

DECCAN Chronicle

THE LARGEST CIRCULATED ENGLISH DAILY IN SOUTH INDIA

HYDERABAD | FRIDAY | 26 FEBRUARY 2021



WEATHER

Max: 34.4°C
Min: 18°C
RH: 72%
Rainfall: Nil

Forecast: Cloudy sky.
Misty morning. Max/Min temp. 34/19°C

ASTROGUIDE

Sarvari: Uttarayana

Tithi: Magha Shuddha

Chaturdasi till 3.44 pm

Star: Ashlesha till 12.30 pm

Varjyan: 11.52 pm to 1.23 am

(Saturday)

Durmuhurtam: 9 am to 9.46 am;

12.52 pm to 1.39 pm

Rahukalam: 10.30 am to 12 noon

HJRI CALENDAR

Rajab 13,144 AH

PRAYERS

Fajar: 5.37 am

Zohar: 12.39 pm

Asar: 4.43 pm

Maghrib: 6.27 pm

Isha: 7.35 pm

SUNSET TODAY 6.21 PM

SUNRISE TOMORROW 6.36 AM

MOONRISE TODAY 4.32 PM

MOONSET TODAY 5.03 AM

COUNTER POINT



Not bail papers, he is distributing party tickets to potential candidates!

SHORT TAKES

Green Card curbs lifted by Biden

Washington: US President Joe Biden revoked a policy issued by his predecessor during the pandemic that blocked many Green Card applicants from entering the US. Indian IT professionals in the US on the H-1B work visas, suffered the most due to immigration system which imposed a seven per cent per country quota on allotment of the coveted Green Card.

■ Report on Page 13

FASTags on TS highways too

Hyderabad: FASTags are set to be made mandatory on TS highways. As of now, they are mandatory only on national highways. However, FASTags are in force since March 2019 on the Hyderabad Outer Ring Road. The Telangana government has initiated steps to make FASTags mandatory on state highways from March. TS plans to initially make them compulsory on the Rajiv Rahadari.

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Covid mutations spread, causes concernCITY... PAGE 4
Owaisi criticises Didi for singling out MIM

NATION | 9

Modi slams Rahul's 'north-south' remarks



SPORTS | 15

Prithvi slams record 227 in one-dayer



TABLOID

Dads cherish bonding time

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Short & Sweet



Indian captain Virat Kohli, Ajinkya Rahane, Cheteshwar Pujara, Rishabh Pant and R. Ashwin celebrate the wicket of England's Jack Leach on the second day of the third cricket Test match against England at Narendra Modi Stadium in Ahmedabad on Thursday. India registered their second Test win inside two days overhauling a meagre target of 49 against England to take an unassailable 2-1 lead in the four-match series on Thursday. Spin duo Axar Patel and Ashwin swung the match in India's favour. England's previous Test loss inside two days came way back in 1921 against Australia. ■ Reports on Page 15

PTI

Nirav can be extradited

UK judge says diamantaire must answer Indian courts

London, Feb 25: In a comprehensive extradition win for the Indian authorities, a UK judge ruled on Thursday that fugitive diamantaire Nirav Modi not only has a case to answer in the Indian courts but that there is no evidence to suggest he would not receive a fair trial in India.

Nirav Modi, wanted in India on charges of fraud and money laundering in the estimated \$2-billion Punjab National Bank (PNB) scam case, lost his legal battle against extradition on all grounds as District Judge Samuel Goozee also concluded that there are no human rights concerns that his medical needs would not be addressed as per several Indian government assurances.

The 49-year-old appeared via video link at Westminster Magistrates'

Court from Wandsworth Prison in south-west London, dressed in a formal suit and sporting a thick beard, and showed no emotion as excerpts of the judgment were read out in court. "I am satisfied that there is evidence upon which NDM [Nirav Deepak Modi] could be convicted in relation [to] the conspiracy to defraud the PNB. A prima facie case is established," the judge noted.

He accepted that while Nirav's mental health had deteriorated due to the lengthy incarceration in a London prison, exacerbated by the Covid pandemic,

his risk of suicide does not meet the high threshold to satisfy him that his mental state is such that it would be "unjust or oppressive" to extradite him.

Under the UK Extradition Act 2003, the judge will now send his findings to the Secretary of State for Home Affairs, Priti Patel. It is the UK Cabinet minister who is authorised to order an extradition under the India-UK Extradition Treaty and has two months within which to make that decision. The home secretary's order rarely goes against the court's conclusions, as she has to consider only some very narrow bars to extradition which are unlikely to apply in this case, including the possible imposition of a death penalty.

■ More reports on Page 10

Centre tightens rules for social media, OTT

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO
with agency inputs
NEW DELHI, FEB. 25

DIGITAL MEDIA & OTT GUIDELINES



5 categories into which OTT platforms must classify content:
U (universal), U/A 7+, U/A 13+, U/A 16+, and A (adult).

3-level grievance redressal mechanism established under the rules with two levels of self regulation.
Level 1 Publisher themselves
Level 2 Self Regulatory Body
Level 3 Oversight mechanism under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

NEWS PUBLISHERS on digital media must implement Norms of Journalistic Conduct of the Press Council of India and the Programme Code under the Cable Television Networks Regulation Act

required to quickly take down any contentious content flagged by the government or legal order.

They also have to appoint executives to coordinate with law enforcement and remove, within 24 hours, content depicting nudity or morphed pictures of women.

They also have to now appoint a resident grievance officer who shall register complaints in 24 hours and file monthly compliance reports. User grievances have to be resolved within 15 days.

Social media platforms, on being asked by court or government, will be required to disclose the first originator of the mischievous information that undermines the sovereignty of India, security of the state, or public order.

MOODY'S SEES 13.7% GROWTH IN NEXT FISCAL

New Delhi, Feb. 25: Moody's on Thursday upped India's growth projection for the next financial year from April 1, to 13.7 per cent, from 10.8 per cent estimated earlier, on the back of normalisation of activity and growing confidence in the market with the rollout of Covid vaccine.

For current fiscal, the US-based rating agency expects the economy to contract by 7 per cent, lower than its previous estimate of 10.6 per cent contraction.

Moody's Investors Service associate managing director (Sovereign Risk) Gene Fang said, "We expect a rebound of 13.7 per cent growth in the next fiscal on normalisation of activity and base effects."

The large rebound incorporates the view that recovery in activity will continue, with the rollout of vaccines and growing confidence in the market that activities are coming back to normal, Fang said in an online conference on India Credit Outlook 2021.

— PTI

India, Pak militaries agree to observe strict ceasefire

PAWAN BALI and SRIDHAR KUMARASWAMI | DC
NEW DELHI, FEB. 25

The Indian and Pakistan armies on Thursday announced that they would strictly observe a ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC) and all other sectors from February 24 midnight in a major de-escalatory move.

The announcement comes after 2020 had seen a 18-year record high of 5,133 truce violations at the LoC and the international border with Pakistan in Jammu and Kashmir. In contrast, there were 3,479

such violations in 2019 and 2,140 in 2018. The tensions at the LoC had risen after the terror attack on CRPF convoy in Pulwama in February 2019, and the revoking of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019. There have been nearly 600 violations in first two months of 2021.

India's director-general of military operations (DGMO), Lt. Gen. Paramjit Singh Sangha, and his Pakistani counterpart, Maj. Gen. Nauman Zakaria, held discussions over the hot-line, and the two sides reviewed the situation along the LoC and all other

Confusion over EWS quota

L. VENKAT RAM REDDY | DC
HYDERABAD, FEB. 25

Confusion prevails over implementation of the 10 per cent reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) in education and employment in Telangana. Official sources in the Secretariat said the state government would appoint a committee to study implementa-

tion of EWS quota in various states and make recommendations to the state government. The implementation of EWS quota is delayed by over two years in the state.

While several states started implementing this in 2019 and 2020, the TS government is yet to act.

Chief Minister K. Chandrashekhar Rao had on January 21 this year announced the state government's decision to implement EWS quota. Accordingly, chief secretary Somesh Kumar issued a government order on February 8. However, no guidelines were issued so far.

To implement 10 per cent EWS quota, the state government needs to create supernumerary seats and jobs.

■ Page 6: TS confused on which model to follow

INFORMATION ALERT Court concerned over huge gatherings in TS Resume daily Covid bulletin: HC

VUJJINI
VAMSHIDHARA | DC
HYDERABAD, FEB. 25

Responding strongly to the sudden stoppage in issuing daily health bulletins, which contain numerical data of the total number Covid-19 cases in the state, and include other details like deaths, recoveries etc., the Telangana High Court on Thursday ordered the Telangana state government to "immediately recommend the exercise of

issuing daily bulletins from Friday onwards".

A division bench of the High Court, comprising Chief Justice Hima Kohli and Justice B. Vijayeswari, while dealing with public interest litigations (PILs) related to Coronavirus issues, learnt that the issuance of daily bulletin has been stopped. The Court directed the Director of Public Health and other officials concerned to immediately recommence the exercise.

■ Page 2: HC wants fresh status report by March 18

The Bench expressed concern over the huge public gatherings and congregations, which have been witnessed in the state. The Court directed the government and Telangana police department to scale-down gatherings. Chief Justice Kohli said, "newspapers have reported that there was a bereavement function in Khammam recently, and at least 20 per cent of people who participated were affected with Coronavirus. Further, the state government has given permission to open up cinema halls, public parks etc., but preventive measures it has put in place are not adequate." These gatherings should be scaled down as we are witnessing a rise in cases in neighbouring states like Karnataka and Maharashtra. Inter-state transport could lead to a spike in infections here too, the Chief Justice observed.

implement EWS quota. Accordingly, chief secretary Somesh Kumar issued a government order on February 8. However, no guidelines were issued so far.

■ Report on Page 2

COVID CASES RISE AGAIN IN TS AS PER CENTRAL DATA

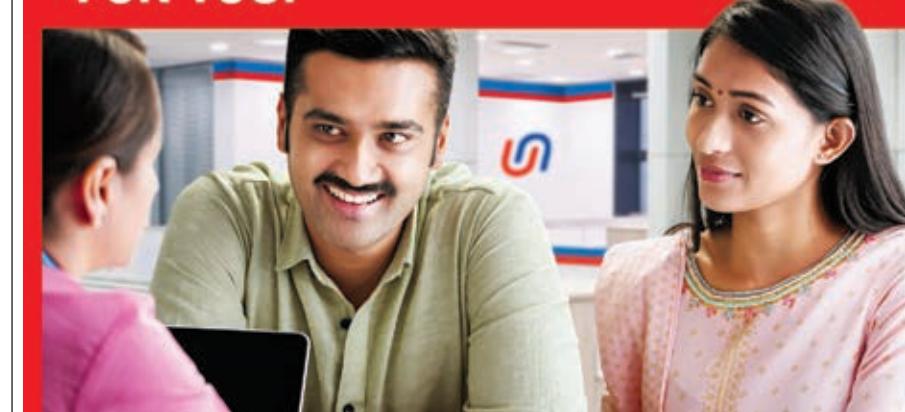
DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, FEB. 25

There are 107 new cases in Telangana according to the data updated by the central ministry of health and family welfare on February 25. With no classification it is not clear which districts are recording more cases. With 213 new cases recorded on February 24, the load of patients in Gandhi Hospital saw a rise.

■ Report on Page 2



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SHORT TAKES
**EFLU STUDENTS
 RESUME SIT-IN
 PROTEST**

HARLEEN
 MINOCHA | DC
 HYDERABAD, FEB. 25

Students from English and Foreign Languages University (Eflu) resumed their sit-in protest outside the main gate of the campus on Thursday demanding the reopening of hostels. Student representatives said that the university authorities were neglecting their demands for over two weeks now.

Earlier, while the management had agreed to meet students after they submitted their demands, students say that since February 18, it was being postponed time and again.

"The university released a circular about in-person classes on February 18 evening while completely circumventing our demands. The truth is that we never demanded resumption of in-person classes. We have only been demanding access to the hostel and other facilities", said a student.

However, the university has denied the claims saying that the registrar, proctor and other officials had met the students and listened to their grievances. A senior official said that they had told student representatives to meet the authorities inside the campus. However, only a five-member delegation was allowed and the students insisted that at least 10 members be part of the discussion, the official said.

The university has also maintained that the decision not to open the hostels till March 31 will remain, in view of the rising Covid-19 cases in several states.

"Students are citing the example of Osmania University, but they should understand that at Osmania, students come only from three districts, whereas at Eflu we have students coming from all over the world. If we allow even one student on the campus and someone turns positive, it will raise a hue and cry", he said.

HC fumes as state fails to set up social security panel

Tells defiant labour officials it will nail them down

DC CORRESPONDENT
 HYDERABAD, FEB. 25

The Telangana High Court admonished the labour department for not taking steps to constitute a state-level Social Security Board (SSB) for unorganised workers in the state, despite orders of the Court on December 16 to do so. The Court directed the official to be present before it (in virtual mode) on the next date of hearing.

"This Court will nail down recalcitrant offi-

cers, who have an obstinately uncooperative attitude towards implementing court orders. It is most unacceptable casual behaviour of officials. It is the responsibility of the government to constitute the board, which will be helpful to poor unorganised workers across Telangana," said Chief Justice Hima Kohli.

A Division Bench comprising Chief Justice Hima Kohli and Justice B. Vijayeswara Reddy was hearing a public interest litigation (PIL) filed by Congress leader C.

Damodar Rajanarsimha, seeking a direction to the Telangana government to constitute a state-level SSB for the unorganised workers and its members.

Despite petitioning the government for the last six years to do so, the board has not been constituted. Even a Court direction has not helped.

During the course of arguments, the Chief Justice Hima Kohli posed a series of questions to the commissioner, labour department, who was present before the Court, asking him to explain the

reasons for the undue delay in constituting the said Board.

The commissioner told the HC Division Bench that he has been holding an additional charge of the post, and further, had sent a proposal to secretary, labour department, for constituting the board; but it is pending with the government. The CJ was not inclined to hear his contentions and termed his contentions as "frivolous and casual".

The case has been adjourned to March 18, 2021.

Girl adopts 5 zoo birds

SANJAY SAMUEL
 PAUL | DC
 HYDERABAD, FEB. 25



Sahasra Sri with her family meet Nehru Zoological Park authorities for adopting five birds.

ated the gesture shown by the children.

The girl's father, Ch.

Naresh, said "My children are fond of birds and wild animals. Sahasra

Sri wanted to do something special on her birthday. She gave ₹5,000 to the zoo authorities for adopting the five birds."

accused, M Gundappa, a resident of Puppalaguda in Manikonda, has been working as a car driver for Madhusudan Kakanji, managing director of Manjushree Polymers, since 2019.

"Gundappa gained the trust of Madhusudan in

the last two years and, taking advantage of it, hatched a plan to steal the luxury car and sell it to make money. Last week, Gundappa in the absence of his employer, stole the car and had been absconding since then," said the police.

Police said that the

Driver flees with owner's car

DC CORRESPONDENT
 HYDERABAD, FEB. 25

A 35-year-old was arrested by the Banjara Hills police for taking off in a luxury car belonging to his employer on Thursday.

Police said that the

accused, M Gundappa, a resident of Puppalaguda in Manikonda, has been working as a car driver for Madhusudan Kakanji, managing director of Manjushree Polymers, since 2019.

"Gundappa gained the trust of Madhusudan in

the last two years and, taking advantage of it, hatched a plan to steal the luxury car and sell it to make money. Last week, Gundappa in the absence of his employer, stole the car and had been absconding since then," said the police.

Following a complaint from the mother of the minor girl, the Kushaiguda police booked a case and placed him under arrest on Thursday.

2nd day turnout rises in junior schools

DC CORRESPONDENT
 HYDERABAD, FEB. 25

The overall attendance of Classes 6-8 students across all schools in the state rose several points up on the second day of the junior school reopening to 14 per cent. As per government data, attendance in 8,056 government and local body schools rose

to 17 per cent against 9 per cent on the first day.

In the 9,612 private schools

across the state, the attendance was at 14 per cent on the second day, against the 10 per cent on day-one. The attendance in model schools and KGBVs however remained low at 3,564 and 381 students respectively. Meanwhile, another gov-

ernment data on Class 9 and 10 attendance on Thursday put the figures at 69 and 78 per cent respectively. Private school attendance was at 67 and 75 per cent respectively. The overall attendance for Intermediate 1st and 2nd years was 48 and 56 per cent respectively on Thursday, as per this data.

KENDRIYA VIDYALAYA PICKET SECUNDERABAD

Interviews for part-time Contractual basis for the post of PGTs - Eng/ Hindi/ Math/ Phys/ Chemistry/ Bio/ Commerce/ Geo/ History/ Eco/ Comp Science & TGTs - Eng/ Hindi/ Sanskrit/ Maths/ Science/ S. Std will be conducted on 05/03/2021. PRTs/ Computer Instructor/ Music & dance/ Data Entry Operator/ Coaches for Sports/ Art and Craft/ Yoga/ Doctor/ Nurse/ Counselor on 06/03/2021. Registration from 8.00 am to 9.00 am. Timing will be strictly adhered to. Screening will be done. For details visit www.kvpicket.edu.in

3 LTR OF HASHISH OIL WORTH ₹15 LAKH SEIZED

DC CORRESPONDENT
 HYDERABAD FEB. 25

The Special Operations Team of LB Nagar along with the Abdullapurmet police seized three liters of hashish oil from two men along with a transport vehicle on Thursday. The total worth of seized items was estimated to be ₹15 lakh, said the police.

The peddlers were identified as Thota Santosh Kumar, 36, and Pawde Veerabhadra, 28, both residents of KPHB, said the police, adding that their associate Raju, the supplier, was reportedly absconding.

"Santosh Kumar has been a fruits and vegetables vendor for about six years and Veerabhadra has been working with him in the same business. During his trips to the outskirts to transport vegetables, Santosh got acquainted with Raju, a resident of Narsipatnam area. Subsequently, Raju suggested him to peddle drugs on commission basis, to which Santosh agreed as his earnings were not enough to run the household," said the police.

The two had earlier transported drugs from Visakhapatnam agency area to Hyderabad and sold it to customers in the surrounding area of Hyderabad city. After police started cracking down on marijuana, they shifted to hashish oil and the demand gave them good profit.

"They purchase the oil for ₹ 90,000 per litre and sell it for ₹4 lakh per litre, or ₹4,000 per 10 ML. On Thursday, they were returning back to the city with the contraband when the officials caught them near ORR and seized three litres of hashish oil from their possession," added the police.

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SHORT TAKES

KTR NAILS OPPN 'LIES' ABOUT JOBS WITH 'FACTS'

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, FEB. 25

Tearing into the opposition for their false propaganda over providing jobs to youth in Telangana, TRS working president and IT minister K.T. Rama Rao on Thursday released the break-up of 1,32,899 job vacancies that have been filled by TRS government since 2014 in various government departments.

Rama Rao hoped that the opposition parties would stop such propaganda and duly go through the facts and figures. He said these details were released with the sole intention of giving clarity and providing the right information to the people of Telangana, especially the youth, who are being misled by the opposition's baseless accusations.

TRS HITS OUT AT BJP, CONG FOR REMARKS ON KCR

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, FEB. 25

Ruling party MLAs and MLCs on Thursday warned Congress and BJP leaders against making snide remarks about Chief Minister K. Chandrashekhar Rao and his government, failing which the party cadre would teach them a befitting lesson.

Legislators G. Vivekananda, Saidi Reddy and MLCs MS Prabhakar Rao, Srinivas Reddy speaking to reporters said that it was unfortunate that the two parties had criticised their MLC nominee. They wanted to know what the sitting MLC from BJP N. Ramchandar Rao had done for graduates in the last six years.

TYRE DEALERS TO JOIN FEB. 26 BHARAT BANDH

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, FEB. 25

Among others, the Hyderabad tyre dealers association would join the Bharat Bandh called by traders on February 26 as part of the planned nationwide protest against the current GST slab system. The traders say the system pushed them into complex calculations and this is burdening them with high taxation rates.

Tyre traders explained that, initially in July 2017 when GST came in, it was explained that this will be a simple and easy way of taxation, wherein traders will end up paying less tax. In reality, this turned out to be more complex, burdening high tax on small traders, they said.

"Tyres are on the highest slab of GST, that is 28 per cent. There are more than a hundred tyre dealers in the twin cities and all of them extended their support for the bandh in protest against the GST."

Khemchand Wadhwanji, secretary, HTDA, said: "From the time GST came in three and a half years ago, the government amended this tax policy for more than 900 times. Despite this, the government failed to make it trader-friendly. We traders are suffering and get slapped with high taxes."

Praveen Kumar Jain, a tyre-dealer at Siddiamban Bazar said, "Initially, the government made us believe that this will be an easy tax system. It turned out to be most-complicated and burdensome. The complexity of this tax is pushing us to spend more time with CAs and other accountants."

Owaisi slams Didi for refusing rally in WB

Questions permission for other Oppn parties

ATHER MOIN | DC
HYDERABAD, FEB. 25

All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) president Asaduddin Owaisi slammed the Mamata Banerjee administration in West Bengal for refusing them permission to hold an election rally in Kolkata. Owaisi questioned the logic when the same was given to BJP, TMC and Left parties.

Interacting with the media here on Thursday, Owaisi said TMC MPs speak about freedom of expression, Constitution and dissent in the Parliament, but contradict themselves when it comes to their state.

"The secular and liberal people who clap when they listen to the speeches of TMC MPs will have to ponder. This clearly exposes TMC double-speak and hypocrisy," he added.

"The BJP won 18 Lok Sabha seats in West Bengal. How can we be responsible for BJP's win when we did not



AIMIM president Asaduddin Owaisi addresses media at Darussalam in Hyderabad on Thursday.

— BY ARRANGEMENT

contest from there? The larger question is on what grounds are they stopping my party from contesting in West Bengal. We will speak against TMC, Congress, BJP and others. These parties do not understand that there is a desire in Muslim youth that we are politically relevant and have a

political leadership that will strengthen democracy," he said.

"If the police administration refuses to permit us even before enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct, how can the elections be free and fair? Narendra Modi, Amit Shah and JP Nadda can hold a rally and

Congress, CPM, TMC are also allowed. Why single us out?" Owaisi asked. Owaisi said once the code of conduct comes into force, "We will be compelled to approach the Election Commission, against the continuation of the police officers who rejected permission for rallies in the same post".

On the possible alliance with Furfur Sharif cleric Abbas Siddiqui, who had recently floated Indian Secular Front (ISF), he said they were in discussions with them. He clarified that his party has already handed over him a list of constituencies that it aims to contest and the cleric had clarified his stand about AIMIM.

On the party's plan for Gujarat, Owaisi said "one of our primary objectives is to fill the political vacuum there. In Gujarat, our party will work with Chhotubhai Vasava's Bharatiya Tribal Party (BTP) and even contest Assembly elections."



TPCC chief N. Uttam Kumar Reddy speaks during the MLC election campaign in Mahabubabad on Thursday.

— P. ANIL KUMAR

Time to teach TRS, BJP a lesson: Uttam

DC CORRESPONDENT
WARANGAL, FEB. 25

TPCC chief N. Uttam Kumar Reddy on Thursday said it is time the BJP and TRS are taught a fitting lesson in the upcoming MLC elections.

He said if the BJP is defeated, the prices of petrol and diesel will automatically come down. The TRS government provided jobs to six of Chief Minister K. Chandrashekhar Rao's kin but forgot the rest of

the state, he said. Speaking at an election preparatory meeting in Mahabubabad, he said that the TRS government is exploitative.

"The Congress party is committed to the social class and that is why Ramulu Naik has been fielded as our MLC candidate. There is no social justice in any other party, which all have fielded candidates from the Reddy community," he noted.

"The unemployed youth in the state have

not been given unemployment benefits so far. Chandrashekhar Rao and K.T. Rama Rao should be ashamed to say that they have given 1.3 lakh jobs in the state. TRS leaders work like a gang of thieves. The Congress party will come to power in 2023 and end the TRS corruption in the state," he said.

Ramulu Nayak, former Union minister Poriya Balaram Naik and Dr Murali Nayak were present on the occasion.

TSPECET 2021 EXAMS TO BEGIN FROM JUNE 7

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, FEB. 25

The Telangana State Council for Higher Education (TSCHE) announced the schedule for the Telangana State Physical Education Common Entrance Test

(TSPECET 2021) exams on Thursday, for admissions into B.P.Ed and D.P.Ed courses in the state.

The physical exams will take place from June 7, 2021, and will go on according to the number of candidates

that registers for the test, the TSCHE said.

The submission of online application forms will begin from March 8 and the last date without any late fee will be May 8. Results will be announced a week after the last day of the test.

6 HELD FOR SMUGGLING MARIJUANA

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, FEB. 25

The arrested were identified as Narotam Sarkar, Prasanjit Biswas, Debrata Chakrabarty, Khokan Halder, Kanjara Shiva Shanker, and Syed Sayeed, said the police.

The officials, who received reliable information about the contraband being smuggled in the city, conducted a route watch at Gudimalkupur and the 34.7 kilos of dry marijuana consignment from the gang on Thursday.

Nageshwar questions TRS' silence over privatisation



Prof. K. Nageshwar, an independent candidate speaks to the staff and officers of various Central public sector units in Hyderabad on Thursday.

DC CORRESPONDENT
HYDERABAD, FEB. 25

Prof. K. Nageshwar, an independent candidate in the ensuing MLC elections from Hyderabad, Ranga Reddy and Mahabubnagar gradates constituency, on Thursday questioned the silence of the Telangana Rashtra Samiti on the Narendra Modi government's policies of privatisation of public sector units. The TRS government criticised the Modi government policies during the GHMC elections but has now become silent, he said. Speaking to the staff and

officers of various central public sector units including ECIL, BEL, BDL, Midhani and HAL, here on Thursday, Prof. Nageshwar said indiscriminate privatisation of the Central Public Sector Undertakings will weaken the national economy resulting in corporate loot of public assets. Absence of strong public sector would only result in such private monopolies, he added. Hyderabad, he said, is home to prestigious CPSUs and the BJP government's privatisation policy will hit employment, and the economy of this city.

KCR owes each youth ₹72K as unemployment arrears: Bandi

DC CORRESPONDENT
NIZAMABAD, FEB. 25

BJP state president Bandi Sanjay said here on Thursday that each unemployed youth in Telangana state has a right to get ₹72,000 as unemployment allowance, based on an unfulfilled promise from Chief Minister K. Chandrashekhar Rao in the 2018 Assembly elections.

"For the last 24 months, the state government has defaulted in paying the ₹3,000 as unemployment allowance," he said.

"K. Chandrashekhar Rao had promised government jobs for each household in the state and ₹3,000 as unemployment allowance to the youth. Also, minister K.T. Rama Rao gave false information on jobs provided to the youth."

The BJP chief called upon the youth to question the ruling TRS leaders on non-payment of unemployment allowance and demand it for the past 24 months too.

Banswada assembly constituency Congress leader V. Malyadri Reddy and a few TRS and Congress activists joined the BJP in the presence of the party state chief MP Dharmapuri Arvind, BJP district president, former MLA Aruna Tara, former MLAs Laxminarayana, Kuna Srisailam Goud, former zp chairman K. Venkataramana Reddy and others were present.

Speaking at a public meeting in Banswada of Kamareddy district, organised by BJP Kamareddy district unit, Bandi Sanjay said that a few party leaders including them Nizamabad BJP district president Revuri Surendra was shot dead by Naxalites and their sacrifices will yield results in the next assembly elections.

dicted that the BJP will form the next government in Telangana in 2023.

"MIM party won 5 MLA seats in Bihar state, where the Muslims population is a mere 12 percent. If so, the 80 per cent Hindus in Telangana will as well vote for the BJP in 2023," he asked.

Bandi Sanjay reiterated that the BJP is not against Muslims and Christians, but it would protect the interests of the Hindus. He recalled that a few party leaders including them Nizamabad BJP district president Revuri Surendra was shot dead by Naxalites and their sacrifices will yield results in the next assembly elections. To end the dictatorship, the corrupt family rule of TRS, BJP will fight courageously," he said.

OBITUARY

Shri Kandukuri Rajeshwar Goud

Rtd. Dy. Registrar of Co-op. Societies
D.O.B.: 25th Feb, 2021
Deep in Our Hearts You will always be remembered and Loved forever
Inserted by: Kandukuri Family
Cremation will be held on today 26-02-2021 at Neredmet



KYLASA MADUSUDHAN RAO

D.O.B: 19-12-1936 D.O.D: 24-02-2021
Inserted by:
Kylasa Pramila (Wife)
Kylasa Surender (Son)
Kylasa Suchitra (Daughter)
Kylasa Sukanya (Daughter)



MR. VINOD BAJAJ

(S/o: Late Dr. Ramjidas Bajaj)
D.O.B.: 23-02-2021
Your memories are always in our hearts and minds. May his soul rest in peace.
Inserted by: KL BATRA & FAMILY



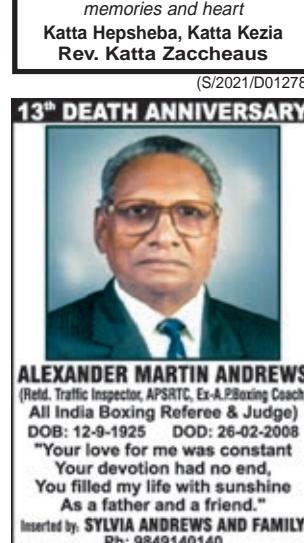
Smt. N. Savithri Garu

W/o: N. Raghunandan Raj
You left us with loving memories which are stored in our Hearts & Minds. Would have been more wonderful if you were with us. We miss you every moment.
Inserted by: FAMILY MEMBERS



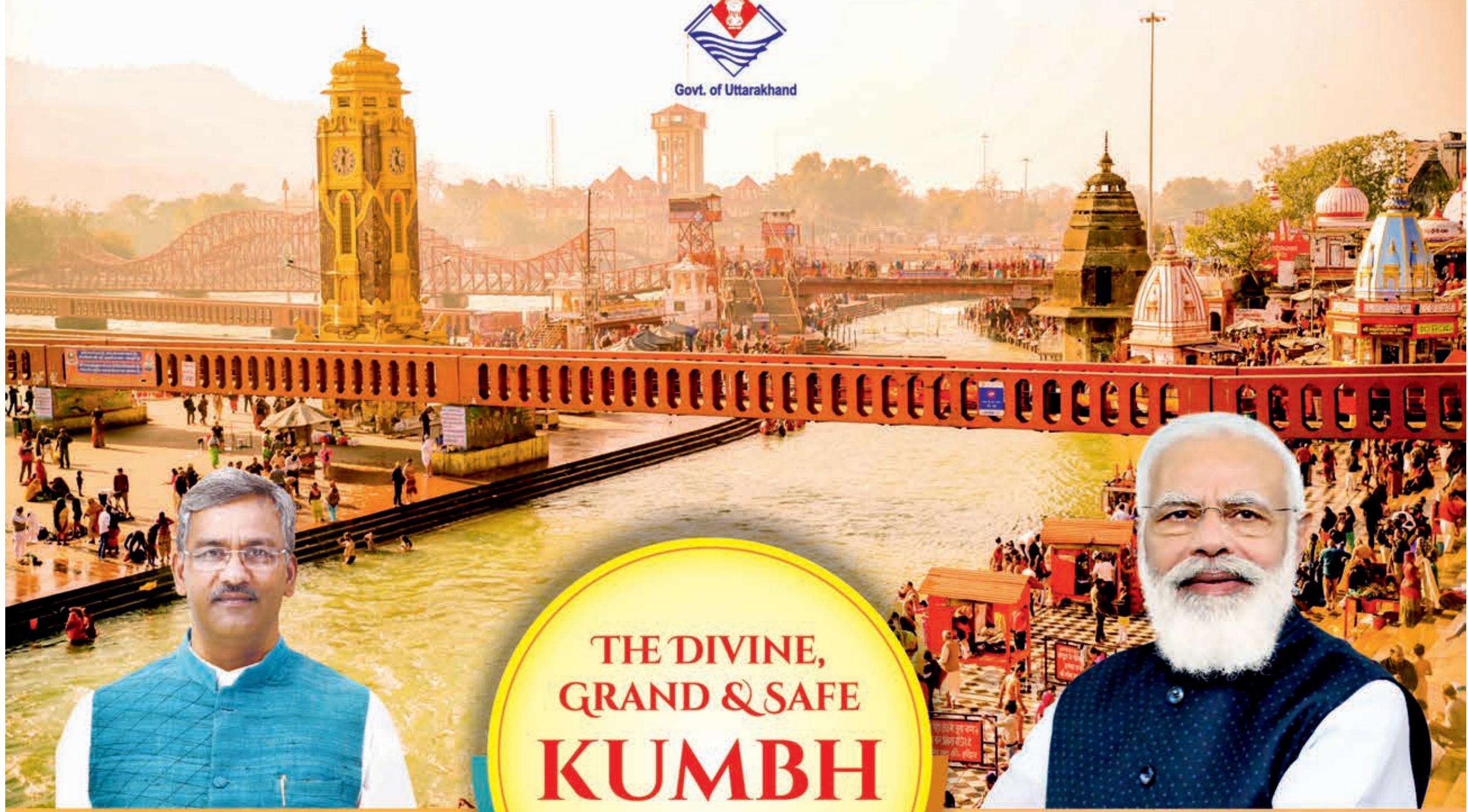
KATTA VIJAYA RAO KATTA SATYAVATHI

D.O.B: 26-02-2007 D.O.D: 24-02-2006
You both will always be in our memories and heart
Katta Hepsheba, Katta Kezia Rev. Katta Zacheaus



ALEXANDER MARTIN ANDREWS

(Retd. Traffic Inspector, APSRTC, Ex-A. Boxing Coach, All India Boxing Referee & Judge)
D.O.B: 12-9-1925 D.O.D: 26-02-2008
"Your love for me was constant Your devotion had no end, You filled my life with sunshine As a father and a friend."
Inserted by: SYLVIA ANDREWS AND FAMILY
Ph: 9849140140



Kumbh at Haridwar is being organised in a planned manner and all the measures are being taken for COVID-19 related safety. Devotees attending the Kumbh Snan are requested to follow COVID-19 guidelines issued by the government.

Trivendra Singh Rawat
Chief Minister, Uttarakhand

THE DIVINE, GRAND & SAFE **KUMBH** **HARIDWAR** **2021**



Holy Kumbh mela offers devotees from the country and abroad a special occasion to witness the spiritual, cultural and social diversity of India. The visitors to Prayagraj Kumbh had experienced the purity and sacredness of Ganga ji. Now, during the divine and magnificent Haridwar Kumbh also, pilgrims from across the globe will experience similar bliss while taking holy dip in clean Ganga.

Narendra Modi
Prime Minister

Safe Kumbh, with Safety from Corona

Religious Places, Dharamshala



- Pilgrims from other states will have to furnish details of their home state, district and tehsil and submit Corona fitness certificate.
- Pilgrims will be allowed to enter religious places on wearing masks.
- Anybody having found COVID-19 symptoms during thermal screening will be immediately isolated and informed to Mela Administration and Control Room.
- Complete details of the pilgrims will have to be submitted to Mela Administration, Zonal-Sector Magistrate and Police Control Room.
- Ashrams and Dharamshalas will be sanitized from time to time.
- Observing thermal screening provisions in temples, sanitation and maintaining two yards distance is mandatory.

Bathing Ghats



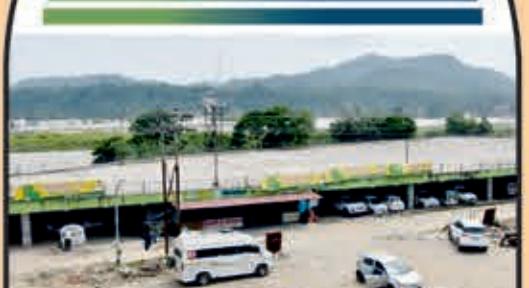
- Police personnel, trained volunteers, staff and swimmers will be deployed to ensure safety and safe distance at bathing ghats in Mela area.
- Dustbins will be kept at ghats for disposal of used gloves, masks and disposal of bio-medical waste.
- Circles will be made at ghats for marking safe physical distance. Any devotee or group of devotees will be given a maximum of 20 minutes for the holy bath.
- Persons above 65 years of age, pregnant ladies and children below 10 years of age should not possibly enter the ghats.

Rest Houses

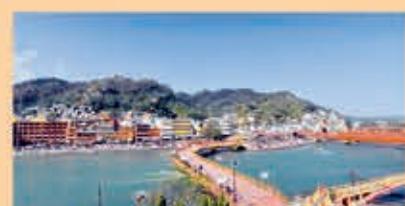


- Pilgrims will be allowed to come out only after showing the registration certificate, RTPCR test report.
- Provisions of COVID-19 related SOPs are to be followed.
- Proper rest houses for pilgrims to be prescribed near Haridwar and Rishikesh Railway Stations.
- Separate arrangements at Railway Station for boarding and de-boarding.
- Personnel deployed at Rest Houses will be equipped with PPE kits.

Parking Lots



- Separate parking lots for vehicles coming from separate directions.
- Sufficient equipment and human resources will be deployed in parking lot for fire protection, and cooking will be prohibited in the parking lot.
- Participation in holy bath and other religious activities will be allowed only with registration on web portal and admission pass.
- Provision of toilets, drinking water and sanitizer for vehicle drivers at parking lots.



Precautions for safety from COVID-19 in Kumbh Mela:



Wearing mask
properly is a must



Keep a distance
of two yards



Keep washing hands
with soap and water

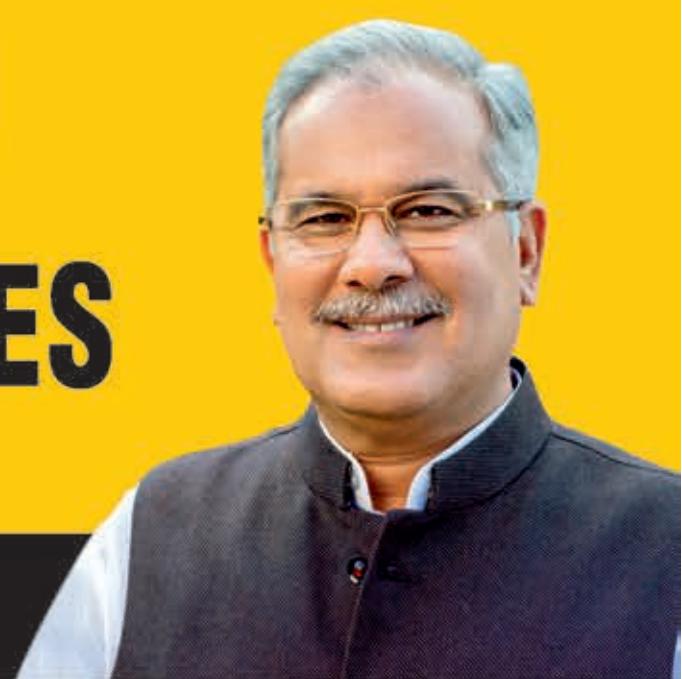


Chhattisgarh

CHAMPION AMID CHALLENGES



Shri Bhupesh Baghel
Hon'ble Chief Minister, Chhattisgarh



**First State
to Procure Paddy at
MSP from More than
95% of its Registered
Farmers**



**New Record in
Disbursement of
Interest Free
Agricultural Loan**



- ❖ Registered Farmers : 21,52,980
- ❖ Paddy Selling Farmers : 20,53,483
- ❖ Paddy Procured : 95.40 lakh metric ton

- ❖ Short Term Agricultural Loan in FY 2020-21 : ₹4,755 cr
- ❖ Kisan Credit Card Issued : 16 lakh
- ❖ New Registered Credit Committees : 725

**First State to Buy
Cow Dung from
Cattle Rearers**



- ❖ Generating Employment Opportunities through Gothans (Cow Sheds)
- ❖ Payment towards Purchase of Cow Dung : ₹ 75.48 cr
- ❖ Women Participation : 44.5%

**Leading State in
Creating Industrial
Investment
Opportunities
despite Recession**



**Leading State in
Procurement of
Minor Forest Produce
Setting New Record**



- ❖ Contribution to Country's Total Procurement : 72.5 %
- ❖ No. of Minor Forest Produce Procured at MSP : 52
- ❖ Raised Tendupatta Collection Remuneration : from ₹2500 to ₹4000 (per standard sack)

- ❖ New Industries Established in 2 Years : 1,207
- ❖ Investment : ₹17,000 cr
- ❖ Employment Generated : 22,000

**Leading State in
Utilization of
CAMPA Fund**



- ❖ Total Tree Plantation in FY 2020-21 : 54 lakh Saplings
- ❖ Employment Generation during COVID-19 : 115 lakh Person Days

DECCAN Chronicle

26 FEBRUARY 2021

Disha bail order should set welcome precedent

The order of the additional sessions judge of Patiala House Courts, Delhi, granting bail to Bengaluru-based climate activist Disha A. Ravi, arrested for her alleged role in the preparation of a "toolkit" that the police claimed led to the violent incidents in the nation's capital on January 26, has sought to right two wrongs. One, it has made a timely intervention and stopped the state from using legal tools to put dissenting citizens behind the bars for no end. Two, it has reassured the people that Article 19 (1) of the Constitution which guarantees the freedom of speech and expression has the strength to come to the aid of a legitimate dissenter.

The court demolished the Delhi police's case by pointing out that it was devoid of material evidence to connect the activist with the case slapped on her; and more importantly, whatever she did was protected by the Constitution. The court found that the investigating agency which charged the activist with sedition has produced "not an iota of evidence" to link her with seditious or violent acts; and reminded the police that it cannot resort to "surmises or conjectures" to convince itself of the culpability of an accused. The "scanty and sketchy" pieces of evidence the agency has produced are not enough to send a 22-year-old young woman with absolutely blemish-free criminal antecedents to jail, it said. The strong words on the nature of the evidence were, in fact, a censure of the police, which went overboard picking up a citizen violating the Supreme Court's guidelines and her basic rights.

The court made a series of observations on the citizen's rights that a democracy would love the judiciary to assert and protect in the face of state assault. "Citizens are conscience keepers of the government in any democratic nation," it said. "They cannot be put behind the bars simply because they choose to disagree with the state policies." In a warning to the self-appointed "patriots" who miss no chance to threaten dissenters with the label "traitor" and the state which has a profligacy to slap sedition charge at the drop of a hat, the court said, "The offence of sedition cannot be invoked to minister to the wounded vanity of the governments." The court observed that difference of opinion, disagreement, divergence, dissent, or even disapprobation, are recognised legitimate tools to infuse objectivity in state policies. If the Constitution was not enough, the judge referred to the nation's 5,000-year old civilisation and the Rig Veda to remind everyone that we were "never been averse to ideas from varied quarters".

It's an irony that a government manned by people who have participated in the greatest freedom restoration movement in Independent India is resorting to suppressing voices of legitimate dissent

An act of sycophancy

The Gujarat Cricket Association succumbed to the temptation of naming the stadium after the Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The cricket arena had many earlier monikers like Gujarat and Motera, besides having borne the name of a famous son of the soil in Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel.

The baptism does break an unwritten law that no edifice should be named after a living person even if it seemed apt to honour a person who headed GCA in the long running Indian tradition of politicians getting themselves elected as presidents of cricket associations. The concept of a magnificent, cricket arena that cost more than ₹800 crores came from his grand vision and its creation was carried out by the other leading contemporary political personality, Union home minister Amit Shah, and his son who is the BCCI secretary. Donald Trump, as US President, even paid a ceremonial visit there just before the pandemic was declared in 2020.

The honour bestowed spontaneously and sentimentally on Narendra Modi is somewhat akin to India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru being awarded the Bharat Ratna by the first President Rajendra Prasad. But it does rankle considering this is a stadium named like this since the Maharashtra politician and chief minister S.K. Wankhede named one in Churchgate in Mumbai after himself in 1974. A second cricket stadium within a stone's throw of historic Brabourne was owed to a clash of egos between Maharashtra Cricket Association and Cricket Club of India. The era of building an edifice of homage to members of one political family is thought to be well and truly over. And so the Congress playing the Sardar Patel card in criticism seems hypocritical now. The issue, however, is to do with the need for 21st-century India to evolve from a sycophantic, fetishist and neta-worshiping past.

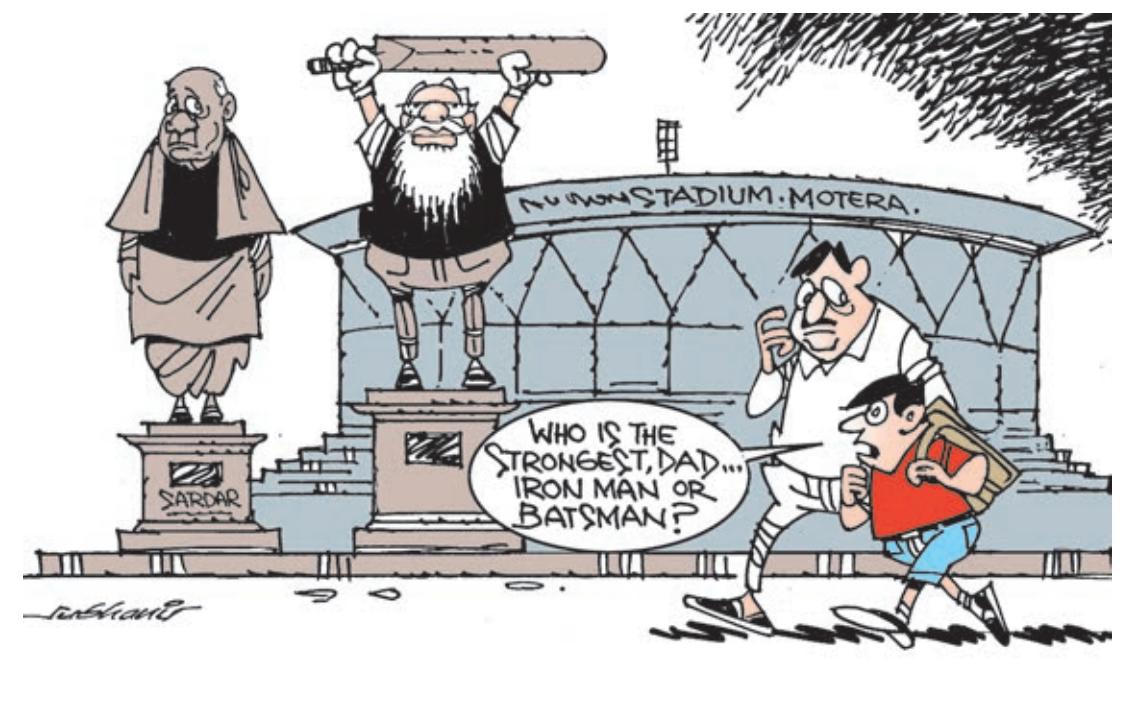
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Subhani



Arrests on flimsy basis undermine democracy



Parsa
Venkateshwar
Rao Jr

It has been the bad practice and bad habit of the Indian police and criminal investigators to slap a mountain of charges against any accused in the hope that at least some, or even one, of them would stick. This amounts to indulging in slander in more than a legal sense. And this is what the Delhi police and its investigators have tried to do with the violence that erupted on January 26, 2021 when the farmers' tractor parade went off the rails at some points. Instead of focusing on what went wrong during the tractor parade, the Delhi police went off on a tangent, distracted by the tweets of American pop singer Rihanna and teenage climate protester/warrior Greta Thunberg. Greta Thunberg put out a toolkit, retracted and put it back again. And it is here that Bengaluru climate activist Disha Ravi, 22, entered the picture. The Delhi police saw it as a good opportunity to nail the international linkages of the imagined conspiracy when they found the toolkit linkage between Ms Ravi and Ms Thunberg. The police discovered that Ms Ravi had a hand in the toolkit when she edited it for Ms Thunberg.

In the heightened atmosphere of the exaggerated nature of the petty violence that broke out at Red Fort on January 26, the reckless overreach of the police under the guidance of an authoritative Union home ministry came into play. The Delhi police went off to Bengaluru, arrested Ms Ravi and brought her to Delhi in total violation of all legal norms in a democratic polity. The courts did not

cover themselves in glory when the legal process was short-circuited in bringing Ms Ravi from Bengaluru to New Delhi as though this country was under martial law and no questions could be raised about the way the Delhi police went about hauling up an ordinary citizen in Bengaluru. The pusillanimity of the courts was further underscored when the police custody of Ms Ravi was readily granted for five days by duty judge Dev Saroha on February 14. This was the police riding roughshod over the law and the judge allowing it tamely. It is at the end of five days of police custody, two

days of judicial custody and another day of police custody, with the police wanting to confront Ms Ravi with the other two accused, Nikita Jacob Shantanu Mukul, that she was finally granted bail and released. 26. Traces of "Khalistani" elements behind the three-month-old farmers' agitation against the new laws brought by the Narendra Modi government has been the theme song of the government and the ruling party. It seems that the police just follow the lead of their political masters.

The excesses committed by the cybercrime branch of the Delhi police should have been condemned by additional sessions judge Dharmender Rana. It was easier for him to exorcise the police on the serious charge of sedition that they brought against the young woman from Bengaluru. The judge tore into the flaky evidence on which they based their charge. It was necessary that the judge had said what he had about the innocuous toolkit and the laboured connect that the police wanted to make between the toolkit, Ms Ravi and the Poetic Justice Foundation (PJF). And he rightly pointed out that the PJF was not a banned organisation for

Judge Rana could have avoided the homilies about pluralist Indian civilisation going back to the Rig Veda and rapped the police for creating a faux chargesheet

that showing support for protesting farmers cannot be an offence and it cannot be deemed sedition. It is only by bringing in the "Khalistani" factor that people like Ms Ravi can be charged with a crime, and even if the charge fails, they can be defamed. It is in this diabolical bid to outlaw dissent and protest that the government and the Delhi police are committing the crime of undermining democracy.

The Disha Ravi case goes much beyond the Delhi police's cyber-crime cell. It is a blatant misuse of the laws of the land. The police can claim that they investigate charges against people in good faith, and they nurse no animus against anyone. We can readily concede the point if they had gone about the investigation in a sober manner. They could have easily built up more evidence, they could have interrogated Ms Ravi in Bengaluru without the cheap theatrics of arresting her and bringing her to Delhi.

There is a clear need for the courts to rule clearly and loudly that the police have no right to arrest people as long as they are cooperating with the investigation, and there is no danger of the person absconding.

In the case of Ms Ravi, it is self-evident that she would have cooperated with the police investigation. Arresting Ms Ravi was an attempt by the police to humiliate and intimidate her and make an example of her to other dissidents. This just cannot be allowed in a democracy. The powers of the police to arrest people and keep them in custody for 24 hours before they are brought before a magistrate for being remanded smacks of a police state. A citizen's liberty cannot be left to the mercy of a policeman or police-woman.

The writer is a Delhi-based commentator and analyst

LETTERS

MODI STADIUM

Renaming the Ahmedabad stadium is not in the BJP's interest, leave alone the Opposition criticism (*Narendra Modi stadium in Gujarat faces Oppn ire, DC, Feb. 25*). Till now ordinary citizens may have been voting for Modi as he projected himself as 'Pradhan Sevak' and 'Chowkidar'. The logic used by BJP leaders to rename the stadium doesn't stand as the Pradhan Sevak could have said no to keep his image intact.

Dr Jaspal Singh Bhatia
Hyderabad

It is the height of narcissism. It is rare to name a public property after a living personality. It proves that Narendra Modi is also after fame in addition to power. Actions earn name, either good or bad. There is no need to rename places, roads, buildings and so on. Leaders should not go for name but work for the people sincerely.

Kshirasagara Balaji Rao
Hyderabad

MAMATA'S JIBE

The strange attacks by Mamata Banerjee and Narendra Modi looks like a cat and mouse game (*Didi: Modi is the biggest rioter, DC, Feb. 25*). No PM in Indian history has been bad-mouthed so much. What forced the West Bengal CM to call the PM names is for the nation to think over and debate.

Zakaria Sultan
Hyderabad

50 YEARS AGO IN DECCAN Chronicle

Mulki rules cover all TS appointments

HYDERABAD, February 25
A full bench of the AP High Court today held that the Mulki rules constitute a Special Law and appointments contrary to it would be invalid, although reservations for Mulki were not specially made in departmental rules. The full bench consisted of the Chief Justice N. Kumarayya, Justice Gopal Rao Ekbote and Justice Sambasiva Rao.

The petitioners, who were all superintendents of the Government departments, filed a writ petition challenging the rules for appointment of Assistant Treasury Officers and to set aside the appointment to that post by departmental recruitment.

to have discussed much more than "progressive politics". As for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the ultra-nationalist Hindu head of the BJP, he is like Donald Trump, a populist with a cult following. Mr Biden may well court Mr Modi too. Noticeably Mr Blinken, like Donald Trump, refers to Asia as "the Indo-Pacific" — a term that the Chinese government detests.

While the geopolitical interests of America and India are clearly in alignment, bringing them into a more formal arrangement may be difficult. India is proudly independent. It does things its own way, and its prickly relationship with the West remains.

While India — currently engaged in border skirmishes with China in the remote Himalayas — is fully aware of the Chinese threat, it may be difficult to lasso the country into a formal mutual defence relationship. The D-10 is one of those neat ideas that might look good in a state department or Foreign Office briefing but, given the difficulties of co-opting India and Germany, can it cut the mustard in the real world?

By arrangement with *The Spectator*



Francis Pike

I s Antony Blinken, US President Joe Biden's secretary of state, preparing to abandon Barack Obama's powder-puff Asian foreign policies? It is now widely agreed that Mr Obama, under whom Mr Blinken served as deputy secretary of state, ceded to China uncontested control of the South China Sea. Mr Obama's so-called "pivot to Asia" was all talk and no trousers. Mr Blinken, who believes diplomacy must be "supplemented by deterrence", may be about to implement a more aggressive foreign policy in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

In his first speech as general secretary of the Communist Party of China in 2012, Xi Jinping made his intentions clear. He stated his commitment to "accepting the baton of history and continuing to work for realising the great revival of the Chinese nation in order to let the Chinese nation stand more firmly and powerfully among all nations". President Xi's international adventurism, under the umbrella of his "Belt and Road Initiative", has been most evident in his illegal military occupation of the South China Sea, but it is a global strategy for domination which can be observed in Central Asia, the Indian Ocean, the

Middle East, Europe, even the Arctic. How did Mr Obama respond? He did nothing. He issued platitudes. He vacillated over whether the Mutual Defence Treaty with the Philippines included the disputed South China Sea. By the end of his presidency, it was too late. And weakness in the South China Sea was undoubtedly an invitation for Mr Xi to push elsewhere on Mr Obama's open door.

There are indications that the Biden administration will seek to construct alliances in Europe and Asia to contain the Chinese and Russian threats. As a former deputy secretary of state, Mr Blinken has the cojones to initiate armed conflict to contest China's already established military control of the South China Sea.

If Southeast Asia is lost, what next? China has already moved on to securing control of the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and Suez Canal trade routes. Burma is in China's pocket. Bangladesh, with 165 million people, where in 2016 Mr Xi made the first state visit by a Chinese leader in 30 years, is being increasingly suborned by Chinese infrastructure investment and armaments. In the south, where the Bay of Bengal meets the Indian Ocean, China is entrenched. In 2018, China negotiated a 99-year lease for Sri Lanka's Hambantota port and 15,000 adjacent acres — just off

Nato is undermined by the continuing membership of Turkey, now closely aligned with China. Even France's President Emmanuel Macron said Nato was "brain dead". But is the D-10 a credible base for an anti-Chinese containment strategy?

A containment strategy needs real military power. Besides the UK and France, the other European nations are largely window dressing. One suspects neither Mr Biden nor Mr Blinken have the cojones to initiate armed conflict to contest China's already established military control of the South China Sea.

If Southeast Asia is lost, what next? China has already moved on to securing control of the Bay of Bengal, the Indian Ocean and Suez Canal trade routes. Burma is in China's pocket. Bangladesh, with 165 million people, where in 2016 Mr Xi made the first state visit by a Chinese leader in 30 years, is being increasingly suborned by Chinese infrastructure investment and armaments. In the south, where the Bay of Bengal meets the Indian Ocean, China is entrenched. In 2018, China negotiated a 99-year lease for Sri Lanka's Hambantota port and 15,000 adjacent acres — just off

India's coast. There's the rub. For China's Southeast Asia strategy is to contain India, which it sees as its long-term geopolitical rival. Although India lags a distant third to America and China in terms of aggregate GDP, it is also likely to overtake the US in 20 to 30 years. India already ranks fourth in the world in terms of aggregate military power.

As for the world's largest democracies, the United States and India should always be the best of friends. Yet US-Indian relations have rarely worked well. India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, rebuffed President Eisenhower; Nehru's meeting with President Kennedy was a car crash. (Kennedy later admitted it was "the worst head of state visit I have had".) Henry Kissinger described Indira Gandhi's meeting with Richard Nixon as a "dialogue of the deaf"; even the normally polite Kissinger described Mrs Gandhi as a "bitch".

Relations between American and Indian heads of government have later improved, but their substance has not. Mr Obama liked Dr Manmohan Singh but judging from his autobiography they do not seem



SHORT TAKES

EMPTY ARTILLERY SHELLS GO MISSING

Jabalpur, Feb. 25: Three empty shells of artillery went missing from the laboratory of heavily-guarded Long Proof Range (LPR), an ammunition testing facility, at Khamaria in Madhya Pradesh's Jabalpur district on Thursday, police said.

The police received a complaint about three empty shells of artillery going missing from LPR, Khamaria police station-in-charge Nirupa Pandey said.

These shells, weighing 6 to 7 kg each, are made of a combination of various metals that fetch good money in the open market, she said.

The police have been alerted and scrap vendors operating in nearby areas are under scanner, the official added.

MAHARASHTRA BUDGET SESSION CURTAILED

SONU SHRIVASTAVA | DC MUMBAI, FEB. 25

Maharashtra government on Thursday announced curtailed budget session of state Assembly citing rising number of Covid cases. However, the Opposition walked out from the business advisory committee accusing the government of running away from its responsibility towards people. The budget session will have eight working days from March 1 to 10. The budget will be presented on March 8.

The decision was taken on Thursday in a meeting of the Business Advisory Committee (BAC), which was attended by chief minister Uddhav Thackeray and leader of opposition in Maharashtra Assembly Devendra Fadnavis among others.

Mr. Fadnavis said, "The government is not interested in holding discussions... In a first, the government does not want to complete the budget process. The budget will be tabled and discussion will be held on it but the demands would not be made on it. It is totally unlawful."

Parliamentary Affairs Anil Parab said that the decision was taken considering Covid-19 situation in the state. "Many ministers and legislators have been infected with the Coronavirus. The session will begin from March 1 to March 10. The Governor's address to the two Houses will be on the first day of the session. In addition to this, supplementary demands will also be tabled on the same," he added.

According to state officials, RT-PCR test has been made mandatory for all the legislators, officials, employees, securitymen and mediapersons for the assembly session.

J&K border residents heave sigh of relief

India, Pak for strict observance of ceasefire agreements

YUSUF JAMEEL | DC SRINAGAR, FEB. 25

IN WRITTEN RESPONSE to a question in Lok Sabha earlier this month, Union Minister of State for Home G Kishan Reddy said a total of 10,752 cases of ceasefire violations have taken place along India's border with Pakistan in the last three years, in which 72 security personnel and 70 civilians were killed.

HE SAID 364 security personnel and 341 civilians were injured in cross-border firings along the International Border and the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir in 2018, 2019 and 2020.

cross border firing and shelling over the years. There had been strong craving for bringing this to a close.

J&K parties too welcome the pledge

Apart from the border residents, the fresh pledge of the two sides to revert to the November 2003 ceasefire agreement and hold to it has been welcomed by J&K's political parties across the board.

Former chief minister and National Conference president, Farooq Abdullah, said that the measure will go a long way towards sustainable peace between the two neighboring countries.

"The agreement between the DGMOs of India and Pakistan will go a long way in ushering long lasting peace along side LoC and IB. NC has always been a strong votary of Indo-Pak peace. It is the people of J&K who have been facing the brunt of escalating tensions alongside the borders. I hope the agreement is followed in letter and spirit. The development, I sincerely believe, will allow people living alongside LoC and IB to go about their normal lives with minimal disruption and risk," he said.

Both sides suffered hugely in interminable hostility particularly after 2010 but it has been mainly the civilian populations on both sides which bore the brunt in

Tired of unending military tensions and frequent bouts of skirmishes between the facing troops, the border residents of Jammu and Kashmir have heaved a sigh of relief over India and Pakistan agreeing to strictly observe all agreements on ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC) and other sectors.

"It has come as a great relief to us. We hope and pray that both sides will really ensure strict observance of all agreements, understandings and cease fire along the LoC," said Irshad Ahmad Khawaja, a resident of Uri while speaking to this newspaper over the phone.

He said that the border residents were happy. Echoing their and his own sentiment, he said, "If the two countries' armies follow the promise we won't suffer any further human and property losses. Kam se kam chen ki sans ley payengay (At least, we will breath in peace)."

Bashir Ahmed Wathloo, chairman of Rural Development Society, Uri said, "I will get a good night's sleep now. My joy knows no bounds today."

However, Bashir Ahmad Dar, who lives at Balkote, a hamlet at a stone's throw from the LoC, said he would keep his fingers crossed. Dar who lost his wife Farooqa Begum, 35, in cross-LoC shelling in November last year said, "I feel lost since I have lost my spouse. Had the two sides abided by the ceasefire agreement they had reached in 2003, my world would not have been ruined."

Though the two countries pushed on with the ceasefire agreement signed after months of tortuous negotiations in 2003, the facing armies and border guards have often clashed both along the LoC and International Border (IB), the 198-km stretch of the 2,912-km India-Pakistan border from Gujarat to J&K called 'Working Boundary' as it passes through a "disputed region" particularly.

The former chief minister added, "I have been saying all along that dialogue is the only way forward if both countries want to stop the unending cycle of violence and bloodshed across the borders and J&K".

to a media query on the statement made by Pakistan's Army chief Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa who had said that "it is time" for his country to "extend the hand of peace in all directions".

The Pakistan Army chief had even called on both countries to resolve the Kashmir issue in a "peaceful and dignified manner", in comments that were seen as a possible outreach to India.

On Thursday evening, the Pakistani NSA tweeted, "I have seen claims by Indian media that attribute ceasefire announcement between Pakistani and Indian DGMOs to back-channel diplomacy between me and the Indian NSA. This is baseless. No such talks have taken place between me and Mr. Doval. The welcome development on the LoC is a result of discussions through the established channel of DGMOs" and that "obviously these are by their very nature not in the public eye and done privately and professionally through the direct channel".

The Pakistani NSA insisted that that "there is nothing more than meets the eye here".

Meanwhile, India on Thursday evening also said it "desires normal neighbourly relations with Pakistan" and has "always maintained that we (India) are committed to addressing issues, if any, in a peaceful bilateral manner".

Asked whether this was the start of the resumption of the Indo-Pak peace process, New Delhi merely said that "on key issues, our position remains unchanged".

India had earlier this month squarely put the onus on Pakistan to "create an environment free of terror, hostility and violence", in its response

Separatist Hurriyat Conference faction headed by Mirwaiz Umar Farooq said, "It is a move in the right direction. It will provide huge relief to the beleaguered people living under constant threat on the LoC and end the bloodshed there."

It added, "Just as the joint statement correctly points out that in the interest of achieving mutually beneficial and sustainable peace along the borders, the two DGMOs agreed to

address each other's core issues and concerns which have propensity to disturb the peace and lead to violence", likewise in the interest of mutually beneficial and sustainable peace in the entire region, Governments of India and Pakistan need to address the core concern of J&K in keeping with the aspirations of its people. It is this issue which is the cause of conflict and violence in the region".

Maha: 229 students test Covid positive

DC CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI, FEB. 25

Worried over the rising cases of Covid-19, the Union Cabinet Secretary has scheduled a review meeting with seven states - Maharashtra, Kerala, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Chhattisgarh - that are witnessing an upsurge in daily detections.

The Centre has also rushed Multi-Disciplinary High Level Central teams to these states.

India's active caseload was 1,51,708 on Thursday comprising 1.37% of the total positive cases. This is largely attributable to the upsurge in daily new cases in these seven states.

Overall 16,738 new daily

MP SPENT ₹724 CRORE FOR COVID-19 TREATMENT, MINISTER INFORMS HOUSE

RABINDRA NATH CHOURHURY | DC BHOPAL, FEB. 25

Madhya Pradesh government has spent ₹724 crore for treatment of Covid-19 patients in the state till January 30.

This was informed by state health minister Prabhuram Choudhury in the state assembly.

Of the amount, the state government has disbursed ₹173 crore to 8 private hospitals designated as Covid-19 facilities in the state.

The state has reported 3,857 deaths so far.

Two hospitals in Bhopal and Indore alone had been disbursed ₹125 crore, Mr Choudhury said.

Bhopal and Indore have been identified as Covid-19 hotspots in the state.

As many as 28,964 Covid-19 patients had been admitted to these 8 hospitals. The 8 hospitals cumulatively recorded 956 deaths.

Madhya Pradesh has so far

recorded 2,60,313 positive cases. Out of them, 2,54,186 patients have recovered.

The state has reported

3,857 deaths so far.

Modi targets Rahul over his 'north-south' remarks

Puducherry, Feb. 25: Attacking Congress leader Rahul Gandhi for his recent 'north-south' remarks, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Thursday alleged that the party's policy was to "divide, lie and rule."

Not mincing words, he said the Congress culture of feudal politics, dynasty politics, patronage politics was ending and people all over the country were rejecting the party.

He also expressed shock over Gandhi's contention that there was no 'dedicated fisheries ministry.'

"They are gold, silver and bronze medal winners in telling lies," Modi said addressing a public meeting in poll-bound Puducherry, as he said people of the union territory

were celebrating the "freedom from misgovernance of Congress." Modi hit out at former Puducherry Chief Minister V Narayanasamy, implying he headed a 'high command' government that served the interests of a few Congress leaders in Delhi.

He also slammed him for "lying" about the complaint made by a woman against the government during the Congress leader's visit here a fortnight ago.

Pitching Puducherry as a region with potential in various sectors, he said the NDA wanted to make it the BEST, saying the acronym meant the UT being a hub of Business, Education, Spirituality and Tourism.

Training his guns against the Congress, whose party-led government fell on Monday after it was reduced to minority in the wake of resignations, he said "the Congress culture you saw in Puducherry for five years is how the party works nationally."

"Our colonial rulers had the policy of divide and rule. Congress has a policy of divide, lie and rule. Sometimes their leaders put region against region, sometimes they put community against community."

Gandhi had said he was used to a "different type of politics" in north India and coming to the southern state was "very refreshing" as people are interested in "issues", which drew condemnation from the BJP, whose leaders accused him of an opportunistic anti-North bias.

— PTI



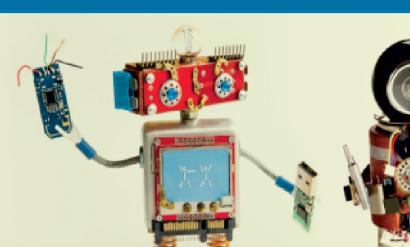
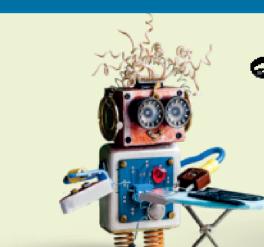


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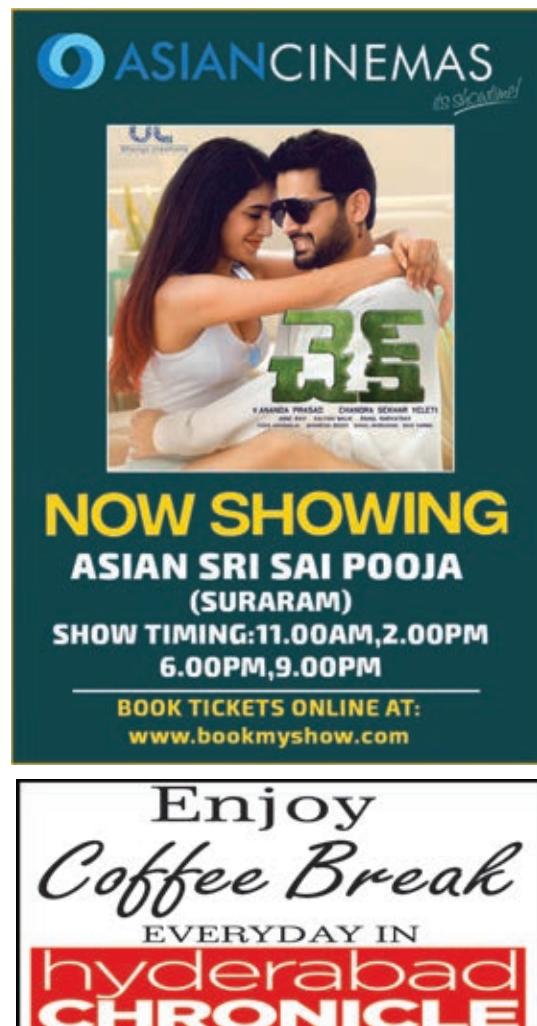
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10.10pm | **MOOSARAMBAGH** - 1.25pm, 6.50pm
IRRUM MANZIL - 1.15pm, 7.05pm | **GALLERIA** -
10.20am, 1.25, 9.50pm | **CENTRAL** - 4.20, 7.50pm
RK - 4.45pm | **INORBIT** - 1.25pm, 7.25pm
ASIAN CINEMAS
GPR - 1.45pm & 4.45pm | **RADHIKA** - 10.55am &
4.35pm | **M CUBE** - 1.30pm & 7.45pm | **SHIVA** -
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CINESQUARE - 10.55am & 7.40pm | **SHA** - 2.30pm
DSL - 3.30am & 9.45pm | **MANTRA** - 1.05,
7.30pm | **CCPL** - 1.30pm & 7.40pm
SUDHA - 1.30pm & 7.40pm
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6.45pm | **MP** - 12.40pm & 6.45pm
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1.10pm, 7.30pm 12.15pm, 9.30pm
S 2 - 10.30am, 4.40, 10.40pm
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PLATINUM - 10.30am, 4.00, 9.30pm



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11.00, 2.00, 6.00, 9.00pm
TARAKARAMA 70MM-2.15, 9.00PM
TALLURI 70MM-11.00, 2.00, 6.00, 9.00pm
LAXMIKALACINEPRIDE-11.30AM
BIG CINEMAS-10.40, 1.45PM
Radhika-1.45PM | GPR-4.30PM
ASIAN CINEMAS
MCUBE-10.20PM |
Cinesquare-4.45PM
AMB CINEMAS-1.55PM
Forum-4.35, 10.00PM | RK-8.30PM
Inorbit-8.10PM | Central-8.20PM
Hitech-7.40PM | Preston-10.15PM
Irrummanzil-10.00PM
Moosarambagh-4.20PM | L&T-7.20PM
INOX
GVK-4.35PM | GSM-4.15PM 8.10
MP MALL-4.05PM
Cinépolis
CCPL-1.20PM | DSL-4.50PM
MANTRA-4.30PM | SUDHA-4.30PM
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Japanese firefighters battle 2 forest fires

Tokyo, Feb. 25: A forest fire broke out in a rural area north of Tokyo on Thursday, near another blaze burning for a fourth day. One man suffered burns and was hospitalized, and firefighters have been deployed, said Hitomi Hirokami, an official at Kiryu in Gunma prefecture, about 100 kilometres northwest of Tokyo.

News footage showed smoke billowing upward from the hills. Another fire has been raging in nearby Ashikaga in Tochigi prefecture, where 207 households have been asked to evacuate, said spokesman Minoru Takayama. Firefighters were working on the ground, while military helicopters were dousing the area. No one

has been injured. The two fires are not directly related, but the area has not had much rain lately, causing flames to spread, officials said. An evacuation order for Ashikaga was first issued Tuesday for about 50 households, underlining how the stricken area was growing.

— AP



SPLIT CYPRUS PREZ HAILS UN BID TO RESUME PEACE TALKS

Nicosia, Feb. 25: The Greek Cypriot president of ethnically divided Cyprus said on Thursday he'll attend a United Nations-hosted meeting in April with the leader of the breakaway Turkish Cypriots with "full political will" to get dormant peace talks up and running again. Nicos Anastasiades expressed in a statement his "strong determination" to try and find common ground with Turkish Cypriot leader Ersin Tatar when they meet in Geneva, Switzerland on April 27-29.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will host the informal meeting that will also be attended by the foreign ministers of Cyprus' "guardians" — Greece, Turkey and Britain. This will be the latest push to get the two sides focused on reaching a peace deal that has remained elusive since Cyprus' division in 1974, when Turkey invaded following a coup aiming at union with Greece.

Only Turkey recognises a Turkish Cypriot declaration of independence in the east Mediterranean island's northern third. The last attempt at cobbling together an accord over several days at a Swiss resort in the summer of 2017 collapsed amid acrimony.

April's meeting is overshadowed by Turkey's apparent shift from the long-established aim of forging a federation made up of Greek- and Turkish-speaking zones. — AP

RARELY SEEN VAN GOGH PAINTING EXHIBITED

Paris, Feb. 25: A rare painting by Dutch impressionist master Vincent van Gogh of a street scene in the Parisian neighbourhood of Montmartre will be publicly displayed for the first time before its auction next month. Sotheby's auction house said the work, painted in 1887, has remained in the same family collection for more than 100 years — out of the public eye.

It will be exhibited next month in Amsterdam, Hong Kong and Paris ahead of an auction scheduled on March 25 in the French capital. "It's an important painting in the oeuvre of Vincent van Gogh because it dates from the period in which he's living in Paris with his brother, Theo," Etienne Hellman, senior director of Impressionist and Modern Art at Sotheby's, said.

Van Gogh moved to Paris in 1886 and lived in Montmartre. He left the capital in 1888 for southern France, where he lived until his death in 1890. "Before this, his paintings are much darker.. In Paris he discovers colour," Hellman said. "Colour blows up into the painting."

"Street Scene in Montmartre" depicts a windmill named the Pepper Mill, seen from the street under a bright sky, with a man, a woman and a little girl walking in front of wooden palisades that surrounded the place. "Paris marks this period where... the major impressionists influence his work," Hellman said.

— AP

SHORT TAKES
GERMAN POLICE RAID ISLAMIC EXTREMISTS

Berlin, Feb. 25: Hundreds of German police officers conducted coordinated raids early Thursday in Berlin and the surrounding state of Brandenburg in the investigation of an organisation banned over allegations of Islamic extremism. Some 800 police, including SWAT teams, were involved in the raids of apartments linked to members of the organisation, authorities told the DPA news agency. The raids were carried out with the primary focus of obtaining evidence. No arrests were immediately reported. Berlin authorities said further details would be released at press conference later Thursday.

MINE COLLAPSE IN INDONESIA KILLS SIX

Jakarta, Feb. 25: An illegal gold mine in Indonesia's Sulawesi island collapsed on nearly two dozen people working inside, killing three and leaving another five missing, officials said Thursday.

Survivors estimated about 23 people were trapped in the rubble when the mine in Central Sulawesi province's Parigi Moutong district collapsed late Wednesday due to unstable soil, said Andrias Hendrik Johanness, who heads the local search and rescue agency. Rescuers were able to pull 15 people from the debris and recover the bodies of three women during a grueling search effort, he said. Police, emergency personnel, soldiers and volunteers were all taking part in the efforts.

DRONE HIT ON SAUDI PALACE WAS FROM IRAQ

Baghdad, Feb. 25: Explosive-laden drones that targeted Saudi Arabia's royal palace in the kingdom's capital last month were launched from inside Iraq, a senior Iran-backed militia official in Baghdad and a US official said.

Speaking to *The Associated Press* this week, the militia official said three drones were launched from Iraqi-Saudi border areas by a relatively unknown Iran-backed faction in Iraq and crashed into the royal complex in Riyadh on January 23, exacerbating regional tensions.

Attacks on the Saudi capital have been sporadic amid the kingdom's years-long war against Houthi rebels who control large part of neighbouring Yemen.

SRI LANKA SEEKS \$2.2 BN FROM CHINA

Colombo, Feb. 25: Sri Lanka is seeking \$2.2 billion from Chinese banks, the government said Thursday, in echoes of a borrowing binge more than a decade ago that resulted in the country having to give up a strategic port to China.

Money and capital markets minister Nivard Cabral said the government was hopeful of finalising a \$1.5-billion swap facility with China's central bank. "Within the next two weeks we should be able to finalise it," Cabral told reporters in Colombo while maintaining that the funds would be used as a "buffer" to meet the government's foreign currency needs.

Official figures show Sri Lanka's foreign reserves plummeted to \$4.8 billion at the end of January.

GAY SEX: MALAYSIAN WINS CHALLENGE

Kuala Lumpur, Feb. 25: A Malaysian man Thursday won the country's first legal challenge against Islamic laws banning gay sex, a victory hailed as "monumental progress" in combating persecution of the LGBT community.

He was charged in an Islamic court in 2019 with attempting to have "intercourse against the order of nature", and several others in the same case have already pleaded guilty and were caned as a punishment.

Critics say the climate is worsening for the gay community in Muslim-majority Malaysia, with government officials often speaking out against LGBT people.

In Thursday's landmark case, the legislation banning gay sex was enacted in Selangor state, outside Kuala Lumpur.

Biden revokes Green Card ban

Lawyers: Was blocking legal immigration

San Diego, Feb. 25: President Joe Biden has lifted a freeze on green cards issued by his predecessor during the pandemic that lawyers said was blocking most legal immigration to the United States. Former President Donald Trump last spring halted the issuance of green cards until the end of 2020 in the name of protecting the Coronavirus-wracked job market — a reason that Trump gave to achieve many of the cuts to legal immigration that had eluded him before the pandemic. Trump on December 31 extended those orders until the end of March. Trump had deemed immigrants a "risk to the US labour market" and blocked their entry to the United States in issuing Proclamation 10014 and Proclamation 10052.

Biden stated in his proclamation on Wednesday that shutting the door on legal immigrants "does not advance the interests of the United States". "To the contrary, it harms the United States, including by preventing certain family members of United States citizens and lawful permanent residents from joining their families here. It also harms industries in the United States that utilize talent from around the world." Biden stated in his proclamation.

Most immigrant visas were blocked by the orders. As many as 120,000 family-based preference visas were lost largely because of the pandemic-related freeze in the 2020 budget year, according to the American Immigrant Lawyers Association. Immigrants could not bring over family members unless they were US citizens applying for visas for their spouses or children under the age of 21.

It also barred entry to immigrants with employment-based visas unless they were considered beneficial to the national interest such as health care professionals. And it slammed the door on thousands of visa lottery winners who were randomly chosen from a pool of about 14 million applicants to be given green cards that would let them live permanently in the

United States. The blocked visas add to a growing backlog that has reached 437,000 for family-based visas alone, said California immigration lawyer Curtis Morrison, who represented thousands of people blocked by the freeze. "I'm thrilled for my clients who are now in position that they can now enter the US," he said.

"But that backlog will take years if the administration does not take ambitious measures." A federal judge last year issued a ruling that all but lifted Proclamation 10052 by allowing temporary foreign workers to enter the United States if their employers are members of the US Chamber of Commerce or several other large organisations that represent much of the US economy. But Proclamation 10014 continued to block thousands of immigrants. Immigration lawyers said they were surprised Biden did not immediately lift the freeze like he did with Trump's travel ban imposed against people from mostly Muslim-majority countries. — AP

German charged with espionage

Berlin, Feb. 25: A German man has been charged with espionage for allegedly passing information on properties used by the German parliament to Russian military intelligence, prosecutors said Thursday.

The suspect, identified only as Jens F. in line with German privacy rules, worked for a company that had been repeatedly contracted to check portable electrical appliances by the Bundestag, or the lower house of parliament, federal prosecutors said in a statement.

As a result of that, he had access to PDF files with floor plans of the properties involved. Prosecutors said, at some point before early September 2017, the suspect "decided of his own accord" to give information on the properties to Russian intelligence.

They said he sent the PDF files to an employee of the Russian Embassy in Berlin who was an officer with Russia's GRU

military intelligence agency. They didn't specify how his activities came to light. The charges against the suspect, who is not in custody, were filed at a Berlin court on February 12. The court will have to decide whether to go ahead with a trial.

Relations between Germany and Russia have been buffeted by a growing list of issues in recent years. In October, the European Union imposed sanctions on two Russian officials and part of the GRU agency over a cyberattack against the German parliament in 2015. In addition, a Russian man accused of killing a Georgian man in downtown Berlin on Moscow's orders in 2019 is on trial in Berlin. And last year's poisoning of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, flown to Germany for treatment and then arrested immediately after he returned to Russia, has added another layer of tensions. — AFP

WHO: LONG COVID PRIORITY FOR AUTHORITIES

Copenhagen, Feb. 25: The World Health Organisation on Thursday urged national authorities to make a priority of understanding the consequences of long-term coronavirus infections to help those suffering from worrying symptoms after many months.

"It's a clear priority for WHO, and of the utmost importance. It should be for every health authority," Hans Kluge, regional director for WHO Europe, said while addressing a press conference.

While some studies have begun to shed light on the illness, it is still unclear why some patients with Covid-19 continue to show symptoms for months, including tiredness, brain fog, and cardiac and neurological disorders.

"The burden is real and it is significant. About one in 10 Covid-19 sufferers remain unwell after 12 weeks, and many for much longer," Kluge said.

— AFP

Completely eradicated poverty in China, says Xi

Beijing, Feb. 25: President Xi Jinping on Thursday declared that China has scored a "complete victory" in its fight against poverty by lifting over 770 million people out of it in the last four decades, calling it another "miracle" created by the country that will go down in history. Absolute poverty has been eradicated in the world's most populous country, Xi announced while addressing a gathering held here to mark the country's accomplishments in poverty alleviation and honour its model po-

verty fighters. China has a population of around 1.4 billion. "No country has been able to lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty in such a short time," Xi said. Xi said that all poor people in rural areas have been lifted out of poverty. With this, China has achieved the UN goal of poverty eradication 10 years ahead of the 2030 deadline, he said. Over the past eight years, the final 98.99 million impoverished rural residents living under the current poverty line have all been lifted out of pov-

erty. All the 832 impoverished counties and 128,000 impoverished villages have been removed from the poverty list, he said. Since the launch of the reform and opening up in the late 1970s, 770 million impoverished rural residents have shaken off poverty when calculated according to China's current poverty line, he said. China has contributed to more than 70 per cent of global poverty reduction over the same period. Xi, also General Secretary of the ruling Communist Party of China, said. — PTI

ORNITHOLOGISTS ASTOUNDED

More than 150 bird species are 'lost' with no confirmed sightings

Black-browed babbler emerges after 170 years

Jakarta, Feb. 25: A bird last seen more than 170 years ago in the rainforests of Borneo has been rediscovered, amazing conservationists who have long assumed it was extinct.

The Black-browed Babbler has only ever been documented once — when it was first described by scientists around 1848 — eluding all subsequent efforts to find it.

But late last year, two men in Indonesian Borneo saw a bird they didn't recognise and snapped photos of it before releasing the palm-sized creature back into the forest, according to Global Wild-

life Conservation.

Ornithologists were astounded to find that the Black-browed Babbler was alive and well, despite not having been seen since before Charles Darwin published "On the Origin of Species".

"It was a bit like a 'Eureka!' moment," said Panji Gusti Akbar, lead author of a paper on the discovery published Thursday in the journal *Bird-*

ingASIA. "This bird is often called 'the biggest enigma in Indonesian ornithology.' It's mind-blowing to think that it's not extinct and it's still living in these lowland forests."

Little is known about the creature with brown and grey feathers, which has been "missing" longer than any other Asian bird, according to the paper.

Researchers hoped to go back to the area where it was recently spotted, but Covid-19 travel restrictions could slow the effort. "There is now a critical window of opportunity for conservationists to secure these forests to protect the

babbler and other species," said Ding Li Yong, a co-author on the paper and a Singapore-based conservationist with BirdLife International.

More than 150 species of birds around the world are considered "lost" with no confirmed sightings in the past decade, conservationists say.

"Discoveries like this are incredible and give us so much hope that it's possible to find other species that have been lost to science for decades or longer," said Barney Long, Global Wildlife Conservation's senior director of species conservation. — AFP



Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan (centre) surrounded by his supporters, speaks through a loudspeaker during a rally in Yerevan, Armenia, on Thursday. He accused top military officers on Thursday of attempting a coup after they demanded he step down, adding fuel to months-long protests calling for his resignation following the nation's defeat in a conflict with Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. — AP

Coup attempt: Armenia PM

YEREVAN, Feb. 25: Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan accused the military of an attempted coup and brought supporters to the streets on Thursday, as months of tensions over its defeat in last year's war with Azerbaijan in the war. President Armen Sarkisian said he was taking urgent steps to try to defuse the crisis.

Under pressure for his handling of the conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has ignored repeated calls to resign for losing swathes of territory to Azerbaijan in the war. President Armen Sarkisian said he was taking urgent steps to try to defuse the crisis.

Thousands marched through the streets of the capital Yerevan in support of Pashinyan, with the opposition urging him to step down to avoid bloodshed or even civil war.

President Armen Sarkisian, whose role is largely symbolic, said he was taking urgent steps to try to defuse the crisis, calling on all involved to "show restraint and common sense." Under pressure for his handling of the conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, Pashinyan has ignored repeated calls

to resign for losing swathes of territory to Azerbaijan in the war.

After largely backing the prime minister for months, the military's general staff on Thursday joined calls for him to step down, saying in a statement that he and his cabinet "are not capable of taking adequate decisions".

Pashinyan hit back with an accusation that top

brass were mounting an "attempted military coup" and fired the chief of the general staff Onik Gasparyan. Hundreds of supporters then joined Pashinyan to march through central Yerevan, chanting "Nikol Prime Minister!"

Speaking to supporters through a megaphone, Pashinyan called for calm, as dozens of police deployed outside the main government offices. "The situation is tense, but we must agree that there cannot be clashes," said Pashinyan, who was joined by his wife, daughters, ministers and security detail.

He said the situation in the country was under control and that the military's call had been an "emotional reaction" to his firing the previous day of the deputy chief of the general staff Tigran Khachatryan.

Armenia's opposition — who have been calling for Pashinyan's resignation since a ceasefire deal in November urged him to heed to military's call.

"We call on Nikol Pashinyan not to lead the country towards civil war and to avoid bloodshed. Pashinyan has one last chance to avoid turmoil," Prosperous Armenia, the country's largest opposition party, said in a statement.

Prosperous Armenia and another opposition party, Bright Armenia, called for the holding of an extraordinary session of parliament. — AFP

RIOT PANEL IS PRO-DEMOCRATS: REPUBLICANS

WASHINGTON, Feb. 25: Republican leaders in the House and Senate say a proposed plan for an independent commission to study the Capitol insurrection is overly tilted toward Democrats, arguing that the panel should have an even split like the one formed to study the September 11 terrorist attacks. House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy and Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell said Wednesday that a legitimate commission would be comprised of an equal number of Republicans and Democrats.

A draft proposed by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi would create an 11-member commission with four Republicans and seven Democrats, three of whom would be chosen by President Joe Biden, according to one of multiple aides who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the details under negotiation.

Pelosi has not commented on the draft or said why there should be more Democratic members. Last week, she said the commission must be "strongly bipartisan" and have the power to subpoena witnesses.

But on Wednesday, House Democratic Conference Chair Hakeem Jeffries said McCarthy hasn't operated in good faith and "set a bad tone" when he supported former President Donald Trump's efforts to overturn Biden's legitimate election victory.

The partisan bickering before the commission gets off the ground is raising questions about whether lawmakers can coalesce around a thorough review of the Jan. 6 riot that interrupted the presidential electoral count and led to five deaths. Both parties support creating an independent investigation, but much of the consensus ends there, with Democrats demanding accountability for lawmakers who amplified Trump's falsehoods about the election. — AP

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