Friday on the occasion of Vykhuntha Ekadasi. The special north gate darshan was observed in all the temples in the district.

Devotees had darshan of the Lord Venkateshwara through the north gate at the Devunikaadapa Laxmi Venkateswara temple and the ancient Kodandarama

temple at Vontimitta. Devotees had darshan of Moksha Narayana Swamy at Ramapuram shrine in Kamalapuram constituency. Temple organiser Kasibhatla Satya Sainath Sarma made all the arrangements for the devotees.

Srirama Kalyana Mahotsavam was held at the Kodandarama temple at the Housing Board Colony. It was cancelled on Srirama Navami, due to the Covid restrictions.

DEVOTEES THROG TO TEMPLES FOR
VAIKUNTA EKADASI IN EG, WG DISTRICTSDC CORRESPONDENT
KAKINADA, DEC. 25

Vaikuntha Ekadasi festival was celebrated with devotional fervor in East and West Godavari districts on

Friday. All the Vaishnavite temples opened the Uttara Dwara Darshan (North Gate), with devotees forming long queues at the temples from the early hours.

Appalayagunta the devotees had darshan from 4 am to 8 pm and 7.30 am till 5 pm respectively. In Tiruchanoor, the daily routine started at 4.30 am and concluded at 8 pm.

The TTD had made elaborate arrangements and observed Covid-19 guidelines while providing dar-

shan to pilgrims at all its temples, including the hill shrine at Tirumala. However, despite repeated announcements by the TTD, devotees gathered in huge numbers at the galleries in the four mada streets at Tirumala during the procession of Golden chariot.

MAN DIES AFTER CENTRING MATERIAL
COLLAPSES AT VS BUILDING SITEDC CORRESPONDENT
TIRUPATI, DEC. 25

A 20-year-old construction worker died after centring iron material of an under-construction village secretariat building collapsed on him at Puderu village of Naidupeta mandal in Nellore district on Friday.

According to reports reaching here, the worker identified as Parri Ramaiah, hailing from Naidupeta mandal was involved in centring works for the secretariat building in Puderu village when accidentally, some of the construction material fell on him.

The local residents immediately rushed him to a nearby hospital, where doctors declared him brought dead. On being informed, police shifted the dead body to Naidupeta government hospital for autopsy. A case has been registered and further investigation is on.

Meanwhile, on learning about the accident, Sullurpeta MLA K. Sanjeevaiah visited the hospital and consoled the family members of the deceased worker.

The MLA assured the family of extending support from the state government.

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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 Mudavanmugal 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.

Shivraj threatens to bury mafia alive

Bhopal: Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan on Friday threatened to bury mafia 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, 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 said.

Odisha: 64-year-old 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

Farmers intensify stir, insist on repeal of laws for parleys

Unions allege that govt's latest offer is nothing but propaganda against farmers

SANJAY KAW | DC
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 the agenda to resume parleys.

In Haryana, protesting farmers took over several toll plazas to allow free movement of vehicles. In Uttarakhanda's 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 police was finally forced to get out of the way of the protesters. In Phagwara, Punjab, some BJP leaders had to slip out from the backdrop 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



Police intervene after a mild altercation between BJP supporters and a section of protestors, 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 Kishangarh village in the national capital, Shah said if farmer organisations felt that any provision of the three new farm laws was against their

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

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

"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

land, this is BJP's promise to you," he asserted.

Shah blamed the opposition, including the Congress, for spreading lies about the minimum support price (MSP) and other provisions of the farm laws.

"Opposition is telling brazen lies. I again reiterate that the MSP will continue and the mandis will not be closed. Farmers' welfare is the top-most priority of the Modi government," Shah said. — PTI

(Charuni) chief Gurnam Singh Charuni rejected the offer of Haryana deputy chief minister Dushyant Chautala to mediate between the Centre and the protesting farmers.

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

Didi: PM spoke 'distorted facts'

RAJIB CHOWDHURI & ANIMESH SINGH | DC
NEW DELHI/KOLKATA, DEC. 25

GHOSH MOCKS MAMATA, CALLS HER DURMUKH

RAJIB CHOWDHURI | DC
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. Banerjee responded to the attack by accusing 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 Mamata 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 West Bengal are engaged in harassing the citizens of Delhi here in the name of the farmers and are ruining the economy of the country," Modi added, his statement comes against the backdrop of unrelenting protests over three new farm laws.

Stung by the Prime Minister's attack, Banerjee said, "While he publicly claimed his intention to help farmers of West Bengal through his PM-Kisan Yojana and alleges non-cooperation

West Bengal BJP president Dilip Ghosh, who is known for making controversial comments, on Friday mocked Chief Minister and Trinamul Congress supreme Mamata Banerjee as a "Durmukh" as a CM face of the ruling TMC in the next year's Assembly election.

He said, "TMC is asking us where is your face (CM candidate)? I tell them: We have many. But you have only one face. But that too has become Durmukh (bad face) now. She claims she is the only face in all of 294 seats. It means there is no one else. That is why no one believes in that party. People are not calling TMC 'Didi's party' anymore. They now claim it to be Pishi's (Aunt) party."

of the state government, the fact is that he is trying to mislead the people with half-truth and distorted facts. Let me set the record straight. I personally have written two letters and have even spoken to the concerned minister two days ago but they are refusing to cooperate and are instead indulging in malicious propaganda for political gains. When we are implementing so many schemes with the Central government, the question of not cooperating on a scheme that is benefiting farmers seems absurd. For all the posturing of the Central government, the fact is that the Modi government has done nothing to help the state of West Bengal."

Pokhran Vajpayee's 'best call,' says EAM

SRIDHAR KUMARASWAMI | DC
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 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".

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

Biswal, who previously served as US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia during the

Obama Administration, said in her Address, "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-year-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."

Biswal added, "With the incoming Biden-Harris administration, there will be a renewed focus on restoring our global alliances and strengthening our global institutions."

Centre prepares detailed outline for vaccine dry run

VINEETA PANDEY | DC
NEW DELHI, DEC. 25

With all eyes now on Covid-19 vaccine, the Central government will carry out a dry run of Covid-19 vaccination on December 28 and 29 in Assam, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Punjab as a step to prepare for the administration of the vaccine and assess the readiness of the supply chain and officials.

A detailed checklist has been prepared by the Union health ministry and shared with the four states to guide them in the dry run. "To strengthen the capacity of our human resource for

Covid-19 vaccine introduction and roll-out, detailed training modules have been developed for different categories of vaccine handlers and administrators including medical officers, vaccinators, alternate vaccinators, cold chain handlers, supervisors, data managers, ASHA coordinators and all others involved in the implementation process at different levels," the government release said.

The Union government, in coordination with states and Union Territories, has been training health workers. According to the Union health and family welfare ministry, 2,360 people, includ-

ing state immunisation officers, cold chain officers, IEC officials and development partners have been trained during a national-level 'Training of Trainers', apart from more than 7,000 at the district level.

The training includes all operational aspects like organisation of vaccination sessions, use of Co-WIN IT platform for management of the entire vaccination process, deployment of HR cold chain preparedness, management of adverse events, communications and inter-sectoral coordination, biomedical waste management, infection prevention protocols etc.

BILATERAL | ISSUES

BGB raises concern over cross-border illegal smuggling

Bangla refutes illegal immigration claim

MANOJ ANAND | DC
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 bor-

der 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.

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 Jaewoo, 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

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 northeast, 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.

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

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.

The address was "a victory speech," Anand Menon, director of the UK in a Changing Europe think-tank, said.

"Boris Johnson was elected Prime minister to get Brexit done, he has now definitively got Brexit done," Menon said. Johnson has come under fierce criticism for his management of the country's coronavirus outbreak, which has so far left almost 70,000 dead, the heaviest toll in Europe.

In recent days, thousands of trucks have been backed up at Channel ports, after France and other European partners blocked crossings over rising cases of a new virus variant believed to spread faster.

With ferry and tunnel crossings unusually staying open on Christmas Day and British soldiers carrying out virus tests, there were signs of the logjam clearing on Friday. Some had pointed out that the transport chaos, which raised fears of shortages of fresh produce, could be a glimpse of what awaited the country if it crashed out of the EU single market without a deal.

— 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.

Columbus police chief Thomas 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.

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

'BALLOON BOY' HOAX PARENTS RECEIVE PARDON

Los Angeles, Dec. 25: Two Colorado parents jailed for falsely claiming their six-year-old son Falcon had floated away in a homemade balloon shaped like a flying saucer have been granted pardons by the western US state's governor.

Richard and Mayumi Heene pleaded guilty in 2009 to the "balloon boy" hoax, which became a worldwide media sensation with millions watching live as the silver helium balloon drifted through the skies for 70 miles (110 kilometers).

— AFP

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 came 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

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.

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

MJ's | FAIRYLAND

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

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.

Burkle, 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



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

— AFP

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

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

DECCAN Chronicle

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.

DECCAN CHRONICLE

Kaushik Mitter

Editor

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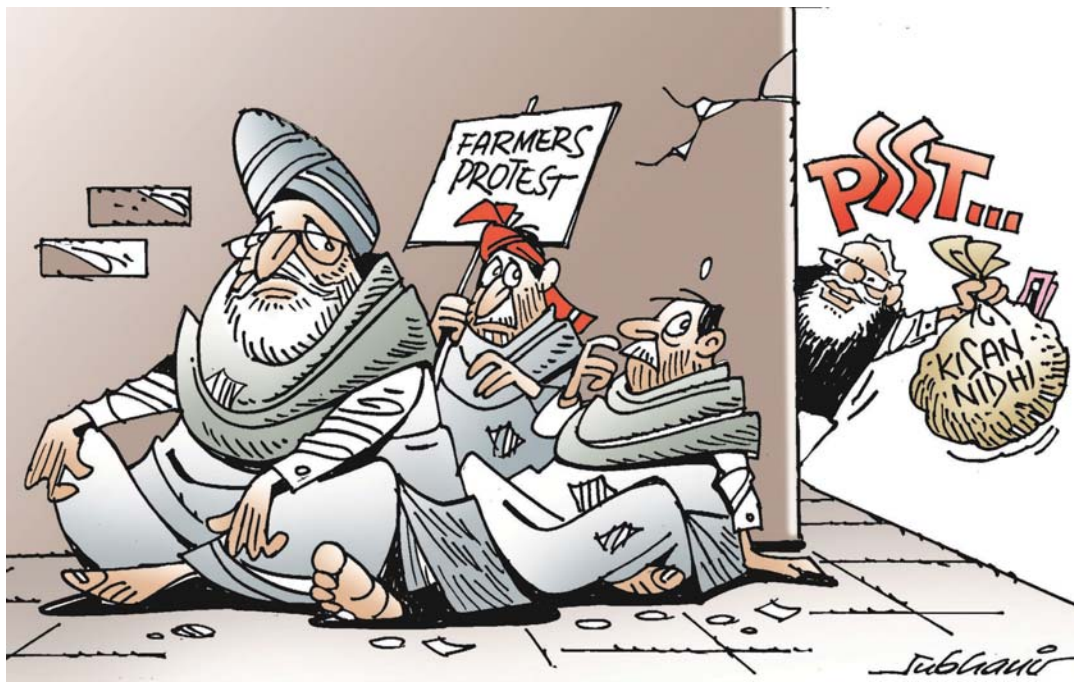
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Subhani



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 tops 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-jyo*. Why not? While in Pune recently, sipping tea inside a spacious tea 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

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

LETTERS

POLITICAL NOVICE

The comment made by Rahul Gandhi that PM Narendra Modi is incapable of leading the nation is nothing short of a comment made by a political novice. Instead of refurbishing his party which is likely to go into oblivion, his harping on Modi is his own incapacity to see the writing on the wall. The forays made by the BJP in several states should be an eye-opener to him. Caught in party wrangles, his concern should be to provide a semblance of opposition to the ruling party at the hustings, and not behave like a political novice.

D. S. P. Rao,
Kakinada.

JAMMU & KASHMIR

This refers to your editorial "BJP's 'new politics' fails to get off the ground in J&K (*DC, Dec. 24*). The decision of the mainstream J&K parties for contesting and coming together putting aside their differences is welcome and appreciated. The polls are a sign of victory for democracy in the region. It needs to be seen as a launching pad towards normalisation in Jammu and Kashmir.

Dr C. Ghanshyam
Visakhapatnam

(The above letter was inadvertently published under another letter writer's name on Friday)

50 YEARS AGO IN

DECCAN Chronicle

Prospects of finding oil in Andhra bright

MASULIPATNAM, DEC. 25.

Oil would definitely be found in Andhra because of the presence of sedimental rocks over the coastal belt from Tuni to Ongole which were originally under the sea. Mr. E. V. Ramana, Senior Geophysicist and Chief of the Seismic Survey Union of the Oil and Natural Gas Commission, said here last night at a meeting of the Rotary Club.

He said, "all other favourable conditions are also present here and if they are found, we have to make a deep drilling."

Oil was likely to be located in Andhra at depths varying from 6,000 to 10,000 feet.

He said oil was found a 10,000 feet at Gujarat and at 20,000 feet in Punjab.

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 benefactor 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 Createo" — or some such.

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

I 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! — *fd*. 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 Custher*, 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 Shongee 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 Bardi 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!

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.

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,” 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.

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.

in Q2:2020-21,” the RBI 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 second 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. 24: 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

DIGITAL | MONEY

Investors consider crash in Bitcoin price as an opportunity to accumulate more of them

Bitcoin crushes doubters with a rally of 224%

EDDIE VAN DER WALT LONDON, DEC. 25

Bitcoin just won't go away. The original cryptocurrency again had commentators eating their words in 2020 — yours truly included. It's now time to accept it's here to stay.

Like Monty Python's Black Knight, Bitcoin believers treat near-fatal volatility as mere flesh wounds. Drops of 80 per cent are welcomed as fortuitous buying opportunities. But far from being a weakness, this is evidence of the asset class' longevity. The cryptocurrency rallied 224 per cent this year, bringing to mind the wild advances of 2017 as it

soared to record highs. While the supply side of the schedule is algorithmically defined, I was caught off guard by the ability of the demand side to withstand volatility. I went into more detail in how my thinking on this asset class evolved in this YouTube podcast:

Supply of the digital tokens are capped at a maximum of 21 million which it is expected to reach in 2140, with periodic reductions in the reward for the network of computers that certify transactions. Yet supply dynamics aren't sufficient to guarantee a long-term future. Many assets have artificially limited



supply: Baseball cards, limited print-run art work, and a number of historic Ponzi schemes fall into this category.

What distinguishes the successes is how investors respond to crashes. In most cases, when a vehicle designed purely

around the greater-fool theory collapses, it never recovers. There has been no substantial progress made on Bitcoin as a unit of exchange. It's far from widespread adoption as a currency.

Since Bitcoin's market capitalisation reached \$1

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

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 was sanctioned under the government's Target Olympic Podium Scheme (TOPS).

The camp will take place from December 28 to January 24 at the Vasas Sports Club in Budapest, Hungary and from January 24 to February 5 at the Olympic Training Centre in Szczyrk in Poland.

The total cost includes airfare, local transportation, boarding and lodging charges and out of pocket allowance. — 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

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

Jinks said sorry to Virat after run out

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



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

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.

— AJINKYA RAHANE

on the first Test goof-up

about it. 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," Rahane said on the eve of the second Test here.

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



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

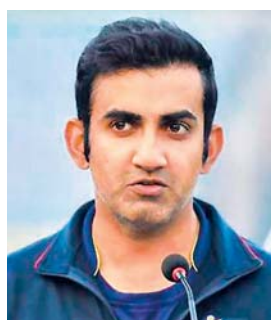
Decision to rotate Saha & Pant is unfair, says Gauti

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 fails 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.

"Australians 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 dependable 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. — PTI

Ramu steals thunder as Nirmal victorious

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, DEC. 24

S. Ramu cracked a splendid century to propel Nirmal Thunders to victory in the Telangana Cricket Association

Kakatiya Cup T20 cricket tournament.

Ramu's quickfire 49-ball 102 that contained 10 fours and eight sixes powered Thunders to a massive 225 for 5 in their stipulated overs. In reply, the Singareni Blasters were bundled out for a mere 109.

Mahesh also chipped in an allround show (54 and 3/22) for the winning side.

In another match, Avinash Kailash smashed 58 as Suryapet Sunrisers posted 156.

In reply Mulugu Masters were all out for a paltry 52 in the face of sharp bowling by Sai Kumar (4/2) and Manish (4/26).

Rakesh also scored a half-

century in a low-scoring match for Medchal Giants, who managed just 101 but restricted rivals Shatavahana Warriors to 99.

Brief scores:

■ Nirmal Thunders 225/5 in 20 overs (S. Ramu 102 — 49b, 10x4, 8x6, Mahesh 54) bt Singareni Blasters 109/9 in 20 overs (Manoj Kumar 59, Mahesh 3/22).

■ Suryapet Sunrisers 156/7 in 20 overs (Avinash Kailash 58) bt Mulugu Masters 52 in 11.5 overs (Sai Kumar 4/2, Manish 4/26)

■ Medchal Giants 101/2 in 13.2 overs (Rakesh 50) bt Shatavahana Warriors 99/6 in 16 overs.

■ Shatavahana Warriors 111/4 in 16 overs (Srujan Reddy Yalam 49) bt Tandur Tigers 100/9 in 16 overs (Srikanth 3/30).

■ Kakatiya Kings 137/9 in 20 overs (Rishi 36) bt Medchal Giants 126 in 19.4 overs (Mahesh 39, Aditya 3/20).



S. Ramu

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

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, DEC. 24

Hyderabad Bottling edged past Gemini Friends in a closely fought final day of the Hyderabad Cricket Association's A-1 Division three-day league match here.

After conceding a one-run lead, Bottling made 220 in their second innings. Gemini looked in control when Yash Gupta (75) and Abdul Ela Qureshi (79) were at the crease.

However, they fell agonisingly short to end up at 215 for 7 in the stipulated 40 overs to lose by four runs.

Brief scores:

■ A-1 Division (Three-Day) Day-3

■ Hyderabad Bottling 385/7 in 90 overs & 220 in 40 overs (B. Ahaan Reddy 39, Aman Sheron 3/44, P. Vishnu 4/51) bt Gemini Friends 386 in 85 overs & 215/7 in 40 overs (Yash Gupta 75, Abdul Ela Qureshi 79, B. Harshith 3/25). **Points:** Hyderabad Bottling 6, Gemini Friends 0.

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