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No end in sight to farmers' fight

PROTEST AGAINST FARM LAWS WILL CONTINUE FOR INDEFINITE PERIOD, WARNS RAKESH TIKAIT

NEW DELHI: Bhartiya Kisan Union (BKU) spokesperson Rakesh Tikait on Friday said the ongoing farmers' protest will go on for indefinite period as there is no planning regarding the duration yet.

"Farmers' protest will go on for indefinite period as there is no plan currently. It might continue till October," Tikait told ANI.

He said this in response to the statement of Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM) leader Gurnam Singh Charni that the farmers' protest will continue till October.

Tikait has reiterated the farmers' demand for a law on minimum support price for the procurement of crops, saying that "business over hunger" will not be allowed in the country, PTI reported.

Tikait's remark came after Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in the Rajya Sabha that "MSP was there, MSP is there, MSP will remain in the future".

"When did we say that MSP is ending," Tikait asked, according to ANI. "We said that a law be formed on MSP. If such a law is formed, all the farmers of the country will be benefitted. Right now, there is no law on MSP and the farmers are looted by traders."

The farmer leader said that the price of crops cannot be decided like the fluctuating cost of air tickets, PTI reported. "There will not be business over hunger in the country," he said. "If hunger goes up, price of crops will be decided accordingly. Those doing business over hunger will be driven out of the country."

Tikait had earlier warned the farmers' agitation will not conclude unless government repeals the three newly enacted agriculture laws and it may go on till October.

On Friday he mentioned that the farmers do a protest every year on October 2 at the Ghazipur border.

"Tear shells and bullets were fired at the farmers on October 2, 2018, at the Ghazipur border. Every year we do a programme here at the Ghazipur border and will also do it this year," he said.

Asked about the debates in the Parliament on the farmers' issues, Tikait said it is good that the issue is being raised and debated in the Parliament.

He further said there must be a genuine reason that the country's farmers are protesting for so long. "The entire nation's farmers are on streets protesting, there must be a reason to it. If the farm laws are not accepted by the farmers, then what is the compulsion of not repealing them?" Tikait asked. **AGENCIES**

SC panel holds talks with 12 farmer unions

NEW DELHI: The Supreme Court-appointed committee on Friday held consultations with 12 farmer unions and peasants from eight states, including West Bengal, on the controversial farm laws enacted by the Centre recently. This is the seventh meeting held by the panel so far. The three-member committee is holding consultations with stakeholders, both online and in person. In a statement, the committee said it held its interactions through video conference with farmers, farmer unions and farmer producer organisations (FPOs). Twelve farm unions and farmers from Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal participated in the detailed deliberations with the committee members, it said.

RAHUL REACTS

- "It is the business of "Bharat Mata" which feeds the nation," he said at the rally held in Padampur town of Rajasthan's Sri Ganganagar district.
- The agitation against the laws will spread in the country as it is not linked to farmers alone. It is the issue of labourers, traders, small and medium businessmen and the middle class, he said.

Validity of e-voting on Franklin MFs upheld

NEW DELHI: The Supreme Court on Friday upheld the validity of e-voting process for winding up of six mutual fund schemes of Franklin Templeton, and said disbursal of funds to unit holders will continue.

A bench of justices S A Nazeer and Sanjiv Khanna, while rejecting the opposition by some unit holders to the e-voting process, said disbursal of funds has to be done as per the earlier order of the apex court.

The top court had on February 2 ordered that Rs 9,122 crore be disbursed within three weeks to the unit holders of Franklin Templeton's six mutual fund schemes which are proposed to be wound up.

It had said that disbursal of money would be done in proportion to unit holders' interest in the assets.

Earlier, the apex court had asked the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) to appoint an observer for overseeing the e-voting process.

The e-voting with regard to the winding up Franklin Templeton's six mutual fund schemes had taken place in the last week of December and it has been approved by a majority of unit holders.

The apex court had on February 2 entrusted the State Bank of India (SBI) Mutual Fund to disburse the money as all the lawyers gave consent to the court's order.

It had granted liberty to the litigating parties to approach the court in case of any difficulty in the disbursal of money to unit holders.

The top court on January 25 had said it would first deal with the issues related to objection to the e-voting process for winding up of the six mutual fund schemes and distribution of money to the unit holders.

Prior to this, it had granted three days for filing of objections to the e-voting.

"SEBI shall appoint an observer regarding the e-voting of unit holders which is scheduled between December 26 and December 29, 2020. The result of the e-voting would not be announced and would be produced before us in a sealed cover along with the report of the observer appointed by the SEBI", the top court had said in its order passed earlier.

It had said that SEBI would also file a copy of the final Forensic Audit Report before the court in a sealed cover.

The apex court is hearing an appeal filed by Franklin Templeton against the high court's order which stopped the fund house from winding up its debt fund schemes without prior consent of the investors.

On December 7, 2020, Franklin Templeton Mutual Fund had said it has sought consent of the unit holders for the orderly winding up of the six fixed income schemes.

On December 3 last year, the apex court had asked Franklin Templeton Mutual Fund to initiate steps within one week for calling a meeting of unit holders to seek their consent for closure of six mutual fund schemes. **AGENCIES**

Inflation eases to 4.06 per cent

THE CONSUMER PRICE INDEX-BASED INFLATION STANDS AT 4.06% IN JANUARY 2021 COMPARED WITH 4.59% IN DECEMBER 2020

NEW DELHI: Retail inflation eased to 4.06 per cent in January, mainly on account of a decline in vegetable prices, as per government data released on Friday.

The inflation based on Consumer Price Index (CPI) was 4.59 per cent in December 2020. The rate of price rise in the food basket was 1.89 per cent in January, significantly down from 3.41 per cent in December, revealed the data released by the National Statistical Office (NSO). The Reserve Bank, which mainly factors in the retail inflation while arriving at its monetary policy, has been asked to keep CPI inflation at 4 per cent (+,- 2 per cent).

Retail inflation for farm and rural workers, meanwhile, eased to 3.25 per cent and 3.34 per cent, respectively, in December, mainly due to lower prices of certain food items.

"Point to point rate of inflation based on the CPI-AL (Consumer Price Index-Agricultural Labourers and CPI-RL (rural labourers) decreased to 3.25 per cent and 3.34 per cent in December 2020 from 6 per cent and 5.86 per cent respectively in November 2020," a labour ministry statement said.

According to the statement, inflation based on the food index of CPI-AL and CPI-RL is at (+) 2.97 per cent and (+) 2.96 per cent, respectively, in December 2020.

Among states, the maximum decrease in the consumer price index numbers for agricultural labourers and rural workers was experienced by Gujarat and West Bengal (-20 points each) mainly due to the fall in prices of gur, onion, green chillies, vegetables and fruits etc.

On the contrary, the maximum increase in the consumer price index numbers for agricultural labourers and rural workers was experienced by Meghalaya (+2 points and +3 points, respectively) following the rise in prices of pulses, mustard oil, fish dry, vegetables and fruits, firewood, plastic shoes and bus fare etc.

The fall or rise in the index varied from state to state. In the case of agricultural labourers, it recorded a decrease of 1 to 20 points in 18 states and an increase of 1 to 2 points in two states. Tamil Nadu with 1,253 points topped the index table whereas Himachal Pradesh with 823 points stood at the bottom. In the case of rural workers, it recorded a decrease of 1 to 20 points in 18 states and an increase of 1 to 3 points in two states. Tamil Nadu with 1,236 points topped the index table, while Bihar with 870 points stood at the bottom.

The all-India consumer price index numbers for agricultural labourers and rural workers for December 2020 decreased by 13 and 12 points, respectively, to stand at 1,047. **AGENCIES**

India improves its online civility score

NEW DELHI: Fewer people in India experienced negative online interactions or encountered online risks in 2020 compared to the previous year, even though risk of hate speech grew during the year, according to a report by Microsoft.

Microsoft's annual study 'Civility, Safety, and Interactions Online 2020' along with findings from its 2020 Digital Civility Index (DCI) indicated that India's score in online civility has improved to 68 in 2020 from 71 in 2019. Lower scores indicate more civility online.

This indicates that fewer people are experiencing negative online interactions or encountering online risks, it added. "A few risks remain high for India's online users — especially hate speech, which has doubled from 2016 to 26 per cent. There has also been a 5 per cent increase in hoaxes, scams, and frauds since 2017 to 22 per cent, and 6 per cent increase in discrimination since 2016 to 16 per cent," it said.

Countries with the best DCI score included the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, Malaysia and the US. The countries with the worst scores include Vietnam, Russia, Colombia, Peru and South Africa.

The latest instalment of the DCI survey, which has been conducted annually for the past five years, surveyed around 16,000 respondents in 32 geographies. The research polled adults and teenagers about their interactions online and experiences of online risks. This year's research included nine Asia Pacific geographies: Australia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. "Microsoft's annual study on digital civility is crucial for raising awareness and encouraging positive online interactions.

"Our societies are relying on and embracing digital technologies more than ever before and a safer internet will improve experiences and shape the well-being of our communities," Microsoft India Group Head and General Counsel Keshav Dhakad said.

According to the report, most common risks included unwanted contact, hate speech, trolling, mean treatment and unwanted sexting.

Topics that drove the most incivility included sexual orientation (40 per cent), religion (39 per cent) and politics (37 per cent), physical appearance (31 per cent) and gender identity (29 per cent). **AGENCIES**

Income criteria eased for family pension grant

NEW DELHI: The Centre has issued instructions to liberalise the income criteria for eligibility of a deceased government servant or pensioner's family member for pension, Union minister Jitendra Singh said on Monday.

The relaxation is granted for family pension to differently-abled survivors as they require greater medical care and financial assistance.

"The government is of the view that the income criteria for eligibility for family pension, applicable in the case of other family members, may not be applied in the case of a child/sibling suffering from a disability," he said. The government has reviewed and decided that the income criteria for eligibility for family pension to such children/siblings shall commensurate with the amount of the entitled family pension in their case, the minister of state for personnel.

The Department of Pension and Pensioners" Welfare has issued instructions on Monday for a child/sibling of a deceased government servant/pensioner suffering from a mental or physical disability, according to a Personnel Ministry statement. They shall be eligible for family pension for life if the overall income is less than the entitled family pension at ordinary rate -- 30 per cent -- of the last pay drawn by the deceased government servant/pensioner, plus the dearness relief admissible thereon, the statement said.

As per Rule 54(6) of the CCS (Pension) Rules, 1972, a child/sibling of a deceased government servant or pensioner, who is mentally or physically challenged, is eligible for family pension for life if he or she is suffering a disability that renders him unable to earn his livelihood, it said. **AGENCIES**

Twitter blocks 97% of accounts flagged by govt

NEW DELHI: Twitter has blocked over 97 per cent of the accounts and posts flagged by the IT Ministry for provocative content and misinformation around farmers" protest, sources said.

This followed a meeting between Twitter representatives and the Information Technology Secretary on Wednesday evening where the US-based microblogging platform was issued a stern warning to comply with local laws or be prepared for action.

The Ministry had questioned Twitter"s delay in taking action on its order to block provocative content that could impact public law and order, whereas the American company had been quick to crack down when a similar instance occurred at US Capitol Hill.

According to the sources, Twitter has now complied with the orders and over 97 per cent of the accounts flagged have been blocked.

Twitter did not respond to queries on the matter.

On February 4, Twitter was asked to take down 1,178 accounts with links to Pakistan and Khalistan supporters that were spreading misinformation and provocative content related to farmers" protest.

Prior to that, the government had sought blocking of 257 tweets and handles in connection with the agitation by farmers over the new agricultural laws. **AGENCIES**

Growth, inflation outlook portends 'more than full recovery'

MANUFACTURING AND SERVICES PMI REMAIN IN EXPANSIONARY ZONE, WHILE BANK CREDIT, SURGING FOREIGN INVESTMENT FLOWS AND CORPORATE BOND ISSUANCES PROVIDE CRITICAL FINANCIAL CUSHION TO THE REAL RECOVERY: REPORT

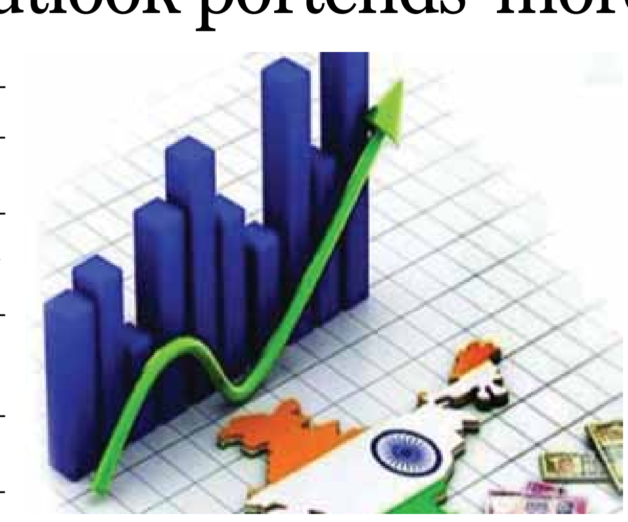
NEW DELHI: Painting a rosy picture of the economy, the finance ministry's monthly report on Tuesday said growth and inflation outlook for 2021-22 portends more than full recovery, and that the country has become the COVID-19 vaccine hub of the world.

"The structural reforms and the policy push under the Aatmanirbhar Bharat Mission along with the slew of measures announced in the Union Budget 2021-22 towards achieving broad-based inclusive growth will strengthen the fundamentals of the economy and bring it back on to a strong and sustainable growth path in the year ahead," the ministry's Monthly Economic Report said.

Growth and inflation outlook in 2021-22, "portends more than full recovery", it added.

Indian economy is estimated to contract 7.7 per cent in the current financial year, mainly due to the coronavirus pandemic. The latest Economic Survey projected growth rate to rebound to 11 per cent during 2012-22 while the Budget estimated real GDP to be between 10-10.5 per cent.

"FY 2021-22 will be the year to rebuild with the IMF projecting growth of output at 11.5 per cent, Economic Survey at 11 per cent and the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee at 10.5 per cent.



"With the IMF keeping India's growth projections elevated at 6.8 per cent in FY 2022-23, India is back as the fastest growing major economy in the world," it said.

The Survey pitched for growth through counter cyclical fiscal policy emphasising that growth alone is the answer to sustaining the public debt burden of the country, the report said.

The Survey was presented in Parliament on January 29 and the Budget on February 1.

The Budget implemented the counter cyclical fiscal policy by raising the target of fiscal deficit to 6.8 per cent of GDP, more than double the FRBM (Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management) target, the report said.

With the expanded borrowing programme mostly meant for funding the enhanced capital outlay, the Budget has set in place the multiplier impact on growth to support the prescribed fiscal deficit target of 4.5 per cent of GDP in 2026 under the fiscal glide path.

The report noted that various measures taken by the government since March 2020 against the pandemic ensured minimum loss of life.

"Early lockdown, health-infra ramp up, gradual unlocking, blanket testing, social distancing, calibrated fiscal stimulus to minimise supply side disruptions and revive demand and structural reforms pursued diligently by government since March, 2020 have now come to fruition to limit the fatality rate to globally one of the lowest at 1.2 per cent," it said.

According to the report, with each day ending with positive COVID-19 cases falling to new lows and economic activity levels attaining new peaks, India has worked its way around the pandemic through the will of the brave people and astute policy interventions by the government.

"The fact that complacency is far from settling in is demonstrated by India administering close to four million doses of COVID-19 vaccine within a span of two weeks since 16th January, 2021 to become the fifth largest inoculated country in the world.

"India has not only become the vaccine hub of the world but has also extended assistance to more than 90 nations requesting doses for stocking up," it noted. **AGENCIES**

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Row erupts over BJP's office land

AAP CLAIMS DELHI UNIT OFFICE LAND GIVEN AT THROWAWAY PRICE, A CHARGE REJECTED BY SAFFRON PARTY

NEW DELHI: The Aam Aadmi Party claimed on Thursday that the Centre had sanctioned more than 2 acres of posh land at just Rs 2 crore to the Delhi BJP to build its office, a charge rejected by the saffron party as baseless.

AAP leader Saurabh Bharadwaj claimed the land at the Deendayal Upadhyaya Marg was not for building any political party office, but a school.

"At one side, the BJP government harasses the ruling party of Delhi and try to evict them from their party office. On the other side, it provides land to the BJP at negligible prices," the legislator said at a press conference in New Delhi.

Bharadwaj demanded that the Delhi BJP must disclose how could they get 10,000 square yards of land in "just Rs 2 crores". "Here, no one can buy 2 yards of land with this money!" he said.

"On behalf of the Aam Aadmi Party, I want to ask the BJP whether it is true that this land was sanctioned to build schools or not," he said.

The Delhi BJP said the AAP was describing the land as a 10,000 sq yard though it was only 809 sq metres and the amount was deposited in 2001 at the prevailing rates. It said the ruling party was showing the amount in today"s time," which was a "total lie".

> "At one side, the BJP government harasses the ruling party of Delhi and try to evict them from their party office. On the other side, it provides land to the BJP at negligible prices"

Bharadwaj added that the Centre had asked AAP to pay crores of rupees as rent for the party office, alleging that the BJP government "had also tried to evict us from this office repeatedly". "The BJP should come clean and tell us whether they have any shame or not to own such a party office despite having such a negligible number of assembly seats in Delhi," he added.

Reacting to it, BJP general secretary Kuljeet Singh Chahal said: "On the contrary, it is the AAP which has constructed its office on government land."

Neither the AAP has the land allotted for this, nor deposited any amount in this regard, Chalal alleged.

He said the government policy was that all political parties should be allotted land in Delhi and it had applied accordingly for land for its office in 2001. The party then moved the Delhi High Court for getting this piece of land and it was on May 12, 2010, that the land was allotted to us, Chalal said, adding the BJP really had to work very hard for this. **AGENCIES**

Deep Sidhu in police custody

A CONTROVERSIAL FIGURE IN THE FARMER PROTESTS, DEEP SIDHU HAS BEEN ACCUSED BY FARMER GROUPS OF ATTEMPTING TO DERAIL THEIR MOVEMENT AND LEADING A 'CONSPIRACY' AGAINST THEM

NEWDELHI: A Delhi court Tuesday sent actor-activist Deep Sidhu to 7-day police custody in connection with the Red Fort violence on the Republic Day during farmers' tractor parade against the Centre's three new agri laws.

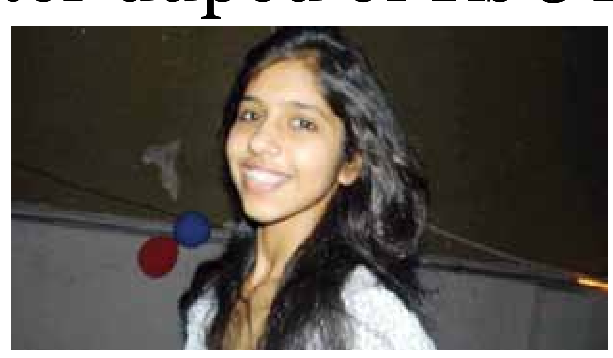
Metropolitan Magistrate Prigya Gupta sent Sidhu to the custody after the police alleged he was one of the main instigators of the violent incidents at the Red Fort.

Sidhu's counsel, however, claimed he had nothing to do with the violence and was at the wrong place at the wrong time. The police had announced a cash reward of Rs 1 lakh for information leading to Sidhu's arrest.

Tens of thousands of farmers broke barriers to storm the national capital on January 26, their tractor parade to highlight their demands dissolving into unprecedented scenes of anarchy as they fought with police, overturned vehicles and delivered a national insult hoisting a religious flag from the ramparts of the Red Fort, a privilege reserved for India's tricolour.

Thousands of protesting farmers who reached ITO from the Ghazipur border clashed with police. Many of them driving tractors reached the Red Fort and entered the monument, where the religious flag was also hoisted. Over 500 police personnel were injured and one protestors died. In the FIR registered in connection with the Red Fort violence, police said two magazines with 20 live cartridges were snatched from two constables by protestors who also damaged vehicles and robbed anti-riot gear. **AGENCIES**

Delhi CM's daughter duped of Rs 34,000



NEW DELHI: Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal's daughter Harshita has allegedly been duped of Rs 34,000 by a man, who approached her as a buyer on an e-commerce platform, where she had put up a sofa on sale, police said on Monday.

An FIR under the relevant sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) has been registered at the Civil Lines police station under north district of the Delhi Police on Sunday after a complaint was received in this regard, they said.

According to the police, the victim had put up a sofa for sale on an e-commerce platform. She was approached by a man who showed interest in making the purchase. To check if the account details shared by her were correct, he initially transferred a minimal amount of money into her account.

Subsequently, the man sent a QR code to the seller and asked her to scan it so that the amount fixed under the deal could be transferred to her account but instead, Rs 20,000 got deducted from her account when she followed the instructions of the buyer, a senior police officer said.

When she enquired about it, the man claimed that he had sent a wrong QR code by mistake and sent another link to her, asking her to follow the same procedure. But again an amount of Rs 14,000 got deducted from the seller's account when she scanned the QR code, the officer said. **AGENCIES**

Farmer, 55, dies by suicide at Tikri

KARANVEER SINGHWAL FROM NARWANA, HARYANA, WAS FOUND HANGING FROM A TREE AT THE PROTEST SITE WHERE LAKHS OF FARMERS HAVE BEEN HOLDING A PEACEFUL SIT-IN FOR ALMOST THREE MONTHS NOW AGAINST THE NEW FARM LAWS. MORE THAN 200 PROTESTING FARMERS HAVE LOST THEIR LIVES SO FAR

CHHAVI BHATIA
Tikri

A pall of gloom descended at Tikri border on Sunday when a 55-year-old farmer died by suicide. Karanveer Singhwal from Narwana, Haryana was found hanging from a tree at the protest site where lakhs of farmers have been holding a peaceful sit-in for almost three months now against the new farm laws. More than 200 farmers participating in the agitation have lost their lives to various causes like hypothermia, heart attack, road accidents and suicide since it started in November.

Singhwal had been camping at the border since November 26 when hundreds of thousands of farmers dug in their heels at various Delhi borders.

A marginal farmer, Singhwal owns only two acres of land. He leaves behind his wife and three daughters, one of whom is married. In his suicide note, the farmer expressed his disappointment with the government's indifference towards their plight and disinterest in repealing the laws.

Dejected at the current state of affairs, the deceased, however, tried to boost his fellow comrades' morale even in his last moment as he urged them to give a spirited fight and not leave till the laws are rolled back.

"Bharatiya Kisan Union Zindabad. We have no idea how long will this struggle go on before the government revokes these black laws...We will not move from here till these black laws are repealed... Inquilab Zindabad," read the suicide note.

The mood remained sombre at Tikri border as farmers held a mourning assembly for Singhwal. Young and old tried to console each other even as they struggled to hold back their emotions. In few poignant moments, youths held hands of their elderly, encouraging them that the fight is not theirs alone.

"It is extremely painful to have lost someone who was fighting for his right. The government should understand that all of us are worried about our future. Why is it behaving so inhumanly," asked Rajinder Malik, a farmer from Bhiwani. Grieving the loss of a fellow 'warrior', the farmers also pledged that they will honour his last wish.

"So many of them who have either taken their lives or died otherwise had only one wish—to take this movement to its logical end. We will not go back till the laws are scrapped. These sacrifices won't go in vain," Dharampal, another farmer from Tohana said.

Doctors camping at Tikri and Singhu border have expressed their concern about the mental health of farmers who have been protesting, saying they are in a sensitive emotional and mental state. They have attributed it to high stress levels, insecurity of future and fear of their movement going on endlessly.

"Behind the smiling and chardi kalan faces we see at the protest site lies a soul that is grappling to make sense of everything. He is constantly dreading losing his land, this battle. It is just not easy being here and fighting without getting affected," says Dr Swaiman Singh. "We try to cheer them up whenever they come to us for treatment or when we go meet them. Their spirits must be kept high. So we encourage them to talk," he further says.

Second 'Jan Rasoi' canteen in Delhi

NEW DELHI: BJP MP Gautam Gambhir on Tuesday launched the second 'Jan Rasoi' in east Delhi's New Ashok Nagar area and said by serving hygienic food at rupee one, this was not just a canteen but a "movement" to feed those in need.

The first 'Jan Rasoi' was launched by Gambhir at Gandhi Nagar market in his East Delhi constituency in December last year. It has so far served 50,000 persons, said a statement from the BJP MP's office.

The canteen at New Ashok Nagar that will serve lunch to 50 persons at a time, was launched by the MP in the presence of BJP national vice president Baijayant Panda and the party's Delhi unit president, Adesh Gupta.

"This is a historic occasion as such a thing is being in Delhi for the first time. We have seen other state governments opening subsidised canteens but nothing of that sort has happened in Delhi. I congratulate our MP for doing such an impeccable job," said Panda, who is also the in-charge of BJP in the national capital. Gambhir said that the 'Jan Rasoi' was not just a canteen but a "movement" to feed those in need and a "mission" to end hunger.

"I have not entered politics to compete in drama and dharnas but to bring real change and that is what I am doing. I only have my resources with which I want to help the most vulnerable sections of society," said cricketer-turned-politician. **AGENCIES**

141 new Covid-19 cases; positivity rate 0.22%

NEW DELHI: Delhi recorded 141 fresh COVID-19 cases and three deaths on Friday, while the positivity rate stood at 0.22 per cent, authorities said.

On February 9, no fatality was registered in the national capital. The positivity rate on Friday stood at 0.22 per cent, authorities said. Delhi had recorded 96 coronavirus cases on January 27, the lowest in over nine months, and the first time the daily incidences count had stood below the 100-mark in that month. Also, on February 5 and 7, the fatality counts were two on both the days, same as on February 2. These new 141 cases came out of the 63,022 tests conducted the previous day, according to the latest bulletin issued by the Delhi health department. The infection tally in the city rose to 6,36,670 and the death toll mounted to 10,889 with three new fatalities, authorities said. The active cases tally on Friday rose to 1053 from 1051 the previous day, according to the bulletin.

The total number of tests conducted the previous day included 41,077 RT-PCR tests and 21,945 rapid antigen tests, it said. PTI KND http://ptinews.com/images/pti.jpg â€œWe bring the World to you" Disclaimer : This e-mail message may contain proprietary, confidential or legally privileged information for the sole use of the person or entity to whom this message was originally addressed. **AGENCIES**

NEWSBRIEF

5 rescued after house collapses

NEW DELHI: Five people were rescued after a house collapsed in the Sadar Bazar area of north Delhi on Tuesday, fire services officials said. A call about the incident was received at around 10.30 am and six fire tenders were rushed to the spot, Delhi Fire Services Director Atul Garg said. Five people have been rescued, of whom three are in a critical state, he added. The injured have been shifted to the Bara Hindu Rao hospital. The rescue operation was stopped at 2.31 pm, officials said. Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal tweeted about the incident and expressed his concern. **AGENCIES**

2021 sees rise in power demand

NEW DELHI: Electricity demand in Delhi is picking up in the new year, recovering from the coronavirus pandemic-hit 2020, with January registering 19 per cent more peaks on 23 days than that in the last year, officials of power distribution companies said on Monday. Delhi"s peak power demand was 3,504 MW (megawatt) on December 1, 2020. Since then, it has increased by over 50 per cent, said a BSES spokesperson. "In January 2021, Delhi"s peak power demand on 23 days surpassed the peak power demand on corresponding days of January 2020 by up to 19 per cent," he said. However, Delhi"s peak power demand in January 2021 at 5,265 MW, was a shade less than the peak power demand of 5,343 MW in January 2020, he added. In the winters, Delhi"s peak power demand crossed 4,000 MW for the first time on December 16,2020 and 5,000 MW on January 1, 2021, he said. **AGENCIES**

Petrol crosses ₹88-mark

New Delhi: Petrol and diesel prices soared to record highs on Friday after rates were hiked for the fourth day in a row.

Petrol price was increased by 31 paise per litre and diesel by 35 paise a litre, according to a price notification of state-owned fuel retailers. This took petrol price to an all-time high of Rs 88.14 a litre in Delhi and to Rs 94.64 in Mumbai. Diesel rates rose to Rs 78.38 per litre in the national capital and to an all-time high of Rs 85.32 in Mumbai.

In four days, prices have gone up by Rs 1.21 per litre for petrol, while diesel has risen by Rs 1.25 a litre. Oil Minister Dharmendra Pradhan on Wednesday had told Parliament that the government is not considering a reduction in excise duty to cool rates from their record highs. Rates have risen as international oil prices touched USD 61 per barrel for the first time in more than a year on improving demand outlook amid the global rollout of COVID-19 vaccines, he had said.

Central and state taxes make up for over 61 per cent of the retail selling price of petrol and about 56 per cent of diesel. Retail petrol rates have risen by Rs 18.57 per litre since mid-March 2020, after the government raised taxes by a record margin to mop up gains arising from fall in international oil prices. Diesel rates have gone up by Rs 16.09. **AGENCIES**

Guidelines issued for parent outreach program

NEW DELHI: The Delhi government has issued guidelines for parents outreach program of School Management Committees, urging school heads to ensure that parents have a mechanism to reach out with their concerns and issues.

In an order issued on February 3, the Delhi Directorate of Education said the School Management Committees (SMCs) were created as a means of increasing parents" participation in the governance of schools and to act as a bridge between parents and the school.

However, citing a report by Boston Consulting Group on Delhi Education Reforms, the Directorate said that despite the active involvement of the SMCs in schools, 63 per cent of parents do not know about SMCs.

As per the guidelines, each SMC member will be responsible to maintain relationships with up to 50 students and their families in their locality and also consider engaging other parents, 'School Mitras', to volunteer in the program. Each school mitra will have the similar responsibility of staying in touch with the families of 50 students through telephone calls or home visits.

"The SMC members and the School mitra need to engage with the parents regarding whatever activities/academics are going on in the school and also to hear from the parents in case of any issues they are facing with regard to their child"s education," the circular read.

The Directorate also laid out process to implement the program instructing the heads of schools to create a list of localities that form the catchment area of the school, list of students in these localities, and identify school mitras in case of larger localities or where there are no SMCs.

"It would be the responsibility of the Teacher Convener to stay in touch with the SMC members and School mitras on an ongoing basis and to take feedback from them that is coming from parents," it read.

The Directorate also said that the school mitra should be invite to the SMC meeting once a month.

In addition to this, a helpline would be set up and run by the Directorate with support from DCPCR where parents can reach out with any queries on an ongoing basis. **AGENCIES**

IITs, TERI to help in real-time monitoring of pollution sources

NEW DELHI: Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Tuesday said his government is collaborating with the IITs in Kanpur and Delhi and environment think-tank TERI for real-time monitoring of pollution sources in the national capital.

At a meeting between Kejriwal and experts from the IITs and The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), it was decided that the Delhi government will work with teams of researchers, launch real-time source apportionment project in Delhi and set up an advanced monitoring system for real-time pollution sources.

In a tweet, the chief minister said, 'IIT Kanpur, IIT Delhi, and TERI have developed technology for real-time source apportionment of pollution. Had a meeting with their experts. We will work with them to implement it in Delhi If we know the source of pollution on a real-time basis, it will help us take immediate action.' According to an official statement, 'The real-time monitoring of the sources of pollution will help the Delhi government take immediate action against these sources. Kejriwal has directed senior officials to work on the matter and submit a proposal to the Cabinet in this regard. After clearance from the cabinet, work will start in full swing.' It said under this initiative, the Delhi government will establish a super-site and a mobile site to find out the sources of pollution real-time at a given hotspot.

'First, the Delhi government will install a super site and mobile site at the pollution hotspots on a pilot basis to study the work of these machines. After a month, it will study the results and work accordingly... The entire project will be carried out under the guidance of Professor Mukesh Sharma from IIT-Kanpur,' Kejriwal said in an official statement.

According to it, the Delhi government will be the first in the country to use this technology to find out sources of pollution real-time.

'It is noteworthy that the Delhi government is committed to reducing air pollution and improving air quality. For this, it has initiated an electric vehicles policy and is also running a 'Switch Delhi' campaign to encourage citizens of Delhi to switch from polluting fuel-run cars to EVs,' the statement said.

The Delhi government said Kejriwal was satisfied with the presentation of the researchers of IIT Kanpur, IIT Delhi, and TERI.

'He has directed officials to start the process of using this technology. The Delhi government will bring a proposal of setting up these advanced techniques to study real-time pollution sources before the Cabinet, after which the work will start,' it said.

The chief minister reiterated that his government is committed to curbing air pollution and several initiatives have been launched in the last one year also to acheve that goal.

'This also includes the electric vehicle policy which is considered the most ambitious policy across India. Now, with this new technology, the Delhi government will be able to find out the sources of pollution in real-time and will take steps accordingly to finish these sources," the statement said.

It said according to the presentation this technology will clarify the factors responsible for the spike in air pollution at a particular spot and also help to study the real-time effect of vehicles, dust, and smoke emanating from factories. **AGENCIES**

ALSO READ | 'PVT SECTOR PLAYS KEY ROLE IN GROWTH STORY' * P5 | PHARMA MARKET LIKELY TO HIT $130B BY 2030 * P5

NEWSBRIEF

CM slams Bedi's stand on civic office inauguration

PUDUCHERRY: Chief Minister of Puducherry V Narayanasamy on Friday said it was matter of concern thatthe Lieutenant Governor Kiran Bedi had ordered thepostponement of the inauguration of the renovated structureof the Municipal office (Marie) slated for today. Bedi had contended that the renovation of the structurewas done with the aid from the Centre and that Centralgovernment officials should have been invited fortheinauguration. "This is an utterly wrong and an incorrect stand asthere is no grant from the Centre," the Chief Ministersaid. **AGENCIES**

Jaipur civic body fights on liabilities

JAIPUR: There was heavy uproar in the first general body meeting of the Jaipur Heritage Municipal Corporation where an annual budget of Rs 783.60 crore was passed. The budget was presented by Mayor Munesh Gurjar, who said during her speech that there was a financial liability of Rs 100 crore on the corporation. The opposition BJP councillors said it was the first AGM (annual general meeting) of the newly-formed Jaipur Heritage Municipal Corporation and wondered how come the old liabilities were there, leading to an uproar. **AGENCIES**

BJP accused of raising funds for polls on pretext of temple

BALLIA/LUCKNOW: Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party president Om Prakash Rajbhar has accused the BJP of collecting money for the next Uttar Pradesh assembly elections on the pretext of raising funds for the Ram Temple construction in Ayodhya. Rajbhar did not substantiate his allegation, which the BJP dismissed as "absurd". "Several donations up to Rs 100 crore each for the construction of the Ram temple has been made. How much of it will be spent in the construction of the temple? The BJP is collecting donations for the next assembly polls in the name of temple construction. A scam of Rs 1,400 crore has been done in the name of Ram temple," Rajbhar told reporters on Tuesday. Asked about the SBSP leader's allegation, BJP spokesperson Rakesh Tripathi told PTI, "Rajbhar is known for making absurd statements. **AGENCIES**

Uproar in House over farm bills

OPPOSITION IN LOK SABHA HITS OUT AT GOVT OVER FARM LAWS, JAN 26 VIOLENCE

NEW DELHI: After days of deadlock over the farmers' issue, opposition parties on Monday slammed the government in Lok Sabha over the three agri laws and demanded their repeal as the House resumed the debate on the Motion of Thanks to the President's address.

Lok Sabha resumed normal functioning on Monday after a week-long disruption over the three central farm laws following an appeal by Rajnath Singh that it was a duty of every member to maintain the tradition of passing the Motion of Thanks to the President's Address.

Saying that the Narendra Modi government is committed to the welfare of farmers and it will remain so in the future too, the BJP defended the ruling dispensation, reported PTI.

BJP member Virendra Kumar said that the Modi government has been trying to double the income of the farmers through various measures.

Referring to the ongoing farmers' agitation against the three agricultural laws, Kumar said there was some anxiety among a section of farmers but the government has tried to allay their concerns through discussions and so far 11-12 rounds of talks have taken place.

"I want to make it clear that the government is committed to the welfare of the farmers. It was, it is and it will continue to do so," he said amidst thumping of desks by BJP members in attendance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi among others.

The House is likely to take up a Short Duration Discussion on the farmers' issue in the second part of the Budget session beginning March 8.

Modi is likely to reply to the debate on Wednesday, Parliament sources said.

Later, participating in the debate, Chowdhury alleged that the government had sent "vandals" to the Red Fort to "desecrate" the monument and defame the ongoing farmers' agitation, and demanded that a JPC probe be held to uncover the "big conspiracy", reported PTI.

"Farmers are at Delhi's borders. More than 200 farmers have lost their lives. Why is the prime minister not talking to them? Why this arrogance? You have a majority and you are trying to bulldoze through your majority. Don't insult the farmers, don't wage a war against the farmers. Are they your enemy?" he said, lashing out at the Modi government.

The Congress leader said that the government did not convene the winter session citing the coronavirus pandemic.

"We should not be afraid of debate. Dissent, disagreement and dialogue are the hallmark of our civilisation," he said.

With such a strong home minister like Amit Shah, how can some people reach the Red Fort, that too on January 26 when the highest level of security was in place in Delhi, PTI quoted Chowdhury as saying.

"Why isn't there a proper investigation into it. It is actually a big, well-planned conspiracy to defame the farmers. The fact is that you have sent some vandals to the Red Fort to create vandalism. Forces within the government are behind it," he alleged.

He was referring to the Republic Day incident during the farmers' tractor parade when hundreds of protesters had stormed the Red Fort, hoisted a religious flag on the ramparts and clashed with the police. **AGENCIES**

DDC members demand re-election for chairman

SRINAGAR: A group of elected District Development Council (DDC) members from Budgam on Tuesday held a protest here, demanding re-election for the post of chairperson.

The group protested at the National Conference (NC) headquarters Nawai-Subah after meeting party general secretary Ali Mohammad Sagar.

In Budgam district in central Kashmir, Nazir Ahmad Khan – an independent DDC member -- was on Monday elected as the chairperson, while Nazir Ahmad Jahara of the NC was elected as the vice-chairperson of the council.

Khan was a member of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), but decided to contest the DDC polls, held in December last year, as an independent candidate.

The officials said there was a tie between Khan and his rival Abdul Ahad Dar with each securing seven votes.

A draw of lots was held in which Khan was declared as successful and thus elected as chairman DDC Budgam.

However, the protesting members said the approach employed by District Budgam officials has raised a question mark on the entire process and "quivered by its failure" to make a mark in the DDC polls, "the BJP and its ilk is employing all dishonest means to benefit its B-team to grab DDCs". The BJP seems to have shun all its inhibitions in winning crossovers through hook or by crook, one of the nine DDC members told reporters.

"The procedure of the lottery was carried out in an unfair manner. The DC wrote the names of the two contenders on a piece of paper and asked the clerk sitting next to him to choose between the two slips. The clerk had already seen the DC scribble the names," he claimed. "Having failed to make any mark in the elections, the BJP, and its ilk is now resorting to all illicit means to grab the power by coercing and intimidating DDC members in one way or another," the member said.

"We had participated in the elections to ensure that the sacred space of democracy is used to benefit the people, but contrary to their claims on strengthening grassroots democracy; the government is derailing democracy and setting wrong precedence by stooping to such stumpy levels of political impropriety and fraudulence," he said. **AGENCIES**

Cong accuses govt of compromising security

NEW DELHI: The Congress on Thursday accused the government of compromising national security and India"s territorial integrity and alleged Defence Minister Rajnath Singh has tried to "mislead" on the issue.

Congress chief spokesperson and general secretary Randeep Surjewala alleged the government was disengaging its troops in Ladakh without giving an assurance as to when would there be status quo ante as on April 2020 when unprovoked Chinese incursions into India"s territory and military buildup started.

"Can the prime minister and the defence minister explain their complete and total failure in protecting India"s territorial integrity," he asked at a press conference.

He said the government has maintained that there has to be complete disengagement and withdrawal of troops by the Chinese in entire Ladakh area.

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scared of even uttering the word China, much less ensuring that Chinese are pushed back decisively from illegal occupation of India"s territory in Depsang plains, Gogra-Hot Springs Sector, Pangong Tso Lake Area and Chumur, Southern Ladakh," Surjewala alleged.

"Defence Minister, on the other hand, seeks to mislead and misinform, without giving full assurance on Chinese withdrawal from India"s territory in aforementioned areas," he further alleged.

Surjewala also asked why is the government agreeing to a selective disengagement only in Pangong Tso Lake area and that also by "presumably changing the LAC to India"s disadvantage".

India and China have reached an agreement on disengagement in the north and south bank of Pangong lake in eastern Ladakh that mandates both sides to cease forward deployment of troops in a "phased, coordinated and verifiable" manner, Rajnath Singh announced in Parliament. **AGENCIES**

Sasikala exits active politics

TIRUPATHUR (TN): Expelled AIADMK leader V K Sasikala on Monday said she will involve herself in active politics following her return to Tamil Nadu after completing a four year prison term in Bengaluru in a corruption case.

In her first comments days after being discharged from a hospital in the Karnataka capital where she was treated for Covid-19, Sasikala said she was indebted to the people of Tamil Nadu but asserted she will not be cowed down by "oppression."

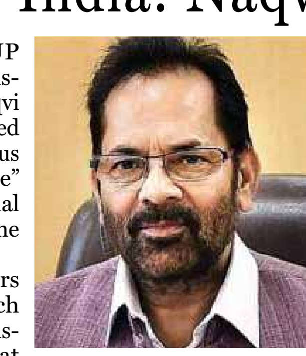
Asked if she would visit the AIADMK headquarters in Chennai, she said "please wait and see." "Sure, for party workers," was her response when reporters asked if she would engage in active politics, months ahead of the scheduled Assembly polls in the state.

She was on her way to Chennai from Bengaluru and briefly addressed supporters here. "I am bound by love, to the Tamil ethos and the principles I have embarked upon. But I can never be enslaved by oppression," she told her loyalists.

Earlier, she returned to Tamil Nadu to a grand reception, days after completing her jail term in Bengaluru in the Rs 66.6 crore disproportionate assets case, amid indications of a confrontation with the ruling party which she once controlled. Asked by reporters about the AIADMK ministers filing police complaint against her use of the ruling party flag on her car, she said "I think it shows their apprehension."

Responding to late Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa"s memorial in Chennai being closed for maintenance, she said "the people of Tamil Nadu know very well what all this means." **AGENCIES**

Rejected politicians defaming India: Naqvi



KANPUR: Senior BJP leader and Union minister Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi on Saturday said "rejected politicians" and the "bogus Bharat bashing brigade" are involved in a criminal conspiracy to defame the country.

Speaking to reporters here, Naqvi said, "Such criminal syndicate of misinformation and Bharat bashing has always been defeated by the commitment of the people of India."

"Such people created a ruckus on the so-called intolerance in the country, raised questions on surgical strike on Pakistan, created confusion over CAA, and opposed steps taken for the well-being of people during the COVID-19 pandemic," Naqvi said.

Now, the 'gumrahi' (misleading) gang has hijacked the farmers' agitation and doing politics over it, he said, adding that some people in the country still have "feudal arrogance".

In a statement, Naqvi said the people of the country, while rejecting all criminal conspiracies and political hypocrisies of some vested interests, have expressed trust in the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

People gave a massive mandate to the BJP-led NDA in 2014 and again in 2019. The masses have supported the policies of the prime minister by giving "tremendous support" to the BJP in assembly, panchayat and local bodies elections in different states and union territories, he said.

"On one hand, the Bharat bashing brigade raised false and fake propaganda of so-called insecurity among minorities, on the other hand PM Modi worked tirelessly to make all sections of society including minorities an equal partner of mainstream development," he said.

"Prime Minister Modi"s commitment to 'sabka sath, sabka vikas' has always exposed these characters. The entire world is admiring Modi"s commitment towards inclusive development," he added. Naqvi said, "When our security forces destroyed terrorist camps by conducting a surgical strike, then some people outside the country and leaders of the grand old party, demanded proof. It was an amazing 'jugalbandi'. **AGENCIES**

RS members bid farewell to retiring members

NEW DELHI: Rajya Sabha on Tuesday bid farewell to four retiring members of the Upper House with Deputy Chairman Harivansh heaping lavish praise on the leader of the Opposition Ghulam Nabi Azad, terming him a repository of rich experiences.

The veteran Congress leader and Nazir Ahmed Laway (PDP) will retire on February 15 while the terms of Mir Mohammad Fayaz (PDP) and Shamsher Singh Manhas (BJP) will end on February 10.

"It was my fortune that I got to sit next to Ghulam Nabi Azad in the House... He has connected the entire country with Jammu and Kashmir... I have not come across a person like him who has such rich experiences... Have learnt a lot from his guidance, decency, conduct...," Harivansh said.

Azad"s political stature is unparalled, he said and added that the Congress leader has risen to such a position in national politics from a block level worker in Kashmir.

He appreciated him for the mammoth work in the health sector like National Urban Health Mission and setting up of medical colleges. Retirement from the house is only a temporary thing and not a break in his chosen path of serving the nation, Harivansh said.

Azad said he is among those lucky people who never went Pakistan and feels proud to be a Hindustani Muslim. He spoke for almost 28 minutes, quoting several couplets and hoping for restoration of peace in Jammu & Kashmir and return of Kashmiri Pandits back to the valley. Fayaz in his speech said, "We work for this country. We have taken the flag of the country to villages. It hurts and saddens us when we are called antinational by the media and others." **AGENCIES**

AP CM's sister plans new political outfit

HYDERABAD: Y. S. Sharmila, sister of Andhra Pradesh chief minister Y S Jagan Mohan Reddy, on Tuesday held talks with her late father's sympathisers here, triggering speculations of her possible political entry in Telangana.

Sharmila's father and late Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy, widely known as YSR, was the chief minister of united Andhra Pradesh from 2004 to 2009. The Congress leader died in a chopper crash in September 2009.

There have been rumours doing rounds on social media for the past few days that Sharmila plans to start a political party in Telangana without her brother's intervention.

She is believed to be in touch with some prominent political leaders, who were closely associated with late Rajasekhara Reddy, eliciting their suggestions and opinion on bringing Rajanna Rajyam (Rajasekhara Reddy's regime) in Telangana.

"I want to understand the ground realities, and want to take their suggestions and the information they have...I called people from the Nalgonda district. This is just a connection (with them)," she said after meeting with her supporters at her Lotus Pond residence in Hyderabad.

The meeting will be held with people from every district, she told the media before the meeting. Sharmila, however, did not directly respond when asked if she would launch a political party. "There is no Rajanna Rajyam now. Why should it not come?" she asked. To a query, she said, "Jagan Mohan Reddy is doing his job in AP, and I will do mine in Telangana." Sharmila and her mother Vijayamma had vigorously campaigned for the YSR Congress party during the general elections in 2019.

However, after Jagan's YSR Congress clinched a landslide victory and he took over the reins of AP, Sharmila was not seen much in public thereafter. **AGENCIES**

Shun populism, delay, dilution, diversion in development: Naidu

DOMINICK RODRIGUES
Mumbai

Delay, dilution or diversion should be avoided in reaching out development to people, while parliamentarians should shun populism in ensuring use of MPLADS funds for Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojna to develop villages as model villages, Vice Presidenti M. Venkaiah Naidu said during a virtual book release recently.

The book titled "Parliamentary Messenger in Rajasthan" and written by Dr K.N. Bhandari focuses on the health and education initiatives undertaken through the MPLAD Scheme on the recommendation of Dr Abhishek Singhvi in Rajasthan over 12 years from 2006 to 2018. The Vice President hoped that the book will serve as a guide for all stakeholders involved in the developmental work under MPLADS.

Since its inception in 1993, the Scheme witnessed Rs.52,810 crores being spent for completion of over 19 crore,47 thousand works alongside creating assets across the country that also saw high degree of involvement of local communities in the identification of works, Naidu said while lauding the Government's decision to put in place 'third party monitoring' of MPLADS works for ensuring their execution in a transparent manner, besides streamlining the processes for creation of assets through the scheme.

"Dr Singhvi underscored the importance of designing initiatives, which are both innovative and location-specific. Railway platform benches and ambulances on specific stretches of accident-prone roads or region specific initiatives -- like the setting up 'Piaos' in arid and parched areas of western Rajasthan -- are schemes that address critical needs of the people of this area, he said while highlighting suggestions made by parliamentary committees for improving the scheme through timely release and proper utilization of funds, monitoring mechanism for quality of works/projects and their timely completion, besides need for effective coordination between MPs and administrative authorities.

Noting decreasing level of debates in the House and politicians' image in people's eyes, the Vice President urged MPs to become role models in upholding dignity and decency in their duties. The Deputy Chairman of Rajya Sabha Harivansh, Union Minister Thawarchand Gehloi, Leader of Opposition in Rajya Sabha Ghulam Nabi Azad, Dr Abhishek Singhvi and other MPs participated in the virtual event.

Development is fine, but not at the cost of lives

The staggering collapse of part of a glacier in Uttarakhand's Nanda Devi mountain and the ensuing floods that have claimed many lives come as a deadly reminder that this fragile, geologically dynamic region can never be taken for granted. A significant slice of the glacier, dislodged by a landslide, according to some satellite images, produced roaring torrents in the Rishiganga and Dhauliganga rivers in Chamoli district, trapping unsuspecting workers at two hydro power project sites. Scores of people are still missing in the wave of water, silt and debris that swamped the rivers and filled tunnels in the Tapovan power project, although the immediate rescue of nearly 15 people by the ITBP, the Army and other agencies brings some cheer. The rescuers face a challenging environment as they try to locate more survivors and bring relief supplies to paralysed communities. These immediate measures are important, along with speedy compensation to affected families. But the Centre and the Uttarakhand government cannot ignore the larger context of the State's increasing frailty in the face of environmental shocks. Once the crucible of environmentalism, epitomised by Sunderlal Bahuguna, Gaura Devi and the Chipko movement, the State's deep gorges and canyons have attracted many hydroelectric projects and dams, with little concern for quake risk. Red flags have been raised repeatedly, particularly after the 1991 quake in the region where the Tehri dam was built and the 2013 floods that devastated Kedarnath, pointing to the threat from seismicity, dam-induced micro-seismicity, landslides and floods from a variety of causes, including unstable glacial lakes and climate change. India has heavily invested in dam development and growth of hydropower, mainly in the Himalaya region. But environmental implications of these projects should not be overlooked.

FIVE OBSERVATIONS

ON THE SELF-REGULATION CODE FOR OVER-THE-TOP CHANNELS

1 **ALL ASPECTS MUST BE LOOKED INTO**
The inexorable growth of OTT channels has infused creative talent into film-making, aided by absence of overbearing censors and vested interests. This development has both positive and negative aspects.

2 **A BALANCED CODE WILL BE HELPFUL**
The urgency of this code arises not from any challenge to law and order or morality posed by films, but the gauntlet of police and court cases that film-makers and the channels are now having to run.

3 **POLICY SHOULDN'T BE OPPRESSIVE**
Govts are lending support to the view that creative expression may be becoming too influential to be left free. The FIRs in UP against the Amazon Prime Video series, Tandav, is just an example.

4 **BAN MANUFACTURED OUTRAGE**
It is high time the Centre took a firm stand against displays of manufactured outrage and let newer channels of creativity flourish. More delay will lead to more confusion and chaos.

5 **PRESENT LAWS MAY BE REVIEWED**
A plethora of laws are available to assess based whether there has been an egregious violation of law, and this determination ought to be made by bodies representing a wide spectrum of civil society.

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MUKUL SANWAL EXPLORES HOW TWO ASIAN GIANTS CAN SHARE PROSPERITY AND BE INDEPENDENT OF EACH OTHER

Taking the long view with China

In late January, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said that while both India and China remained committed to a multipolar world, they should recognise that a "multipolar Asia" was one of its essential constituents. As it moves to becoming the third largest economy in the world, India needs to have a clear-eyed world view and strategy as it makes hard choices. It needs to reject the developing country regional mindset that has hobbled national aims and foreign policy.

The Year End Review of the Ministry of Defence pertinently refers to the "sanctity of our claims in Eastern Ladakh" instead of the term "border" used since 1954, opening space for a settlement. We are now confidently moving out of the predicament that Jawaharlal Nehru placed us in Kashmir, fully integrating it into the Indian Union and consolidating our claim line.

The External Affairs Ministry is also now more forthright. We have a "special and privileged strategic partnership" with Russia, which provides more than three-quarter of India's military equipment, and a "comprehensive global strategic partnership" with the U.S. despite the United States Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific, 2018, wishing that India sees the U.S. as its preferred partner on security issues. India's relationship with the U.S.-led Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), where the others are military allies, has rightly been cautious, as U.S. President Joe Biden sees China as a 'strategic competitor' rather than a 'strategic rival'. Realism dictates that India does not need to compromise on its strategic autonomy.img

The foreign policy challenge for India is really two sides of the China conundrum: defining engagement with its neighbour which is consolidating an expanding Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) while remaining involved with the strategic, security and technological concerns of the U.S. located across the vast Pacific Ocean. The U.S. 'Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments involving the People's Republic of China' cautions that U.S. aircraft carriers, symbols of the country's military hegemony, may not enjoy unquestioned dominance for much longer. Former President Barack Obama's military pivot to Asia failed to overawe China in the South China Sea and the costs of former President Donald Trump's trade tariffs were borne by American consumers and companies.

In the financial sphere, there is the real possibility of the Chinese renminbi becoming a global reserve currency or e-yuan becoming the digital payments currency. China is the world's largest trading economy. It could soon become the world's largest economy — the Fortune Global 500 list of the world's largest companies by revenue for the first

time contains more companies based in China, including Hong Kong, than in the U.S. The BRI countries are using the renminbi in financial transactions with China, and can be expected to use it in transactions with each other. Even the European Union, smarting under Mr. Trump's sanctions, created its own cross-border clearing mechanism for trade. China has stitched together an investment agreement with the EU and with most of Asia. Relative attractiveness will determine when the dollar goes the way of the sterling and the guilder. China, facing technological sanctions from the U.S., may well put in the hard work to make this happen soon.

Some form of the EU's China policy of seeing the emerging superpower as a partner, competitor, and economic rival depending on the policy area in question is going to be the global norm. The EU's reaching out to China despite misgivings of the U.S. means the West has given up on containing the rise of China. This broad perspective is also reflected in India's participation in both the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, led by Beijing and Moscow and designed to resist the spread of Western interests, and in the U.S.-led Quad, with its anti-China stance. Within the United Nations, India's interests have greater congruence with China's interests rather than the U.S.'s and the EU's; sharing the COVID-19 vaccine with other countries distinguishes India, and China, from the rest.

The congruence between India and the U.S. lies in the U.S.'s declared strategic objective of promoting an integrated economic development model in the Indo-Pacific as a credible alternative to the BRI, but with a caveat. China opening new opportunities for countries in the Eurasian landmass means that ASEAN will not easily move out of the BRI infrastructure, digital, finance and trade linkages; Sri Lanka is a recent example. The China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank has increased its membership to 100 countries. China is now the second-biggest financial contributor to the UN and has published more high-impact research papers than the U.S. did in 23 out of 30 "hot" research fields and enhancing its 'soft power' nearly to levels achieved by the U.S. earlier.

Instead of an alternate development model, India should move the Quad towards supplementing the infrastructure push of the BRI in line with other strategic concerns in the region. For example, developing their scientific, technological capacity and digital economy, based on India's digital stack and financial resources of other Quad members, will resonate with Asia and Africa.

Another area where India can play a 'bridging role' is global governance whose principles, institutions and structures now have to accommodate other views for issue-based understandings. President Xi Jinping's "community with shared future for mankind", and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "climate justice" and asking how long India will be excluded from the UN Security Council, challenge the frame of the liberal order without providing specific alternatives. With respect to digital data, the defining issue of the 21st century, India has recently expressed that there must be reciprocity in data sharing, and this is the kind of 'big idea' for sharing prosperity that will gain traction with other countries.

India's recent policies are gaining influence at the expense of China and the West, and both know this trend will accelerate. The steps to a $5 trillion economy, shift to indigenous capital military equipment, and a new Science, Technology and Innovation Policy underline impact, capacity and interests. ASEAN remains keen India re-join its trade pact to balance China. It is being recognised that India's software development prowess could shape a sustainable post-industrial state different to the U.S. and China model. As in the historical past, Asia is big enough for both Asian giants to have complementary roles, share prosperity and be independent of each other and of the West.

Mukul Sanwal is a former UN diplomat. Views expressed are his own

RAVI CHELLAM STRESSES ON THE NEED TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT BIODIVERSITY AND NATURAL ECOSYSTEMS

Moving towards sustainable growth

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught us many lessons. It made us realise that we are a part of nature and emphasised the urgent need to protect the ecological functions of the biosphere we live in. It has unequivocally highlighted how vital the health of the planet is for our individual and collective well-being as well as the growth of our economies.

The pandemic has resulted in huge economic losses. Globally, the GDP is expected to contract 2.4% to 8% in 2020. The World Economic Forum (WEF) estimates that the global cost of dealing with the pandemic could be from $8.1 trillion to $15.8 trillion. Preventing such pandemics will cost only a fraction of this amount, estimated at $22.2 billion to $30.7 billion a year, and this is without factoring in the human suffering.

We have to recognise that there would not be an economy without the natural environment. Global studies documenting human ecological footprint, the decline in wildlife populations, and the conversion rates of natural ecosystems for other uses, place India among countries experiencing the highest rates of negative change. This increases our vulnerability towards catastrophes, including pandemics. Additionally, there is a strong correlation between human density, richness of biodiversity, and the emergence of zoonotic pathogens of wild origin, which renders India particularly vulnerable. With high human densities —

among the highest diversity of mammals in the world — and a saturated interface between humans and wildlife, India is considered to be among the hotspots for zoonotic emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases.img

The WEF's Global Risks report for 2021 states that environmental risks continue to threaten the global economy. The top five risks are extreme weather, climate action failure, human environmental damage, infectious diseases and biodiversity loss. In terms of impact, infectious diseases top the list, followed by climate action failure. The top two risk response blind spots are climate action failure and biodiversity loss.

Our models of development and our notions about them have to change. Destruction of environment should no longer be justified in the name of development. Like all pandemics, COVID-19's emergence has been entirely driven by unchecked activities in the name of development. Rampant destruction of natural habitats, especially due to mining and infrastructure development, continued expansion and intensification of agriculture and animal husbandry as well as unrestrained consumption have disrupted nature, increased contact between wildlife, livestock, pathogens and people, setting the stage for the pandemic to take hold of our lives. Pandemic risk can be significantly lowered by reducing human activities that drive the loss of biodiversity as it will help prevent the spillover of new diseases.

A study by Swiss Re Institute published in 2020 introduces a new biodiversity and ecosystem services index. It found that globally, 20% of countries, including India, have fragile ecosystems. It also states that 55% of the global GDP depends on high-functioning biodiversity and ecosystem services.

It is evident that policymakers should factor biodiversity and ecosystems into their economic decision-making. This will accelerate the transition from a fossil fuel-based economy to sustainable, equitable, inclusive and just development models. The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review, commissioned by HM Treasury and released on February 2, 2021, highlights the grave risks faced by the world because of the failure of economics to take into account the rapid degradation of nature. The review stresses the need to find new measures for growth and development to avoid a catastrophic breakdown. The world's governments need to come up with a form of national accounting that is different from the GDP model, and the new system has to account for the depletion of nature and natural resources.

The evidence is overwhelming. All budgets need to reduce investments, including subsidies, in activities that will further degrade our natural habitats. By orders of magnitude, we should enhance investment in research in sustainability science.

A National Mission on Biodiversity and Human Well-Being has been approved by the Prime Minister's Science Technology and Innovation Advisory Council. The overarching objectives are to restore and enhance biodiversity, strengthen its sustainable use, generate thousands of green jobs and encourage the Indian public to appreciate the natural and associated cultural treasures that we have collectively inherited. This initiative has the potential to enable India to play a global leadership role in linking conservation with tangible human well-being outcomes.

Ravi Chellam is CEO, Metastring Foundation and is associated with Biodiversity Collaborative, Bengaluru. Views expressed are his own

BOOKS: REVIEW

CM face may be an issue for BJP in Bengal

The BJP's major problem in West Bengal will be its chief ministerial face for the 2021 assembly elections, according to a new book which also claims the party does not have a leader who can match the mass appeal of Mamata Banerjee.

In states like Uttar Pradesh, the BJP achieved success without projecting any chief ministerial candidate but will this be possible in West Bengal, journalist Sambit Pal asks in his book "The Bengal Conundrum: The Rise of the BJP and the Future of the TMC".

As West Bengal grapples with tumultuous times - from the controversy surrounding the National Register of Citizens (NRC) to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic - on the cusp of this crucial election, the BJP and the TMC are rolling their dices to win the strategic battle. "The BJP's major problem in Bengal will be the chief ministerial face for 2021 assembly election. There is already an internal feud on this issue," Pal argues.

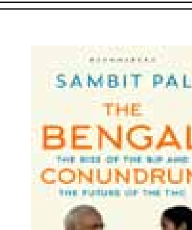
"The names of former Indian cricket captain Sourav Ganguly, Rajya Sabha member and journalist Swapan Dasgupta and even a monk of Ramakrishna Mission, Swami Kripakarananda, have already come up in media reports. Former governor of Tripura and Meghalaya and former BJP state president, Tathagata Roy, also openly threw his hat in the ring, expressing his desire to be the chief ministerial candidate," he writes. BJP leader Kailash Vijayvargiya has, however, asserted that the party would not go to the assembly elections with any chief ministerial candidate.

"The Bengal BJP has no such leader who can match the mass leader that Mamata Banerjee is. The TMC also knows this will be an advantage for them," the author claims. "While the BJP is all set to

> **The BJP's major problem in Bengal will be the chief ministerial face for 2021 election. There is already an internal feud on this issue, says the new book**

take up the issues of TMC's corruption, syndicate raj, bhatija-raj (targeting Abhishek Banerjee), Muslim appeasement and Mamata's opposition to NRC-CAA, Mamata Banerjee is depending on her fighter image and on rousing the Bengali sentiment," the book, published by Bloomsbury India, says.

In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP took its tally of seats from 2 to 18 and vote share of 17 to 40 per cent in just four years. A number of TMC leaders, including MPs and



The Bengal Conundrum: The Rise of the BJP and the Future of the TMC
By Sambit Pal
Bloomsbury India
320 pages; Rs799

MLAs have joined the BJP recently.

Banerjee has been asserting that only the TMC, being a Bengal-based political party, has the right to rule the state instead of the Narendra Modi-Amit Shah-led BJP.

In The Bengal Conundrum, senior journalist Sambit Pal attempts to explain why a state that was the citadel of Left politics for decades has turned Right in less than 10 years. Documenting the contemporary political history of Bengal, both through written and exclusive first-hand accounts, the author answers how Mamata Banerjee's politics and governance over the past few years set a fertile ground for the combined force of the BJP and the RSS to construct a compelling political narrative in Bengal.

As West Bengal grapples with tumultuous times-from the controversy surrounding the National Register of Citizens (NRC) to the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic-on the cusp of a crucial election, the BJP and the TMC are rolling their dices to win the strategic battle. Whether Mamata Banerjee wins or loses the 2020 state elections, it remains clear that politics in eastern India has changed irrevocably, and will be experiencing the aftereffects for years to come. Pal says there has been a sharp shift from politics over economic policies and livelihood to identity politics in the last decade in West Bengal. "In 2007-11, people in Bengal were discussing about rights and livelihood. The discussion was on the creation of jobs, farmland acquisition for industries and SEZs and investment in the state. In 2019-20, the discussion revolves around religious and social polarisation and corruption in the ruling party," he says.

The author claims that even though poll strategist Prashant Kishor has been trying his best to revive Mamata's as well as the party's image, "corruption at the grassroots level could not be eradicated completely".

ALSO READ | 'BUDGET REFLECTS DISMAL STATE OF ECONOMY' * P7 | RAILTEL UNVEILS IPO OF 87,153,369 EQUITY SHARES * P7

'Pvt sector plays key role in growth'

THE SECTOR MUST LIVE UP TO EXPECTATIONS, SAYS INDIA INC AFTER MODI'S REMARKS

NEW DELHI: India Inc on Thursday said Prime Minister Narendra Modi's acknowledgement of the private sector's role in India's growth, national progress and enhancing the country's prestige globally is a much-needed shot in the arm for entrepreneurs, and the industry must live up to the expectations.

Industry chamber FICCI hoped that the statement by Modi will lead to a fresh new discourse towards the national consensus on the role industry and enterprise play in this country. Industry leaders Anand Mahindra and Sajjan Jindal also took the PM's words as a great encouragement for the "community that has been creating wealth and jobs in the country".

FICCI President Uday Shankar said in a statement said, "At a time when the COVID-19-hit Indian industry is trying to pick up its rhythm of high growth, the prime minister's acknowledgement would be a much-needed shot in the arm for entrepreneurs and the business community."

They were referring to Modi's remarks praising the private sector on Wednesday during his reply in the Lok Sabha to the discussion on the Motion of Thanks to the President's address. Modi had stated that the public sector is essential but at the same time, the role of the private sector is also vital.

Shankar said, "We are grateful to him for the trust reposed in the private sector. While this speaks of the vision of the prime minister in the role played by the industry in nation building, it also puts enormous responsibility on the business community to rise up to keep national interest above everything else."

Expressing similar views, earlier in the day, Mahindra Group Chairman Anand Mahindra tweeted, "Welcome words of encouragement at a fragile time for private enterprise due to the pandemic. Now, we have to live up to the expectations...both in performance and governance."

Pitching for private enterprises, Modi in his address had also said there should be faith in the abilities of India's young population and everyone should get opportunities. The prime minister had cited the examples of telecom and pharma sectors to note as to how the robust presence of private firms in these fields has helped people, with even the poor using smartphones, and mobile calls costing virtually nothing due to competitiveness.

Similarly, JSW Group Chairman and MD Sajjan Jindal tweeted, "For the first time ever, a prime minister of our country has publicly shared his respect for the Indian entrepreneurs. This is great encouragement for the community that has been creating wealth and jobs in the country." Modi had said India is proud of the role of the private sector in national progress and in enhancing India's prestige globally. "To use improper words against the private sector may have got votes for a few people in the past but those times are gone. The culture of abusing the private sector is not acceptable any longer. We cannot keep insulting our youth like this," he had said.

Stating that the private sector contributes as much as 87 per cent to the GDP and almost 60 per cent to the employment in the country, Shanka said, "If India has to lift its teeming millions out of poverty, we need to create a national consensus to ensure that those who create jobs, economic value and a culture of enterprise are recognised for their contribution." **AGENCIES**

Emami scouts for acquisitions

NEW DELHI: FMCG major Emami Ltd is looking out for acquisitions both in India and international markets to strengthen its footprint, while also tapping at opportunities arising out the coronavirus pandemic, according to a senior company official.

The company, which is seeking to enhance the contribution of sales from e-commerce channel to 6-7 per cent in the next one to two years from the current 2.5-3 per cent of total sales, is scouting for opportunities to invest or buy majority stakes in digital first brands and companies.

"Of course. To grow inorganically has been one of the strategies for Emami since the last decade or more," Emami Ltd Director Harsha Vardhan Agarwal told PTI when asked if the company is seeking to tap acquisition opportunities arising out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Citing the examples of Emami's acquisitions of Zandu and Kesh King, he said,"Going forward also we are looking for good acquisition opportunities both in India as well as international markets, where we see good strategic fit and where we see the right value."

When asked if the company is currently in discussions for takeovers, Agarwal said,"Always, there is something on the table, honestly. Even now we are in touch with and have discussions with few companies. These are in India and are at a very preliminary stage." With up to Rs 400 crore of cash in hand and debt-free, he said for Emami budget for acquisition is not a constraint but the company is looking more at strategic fit and potential of the target brand.

"It can even be regional (brands). Some of the regional brands if we see the potential, we are always open for them," Agarwal added.

With the company working to enhance its presence in the digital channel, he said,"Apart from that (traditional brands) we are also always looking for opportunities to invest and also if needed buy majority (stakes) in digital first brands and companies."

Elaborating further, he said such an acquisition would be in the area where Emami operates or in newer categories and it will not only give the company increased presence in online channels but would also enhance its "learning curve in the area of digital".

"It is more in the area of product and services rather than too much technology but yes if there is any company which has some very good technology which has the potential to make an impact on our business, then we can always evaluate that," he added. **AGENCIES**

NEWSBRIEF

Welfare scheme for tea industry workers

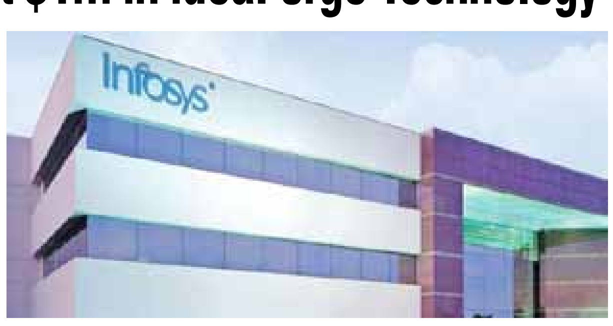
KOLKATA: Tea Board India on Wednesday said it is devising a special scheme for workers of the industry after the Centre proposed to provide Rs 1,000 crore in the budget for the welfare of labourers in tea estates in Assam and West Bengal. The board said it will submit the scheme to the Union ministry commerce and industry for its implementation. Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had announced that the government will provide Rs 1,000 crore for the welfare of tea workers especially women and their children in the two states. The board said the scheme will be centred around health, education and skill development. Around 6.23 lakh women workers are involved in the tea industry in Assam and West Bengal, it said in a statement, adding that the two states contribute around 81 per cent of the country's total production of the crop. According to the board, the tea industry showed tremendous resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the women workforce had made strenuous efforts to resume production during the crisis. The scheme will help increase the productivity of the women workers in the two states and improve their quality of life, it added. **AGENCIES**

InterGlobe Aviation pays ₹2.10 cr to SEBI

NEW DELHI: InterGlobe Aviation Ltd has settled a case with the Securities and Exchange Board of India involving alleged violation of corporate governance norms raised by its co-founder and director Rakesh Gangwal. The company paid ₹2.10 crore to the regulator. The company settled the matter "without admitting or denying any violation on its part," by paying a settlement charge of ₹2.1 crore, according to a SEBI order, reported PTI. The watchdog initiated an investigation against the airlines after it had received several complaints from Rakesh Gangwal alleging several violations. SEBI disposed of the proceedings against InterGlobe Aviation, reported Reuters. In July, 2019, Gangwal wrote to SEBI seeking its intervention to address corporate governance issues. Flagging concerns about certain questionable related party transactions, he had said shareholders' agreement provides co-promoter Rahul Bhatia unusual controlling rights over IndiGo. Bhatia camp had rejected the allegations. Based on the complaints, SEBI examined the issues and based on its investigation, a show cause notice was issued with respect to InterGlobe Aviation on 10 November, 2020. **AGENCIES**

Infosys to invest $1m in ideaForge Technology

NEW DELHI: IT services major Infosys on Thursday said it will invest an additional USD 1 million (about Rs 7.2 crore) in ideaForge Technology, a UAV systems manufacturing company.



In 2016, Infosys had announced investing in ideaForge, an Indian start-up focused on unmanned aerial vehicle or UAV solutions (drones).

"The company has agreed with ideaForge Technology... to invest an additional USD 1 million (earlier, the company had invested USD 1.5 million in 2016) taking the cumulative investment to USD 2.5 million as of date, subject to necessary closing conditions," Infosys said in a regulatory filing. The transaction is expected to be completed in the fourth quarter of FY21, it added.

The filing noted that Infosys has a minority holding, not exceeding 20 per cent of the outstanding share capital of the company.

"ideaForge"'s UAV systems are increasingly being used across a wide spectrum of organisations. Several customers of Infosys have also embraced UAV systems as they digitalise rapidly. The investment is intended to be utilised on R&D, sales, marketing, business development and working capital needs at ideaForge," it added.

This is expected to enhance joint capabilities to help Infosys customers better, the filing said.

Based out of Mumbai, ideaForge is known for rugged and high-precision UAV systems. The systems are used extensively for inspection, surveillance and mapping with integrated vertical solutions across defence, homeland security, mining, construction, agriculture, energy and utilities. **AGENCIES**

Budget to help resolve payment issues: IEEMA

NEW DELHI: Domestic electrical equipment makers expect budget proposals, including the revival scheme for discoms, would help resolve their payment-related issues with power distributing companies.

There will a number of other positive outcomes of the announcements made with respect to the power sector in the Budget, Anil Saboo, the President of the Indian Electrical & Electronics Manufacturers" Association (IEEMA) told PTI.

"We welcome the announcements made in the Budget (for power sector). These will help address several issues of our industry which include payment cycle stress. Power discoms owe about Rs 35,000 crore to our industry," Saboo told PTI. The viability of distribution companies is a serious concern, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman had said while presenting the Budget for 2021-22.

In the Budget, the minister proposed a scheme with an outlay of Rs 3.05 lakh crore over five years to revive discoms. The scheme will provide assistance to discoms for infrastructure creation including pre-paid smart metering and feeder separation, upgradation of power systems.

Saboo said the scheme will improve the financial condition of the discoms in the country and as a result of the same, their "payment cycle" to electrical equipment makers will improve. Another positive impact which the scheme will have on his industry, he said, would be that installations of pre-paid smart metering and feeder separation and upgradation of power systems will increase the demand for electrical equipment manufactured domestically.

"At present, we are able to sell only 50 per cent of our total produced goods in India due to less demand against cheap imported items. But due to increased infrastructure, we will be able to supply more in the market," he said, without sharing an estimate.

On the proposal of a framework to give power consumers alternatives to choose from more than one distribution companies, the IEEMA President said this will give more power into the hands of consumers. This will help small units in the country across sectors to reduce their cost of production. Saboo said in Uttar Pradesh prices of electricity for industry varies between Rs 6-7.50 a unit, while in Rajasthan it is as high as 8.50 per unit and in Punjab Rs 5.15 a unit. However, a choice in choosing a discom will help users both domestic and industrial with cheap electricity and better power supply. **AGENCIES**

DTH structure attractive: Airtel

NEW DELHI: The DTH market proposition continues to be "attractive" in the medium to long run, given the current structure, the upside opportunity from cable conversion, and current niche play of streaming services, Bharti Airtel CEO Gopal Vittal has said.

Airtel, which added about 485,000 customers in Direct-to-Home (DTH) television segment and logged a sequential revenue growth of just under 5 per cent, said it is now number two player in the DTH space. Its Digital TV services customer base stood at 1.78 crore as on December 2020.

"In fact, one of the highlights of this business is its competitive and consistent performance. We believe, we have outstripped all other players in terms of revenue growth. We also believe that on a like-to-like basis, we are now clearly the number two player in the DTH industry," Vittal said during an investor call post Q3 results announcement by Bharti Airtel, earlier this week.

On the outlook for DTH business, Vittal said the structure of the industry still made it "attractive" in the medium to long term. "...the price structure in India on the linear television side is very, very low when compared to most of the markets," he said. Moreover, the upside opportunity to convert from cable, is high. "The price structure is such that it"s a small amount to pay to get channels that you may still want to consume along with streaming services," Vittal said.

Also, streaming services are still a niche industry in India, given that the cost structure of streaming is contingent on more broadband penetration as also payment for the content, he said adding that DTH segment, therefore, continues to hold promise in the medium term. The Digital TV services revenue for Airtel was at Rs 789.2 crore in the just-ended quarter. **AGENCIES**

Pharma market likely to hit $130 billion by 2030

NEW DELHI: The Indian pharmaceutical industry has proved to be a dependable supplier of quality drugs in a time of global need on account of the COVID-19 pandemic, and is expected to reach a size of USD 130 billion by 2030, Chemical and Fertiliser Minister D V Sadananda Gowda said on Monday.

Following the onset of the pandemic, the Indian pharma industry has shown its role as a reliable supplier of drugs and medical devices in a time of need, he added. "The total market size of the Indian pharma industry is expected to reach USD 130 billion by 2030. The medical devices industry in India has the potential to grow at 28 per cent per annum to reach USD 50 billion by 2025," Gowda said. He was addressing the curtain raiser press conference on the 6th edition of "Indian Pharma & India Medical Device 2021".

"India has been serving more than 200 countries with its pharma products and will continue to discharge its responsibilities. We intend to continue formulating plans that are based on sound science, technology, business sense, and ethics," Gowda said. Pharmaceuticals are one of the top-10 attractive sectors for foreign investment in India. FDI inflows in the pharmaceuticals sector reached Rs 3,650 crore in 2019-20, recording a growth of 98 per cent year-on-year, he added.

"While India will continue to strive to achieve and maintain a leadership position in the manufacturing and supply of high-quality generic medicines and medical devices, we also need to look at how to improve access to medical care," Gowda said.

At this year"s edition, "we would like to deliberate upon strategies to help us innovate and bring newer and affordable therapies to the market and cement India"s position as a truly world-class favoured investment destination," he added.

Emphasising the importance of India for the inoculation against COVID-19 globally, Minister of State for Chemicals and Fertilisers Mansukh Mandaviya said India has already made two COVID-19 vaccines and has supplied them to 12 countries. **AGENCIES**

ESDM firms diversify manufacturing base from China to India

NEW DELHI: Four firms in the electronic system design manufacturing (ESDM) sector have diversified their manufacturing base from China to India, Parliament was informed on Wednesday.

Replying to a written question in the Lok Sabha, Minister of State for Commerce and Industry Som Parkash said there are several companies that have indicated their plan/interest to relocate their bases.

He also said that employment for 31,509 people is likely to be generated from the relocation projects at present.

"4 companies in the ESDM sector have diversified their manufacturing base from China to India," he added.

In a separate reply, Parkash said that till January 27 this year, 1,402 startups are recognised by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT).

It had recognised 14,778 startups in 2019.

"An amount of Rs 4,376.95 crore has been committed by SIDBI to 62 Alternative Investment Funds (AIFs) out of the Fund of Funds for startups as on January 31, 2021," he added.

Replying to a separate question on the export of COVID vaccine, Minister of State for Commerce and Industry Hardeep Singh Puri said that vaccines, including COVID vaccines, are covered under a common ITC HS codes.

In trade parlance, every product is categorised under a code. It helps in the systematic classification of goods across the globe.

India's export of vaccines, including COVID vaccines, stood at around USD 353 million during April-January 2020-21. "Government has granted permission to Serum Institute of India Pvt, Ltd., Pune and Bharat Biotech International Ltd, Hyderabad for the manufacture of COVID-19 vaccines. **AGENCIES**

Western Railway highlights cargo growth, video security

DOMINICK RODRIGUES
Mumbai

The Western Railway held a webinar recently to assess and encourage railway freight customers potential during the present financial year. The virtual meeting was held following the freight customers specific gratitude for recent policy changes that encouraged them to offer higher volume of traffic to Railways.

This webinar was attended by around 80 participants from Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. These included over 40 representatives of various parties, including major customers like Adani Port, Reliance Industries, Gandhidham Chamber of Commerce, IFFCO, GNFC, ONGC, IOC, Ultratech cement, Wonder cement, CTA Logistics, GPPL, KRIBHCO, TCL etc.

Urging Rail customers to use the Railways e-portal (Freight Business Development portal) and take advantage of the recent policy reforms issued by Railway Board for development of goods sheds on PPP model, Alok Kansal, General Manager, Western Railway, called for using the customers CSR fund for development of Railway Goods sheds and other facilities.

While the WR has already crossed loading of 66 Million Tonnes in generating revenue of above Rs 8000 Crores through freight movement, it is expected to cross 82 Miiliion Tonne Loading to surpass revenue generation of Rs. 10,000 Crore in freight, he said, adding that the Western Railway was first to surpass 100-Crore mark in parcel revenue by generating Rs 145 crores in the month of November, 2020 itself.

Meanwhile, the Western Railway recently set up a "Centralised Video Surveillance System Control Room" at Churchgate in Mumbai as part of the Indian Railways efforts to enhance security at Railway stations, which are major hubs of transportation.

"The Railways is in the process of installing Internet Protocol (IP) based Video Surveillance System (VSS) at stations, including waiting halls, reservation counters, parking areas, main entrance/ exit, platforms, foot over bridges, booking offices etc. The Railway Board has approved works for provision of Video Surveillance System covering 983 stations over Indian Railways under Nirbhaya Fund," Kansal said, adding that the new surveillance system will ensure safety of passengers especially women & children,on station premises through integration of camera feed of all stations at Security Control Room at Churchgate station, he said.

RailTel- a Miniratna PSU under Ministry of Railways, has been entrusted with the work of providing IP-based VSS with video analytics and facial recognition system. By December 3, 2020, around 250 railway stations across India were provided VSS, Puneet Chawla, CMD/RailTel said, adding "We are working on providing similar centralized monitoring centres in other Zonal Railways also, besides work continuing on schedule in other stations as well."

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Life insurance net down 8.4 per cent

24 LIFE INSURANCE COMPANIES POST PROFIT WORTH RS 7,728.30 CRORE IN 2019-20

NEW DELHI: The life insurance industry registered a decline of 8.4 per cent in net profit at Rs 7,728.30 crore in 2019-20, Irdai's annual report showed on Wednesday.

The 24 life insurance companies had posted profit after tax of Rs 8,435.81 crore in 2018-19.

"During the financial year 2019-20, the life insurance industry reported a profit after tax of Rs 7,728 crore as against Rs 8,436 crore in 2018-19. Out of the 24 life insurers in operation during the year, 17 companies reported profits," said the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (Irdai) Annual Report 2019-20.

The country's largest and only state-owned life insurer LIC registered a modest increase of 0.9 per cent in net profit at Rs 2,712.71 crore during the year as against Rs 2,688.50 crore in the preceding fiscal.

The remaining 23 private sector players registered a decline of 12.7 per cent in their collective net profit at Rs 5,015.59 crore as against Rs 5,747.31 crore in FY19.

Irdai said the investment income (excluding dividend distribution tax) of all the life insurers during the year was down by 18 per cent at Rs 2.34 lakh crore. LIC's investment income grew by 6 per cent to Rs 2.37 lakh crore.

On the other hand, the private sector companies faced loss with investment income (including the negative movement in the fair value of unit linked assets) coming in at (-) Rs 3,105.97 crore. There was investment income of Rs 61,158.07 crore in 2018-19.

During the year 2019-20, LIC proposed Rs 2,698 crore as dividend to the Government of India (shareholder), as against Rs 2,661 crore in 2018-19.

Six private life insurers paid/ proposed dividends of Rs 1,216 crore, down from Rs 1,781.26 crore a year ago.

The six players who paid out dividends in FY20 were ICICI Prudential, Max Life, Shriram Life, Bajaj Allianz, Star Union Dai-ichi Life and IDBI Federal Life.

In total, the dividend paid by the life insurers was at Rs 3,913.49 crore in FY20, down by 11.9 per cent from Rs 4,441.86 crore in the previous fiscal year.

Irdai said Sahara India Life Insurance had declared dividend of Rs 23.20 crore for FY18-19, which was cancelled on the directions of the Authority.

With regard to death claims, the insurers settled as many as 8,74,849 claims, with a claim settlement ratio of 96.76 per cent. While LIC settled 7,58,916 claims (96.69 per cent), the collective settlement by the remaining private sector players was 1,15,933 (97.18 per cent).

Further, Irdai said during the first decade of insurance sector liberalisation, the sector has reported increase in insurance penetration from 2.71 per cent in 2001 to 5.20 per cent in 2009.

Insurance penetration is measured as the percentage of insurance premium to GDP.

"Since then the level of penetration was declining and reached 3.30 per cent in 2014. However, the insurance penetration started again increasing from 2015 and in 2019, penetration was 3.76 per cent," said the annual report.

Insurance density, which is calculated as the ratio of premium to population (per capita premium), has reported consistent increase from USD 11.5 in 2001 to USD 64.4 in 2010.

Since then, the level of density was declining up to 2016. However, it started increasing from 2017 and in the year 2019, the insurance density was USD 78, said the insurance regulator. Measure of insurance penetration and density reflects the level of development of insurance sector in a country. **AGENCIES**

FDI cap hike to raise insurance penetration

NEW DELHI: Implementation of the Budget proposal to raise the foreign direct investment (FDI) limit in the insurance sector to 74 per cent will help attract overseas capital and enhance insurance penetration in the country, according to experts.

Deloitte India Partner and Financial Services Industry Leader Sanjoy Datta said the announcement to raise the FDI cap in the sector was a much-awaited move by the government. It is in direct recognition of the requirement for significant capital inflows to provide adequate levels of insurance cover to the population, he added.

The proposed increase in FDI would also likely result in increased value for customers by way of more product options at reduced costs, he said.

"We see a possibility of select foreign partners in existing insurance JV"s (joint venture) seeking to increase ownership levels, attractive valuation for exits for existing investors (domestic and foreign) as well as the entry of new investors who prefer majority equity holding in the entity," he added.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in her Budget Speech 2021 proposed to amend the Insurance Act, 1938, to increase the permissible FDI limit from 49 per cent to 74 per cent in insurance companies and allow foreign ownership and control with safeguards.

Shardul Amarchand Mangaldas & Co. Partner Shailaja Lall said a more liberal FDI policy will certainly attract higher amounts of foreign capital, which will aid in increasing insurance penetration in India.

"While this is a welcome move by the government, foreign investors will certainly view this development with "a pinch of salt" and like to take a cautious approach. Much will depend upon the fine print of the conditions being proposed," Lall said.

She added that once there is more clarity, it will need to be seen as to how many foreign investors are willing to infuse capital, without the ability to control the board.

"Any conditionality and regulatory approvals attached to payment of dividends to foreign investors may add another level of complexity. It is possible that the Irdai may also prescribe certain conditions to safeguard policyholder moneys," she said. **AGENCIES**

NEWSBRIEF

Finance Bill proposes amendments for FPIs

NEW DELHI: The finance ministry on Thursday said the Finance Bill has proposed amendments permitting foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) an entry into debt financing of emerging investment vehicles REITs and InvITs. In the Union Budget for 2021-22, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman proposed to permit FPIs to invest in listed debt securities issued by REITs and InvITs. In this context, the Government of India as part of the Finance Bill, 2021, has proposed amendments in the Securities Contracts (Regulation) Act, 1956 and Securities and Exchange Board of India Act, 1992. Amendments have also been proposed in the Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002 and the Recovery of Debts Due to Banks and Financial Institutions Act, 1993. **AGENCIES**

SBI crosses Rs 5trn-mark in home loan business

MUMBAI: State Bank of India (SBI) on Wednesday said it has crossed the Rs 5 trillion-mark in its home loan business. The real estate and housing business (REHBU) unit of the bank has grown five times in the last 10 years with an asset under management (AUM) of Rs 89,000 crore in 2011 to Rs 5 trillion in 2021. "This extraordinary feat is a testament to customers" continuous trust in the bank. We feel that combining technology with personalised service is the key in the current scenario," the bank"s chairman Dinesh Khara said. The bank is also working on various digital initiatives to improve the efficiencies in home loan delivery, including a unique integrated platform Retail Loan Management System (RLMS) which will provide an end-to-end digital solution, he added. **AGENCIES**

Officer booked for pension fund fraud

JAMMU: The Jammu and Kashmir Police on Wednesday booked a former Finance department official for being allegedly involved in misappropriating pension funds to the tune of over Rs 25 lakh, an official said. The case against ex-head cashier of Reasi Treasury Thakur Dass was registered following a written communication from Deputy Director (Central), Accounts and Treasuries, Finance department, Mohammad Iqbal Ganaie, a spokesperson of the Crime Branch, Jammu, said. The complainant alleged Dass, who was entrusted with the payment of pensions to the rightful claimants and have domain over the government exchequer, deliberately and fraudulently credited Rs 24,85,340 into an account of his daughter-in-law, Madhu Rani, and also transferred Rs 31,775 into his personal account by misusing his official position, he said. **AGENCIES**

Nashik bank faces withdrawal curbs

MUMBAI: The RBI has put restrictions on withdrawals from Independence Co-operative Bank Limited, Nashik because of the lender"s present liquidity position.

However, 99.89 per cent of the depositors are fully covered by the Deposit Insurance and Credit Guarantee Corporation (DICGC) insurance scheme, the Reserve Bank said in a statement on Wednesday.

As per the insurance scheme, every depositor in a bank is entitled to receive deposit insurance claim amount of his/her deposits up to Rs 5 lakh from the DICGC.

The restrictions will remain in force for a period of six months.

"Considering the bank"s present liquidity position, no amount from the total balance across all savings bank or current accounts or any other account of a depositor, may be allowed to be withdrawn, but are allowed to set off loans against deposits subject to... conditions...," the central bank said.

The RBI has also put certain other restrictions on the bank from the close of business on Wednesday.

It said the chief executive Officer of the bank will not, without prior approval of RBI, grant or renew any loans and advances, make any investment, incur any liability, and disburse any payment, among others.

It further said the issue of the directions to Independence Co-operative Bank Limited should not per se be construed as cancellation of banking licence by RBI.

The bank will continue to undertake banking business with restrictions till its financial position improves, it added. **AGENCIES**

PNB, Indian Oil sign loan deal

THE MoU WILL BENEFIT DEALERS WITH CREDIT FACILITIES AT LOWER INTEREST RATES, NIL MARGIN, AND WITH MINIMUM OR ZERO COLLATERAL REQUIREMENTS THROUGH THE PNB E-DEALER SCHEME

NEW DELHI: State-owned Punjab National Bank (PNB) on Wednesday said it has inked a pact with Indian Oil Corporation to provide up to Rs 2 crore to the oil company"s dealers.

Punjab National Bank (PNB) signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with India Oil Corporation Ltd to cater to the financing needs of the IndianOil dealers, the bank said in a release.

The MoU would benefit dealers with credit facilities at lower interest rates, nil margin, and with minimum or zero collateral requirements through the PNB e-Dealer scheme, it said.

Understanding the financial requirements and providing ease of banking services, PNB electronic dealer finance scheme is a tailormade credit lending product crafted for the Indian Oil dealers, the lender added.

The loan can be availed maximum up to Rs 2 crore with zero-margin. Also, PNB said it will not ask for any collateral security from those having dealership with Indian Oil of 5 years or more.

Existing proprietorship, partnership, LLP, company, trust, society having a valid dealership agreement with Indian Oil can avail the scheme.

"This MoU is of special significance as the Indian MSME sector is gearing up to serve the nation's growing demand in the post-pandemic times. PNB, with its offering of the most diverse and customised bouquet of products, is looking forward to bringing value to the entire ecosystem of dealer inventory financing starting with this best-in-class eDealer Scheme with IndianOil," Rajeev Puri, Chief General Manager, MSME Division, PNB, said.

This first of its kind deal will pave the way for future speciality financing products that PNB 2.0 look forward to unveil, Puri said. **AGENCIES**

Index-linked insurance products advised

THE WORKING GROUP RECOMMENDS THAT UNDER ULIPS, A SEGREGATED FUND MAY ALSO BE ALLOWED TO BE OFFERED AS AN OPTION WITH AN OPTION TO INVEST IN ASSETS CONFIRMING TO A CHOSEN INDEX

NEW DELHI: An Irdai panel has made a case for the introduction of index-linked insurance products (ILIP) an apt alternative to the current conventional guaranteed products and ULIPs.

In August last year, the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (Irdai) had constituted a working group (WG) for the purpose of examining the need of index linked products in India. The panel has submitted its report to the regulator on which comments have been invited till March 8.

The report said the relevance of ILIP is further enhanced, in the current context of volatile investment markets leading to the customer preference for guarantees. And, it has therefore possibly resulted in the current industry practice of selling significant amount of guaranteed products with plausible increased balance sheet risk for the insurers.

"The WG therefore believes that ILIPs could be an apt alternative or complimentary option to the current conventional guaranteed products (including annuities and savings products) and ULIPs, particularly in the context of volatile investment markets/ stressed interest rates," it said. For the annuity product with return of purchase price, the recommendation of the panel is to allow resetting of annuity rates with reference to a specified index on top of the minimum stipulated guarantees at stated periodicity.

The customer concerns are to be taken care of with a properly disclosed benchmark index, besides offering the customers a choice to change the annuity option, to switch the full amount to other form of annuities or opt for open market option. This will reduce the risks for insurers as well as enhance the customer value and options for the annuitants and pensioners, it said.

"The working group recommends that under ULIPs, a segregated fund may also be allowed to be offered as an option with an option to invest in assets confirming to a chosen index," the report said.

It notes that a need exists to have ILIP which would not only give more options and alternatives to the policyholders to choose from, but also could help the insurers to manage their asset liability management risks in a better way. **AGENCIES**

Bankers plan strike to oppose PSBs' privatisation

NEW DELHI: The United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU), an umbrella body of nine unions, on Tuesday gave a call for a two-day strike from March 15 to protest against the proposed privatisation of two state-owned lenders.

In the Union Budget presented last week, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced the privatisation of two Public Sector Banks (PSBs) as part of its disinvestment plan.

The government has already privatised IDBI Bank by selling its majority stake in the lender to LIC in 2019 and merged 14 public sector banks in the last four years.

It has been decided to oppose the government"s decision to privatise banks during the meeting of UFBU held on Tuesday, All India Bank Employees Association (AIBEA) general secretary C H Venkatachalam said.

"The meeting discussed the various announcements made in the budget of the central government regarding reform measures like privatisation of IDBI Bank and two PSBs, setting up of bad bank, disinvestment in LIC, privatisation of one general insurance company, allowing FDI in insurance sector up to 74 per cent, aggressive disinvestment and sale of public sector undertakings, etc," he said.

The meeting observed that all these measures are retrograde and hence need to be opposed, he added.

After deliberations, it was decided to give the call for a two-day -- March 15 and March 16 -- strike against the government"s moves, AIBOC general secretary Soumya Datta said.

Members of UFBU include All India Bank Employees Association (AIBEA), All India Bank Officers" Confederation (AIBOC), National Confederation of Bank Employees (NCBE), All India Bank Officers" Association (AIBOA) and Bank Employees Confederation of India (BEFI).

Others are Indian National Bank Employees Federation (INBEF), Indian National Bank Officers Congress (INBOC), National Organisation of Bank Workers (NOBW) and National Organisation of Bank Officers (NOBO). **AGENCIES**

Health insurance eyes higher double-digits growth

WHILE COVID-19-LIKE SCENARIOS WOULD BE RARE EVENTS, IT WOULD INCREASE THE PREMIUM PRICING FOR THE ENTIRE POPULACE, WITH EXTRA CARE NEEDED FOR THE TREATMENT OF INFECTIOUS DISEASES

MUMBAI: Health insurance segment, which has seen strong growth over the last five years, will continue to witness a higher double-digit growth in the medium term helped by low penetration, according to a report.

During FY15-FY20, the segment expanded by a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 20 per cent.

"We expect the sector to grow at higher double digits in the medium term, with private players growing even faster as they have been gaining market share over public sector firms and also because of the increase in premium prices due to medical inflation," India Ratings and Research said in a report.

The agency said it is essential for insurers to maintain adequate buffers over the regulatory minimum so as to be prepared for any unforeseen risk events.

With the increasing standardisation of policies with an incremental reduction in exclusion, there could be upward pressure on premium pricing, it said.

Also, the COVID-19 outbreak has led to an increase in claim severity across insurers, as the lack of standard rates between hospitals has led to higher outflows, it said.

"While COVID-19-like scenarios would be rare events, it would increase the premium pricing for the entire populace, with extra care needed for the treatment of infectious diseases," the report said.

It said the profitability of a large number of health insurers is largely driven by investment income, as many are yet to achieve underwriting profitability.

With interest rates remaining subdued for a medium duration due to ample liquidity in the system, there would be pressure on the profitability of insurers, the agency said.

It said the incremental use of the new technology (such as blockchain) would be immensely advantageous for the segment.

Technology would help reduce redundancy and duplication through seamless and real-time transaction recording across various insurance business process flows comprising contracting, underwriting, claim processing, distribution and historical tracking of documents, the report added.

There is a great need for real-time technology for reimbursement-based claims, wherein customers need real-time monitoring of the status at each step of the health insurance claim, the report said.

"Thus, technology can play an important role in controlling insurers" operating expenses, which forms a large part of the overall cost, with the claim ratio and investment income being volatile at times based on the operating environment," it said.

The agency said it expects significant solvency buffers to be maintained, on an ongoing basis, for its rated issuers. **AGENCIES**

PFC net profit rises 17% at Rs 3,963 crore

NEW DELHI: State-run Power Finance Corporation (PFC) on Thursday posted a 17 per cent jump in its consolidated net profit at Rs 3,963.18 crore for the quarter ended in December.

The firm"s consolidated net profit was at Rs 3,386.72 crore in the year-ago period, a BSE filing said.

The firm"s total income rose to Rs 18,441.72 crore in the quarter under consideration from Rs 15,878.04 crore in the same period a year ago.

On the pandemic"s impact, the company said that there will not be a significant impact of this outbreak in continuing its business operations, maintaining its financial position, and assessing its ability to continue as a going concern.

Commenting on the results, PFC Chairman and Managing Director R S Dhillon said: "I am happy to see that PFC has so far navigated the pandemic well with a high level of resilience. This quarter results are a testament to this. With Indian economy getting back on track of recovery, I feel positively about the recovery in Indian power sector."

" I believe that PFC is in a strong financial position to leverage on attractive growth opportunities."

PFC Director Finance Parminder Chopra said, "3rd quarter has been remarkable for PFC with quarterly profit reaching an all-time high. Our overall third-quarter results reflect the strong operational strength and solid fundamentals of PFC in a continuing challenging environment."

According to a statement, under the Aatma Nirbhar Discoms liquidity support announced by the GOI, PFC & its subsidiary REC Ltd combined together, have so far sanctioned Rs 1,35,497 crore (loans to state utilities) and disbursed Rs 46,074 crore. The company has reduced consolidated net NPA (non-performing assets or bad loans) ratio from 3.56 per cent in Q3"20 (third quarter of 2019-20) to 2.12 per cent in Q3"21 (third quarter of 2020-21) due to resolution of stressed assets, it said. **AGENCIES**

BUDGET 2021 SLAMMED

OPPOSITION LEADERS IN RS TERM THE BUDGET AS ONE 'FOR THE RICH AND BY THE RICH'

NEW DELHI: Opposition parties in the Rajya Sabha on Thursday termed the union budget for 2021-22 as one "for the rich and by the rich" that reflected a "painful story" of the country and bankruptcy of its economy.

Various parties including the Congress, TMC, SP and left parties hit out at the government over the state of the economy and rising unemployment and alleged that the Modi dispensation was out to sell the country"s assets.

Participating in the debate on the union budget, Congress leader P Chidambaram tore into the government for presenting a "disappointing" budget and described it as a "budget for the rich, of the rich and by the rich" meant for only "one per cent of India"s population controlling 73 per cent wealth".

Rejecting the budget, the former finance minister hit out at the ruling dispensation, charging it with "incompetent economic management".

Participating in a debate on the budget, he said, "The sub-text is, this is a budget for the rich, of the rich and by the rich.... There is nothing for the poor people of India, who continue to suffer.... This is a budget for those one per cent who control 73 per cent of India"s wealth."

He said the government is in denial about the slowdown in the economy and believed that the problem in the economy is cyclical and not structural.

"Two years of slowdown before the coronavirus is a reality," he said.

Chidambaram alleged that the country has witnessed three years of "incompetent economic mismanagement".

"Mark my words, the growth projections will fall short by the end of 2021," the former finance minister asserted. TMC member Sukhendu Sekhar Ray said the budget reflects the bankruptcy in the Indian economy.

"The Budget has shown certain dreams that even the Economic Survey has not talked about them," he said.

Stating that the budget outlines a "painful story", Ray said neither does it have the government"s story nor that of the Opposition or that of the common man. All it has is a painful story, he alleged.

He further said the Economic Survey pegged the country"s growth at 11 per cent for the 2021-22 fiscal but the Budget document projected more than this at 14.4 per cent.

"On January 4, the World Bank global report estimated India"s GDP to plunge 9.6 per cent. However, a spokesperson of the government says such a report should not be relied upon. Till date, we don"t know about the revised estimate. How do we reject the World Bank Report and how do we trust your figures," he asked.

Budget 2021

Ignoring these reports, the government is showing the dream of "Atmanirbhar Bharat" to everyone, he added.

On labour laws, the Trinamool Congress leader said the six labour laws have been amended for the benefit of corporates and termed it as an "anti-labour step".

"The hire and fire policy shall prevail upon the working conditions of the workers. The working hours will be extended from 8 hours to 12 hours at the dictates of corporates. This is going to happen when the labour laws will be implemented," Ray said, asking, "Who will give the consent? If employees don"t give, they will lose their jobs".

There is a "vast army" of unemployed people and it will lead to a law and order problem in the coming days, he warned.

CPI (M) member Elamaram Kareem said the Union Budget is very disappointing and it has failed miserably in addressing the present situation.

He said the Budget is far away from the ground realities and is "cruelly insensitive" to the sufferings of the toiling mass. "This budget looks like a sales advertisement. Everything is for sale here," he alleged.

Manoj Jha of RJD said earlier it used to be a budget for general people but since the 1990s it has become "khaas" (special) budget. He said the budget has failed to address the current challenges.

Jha also criticised the government for privatisation, including Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC).

Samajwadi Party (SP) leader Vishambhar Prasad Nishad said he does not think that the government"s plan about doubling the income of farmers will succeed and pointed out that there is no provision for the farm-allied sectors in the budget.

"The budget is a bundle of untrue bluffs," he said.

The budget will increase the disparity between the rich and the poor and it is very disappointing for farmers, wage-earners and small traders, Nishad said. **AGENCIES**

FY22 real GDP to grow at 10.4%

MUMBAI: India's real GDP will grow at 10.4 per cent in FY22, after a 7.8 per cent contraction in the pandemic-impacted FY21, India Ratings and Research said on Wednesday.

The domestic ratings agency, however, made it clear that the higher growth in FY22 will be due to the low base and from a trend growth perspective, India will still be at a lower level at the end of the next fiscal.

"This fiscal year (FY21) is giving us the worst growth in independent India, next fiscal will be the best because of the base effect because we have slowed down so much this year," its Chief Economist Devendra Pant told reporters on a call.

The agency has a "cautiously optimistic" view on the Indian economy at present, he said, welcoming a slew of Budget measures including the transparency and credible assumptions it makes.

However, consumption, which has been the mainstay of growth for many years, has been lagging. After consecutive years of slowing growth and now a contraction, the rational consumer has decided to cut down on expenses, he said.

Economic growth potential has slipped to not more than 5 to 6 per cent as against the 7.5 to 8 per cent levels it was pegged at before the beginning of the growth slowdown in FY17, the agency's Principal Economist Sunil Kumar Sinha said.

He said the 15th Finance Commission also assumes a similar growth trajectory in the medium term and warned that pump-priming the economy to achieve more than potential will lead to inflationary pressures.

Sinha further said the economy will be merely covering the lost ground of FY21 in the next fiscal, and if looked at from a longer term lens, it will be only a marginal recovery.

The agency expects headline retail inflation to cool down to 4.3 per cent in FY22, which is still above the RBI's mid-term target of 4 per cent, and hence expects a longish pause for 6-9 months more from the central bank, he said.

Sinha said from a consumption growth perspective, the recently announced Budget indeed has some measures but rued that it ignores the bottom of the pyramid, as there are no specific measures towards that base.

He pointed out that there has been a cut in the spends towards rural employment guarantee as well, which can be seen as being indicative of the government's confidence in the recovery wherein it feels that economic growth in itself will lead to a betterment of conditions for the target population.

Pant added that the government has conceded to taking a relook at the MNREGA spends if the conditions so arise during the course of the year.

From a revenue gathering perspective, while a bulk of the budgetary targets are realistic, there is an overdependence on the divestment programme, he said.

"The recovery in the economy is clearly on. But we are some distance away from fully recovering from where we were before the pandemic and the lockdowns," Pant said. The agency also lauded the Reserve Bank for doing a "phenomenal" job in supporting the economy through the pandemic. **AGENCIES**

Disclosure format created under insider trading rules

NEW DELHI: Capital markets watchdog Sebi on Tuesday came out with a new format for disclosures to be made under the insider trading norms.

In light of amendments to the PIT Regulations affecting the inclusion of members of the promoter group, and designated person in place of employee and on the basis of feedback received from market participants and exchanges, the relevant disclosure formats have been suitably revised, Sebi said in a circular.

Under the new format, details of securities held upon becoming a member of the promoter group of a listed company and immediate relatives of such persons need to be disclosed, besides, any change in shareholding also needs to be disclosed.

In September, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) had decided to implement system-driven disclosures for members of the promoter group, directors and designated persons of a listed company.

The system-driven disclosures in the securities market were first introduced in December 2015 and are being implemented in a phased manner.

"It has now been decided to implement the system-driven disclosures for member(s) of promoter group and designated person(s) in addition to the promoter(s) and director(s) of the company...under the PIT Regulations," Sebi had said that time. **AGENCIES**

Study to assess impact of SC, NGT decisions

NEW DELHI: Government think tank Niti Aayog has commissioned a study to assess the "unintended" economic impact of select decisions of the Supreme Court and the National Green Tribunal and to review if the stated objective behind the judicial pronouncements was met, according to a project brief document.

Jaipur-based CUTS International has been asked to do the study on the apex court rulings on halting consultation of Mopa Airport in Goa, stopping iron ore mining in Goa, and shutting down Sterlite Copper's Tuticorin plant in Tamil Nadu.

While an email sent to Niti Aayog spokesperson remained unanswered, CUTS International director Amol Kulkarni confirmed receiving the mandate.

"This study will ex-post examine the unintended economic consequences of key judicial/ quasi judicial decisions and review if the objective of the judicial decision was met," according to the CUTS International project brief document.

As per the document, to highlight the economic impact, five cases have been selected of which three were decided by the Supreme Court and the other two by the National Green Tribunal.

"Judicial decisions have far-reaching economic impacts which are often not taken into account at the time of decision making. Some of the recent judgments/orders of the Supreme Court of India (SC) and the National Green Tribunal (NGT) indicate that the economic impact analysis of judicial decisions is yet to gain broader acceptance.**AGENCIES**

Global preventive healthcare priority

DOMINICK RODRIGUES/ ARUNKUMAR RAO
Bengaluru

"Global preventive healthcare should be a priority" – is the lesson learnt from the Covid-19 pandemic that has swept the world in its marauding rampage while claiming millions of lives and bringing industry to a standstill.

This message was echoed by President of India, Ram Nath Kovind while addressing the 23rd Annual Convocation of the Rajiv Gandhi University of Health Sciences, Karnataka in Bengaluru recently. "The first major pandemic in over a century has taught us to be better prepared for unforeseen public health crises and heeding the warnings of .scientists – that Covid-19 seems to be a rare, one-of-a-kind health-crisis – highlighting greater attention to public healthcare as a priority" he said while emphasizing to the students on how their entry into this noble profession opened up unforeseen and unprecedented opportunities to serve humanity.

Noting the latest Union Budget had recognized 'health and well-being' as one of the six crucial pillars of Atma-Nirbhar Bharat, he said boosting healthcare infrastructure in the country is being given strong emphasis and effective utilisation of this national resource would be possible only with their active support and contribution.

"Healthcare delivery in India is poised to undergo a change at all stages – prevention, diagnosis and treatment. No single entity in the healthcare sector can deliver results and achieve outcomes. The evolution of the sector calls for active involvement and participation of all stakeholders and the use of innovation to bridge intent and execution," he said.

The President lauded the Rajiv Gandhi University of Health Sciences -- one of the largest networks of affiliated institutions in the world – for leading many innovations in the field of healthcare education and emerging as a globally credible brand due to the sustained efforts made by the leaders of this university since its inception.

Karnataka eyes 10L jobs in IT by 2025

BENGALURU: The Karnataka Digital Economy Mission (KDEM) will create ten lakh jobs by 2025 in the state as it will attract more investments in the information technology sector, Karnataka Deputy Chief Minister Dr C N Ashwath Narayan said on Tuesday.

"The KDEM will create ten lakh jobs by 2025 and will help Karnataka to reach the goal of USD 150 Billion in IT exports and also to become a USD 300 Billion Economy by 2025," Narayan, who holds the electronic and the IT-BT portfolio, said. He was speaking at the inauguration of the office of Karnataka Digital Economy Mission which has the objective of increasing digital economy contribution to GSDP to 30 per cent and launch of the "Beyond Bengaluru" report which facilitates achieving this target.

He added that the government would focus on improving connectivity even to remote parts of the state, providing round the clock electricity, and reduce rural-urban divide by establishing needed infrastructure in order to strengthen the digital economy. He sought a bigger role for KDEM in improving the economy of the state.

"The government wanted KDEM to be more industry friendly and keeping this in mind it has allowed for 51 per cent stake to Industry associations while retaining a minority holding of 49 per cent for itself.The government wants to act rather as a facilitator than an authority," Narayan pointed out.

According to the Additional Chief Secretary in the department of electronics, IT/BT, E V Ramana Reddy, the IT sector contributes 25 per cent of GSDP of which 98 per cent accounts for Bengaluru alone. In order to increase the share of other regions of the state as well, the "Beyond Bengaluru" project has been initiated, he said. According to officials, the KDEM has been set up on a public-private partnership model, where Industry associations NASSCOM, The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM), India Electronics & Semiconductor Association (IESA), and Vision Group on Startups- contribute 51 per cent stake. **AGENCIES**

Restoration of 4G to boost J&K economy

SRINAGAR: Trade bodies and tourism players on Saturday welcomed the restoration of 4G mobile internet services in Jammu and Kashmir, saying it will boost economic recovery in the union territory.

High-speed mobile internet services were restored last midnight in 18 districts. The services were there in two districts - Ganderbal and Udhampur - since August last year.

"It is better late than never. The government has realised how much losses our economy has suffered. This move will give a boost to the economic recovery now," president, Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI), Sheikh Aashiq told PTI.

"Every sector was affected, especially our export-oriented industry which officially declined 40-50 per cent due to its non-availability. The low speed 2G services did not serve the purpose," he said.

Rstoration of high-speed mobile internet would especially help the young, budding, entrepreneurs who are dependent on social media, he said.

"Though the government has realised it now, the impact of non-availability of high-speed internet will last long. It will last until the government realises how to boost them, to provide them sops or cushion for running their businesses," he said.

Aashiq said education was one of the most important sectors which suffered a great deal over the last year-and-a-half. He hoped that the security situation remains good so that these services continue without any interruption. **AGENCIES**

RailTel Corp unveils IPO of 87,153,369 equity shares

DOMINICK RODRIGUES
Mumbai

RailTel Corporation Of India Limited ("RailTel") -- one of the largest neutral telecom infrastructure providers in the country – is launching its IPO of 87,153,369 equity shares priced at between Rs 93 to Rs 94 per share from February 16 to February 18 this year.

RailTel is a Mini Ratna (Category-I) Central Public Sector Enterprise -- wholly-owned by the Government of India and under administrative control of Ministry of Railways -- owning a Pan-India, 59,098 route kilometers optical fiber cable network and exclusive Right of Way (ROW) along Railway track – across several towns & cities and rural areas of the country.

The objects of the Offer are to carry out the disinvestment of 87,153,369 Equity Shares held by the Selling Shareholder; and to achieve the benefits of listing the Equity Shares on the Stock Exchanges.

Puneet Chawla, Chairman & Managing Director, RailTel Corporation of India Limited, said while RailTel crossed a Rs 1,000 crores turnover in 2017, it witnessed last year a 12.4% growth in revenue and 34% in PAT with expected 20% growth in its services this year. "India has the world's lowest 'fixed broadband' per 100 people, but a huge growth potential. The new Data Protection policy emphasizes exponential growth in the Data Centers field and we are partnering with the Railways in digitalization," he said.

Describing RailTel's coverage of 6,000 railway stations including 256 major stations and 14,000 rail coaches in the country, he said "We created one of the largest such public networks in the world and today are the 'largest neutral telecom provider'. Besides being key partner for the Railways in digital transformation with 3.5 lakh customers in India, We have 1085 towers and our own "Rail Cloud" for cloud computing, turnkey ICT projects."

"We have entered the field of consultancy and railway signaling projects, and are emerging into creation of the 'pathbreaking' Train Collision Avoidance System for the Railways Hi-Speed Mobile Corridor," he said, adding "Our volumes are low but our profits are the highest among competitors. Our current orderbook stands at Rs 4,000 crores and rising, where Covid-19 had a positive impact on our revenue growth by 2.55 times (broadband subscribers) through new opportunities like hospital telecom services and education sector comprising connecting schools."

Highlighting RailTel's forward strategy, he said "Our uniqueness as 'Right of Way' and reach makes us a key value proposition to deliver on demand while spreading out to other sectors like education and health, besides railway signaling (the focus area.) We are into developing India's Hi-Speed Corridor, besides working beyond India's borders in Kenya, Bangladesh and Mauritius."

"The Prime Minister announced connecting telecom to 6 lakh villages in the next 1,000 days – which is a big opportunity and we have asked for "spectrum" through the Railways (approved by TRAI) while upgrading our network to meet the challenges of such services. Being registered as an aggregator for PDOA, this is a big opportunity in building the world's largest public WiFi network," he added.

RailTel offers a diversified portfolio of ICT services and solutions including MPLS-VPN, leased lines services, TPaaS, e-Office services and data center services, large network hardware system integration, software and digital services to enterprises, public sector banks, defense organisations and educational institutions; operated through data centers located in Gurugram, Haryana, Secunderabad and Telangana to host and collocate critical applications for customers including the Indian Railways.

RailTel is also appointed by the Ministry of Railways for implementation of the Hospital Management Information System and has been also allotted the e-Office Project Phase 3 project. ICICI Securities Limited, IDBI Capital Markets & Securities Limited and SBI Capital Markets Limited are appointed as the BRLMs to the Offer.

IS BIGG BOSS injurious to *mental health?*

A housemate cries out for help. Another being shut up while speaking of the need for a psychiatrist. Someone else whines about bad memories haunting them after stepping into the Bigg Boss house again. These are a few instances of the ongoing Bigg Boss 14, and these are not one-off.

Year after year, week after week, we have seen a captive bunch of housemates act in a way that is far from normal, serving up their quirks, insecurities and instabilities for voyeuristic consumption and big ratings.

Housemates have mentioned how the situation even brings out suicidal tendencies at times. Behavioural scientists compare life in the house to living in prison, adding that while the show itself promotes aggressive behaviour and normalisation of abuse, it also reflects perversion among viewers who savour such "humilitainment".

Which makes us one wonder -- can the show have a lasting effect on the mental health of contestants, as also the audience watching it? Can engaging in such activity week after week in a captive domain or, as audience, deriving pleasure out of watching such activity, be deemed 'normal'?

Earlier this week, evicted contestant Jasmin Bhasin, who has returned to the house to support boyfriend Aly Goni, was seen taunting housemates for their earlier comments. When she tried to explain, she broke down and admitted that all the bad memories of her stint in the show had come back to her.

In another instance, Rubina Dilaik blurted out about harbouring suicidal tendencies, having temper issues and having a strained relationship with her parents in the past.

Perhaps staying locked away for months does that to you, too. You want to exorcise your inner demons. Rubina, after all, spoke of her need to consult a psychiatrist, following which her husband, the now-evicted Abhinav Shukla, asked her to not mention these things on camera.

"Bigg Boss is an interesting social experiment with people living in a closed space with no connection with the outside world. Even during the pandemic (when people were locked inside the house) people had a connection with cellphones, but in the (Bigg Boss) house that is also not there," Sunil Mittal, Director, Cosmos Institute of Mental Health and Behavioural Sciences (CIMBS), told IANS.

Mittal compares life in the house to "living in prison".

"It has a huge impact on the mental health of people who are inside, and the people who are watching it," added the psychotherapist, who feels that the show promotes bullying, aggressive behaviour and normalisation of abuse.

"It normalises a certain language. I agree that abusing and cuss words are used in real life, but (what about) the context with which it is used in the show. Then there is heightened drama for TRP," he added.

According to Radhika Bapat, clinical psychotherapist, shows such as Bigg Boss appeal to the voyeur in people.

"There is perversion in looking through a peephole and gaining access to information. They say 'there is a charm about the forbidden that makes it unspeakably desirable'. There is also the psychological term 'humilitainment', that is used with such reality 'dramas', which is the tendency for you and me as viewers to be attracted to spectacular humiliation and subjugation of real people," Bapat told. AGENCIES

SUSHMITA'S cryptic post sparks speculations

Sushmita Sen on Wednesday shared a cryptic post that reveals a hint of malice towards men, and a section of users were speculating if the 45-year-old actress had broken up with her boyfriend.

Sushmita took to her Instagram account and shared an anonymous quote: "The problem is women think he will change, he won't. The mistake men make is thinking she'll never leave, she will."

"Moral of the story... He won't, She will, #factcheck #truethat. I love you guys!!! Mmuuuaaah," she added.

Soon, social media was flooded with guesswork over whether she is headed for splitsville with the latest boyfriend, model Rohman Shawl.

"Ma'am please don't tell me you broke up. I was just waiting to see you getting married. #heartbreak," commented a fan of the actress.

"I hope all is well with your partner," wrote a user.

While many agreed with the actress' viewpoint, a lot of users felt she was generalising while blaming all men.

"Same goes the other way around, stop always playing the victim card for females," commented a user. "Works the other way to. Why beat up men alone?" asked another user. AGENCIES

Row over Erdogan's call for Constitution revamp

ANKARA: Four years after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan assumed sweeping powers, he has wrong-footed his opponents once again by calling for a new Constitution, sparking accusations of trying to set up a diversion from the country's woes.

Taking seemingly everyone off guard, Erdogan mentioned early last week during one of his near-daily speeches that "it may be time for Turkey to reopen the debate about a new Constitution".

The timing aroused immediate suspicions over the intentions of a man who has been at the apex of Turkish political life since 2003, first as Prime Minister and as President since 2014.img

The 66-year-old Turkish leader is facing a sudden burst of student protests, an economy that was under strain even before the COVID-19 pandemic struck last year, and polls showing a melting support base.

The current Constitution was changed in a controversial 2017 referendum, which created an executive presidency.

It went into force barely a year later when Erdogan won re-election, with the amendments allowing him to consolidate his power.

Since then the only politicians demanding constitutional changes have been members of the opposition, all calling for a return to the previous parliamentary democracy.

Few think this is what Erdogan has in mind. "This is only an attempt to change the agenda so that the economy, the pandemic, farmers' concerns, traders' worries and rights violations aren't discussed," Idris Sahin, deputy chairman of the opposition Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA), said.

DEVA was launched last year by Ali Babacan, a former Erdogan ally who won the West's trust as Economy Minister. AGENCIES

Pak Court bars execution of inmates with mental disorder

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's Supreme Court on Wednesday barred the execution of inmates suffering from mental disorder, observing that carrying out the death sentence does not "meet the ends of justice" if a convict was unable to comprehend the rationale behind the punishment.

A five-member Bench headed by Justice Manzoor Ahmad Malik passed the order on the appeals of mentally ill death-row prisoners – Kanizan Bibi, Imdad Ali and Ghulam Abbas – who have respectively served 30, 18 and 14 years on the death row. The petitioners, who showed symptoms of mental illness, demanded that their sentence be commuted.img

The court commuted the death sentences of Kanizan Bibi and Imdad Ali to life imprisonment and directed that a fresh mercy petition be filed to the Pakistan President on behalf of Ghulam Abbas.

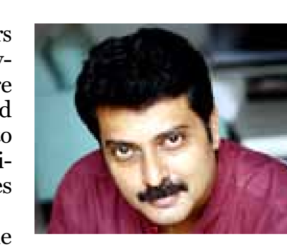
The court observed that carrying out the death sentence does not "meet the ends of justice" if a convict was unable to comprehend the rationale behind the punishment due to a mental illness. It also ordered the Punjab government to shift the accused from prison to the Punjab Institute of Mental Health, Lahore, for treatment and rehabilitation.

However, the Bench in the judgment clarified that not every mental illness shall automatically qualify for an exemption from carrying out the death sentence.

"This exemption will be applicable only in that case where a medical board, consisting of mental health professionals, certifies after a thorough examination and evaluation that the condemned prisoner no longer has higher mental functions to appreciate the rationale behind the sentence of death awarded to them," the judgment read. AGENCIES

Narain hopes to complete 'unfinished business'

NEW DELHI: Nearly 12 years after he crashed out following a freak accident, a more determined and experienced Narain Karthikeyan is back to complete an "unfinished business" in the Le Mans Series endurance racing.



India's first Formula One driver, Narain, dislocated his shoulder in May 2009, forcing him out of the 24 Hours of Le Mans, which is considered one of the world's toughest races.

The 44-year-old is now back, forming an all Indian team comprising former F2 and European Le Mans Series racer Arjun Maini and 2020 IMSA Prototype Challenge champion Naveen Rao.img

"Yeah, absolutely, I'm here to complete an unfinished business. Le Mans is one of the greatest races in the world and I want to go back and get the job done and not only drive there but be competitive," Narain said during a virtual media conference on Thursday.

The trio will represent Racing Team India which will make its debut in the Asian Le Mans Series in Dubai this weekend in a bid to secure an invitation to the coveted 24 Hours of Le Mans, to be held in France on June 12-13.

Racing Team India's Dubai debut will make it the first outfit with an all-Indian driver line-up to compete in international endurance racing.

"It's such a great thing to hold an Indian licence. All three Indian drivers competing for top honours in LMP2 would be awesome." AGENCIES

Elavenil rewrites air rifle world mark

NEW DELHI: World No. 1 Elavenil Valarivan was close to her best as she shot 253.0 in the final to top women's air rifle in the National shooting selection trials at the Dr. Karni Singh Range, Tughlakabad, on Thursday.

The 22-year-old Elavenil's final score was better than the world record of 252.9 held by Apurvi Chandela, who was below par and failed to make the final. Elavenil had earlier topped qualification with 631.6. She was 0.3 point ahead of Olympian Ayonika Paul who eventually placed seventh.

Third-placed Meghana Sajjanar (630.0) and fourth-placed Shriyanka Sadangi (630.9) were also very impressive in qualification.img

In women's air pistol, Manu Bhaker was too strong for the field, as she won with a total of 243.7 after having topped qualification with 584.

What was commendable was the manner in which the 47-year-old Padma Devaram of the Railways rose to the second spot ahead of a bunch of talented young girls including the Olympic quota winner Yashaswini Deswal.

Incidentally, Padma beat Yashaswini in the shoot off to progress after a tie midway through the final. She also had the second best qualification score of 577 along with Shri Nivetha who placed eighth in the final.

In men's 50-metre rifle 3-position, Olympian Sanjeev Rajput emerged on top both in qualification and final ahead of fellow Olympic quota winner Aishwary Pratap Singh Tomar.

In rapid fire pistol, Vijayveer Sidhu topped both qualification and final with big margins to emphasise his growing confidence in the event. AGENCIES

UK's Covid-19 variant may undermine vaccines

LONDON: he coronavirus variant first found in the British region of Kent is a concern because it is mutating and so could undermine the protection given by vaccines against developing COVID-19, the head of the UK's genetic surveillance programme said.

She also said the British variant was dominant in the country and was likely "to sweep the world, in all probability".

The coronavirus has killed 2.35 million people and turned normal life upside down for billions, but a few new worrying variants out of thousands have raised fears that vaccines will need to be tweaked and people may require booster shots.img

Sharon Peacock, director of the COVID-19 Genomics UK consortium, said vaccines were so far effective against the variants in the United Kingdom, but that mutations could potentially undermine the shots.

"What's concerning about this is that the 1.1.7 variant that we have had circulating for some weeks and months is beginning to mutate again and get new mutations which could affect the way that we handle the virus in terms of immunity and effectiveness of vaccines," Ms Peacock told the BBC.

"It's concerning that the 1.1.7, which is more transmissible, which has swept the country, is now mutating to have this new mutation that could threaten vaccination." That new mutation, first identified in Bristol in southwest England, has been designated a "Variant of Concern", by the New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group.

Britain's chief scientific adviser, Patrick Vallance, said the Bristol variant had one of the same mutations as the South African. "It is not surprising that it has happened and it will happen elsewhere as well," he said on Wednesday.

"In getting that variant it does make it slightly more likely to look different to the immune system so we need to watch out for it, we need to measure it, we need to keep on top of it and need to keep testing the vaccine effects in thissituation."

There are so far 21 cases of that variant which has E484K mutation, which occurs on the spike protein of the virus, the same change as has been seen in the South African and Brazilian variants. "One has to be a realist that this particular mutation has arisen in our kind of communal garden lineage now, at least five times - five separate times. And so this is going to keep popping up," Ms Peacock said.

British people should expect to receive repeated vaccinations against COVID-19 in future to keep pace with mutations of the virus, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Wednesday.

There are three major known variants that are worrying scientists: the South African variant, known by scientists as20I/501Y.V2 or B.1.351; the British variant known as 20I/501Y.V1or B.1.1.7; and the Brazilian variant known as P.1. The British variant, which is more infectious but not necessarily more deadly than others, was likely "to sweep theworld", Peacock said.

"Once we get on top of (the virus) or it mutates itself out of being virulent - causing disease - then we can stop worrying about it. But I think, looking in the future, we're going to be doing this for years. We're still going to be doing this 10 years down the line, in my view." AGENCIES

National basketball legends honoured in Bengaluru

DOMINICK RODRIGUES/ ARUNKUMAR RAO
Bengaluru

It was a moment in time for basketball history when the "Old and the New" rubbed shoulders and shared words of experience. The occasion was a felicitation function honouring Indian Basketball Legends at the Sree Kanteerava stadium complex in Bengaluru recently.

The event, organized by the Basketball Federation of India (BFI), witnessed top players, including padmashree awardees from different parts of India, interacting with the present national men's and women's teams. Felicitating the basketball stars, Karnataka Home Minister Basavaraj Bommai recalled his experience as a university sportsperson and said the national award achievement by sports persons ensured them being remembered beyond their lifetime.

The BFI felicitated Anitha Paul Durai, Padma Shree awardee-2020, Ramkumar Gahlawat, Dhyan Chand awardee-2003, Gulam Abbas Moontasir, Arjuna awardee-1970, Ajmer Singh, Arjuna Awardee 1982, Vishesh Bhriguvanshi, Arjuna awardee,-2009, Sajjan Singh Cheema, Arjuna awardee-1999, Hanuman Singh, Arjuna awardee-1975 and Suman Sharma, Arjuna awardee, -1983.

Thanking the state government for promoting basketball, Basketball Federation of India and Karnataka Olympic Association President, K Govindaraj noted that availability of the best of sports facilities in Bengaluru had resulted in national camps being regularly held here. Others present on the occasion included: BFI secretary-general Chander Mukhi Sharma, Karnataka Additional Chief Secretary Shalini Rajneesh, and Department of Youth Empowerment and Sports (DYES) Commissioner K Srinivas.