

POLITICS

WEST BENGAL, ASSAM SET FOR FIRST PHASE POLLING; CM SONOWAL AMONG CONTESTANTS



BANKING & FINANCE

RBI CHIEF DISCUSSES PRIVATISATION OF PUBLIC SECTOR BANKS WITH GOVERNMENT



POTPPOURRI

KANGANA RANAUT, MANOJ BAJPAYEE, DHANUSH TOP WINNERS AT 67TH NATIONAL FILM AWARDS



Bandh pauses Punjab, Haryana

FARMERS BLOCK HIGHWAYS AND ROADS IN NATIONWIDE PROTEST AGAINST THE THREE AGRI LAWS

CHANDIGARH: Farmers blocked national highways and other key roads at many places in Punjab and Haryana, and squatted on railway tracks at several locations disrupting road and rail traffic as part of their nationwide protest against the Centre's new agri laws.

According to the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM), which is spearheading the farmers' stir, said Bharat Bandh is being observed from 6 am to 6 pm to mark four months of the farmers' agitation at Delhi's three borders -- Singhu, Ghazipur and Tikri. Shops remained closed at several places in Punjab. At a few places in Haryana too shops were shuttered in support of the Bharat Bandh. Public and private transport remained off the roads in Punjab.

In neighbouring Haryana, State Transport Minister Moolchand Sharma told PTI that Haryana Roadways bus services will be suspended in those districts where it is felt that it is not conducive to operate them in view of the farmers' protest.

"Bus services are otherwise functional in Haryana," he said.

Since morning, farmers in the two states gathered at several highways and roads, including in Bathinda, Ludhiana, Amritsar, Patiala, Mohali, Rohtak, Ferozepur, Pathankot, Jhajjar, Jind, Panchkula, Kaithal, Yamunanagar and Bhiwani districts.

Farmer union leaders said they were allowing ambulances and other emergency vehicles as well as marriage processions to pass. In view of the "Holla Mohalla" festival at Sri Anandpur Sahib, vehicles carrying devotees were being allowed to commute. The protesters have even arranged "langar" for the devotees at the protest sites.

Haryana BKU leader Gurnam Singh Chaduni, in a video message on Friday, appealed to the protesting farmers to ensure the smooth passage of essential supplies or even sick persons travelling in private

vehicles or those travelling in neighbouring areas. "We have to protest peacefully," Chaduni said. The Bharat Bandh had its effect on rail services in Punjab and Haryana. Protesters squatted on railway tracks at several locations, including in Amritsar, Jalandhar, Ludhiana, Ferozepur, Ambala, Jind, Jhajjar, Panchkula and some other districts in the two states, leading to disruption of rail traffic. Some of the protesters blocked the Ambala-Delhi highway near Ambala Cantonment badly affecting the service on the route.

A group of protesters squatting on railway tracks near



Farmers protesting on a highway, blocking traffic.

Farmers protesting on a highway, blocking traffic.

Shahpur village, around five kilometres from Ambala Cantonment, due to which all the trains running between Delhi and Saharanpur were stranded, railway officials said.

At Karnal railway station, the New Delhi-Katra Vande Bharat Express was stranded due to blockade by farmers in Ambala. "Due to the pandemic, one is going through difficult times. Now, to remain stranded at a railway station for hours with small children is quite difficult. Trains on this route should have been cancelled for today to avoid passenger inconvenience," said a woman passenger travelling with her two children.

The agitators farmers blocked several key roads, including Chandigarh-Delhi, Amritsar-Delhi, Hisar-Delhi and Bhiwani-Delhi national highways. They parked their tractors and other vehicles in the middle of the carriageways.

They also blocked the Ambala-Rajpura Highway on the Haryana-Punjab border near Shambhu barrier, and the Ambala-Hisar Highway near Ambala City.

The protesters, many of them carrying placards, squatted on key roads and raised slogans against the BJP-led government at the Centre. There were sit-ins at toll plazas in several places.

In Amritsar district, a group of farmers held a shirtless protest and raised slogans demanding the repeal of the farm laws. In Ludhiana, Punjab's industrial hub, some markets including on Gill Road, Ghumar Mandi, Clock Tower, cloth market and Akal Market remained shut while in Mohali too most markets were closed. Traffic on national highways passing through Haryana, including Ambala and Chandigarh, was comparatively less as many avoided travelling during the Bandh hours. However, at many places, long queues of trucks and other heavy vehicles could be seen on roads. **AGENCIES**

Sebi eases norms for start-ups' listing

THE REGULATOR APPROVES REVAMPING OF DELISTING RULES AND RATIONALISING THE EXISTING FRAMEWORK RELATED TO RECLASSIFICATION OF PROMOTER AND PROMOTER GROUP ENTITIES



NEW DELHI: To encourage listing of start-ups, markets watchdog Sebi on Thursday approved a slew of relaxations to norms, including reducing holding period for pre-issue capital.

Besides, the regulator approved revamping of delisting rules and rationalising the existing framework related to reclassification of promoter and promoter group entities.

At the meeting of Sebi board on Thursday, it was also decided to introduce new requirements for sustainability reporting by listed entities. This

new report will be called the Business Responsibility and Sustainability Report (BRSR) and will replace the existing Business Responsibility Report (BRR).

The BRSR will be applicable to the top 1,000 listed entities (by market capitalisation) for reporting on a voluntary basis for FY 2021-22 and on a mandatory basis from 2022-23.

Sebi on Thursday also provided clarity on change in control criteria for market intermediaries and requirement for seeking its prior approval. With regard to unlisted body

corporate intermediary, transfer of shareholding among immediate relatives would not be construed as change in control. "Transfer of shareholding by way of transmission to immediate relative or not, shall not result into change in control," Sebi said in a circular. Immediate relatives include any spouse of that person, or any parent, brother, sister or child of the person or of the spouse.

In a circular in 2011 addressed to stock exchanges, depositories and intermediaries, Sebi had specified the procedure for seeking prior approval for change in control from it. Now, the regulator has provided some clarifications. The latest circular is addressed to all stock brokers through exchanges, depository participants through depositories, merchant bankers, registrar to an issue and share transfer agent, debenture trustee, credit rating agencies and bankers to an issue. **AGENCIES**

Raids on MLAs' premises expose embezzlements in Housing Schemes

SATISH HANDA Chandigarh

Recent raids by teams of Income Department at the residential and commercial premises of Haryana MLAs Dharam Singh Chhokar of Congress and an independent leader Balraj Kiundu exposed large number of embezzlements in real estate companies involved in construction of flats under Affordable Group Housing Scheme assuring own house by every one by the year 2025 on which handsome subsidy is being allowed to the builders make available houses at reduced, affordable prices. Income Tax Department teams during raids took into possession several documents including a diary at Chhokar's residence having detail of nearly 100 crore suspicious purchase bills of construction material which could not be clarified during preliminary investigation. Income Tax teams also raided two projects at Gurugram



and Delhi where construction of flats under this scheme was going on and took into possession several cheques issued by people booked the flats in these projects, which were not deposited in the bank.

Preliminary investigation revealed that large number of builders booked flats under Affordable Housing Scheme in the names of their family members, friends and staff members to enable them to sell these flats later on higher rates getting handsome premium. Information reveals, there are several concessions available to builders of flats under

this scheme by the government, which include additional covered area in these flats, special rebate in each acre area development fee (EDC) area and 100% rebate in license fee, rebate in interest on bank loans for purchase of these flats as compared to flats constructed under ordinary housing schemes and rebate in income tax.

Sources reveal, large number of builders constructed flats under Affordable Group Housing Scheme 2013 after getting license from the government found involved in earning huge amount through embezzlements.

According to information, 103 licenses were issued by the government to different real estate companies at Gurugram seven years ago, of them only 16 companies have been able to obtain completion certificate so far and 26 builders has not applied for completion certificate so far even after five years completion in construction work.

SC upholds Tata Sons' decision to sack Mistry

NEW DELHI: The Supreme Court on Friday ruled completely in favour of multi-billion salt-to-software conglomerate Tata Sons Private Ltd. by setting aside a National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) decision to reinstate minority shareholder Shapoorji Pallonji group's scion, Cyrus Mistry, as its executive chairman.

Mistry was initially only removed from the post of executive chairman of Tata Sons. However, his subsequent actions, including the leaking of a confidential mail to the media to create a "sensation" and passing on information to the Income Tax authorities while claiming to be a "law abiding citizen", was an open declaration of "all-out war" against the Tatas. These led to his removal as a director, the court said.

"Cyrus Pallonji Mistry himself invited trouble," a three-judge Bench, led by Chief Justice of India Sharad A. Bobde, declared in a 282-page judgment. Chief Justice Bobde said the ouster of Mistry not only as executive chairman but also director was justified. The court dismissed allegations by Mistry of oppression of minority shareholders, such as the Shapoorji Pallonji (SP) group, by the Tatas, who hold majority stake. The SP group holds 18.37% shares. "It is an irony that the very same person who represents shareholders owning just 18.37% of the total paid-up share capital and yet identified as the successor to the empire, has chosen to accuse the very same Board, of conduct, oppressive and unfairly prejudicial to the interests of the minorities," the apex court snubbed Mistry's side. **AGENCIES**



Green cover increasing via govt, NGO initiatives

DOMINICK RODRIGUES/ARUNKUMAR RAO Bengaluru

Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Prakash Javadekar said the last seven years has witnessed tree cover in India increasing by 15,000 sq kms due to various initiatives that included NGOs also. "Politicians have their limitations, but initiatives like Cauvery Calling campaign don't have boundaries in doing good work of creating green cover," he said during the "Forest to Farm - the Way Forward" event held on the occasion of "International Forests Day" here yesterday.

"Ensuring a better life, physical progress for people is a politician's job, but we should all ensure preservation of every rain drop of water that create rivers which have nurtured this civilization for thousands of years," Javadekar said while lamenting the growing incidents of man-animal conflict in which 500 people are killed every year. "The Cen-

tral government has launched a project to augment fodder and water in forests to reduce such incidents with the help of cutting edge technology that identify forest areas for augmentation."

Karnataka Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa, while lauding efforts of farmers in the Cauvery Calling initiative, said that Karnataka's emphasis on increasing its forest area in 2019 was the highest in the country as the Government distributed economically-important saplings to the region's farmers -- keeping in mind their financial development -- alongside ecological development through the forest department.

Assuring the Karnataka Government's total support to Isha Outreach's "Cauvery Calling" project, the Chief Minister congratulated farmers, environmentalists and others for their contribution in increasing Karnataka's green cover by more than 1000 sq km -- the highest increase in the country. He also highlighted "Krushu Aranya Protsaha Yojane



Ministers and officials at an event.

(KAPY)" which incentivizes tree-based farming for farmer prosperity and for revitalizing soil and water bodies. Farmers from the Cauvery river basin districts of Karnataka who have adopted tree-based farming -- the farming model promoted by Cauvery Calling -- were felicitated at this event by the two Ministers and Sadhguru.

Meanwhile, urging for all wood needs to be met by growing wood for economic gain on private farmlands, Sadhguru said the way forward was in wood-based industries

contracting with farmers for their requirement so that the 70,000 crore import of timber may be stopped and the revenue given to our farmers. "Soil is the largest reservoir of water and 87% of all life on the planet thrives on 39 inches of topsoil," Sadhguru said while observing that in the last 74 years of Independent India, the issue of increasing forest cover has not been addressed with the kind of significance and importance as in the past few years.

Advising the formation of a tree ministry on the lines of agriculture at the national level and the post of tree evaluators being created at the state level, Sadhguru also highlighted the foundation's eco-restoration project -- for planting 2.4 billion saplings in the Cauvery river belt -- where 3.5 crore saplings had been planted over the years. He appealed to the Karnataka Chief Minister to set up government posts of tree evaluators for creating a system to authenticate trees and their benefits to the soil. Cauvery Calling -- a ground-breaking eco-restoration project launched by Sadhguru -- is a 12-year mission to revitalize the river Cauvery, recharge groundwater tables, restore soil health and make farming an economically-prosperous proposition for farmers. It will encourage farmers to plant 242 crore high-value timber trees on their own farmlands for economic gain. The Campaign has proven the economic and ecological benefits of this model over nearly two decades, which has seen farmer income rising between 3 and 8 times.

DHFL booked over 2.60 lakh fictitious home-loan accounts

NEW DELHI: The CBI has booked the DHFL and its directors for allegedly creating over 2.60 lakh fictitious home-loan accounts, some of which were used to claim interest subsidies in the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), officials said on Wednesday.

The irregularities were pointed out in the report of auditor Grant Thornton, appointed by the present board of the scam-hit DHFL, they said.

Promoters Kapil and Dheeraj Wadhawan, both booked along with the company, allegedly opened a fictitious branch of the DHFL in Bandra and fake accounts worth Rs 14,046 crore of home-loan borrowers, who had already repaid their loans, were entered in the database, they said.

A total of 2.60 lakh "fake and fictitious" home-loan accounts were created in the non-existent branch from 2007-19 for total loan worth Rs 14,046 crore, out of which Rs 11,755.79 crore were deposited or routed to several fictitious firms



DHFL logo.

known as Bandra Book firms, according to the FIR. Several of these bogus loan accounts were allegedly opened in the PMAY to claim interest subsidies from the National Housing Bank in connivance with its officials, they said.

The DHFL had granted 88,651 cases under the PMAY till December 2018 and it received interest subsidy of Rs 539.40 crore, while it has to receive Rs 1,347.80 crore from the government, it said.

DHFL on Friday said its administrator has filed additional affidavits in the NCLT Mumbai in connection with fraud amounting to over ₹1,424 crore. The company, which is undergoing a corporate debt resolution process in the Na-

tional Company Law Tribunal (NCLT), is being run by an administrator in the aftermath of IIL&FS crisis in 2018 and unearthing of massive fraud in the company.

The administrator of the company has appointed Grant Thornton (GT or transaction auditor) to conduct investigation into the affairs of the company.

The administrator of the company received an initial report from the transaction Auditor, indicating that there are certain transactions which are undervalued, fraudulent and preferential in nature, DHFL said in a regulatory filing.

"Basis the investigation and observations of the transaction auditor, the administrator has filed two additional affidavits (to the two already filed applications) before the Mumbai bench of the NCLT on March 4, 2021, in respect of disbursements made to certain entities as inter corporate deposits (ICDs), against Kapil Wadhawan, Dheeraj Wadhawan, Township Developers India Ltd. and entities to whom ICDs were given," DHFL said. **AGENCIES**

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9% interest on procurement payout delay

PAYMENTS FOR THE CROPS PROCURED TO BE MADE DIRECTLY INTO THE VERIFIED ACCOUNTS OF FARMERS, SAYS CM

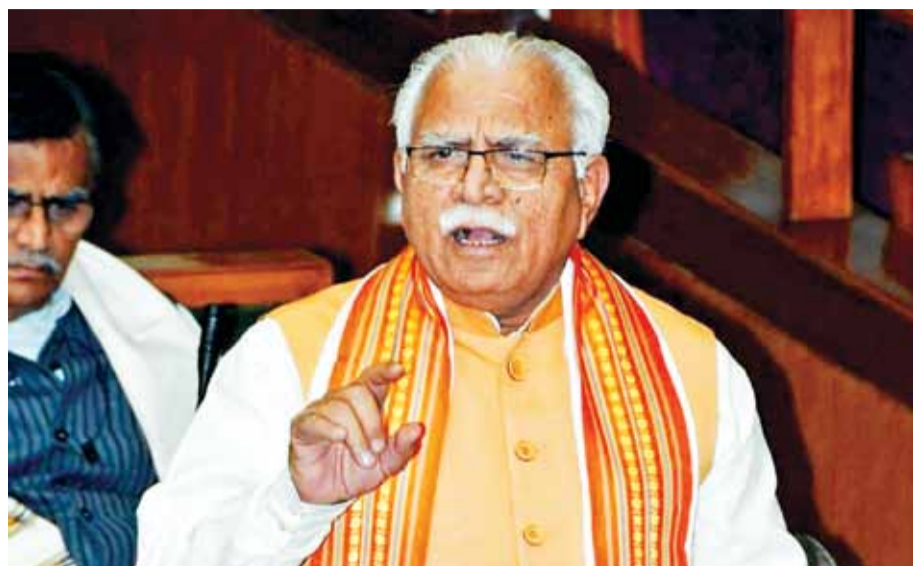
CHANDIGARH: An interest of 9 per cent would be paid to farmers if payments for their crops procured during rabi season, commencing from April 1, get delayed, Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar announced on Tuesday.

The payments for the crops procured would be made directly into the verified accounts of farmers.

The chief minister said this while presiding over a review meeting of officers engaged in the upcoming procurement season held here. Deputy Chief Minister, Dushyant Chautala was also present in the meeting, an official statement said.

"Farmers must receive payment of their procured produce within a stipulated time period. Any delay in payment would not be tolerated. Responsibilities should be fixed to ensure that farmers are paid on time," said Khattar.

During the meeting, Khattar also reviewed the arrangements being made for the smooth procurement of crops and directed the concerned departments and procurement agencies to ensure that farmers do not face any inconvenience



while selling their produce in different mandis across the State.

"Hassle-free and time-bound procurement should be ensured by making advance scheduling plans so that farmers do not face any problems," Khattar directed.

The chief minister said that in view of the sudden surge in COVID-19 cases in the state, like last year, the required

number of procurement centres should also be increased ensuring hassle-free procurement.

Procurement of wheat and mustard would commence from April 1 while procurement of other crops would start from April 10. Timely identification of places required for setting up these procurement centres should be done at the earliest, Khattar

directed the officials.

"Suitable transportation arrangements should be made for lifting of the crops from the mandis on time and if any transporter fails to lift the crops within 48 hours, then the Deputy Commissioners should remain ready with any alternative transport arrangements," he said.

During the meeting, Additional Chief Secretary, Food

Civil Supplies and Consumer Affairs Department, Anurag Rastogi, informed that Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)/guidelines have been issued to every Deputy Commissioner for strict implementation throughout the procurement season.

The Deputy Commissioners have been directed to ensure that COVID-19 safety protocols are strictly followed at each procurement Centre, he further informed.

While presiding over a review meeting regarding COVID-19 vaccination drive, crop procurement and other issues with senior officials of various departments here last week, Khattar had said during this year's procurement process, the state government has decided to ensure 100 per cent transfer of direct online payments in the accounts of the farmers.

Last year, the state had transferred more than 50 per cent of the payments directly to the accounts of the farmers and the rest of the payments were made through Arhtiyas (commission agents), Khattar had said. **AGENCIES**

Punjab sees highest single-day spike of 3,000 COVID cases

CHANDIGARH: Punjab reported the highest single-day spike of 3,176 COVID-19 cases on Friday, taking the tally to 2,26,059, while 59 more people died due to the infection.

The state had seen this year's maximum single-day spike of 2,700 infections on Thursday. It had recorded the highest single-day rise of 2,896 cases on September 17 last year.

According to a medical bulletin, 59 fatalities in the state took the death toll to 6,576. The number of active COVID-19 cases increased from 21,405 on Thursday to 22,652, it said.

Jalandhar reported a maximum of 494 cases, Mohali 409, Ludhiana 395, Amritsar 304, and Patiala 285, among districts, which witnessed new cases.

The districts which saw deaths included Jalandhar (14), Hoshiarpur (14) and Ludhiana (5). A total of 1,816 coronavirus patients were discharged after recovering from the infection, taking the number of those recovered to 1,96,831, the bulletin said.

There are 25 critical patients who are on ventilator support, while 304 are on oxygen support, it said.



A total of 57,82,674 samples have been collected for testing so far in the state, the bulletin said. Meanwhile, Chandigarh reported 248 COVID-19 cases, taking the total count to 25,604. The death of four more persons took the toll to 372, according to the bulletin. The number of active cases rose from 2,286 on Thursday to 2,392 on Friday, it said.

A total of 138 patients were discharged after they recovered from the infection, taking the number of those recovered to 22,840, the bulletin said. A total of 3,02,049 samples have been taken for testing so far and of them, 2,75,427 tested negative while reports of 279 samples were awaited, it said.

In a separate develop-

ment, a COVID-positive undertrial escaped from the prisoner ward of the civil hospital here on Friday, police said. The accused has been identified as Avtar Singh, a resident of Raikhana village in Bathinda district, police said.

A few days back, police arrested Singh with more than 1,000 banned capsules of a drug, officials said, adding that the accused tested coronavirus-positive after he was nabbed. Singh was then admitted in the prisoner ward of the Civil Hospital here from where he escaped, police said.

Another case has been registered against the accused and five police officials who were on duty at the ward, officials added. **AGENCIES**

Punjab, Haryana DGPs review organised crimes

CHANDIGARH: Police chiefs of Haryana and Punjab and senior police officials of Chandigarh on Thursday held a joint conference in Panchkula to evolve a strategy to tackle organised crimes in the region.

The conference was jointly presided over by Haryana Director General of Police Manoj Yadava and Punjab DGP Dinkar Gupta and was also attended by senior functionaries of Chandigarh Police.

The top police officials of the two states and one Union territory emphasized upon creating an institutional mechanism to effectively coordinate for curbing organised crimes by creating a common database and sharing information about offenders on a real-time basis.

Speaking on the occasion,

Haryana DGP Yadava said holding such coordination meetings would certainly help keep tabs on criminal activities of interstate gangs, detecting offences and sharing information on a real-time basis.

In a statement, Haryana police said DGP Yadava suggested a mechanism for sharing telephone numbers of police officials at all levels to achieve better coordination and to prevent and to detect inter-state crimes.

He also pointed out how the use of social media platforms by dreaded gangsters and their hideouts in foreign countries pose a challenge in nabbing them. Punjab DGP Gupta said, "We should create a system where any information on an organised crime could be shared immediately to nab such criminals." **AGENCIES**

Illicit liquor factory busted near Ambala

SATISH HANDA
Chandigarh

Kurukshetra police along with Excise Department Ambala led by Aalok Passi DETC and Bhagat Singh ETO raided a factory manufacturing illicit country made liquor in two rented residential houses in Shyam Colony near police station Saha at a distance of about 12 km from Ambala.

They used to smuggle illicit liquor to Punjab, U.P., Chandigarh and few towns in Haryana state. DSP Headquarter Kurukshetra Subhash Chander told that police party during checking at a barrier at Shahabad in Kurukshetra district seized 56 cases illicit liquor in Malta Club brand from a Tata-S vehicle and during preliminary investigation the driver told that they collected stocks from a factory at Saha for deliver at Karnal and Panipat.

The raiding team arrested two persons identified as Sachin alias Gholu originally hailing from Panipat and Sunil a resi-



dent of village Badot in Sonapat district and started search for another six persons managed to escape including Sanjay a resident of Panipat used to prepare illicit liquor in two residential houses.

Sachin failed to produce rent deed agreements of both premises the owner of one of them was residing in abroad. During search, the raiding team collected 400 litre fake liquor, 21 cases Desi liquor, 5880 empty bottles, corks, two filling machines, seven types of labels of different brands packed in six bags, two tanks of 2000 litre

capacity, 1 tank of 100 litre capacity, chemical used to produce liquor, large number of drums, a Tata 407 vehicle and two motorcycles parked outside the premises.

Surprisingly, in spite of tall claims, Ambala has become a hub for manufacture, smuggling and door-to-door sale of illicit liquor in the state since past sometime. Police and excise department recently busted two rackets involved in manufacturing fake liquor in recent past including a factory at village Mandaur producing rum, another factory at village Durana.

Punjab govt deceived people: Kejriwal

CHANDIGARH: Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Sunday hit out at the Amarinder Singh-led Punjab government, accusing it of not keeping its poll promises and deceiving people.

Addressing a Kisan Maha Sammelan organised by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) at Punjab's Moga, he told people that his party will always stand shoulder to shoulder with the farmers protesting against the Centre's three farm laws.

He also took on the Modi-led Union government over the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill, 2021, alleging that the Centre wants to "snatch power" from the Chief Minister of Delhi.

Kejriwal said four years ago, Punjab Chief Minister Ama-



rinder Singh had made "big promises".

"Captain Sahib had said smartphones will be given. Who got smartphones just raise your hands? Captain Sahib had said farmers' loan will be waived. Whose loan has been waived just raise your hands," said Kejriwal.

The Delhi CM said the Congress had also promised jobs to the youth ahead of the 2017

Assembly polls.

"Not even a single promise has been fulfilled," he alleged, adding that Amarninder Singh have "deceived" people.

"Neither anyone was given job nor anyone's loan was waived," he claimed. "I want to ask you if somebody deceives you, then what do you do? Use se badla lete hain (Revenge is taken from him). Captain Sahib has deceived you. **AGENCIES**

1,057 govt schools to be closed in Haryana

SATISH HANDA
Chandigarh

Haryana state government has decided to close down nearly 1057 government primary and middle schools in Haryana state having student strength less than 25 and the students of these schools will be shifted to other schools in adjoining areas within a distance of a couple of kilometres.

However, decision was strongly condemned by the parents of students studying in these schools as well as teachers and other staff in these schools, said the decision will not only adversely affect the students but also nearly 3000 teaching and other staff working in these educational schools will become jobless.

They made an appeal that education department in the state should work out an alternate solution to keep alive these schools instead of taking action to close down such schools and make teachers as well as staff working in these schools jobless.

According to a survey conducted by this correspondent in Ambala district, there are as many as 51 such primary schools having strength of students in these schools less than 25. Similarly, there are 54 middle schools has been identified in the district having students strength between 11 and 15.

Information also reveals 743 primary government schools in the state have less than 25 students with total strength of 1304 teachers in these schools. Similarly, there are 314 middle schools in the

state having 930 teachers employed in these schools, of them 50 schools having strength between 0 to 5 students, 20 schools having between 6 to 10 students, 54 schools having between 11 to 15 students, 89 schools having between 16 to 20 students and 101 schools having between 21 to 25 students in these schools.

A survey of primary schools in Haryana state reveals that there are 91 schools having between 0 to 5 students, 120 schools having between 6 to 10 students, 204 schools having between 11 to 15 students, 180 schools having between 16 to 20 students, and 148 schools having between 21 to 25 students.

State Press Secretary, Haryana Backward Classes Government Teachers Union Mohan Lal Parocha said that state government's decision to close down the schools having insufficient number of students is a step taken by the government in hurry, which will not only make nearly 3000 teachers unemployed but also another nearly 300 persons working as cleanliness staff, sweepers, watchmen and mid-day meal workers in these schools jobless.

He said it is moral duty of state government to provide education to children but on the other hand government has decided to down shutters of these schools instead of working out a solution to keep alive such temples of education and also save employment of large number of teachers and staff in these schools.

Shiromani Akali Dal slams Centre on GNCTD Bill

CHANDIGARH: The Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) on Tuesday raised strong opposition over the Bill that seeks to give more power to the Lieutenant Governor in Delhi.

In a statement here, SAD senior leader Daljit Singh Cheema said the party requests the Centre to withdraw the bill from the Rajya Sabha "in the national interest".

"The passage of the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill 2021 in the Lok Sabha which proposes to curtail the powers of an elected government is not conducive to democratic functioning," he said, and asked the central government to review it.

He said the SAD will con-

tinue to oppose the Bill in the Rajya Sabha. The Rajya Sabha witnessed repeated adjournments on Tuesday as opposition Congress and AAP members protested against the Bill.

The uproar in the Upper House started when Deputy Chairman Harivansh Narayan Singh asked Minister of State for Home Affairs G Kishan Reddy to move a motion for the consideration of the GNCTD (Amendment) Bill 2021.

The Bill, passed in the Lok Sabha on Monday, seeks to make it clear that the "government" in Delhi means the "Lieutenant Governor".

The bill also makes it mandatory for the Delhi government to take the opinion of the LG before any executive action.



Cheema said the Bill seeks "to bring a democratically elected government under a selected appointee of the Union government".

"This is against the federal system of the Constitution and could pave the way for more far

reaching changes which are not good for diverse country like India. We request the central government to withdraw and Bill from the Rajya Sabha in the national interest," he said.

Speaking about the changes being made through the

amended Bill, the SAD leader said now the Lt Governor's opinion would have to be obtained before taking any executive decision.

He claimed this would negate the ideals of representative governance and democracy. Terming all these measures as "anti-people", Cheema said the SAD had always stood up for maintaining the federal structure of the country as enshrined in the constitution. "We feel that the Bill seeks to take away the powers of the Delhi government and we are thus opposing this on a matter of principle," he said.

The SAD will take up the issue forcefully in the Rajya Sabha and also appeal to all like-minded parties to oppose

this "undemocratic Bill", he said. Cheema claimed the introduction of the Bill had perturbed citizens across the country.

"It comes on the heels of earlier abolition of the Jammu and Kashmir legislative council and later introduction of three agricultural laws which seek to do away with assured government purchase of food grains under the minimum support price (MSP) regime and allowing hoarding of food by corporate houses.

"Even as these Acts have been passed, the draft electricity bill which seeks to centralize all power decisions besides seeking to take away the power of State electricity utilities is in the offing," he claimed.

2,000 addicts lose lives due to drugs and liquor overdose

MORE THAN 47 PERSONS DIE AFTER TAKING FAKE LIQUOR AT PANIPAT, SONEPAT AND FARIDABAD DISTRICTS IN HARYANA STATE DURING CURRENT YEAR. AS A RESULT, SEVERAL PERSONS INVOLVED IN MANUFACTURING FAKE LIQUOR HAVE ALREADY BEEN ARRESTED BY THE STATE POLICE

SATISH HANDA
Chandigarh

Haryana state has left behind Punjab famous for consuming drugs and liquor in the country in past years. Information reveals, more than 2000 persons in these states have lost lives due to excessive consumption of drugs and liquor in past one decade.

According to Haryana state police information 162 persons were reported died due to consumption of fake liquor, 159 persons died in Punjab and 78 persons lost lives in U.P which is much bigger than both Haryana and Punjab states during 2018.

Recently, more than 47 persons died after taking fake liquor at Panipat, Sonapat and Faridabad districts in Haryana state during current year as a result several persons involved



in manufacturing fake liquor have already been arrested by the state police.

According to Narcotic Crime Bureau (NCB) information, 86 persons lost their lives after taking overdose of drugs in Haryana state, 88 persons died in

Punjab state, 14 persons died in Himachal Pradesh, 88 persons died in UP and 153 persons died in Rajasthan during 2018.

NCB information also revealed that 410 persons were reported died due to excessive consumption of fake liquor in

past few years as such Haryana government decided to take stern action against those involved in manufacturing, selling and smuggling illicit liquor and seized huge quantity of illicit liquor and arrested several persons involved in rackets manufacturing fake liquor illegally in past one year.

Haryana Home Minister Anil Vij few months ago ordered to constitute Narcotic Crime Bureau in the state to wipe out illegal drugs and liquor business from the state, however the same failed to function effectively due to COVID-19 outbreak in the state.

Data provided by Delhi and Chandigarh Zone Narcotic Control Bureau handling the states of Haryana, Punjab, H.P., U.P., Chandigarh and Delhi revealed that between the year 2016 and 2019 fast increased cases

of drugs and liquor smuggling were registered identified as 2063 cases of drugs smuggling registered in 2016 followed by 2248 cases registered in 2017, 2587 cases registered in 2018 and 2677 cases registered in 2019.

In Haryana and Punjab, which included Poppy Husk, Opium, Smack, ganja, Charas, Sulpha, Heroine, Coquine and Hashish.

According to NCB data 10150 kg Poppy Husk was seized in 2016, 12081 kg seized in 2017, 10938 kg seized in 2018, and 11984 kg seized in 2019. In case of Opium NCB seized 118.12 kg in 2016, 86.13 kg in 2017, 105.69 kg in 2018 and 119.72 kg in 2019. In case of Smack NCB seized 26.24 kg in 2016, 17.53 kg in 2017, 21.12 kg in 2018 and 17.45 kg in 2019.

POLITICS

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NEWSBRIEF

'Prohibit use of children during poll campaign'

NEW DELHI: The apex child rights body NCPCR has asked poll authorities to prohibit use of children in the election campaign in any form, taking "serious view" of minors being engaged in various activities such as sloganeering and circulation of pamphlets in violation of their rights. In an advisory to the poll authorities in West Bengal, Puducherry, Assam, Tamil Nadu and Kerala on Thursday, the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) said it has received numerous complaints about usage of children during election campaigns in multifarious activities, which are in derogation and violation of rights of children. **AGENCIES**

Rajya Sabha MP Mohammedjan dead

CHENNAI: Former Tamil Nadu Minister and AIADMK Rajya Sabha Member A Mohammedjan died on Tuesday. He was 72. After he reported of uneasiness, the MP was taken to Walajapet general hospital in Ranipet district and he was declared brought dead by authorities, his relative said. "He had just returned home (Ranipet) after campaigning for the Assembly polls. After he said he was experiencing chest pain, we rushed him to the hospital and on the way he became unconscious. Doctors, after examination, said he died of heart attack," the relative told PTI. He is survived by his wife, three sons and a daughter. **AGENCIES**

UPA-II preparations are on, claims Raut

MUMBAI: Shiv Sena leader Sanjay Raut on Friday said that "some people in Delhi" are preparing to form UPA-II, which is why the existing UPA needs to be strengthened if the opposition is to fight the BJP. He made the statement while speaking to reporters in Delhi, a day after he reiterated that NCP chief Sharad Pawar should head the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) that is currently being led by the Congress. Replying to a question, Raut said the "drama" of forming "third, fourth or fifth fronts" has failed so far, hence the existing UPA needs to be strengthened. "Some people in Delhi are preparing to form UPA-II. Hence, I am saying this out of concern. The UPA-I has to be strengthened," he said, without specifying who these people in the national capital are. **AGENCIES**

Bengal, Assam see first phase polling

MORE THAN 1.54 CRORE VOTERS IN THE TWO EASTERN STATES CAST THEIR VOTE TODAY

KOLKATA/GUWAHATI:

Over 1.54 crore voters in the eastern states of West Bengal and Assam will exercise their franchise on Saturday in the first phase of polling to decide the fate of key candidates and whether the former Naxal-affected 'Junglemahal' area of Bengal will transfer its loyalty to the BJP. Polling in 30 assembly segments in West Bengal, most of which are in Junglemahal region, will be almost a straight fight between the BJP and ruling TMC. The Bharatiya Janata Party feels it has the upper hand in the area as it had managed to win most of the Parliamentary seats in the region in the 2019 general elections. The elections will be held amid tight security with the Election Commission deploying around 684 companies of central forces that would guard 10,288 polling booths housed in 7,061 premises, officials said. Besides, the state police will also be deployed at strategic locations, they added.



ra, four in Jhargram and six in Paschim Medinipur, besides the seven seats in high-stakes Purba Medinipur - the home ground of BJP leader Suwendu Adhikari.

The TMC and BJP have fielded candidates in 29 seats each, while the Left-Congress-ISF alliance has put up candidates in all 30 seats, even as there are "friendly fights" in some. In Jhargram, 11 paramilitary personnel will be deployed per booth, the highest for any election held in the state so far, officials said. In the other districts, an average of six paramilitary personnel will be deployed per booth, officials said. "Declaring all 1,307 booths in 1,010 premises as Left Wing Extremist (LWE) areas in Jhargram, we have decided to deploy 127 companies of the central forces only for booth management," an Election Commission official told PTI.

Another 14 companies of central forces will be used as Quick Response Teams (QRTs), one company for the maintenance of strong room and another two companies will be kept reserved as district and sub-divisional striking force, he said. Altogether, 144 companies of central forces will be deployed in Jhargram for the election, he added. "The central forces will be mainly deployed in and around the booths and the state force will be used for the maintenance of law and order. The constables will be used for queue management," the official said. **AGENCIES**

With the first phase, polling will be over in two districts -- Purulia and Jhargram. The Trinamool Congress is fighting in 29 of the 30 seats, while supporting an Independent in the Joypur assembly segment in Purulia as the nomination of its official candidate Ujjwal Kumar was rejected by the EC due to a discrepancy. The BJP is also contesting the polls in 29 seats, while its ally AJSU Party of Jharkhand fielding a candidate in Baghmundi. Congress heavyweight Nepal Mahato is the alliance candidate from the seat, even as the Forward Bloc fielded Debranjani Mahato. AJSU Party has nominated Ashutosh Mahato, while the TMC fielded Sushanta Mahato.

As per the official seat-sharing arrangements of the opposition alliance, the Left is fighting in 18 seats, Congress in 10 and ISF two. However, "friendly fights" between the Left parties and Congress are on the anvil in some seats, including Baghmundi and Joypur, as negotiations could not be concluded. **AGENCIES**

Inequality rising under NDA govt: Congress

NEW DELHI: The Congress on Tuesday alleged that economic inequality in the society has been increasing under the NDA government, a charge refuted by the BJP, which said Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been sincerely working for the welfare of the poor.



Initiating the debate on the Finance Bill, 2021, Congress member Amar Singh said the economic situation in the country is deteriorating and charged that 73 per cent of the country's wealth is going to just 1 per cent of the population. "Inequality is increasing very fast," he said.

Singh said except agriculture, all sectors have been suffering due to "wrong" policies adopted by the central government. He said if the central government does a sample survey of the unorganised sector, which contributes 45 to 50 per cent to the economy and provides employment to a similar number of people, it will find that the sector is the worst sufferer. Singh charged that the government has given tax relief only to the rich whereas the common people have been suffering because of the price rise of essential commodities and petroleum products. The Congress member claimed that allocation to the health and agriculture sectors has reduced which will create problems for the poor.

He also demanded that the three agricultural laws should be withdrawn as demanded by the agitating farmers. BJP member Rajendra Agrawal said the BJP-led government has been working relentlessly for the welfare of the poor, deprived, backward and women. "Ever since Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed charge in 2014, he has been working for the all round development of the poor and downtrodden without taking any break," he said.

Agrawal said the three agricultural acts enacted last year have been beneficial for farmers and many peasants have already benefitted from them. He also blamed the Congress and Left parties for the poor condition of the country's agriculture and industrial sectors. The BJP member charged the Congress cannot go beyond the prism of votes bank politics and when in power, carried out development where it would get votes. **AGENCIES**

Partial impact of 'Bihar bandh'

PATNA: Workers of RJD, Congress and the Left parties hit the streets across the state on Friday as part of 'Bihar Bandh' call given by them in support of farmers cause and also to protest police action against the opposition MLAs in the assembly three days back. The shutdown decision has also included matters relating to unemployment and farmers demand for withdrawal of new farm laws, on which a call for all India bandh has been given by the farmers bodies.



The bandh had partial impact on normal life in the state as protesting opposition parties workers blocked national highways, state highways and squatted on railway tracks at few places. They raised slogans against the state government, burnt tyres at some places and held small meetings at prominent places in different towns. No untoward incident has been reported during the bandh from any part of the state. The protestors forced delay of trains for a brief period in some places in the state.

RJD leader Tejashwi Prasad Yadav could not participate in the bandh which he had announced the previous day. "Our party leader was supposed to lead the bandh in the state capital but he could not participate as he has to attend funeral of his uncle Mahavir Rai, Lalu Prasad's elder brother, who died yesterday in the state capital," RJD spokesman Mrityunjay Tiwari said. Workers of the Left parties - CPI, CPI(M) and CPI(ML) - were seen on the roads of Patna especially at Dakbungalow square waving party flags.

RJD workers also blocked bypass road (NH-30) near Nandlal Chapra in the state capital, hampering traffic movement for some time. Though, the call for Bharat bandh was already given by the farmers unions to protest against the three farm Acts. But, since the state government resorted to police action on March 23 inside the Assembly in which opposition MLAs were thrashed by the police while forcibly evicting them from the House. 'So we are also protesting against the governments anti-democratic and autocratic style of functioning,' CPI(ML) state secretary Kunal said. He sought an apology from chief minister Nitish Kumar for police action against legislators in the assembly and also for bringing the Bihar Special Armed Police Act, which he termed a 'black law'. **AGENCIES**

TN CM slams DMK over 'dynasty politics'

VILLUPURAM (TN):

AIADMK top leader and Chief Minister K Palaniswami on Saturday slammed the DMK over 'dynasty politics' and took pride in saying that even an ordinary party worker would get the top position in his party.



The DMK has not reformed itself though it was out of power for a decade, Palaniswami said, canvassing votes for Law Minister C Ve Shanmugam who has been fielded from Villupuram constituency for the April 6 Assembly polls.

Dynasty politics was all about a particular family holding the top position in the party again and again and while even an ordinary worker could get the top position in the AIADMK, it was not the case with DMK, he claimed. "It was previously Karunanidhi, and then (his son) Stalin and now Udhayanidhi Stalin (DMK youth wing secretary and candidate from Triplicane-Chepaug segment in Chennai) has emerged. This election is all about putting a fullstop to dynasty politics," he said.

Replying to Stalin who alleged a scam in award of tenders by highways department at a poll meeting today in southern Tamil Nadu, Palaniswami said the allegation was a bundle of lies. During the DMK regime, it was only Stalin, who awarded tenders to his relatives, the CM alleged. In his campaign at multiple locations in this district and nearby Kallakurichi, Palaniswami targeted the DMK and its chief Stalin over several issues. Lashing out at Stalin for a wanton, false campaign that AIADMK was subservient towards the BJP, he said it was a false and defamatory propaganda. **AGENCIES**

Politicians' relatives join the Kerala fray

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM:

A plethora of politicians' relatives—including sons, daughters and sons-in-law, are in fray for the April 6 Assembly polls in Kerala, hoping to cash in on their legacy to woo voters.



Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan's son-in-law P A Mohammed Riyas, the national president of Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI), is making his debut in the Assembly polls from Bepoyre, while Congress leader K Muraleedharan, MP and Padmaja Venugopal, children of former Chief Minister late K Karunakaran have been fielded from Nedom and Thrissur respectively.

Vijayan is seeking re-election from Dharmadam in Kannur. In over 20 of the 140 seats, children of former ministers and MLAs from the ruling CPI(M)-led LDF and Opposition Congress-led UDF are testing the electoral waters this time even as several aspirants were allegedly cold shouldered.

According to J Prabhaskar, political analyst, when there is no politics in politics, kith and kin, businessmen and independents matter. Political parties claim public acceptability of these candidates when they field such candidates. This means their partymen are not acceptable. "Look at the contradiction. They say that they want a publicly accepted person and reversely accept that their party workers are not publicly accepted. What kind of argument are they putting forward," he asked.

"This means their politics is at a discount. When politics comes at a discount, the publicly acceptable people become candidates, the kith and kins and businessmen become candidates....it's the policies which clothe a political party. When the ideology and policies are removed, politics become naked," he said. It's a reflection of this kind of politics that is found in political parties irrespective of ideology going after relatives, Prabhaskar, former political science professor with the University of Kerala, told PTI.

Lathika Subhash, Congress ex-Mahila Morcha president, had quit the party after a "mundan protest" on being denied a ticket by the UDF and is contesting as an independent from Ettumanoor. Veteran Congress leader, K C Rosakutty too quit the party and warmed up to the rival front, miffed at being overlooked for the Kalpetta seat, while the Left Front also had its share of disgruntled candidates.

Three sons making their electoral debut are P E Abdul Gafour (Kalamassery), the son of former minister Ibrahim Kunju, who was denied a seat by the IUML, an ally of the Congress-led UDF, Suresh K Achuthan, son of former Congress MLA, K Achuthan (UDF), and LDF-independent candidate Dr V Sujith (Chavara), son of former MLA late N Vijayan Pillai. **AGENCIES**

nothing could be more appropriate moment than this as we could spread our words to make people aware of the inherent danger," Riddhi said. Titled "Nijeder Mote, Nieder Gaan" (Our song about our views), the song also takes digs at the effort to pass off mythology as history, besides noting the state of women's safety in the country and LG-BTQ rights.

Actor Deboleena Dutta Mukherjee, who has also lent voice, said, "We have clearly pronounced our stance against fascism in the video." "When Riddhi broached the topic to me and asked me to be part of the video, I immediately agreed. I think the message against the politics of hatred and fascism has come loud and clear in the video, which already got widely shared on social media. This is very urgent in the present situation," she told PTI. Deboleena was viciously trolled with threats of rape and beheading on social media after she said at a panel discussion recently that she can cook beef. The video has been shot in different parts of Kolkata, including the iconic College Street and Chinese Kali Bari in Tangra, while featuring books by BR Ambedkar and "Raktakarabi" by Rabindranath Tagore. **AGENCIES**

Dalit author scripts new role in politics



KOLKATA: Manoranjan Byapari describes himself as "every man you meet after stepping out of home". The former Naxalite-turned litterateur, who has been fielded by the TMC as its candidate from Balagarh seat in Hooghly district, has donned several hats in the last 50-odd years. However, the award-winning author and Dalit activist contended that he still identifies himself with the rickshaw-pullers and roadside tea-sellers, "who live by the sweat of their brow."

"I had to bend over backwards to make ends meet. Over the years, I have worked as a rickshaw-puller, a cremation ground caretaker, a cook and a tea-seller and the experiences that I have gained have made me an empath and gave me the courage to be the voice of the voiceless," he said. Byapari, an exponent of Dalit literature, pointed out that all these years he has only written about the marginalised sections, highlighting their woes, "but it was time to translate words into action, and

what better way to start than joining politics at a time when Bengali culture, traditions and literature have come under threat". The TMC nominee, who enthralled discerning audiences with his discourses at the Jaipur Literary Fest in 2018 and other gatherings, exuded confidence that he would win the polls as "voters know that I am one of them". Among Byapari's well-known books are 'Tibritto Chandal Jeebon' (Interrogating My Chandal Life), a biographical novel which details his travails as a lower caste refugee, and 'Batashe Baruder Gandha' (There's Gunpowder in the Air), a fictionalised account of his life in jail as a Naxalite. Asked why he chose to join the TMC and not a communist party, given his brief stint with the Naxal movement in Bengal, Byapari promptly said, "I was young and disillusioned back then. It took me time to realise the frailty of the (ultra-Left) crusade. It wasn't an informed choice." **AGENCIES**

Poll panel works on e-voting tech

HYDERABAD: The Election Commission of India is working with IIT-Madras on using Blockchain Technology for remote voting and considerable development in that direction is expected by 2024 General Elections, Chief Election Commissioner Sunil Arora said on Friday here.



Interacting with Indian Police Service (IPS) probationers at the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel National Police Academy here, he said though "One Nation One Elections" is desirable, it is difficult to achieve it as it requires amendments of existing laws and political consensus. "We are doing a project with IIT-Madras, Chennai, and some of the eminent scientists. We are doing a Blockchain project. We

are very hopeful by 2024 Lok Sabha elections you will see a lot of fundamental differences the way we (Election Commission) is working, including this (e-voting)," Arora replied when asked if the EC is working to introduce app-based e-voting for the convenience of citizens to vote remotely. He said the EC is also working on linking Aadhaar card with voter id as part of electoral reforms. On "One Nation One Election," he said the existing laws will have to be amended to undertake that gigantic exercise which also requires political consensus. "It's a desirable goal, difficult

Makers of viral Bengali song oppose divisive politics

KOLKATA: A galaxy of Bengali actors and musicians came together in a music video, stressing the need to stamp out "fascist forces", days ahead of the elections in the state. From NRC-CAA to unemployment, the video reflects on the current issues in the country with digs at the bloodsheds in the name of religion and the orgy of violence. "We will not give into divisive and steamrolling politics, which defies all democratic norms. No political party is a saint, but there's a time when you have to call out the autocrats and choose the lesser-

evil," actor-director Parambrata Chatterjee told PTI. "The message of the song is pretty clear. There's still a relevance of the civil society which can speak the more important narratives of the times without having any particular party colour," he added. The song in which the words -- "Ami anyo kothao jabona, ami ei deshe tei thakbo", meaning I won't go anywhere else and would continue to live in this country" come as a refrain has been penned by actor Anirban Chatterjee. The music video is directed by young actors Riddhi Sen and Rwitobroto Mukherjee.



"We have to defeat the dark forces who are spreading the ideology of hatred and clamping diktats on us," said actor Riddhi. He said that the song, which brought together several top actors and musicians of West Bengal, was being planned since 2019-end when the country was on a boil over the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). "However, we thought

nothing could be more appropriate moment than this as we could spread our words to make people aware of the inherent danger," Riddhi said. Titled "Nijeder Mote, Nieder Gaan" (Our song about our views), the song also takes digs at the effort to pass off mythology as history, besides noting the state of women's safety in the country and LG-BTQ rights. Actor Deboleena Dutta Mukherjee, who has also lent voice, said, "We have clearly pronounced our stance against fascism in the video." "When Riddhi broached the topic to me and asked me to be part of the video, I immediately agreed. I think the message against the politics of hatred and fascism has come loud and clear in the video, which already got widely shared on social media. This is very urgent in the present situation," she told PTI. Deboleena was viciously trolled with threats of rape and beheading on social media after she said at a panel discussion recently that she can cook beef. The video has been shot in different parts of Kolkata, including the iconic College Street and Chinese Kali Bari in Tangra, while featuring books by BR Ambedkar and "Raktakarabi" by Rabindranath Tagore. **AGENCIES**

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Tweaking of PF savings cap will hurt commoners

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman recently steered through Parliament the Finance Bill of 2021 that included 127 amendments. The tweaking in the proposal to tax income on PF contributions over Rs2.5 lakh a year is one of them. Responding to MPs' concerns on the tax, she said that nearly 93% PF account holders will be covered by the Rs2.5 lakh per year limit, while a mere 1% were abusing the system. Yet, she introduced an amendment doubling the threshold for annual PF contributions to Rs5 lakh, only for employees whose employers do not remit any contribution to their retirement fund account. For the crores of Employees' PF account holders in the private sector, this Rs5 lakh threshold is a non-starter as an employer-employee relationship is an implicit requirement to open an EPF account. While employees may voluntarily enhance contributions beyond the statutory wage limit of Rs15,000 a month and employers are not bound to match enhanced contributions, a 'zero employer contribution' scenario is not possible for EPF members. This suggests that only some senior government staff who joined service before 2004 and are not part of the NPS will benefit from this concession, as they contribute to the GPF account and get a defined benefit pension separately. In a country with a large informal workforce and sparse social security systems, reasonable savings for retirement should not be penalised. But to give tax relief for such savings only to government employees smacks of bureaucratic preservation of self-interests deriding an equitable approach to taxation. The least the government could have done was to offer the same cap of Rs5 lakh to EPF members, by including their employer contributions during the year. The government must conduct a due diligence before making any legislations. Else, their implications directly affect the common people.



PRAVEEN CHAKRAVARTY BELIEVES THE STATES IN INDIA MUST BE GIVEN THE AUTONOMY TO CREATE JOBS

Increasing nativism amid job crunch

The Haryana government has recently passed legislation that mandates companies in Haryana to provide jobs to local Haryanis first, before hiring people from outside the State.

The unemployment rate in Haryana is the highest of all States in India, as per data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, or CMIE. A whopping 80% of women in Haryana who want to work cannot find a job. More than half of all graduates in Haryana are jobless. The jobs situation in Haryana is staggeringly dismal.

Politically, 11 out of the 18 million voters of Haryana do not have a regular job. World history warns us that when such a vast majority of adults are jobless, it inevitably leads to social revolutions and political upheavals. So, it is entirely understandable that the democratically elected Haryana government panicked and chose to reserve the few available jobs for its own voters.

Haryana is not alone in this quandary. The cabinet of the government of Jharkhand approved similar legislation to reserve jobs for Jharkhand residents. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu announced a similar proposal to reserve jobs for Tamils in its manifesto for the upcoming Assembly elections. Many States in India have embarked on this nativism adventure to protect the interests of the vast number of their jobless locals.

Predictably, this has attracted criticism from economists and commentators, as it militates against their liberal idea of a free economy. 'Focus on creating more jobs, not on reserving the few available ones' is the popular refrain. But, it is a false binary. Creation of new jobs is not entirely in the control of State governments. It is a complex interplay of multitude of factors.

Job creation is obviously an outcome of the performance of the larger economy. If say, the American giant retailer, Amazon, believes that the Indian economy is poised to grow robustly, it may choose to expand its operations in India. The Chief Minister of a State in India has limited control over the management of the larger economy and thereby, attract new investors and businesses who can create jobs. When Amazon, enticed by a buoyant Indian economy, decides to expand its Indian operations, then presumably, the State governments can compete to lure Amazon to their State and help create new jobs.

Ostensibly, Amazon needs abundant high quality skilled and unskilled labour, land at affordable prices, uninterrupted supply of electricity, water and other such 'ease of business' facilities for its expansion. State governments in India can theoretically compete with each other on



these parameters to attract Amazon to set up operations in their State. Further, any tax advantages that a particular State can provide vis-à-vis others will increase its attractiveness for Amazon. In fact, this is exactly what happened in America in 2018 when Amazon decided to build its second headquarters and various States, towns and cities publicly competed with each other to woo Amazon and its jobs to their area. But, realistically in India, in very few of these parameters can a poorer State compete against a richer State to attract Amazon.

An elected State government can certainly, during its five-year tenure, attempt to provide high quality local infrastructure to attract new businesses. State governments also have the ability to provide land at affordable prices or for free to attract investments. However, the availability of skilled local labour is a function of many decades of social progress of the State and cannot be retrofitted immediately. After the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), State governments in India have lost their fiscal autonomy and have no powers to provide any tax concessions to businesses. So, while State governments have the ability to use land and local infrastructure as tools to attract businesses, they do not have control over immediate availability of skilled manpower or to use taxes as a tool to lure. In America, States compete against each other vigorously using tax concessions and land offers to bring new jobs to their States.

But, beyond all these, the most critical factor in the choice of a location for a large business is what economists term as

the 'agglomeration effect' — the ecosystem of supply chain, talent, good living conditions and so on. A State with an already well-established network of suppliers, people, schools, etc. are at a greater advantage to attract even more businesses than the States that are left behind. Put simply, if Amazon's competitor Walmart is already established in Karnataka, then there is a greater incentive for Amazon to also locate itself in Karnataka to take advantage of the established ecosystem. This leads to a cycle of the more prosperous States growing even faster at the expense of the lagging States.

The '3-3-3' danger

This phenomenon is already evident in India's increasing economic divergence among its States. In previous published joint research, I have called this '3-3-3' effect — the three richest large States (Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka) are three times richer than the three poorest large States (Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh), in per-capita income, compared to 1.4 times in 1970. This gap between the richer and poorer States in India is only widening rapidly and not narrowing, due to the agglomeration impact of modern economic development paradigms.

In the absence of a level playing field and with no fiscal autonomy, it is enormously difficult for developing States in India to attract new investments and create new jobs. In this context, an elected government that operates on a five-year electoral cycle, confronted with a powder keg of millions of jobless voters will understandably resort to seemingly 'paise wise, rupees foolish' appeasement policies to salvage whatever it can of an ominous employment situation. After all, how is the Haryana government's policy to restrict labour movement into its borders and protect jobs for locals any different from the Prime Minister's self-reliant India' initiative to restrict goods movement into India's borders and protect local jobs?

The potent combination of widening inter-State inequality, a 'rich States get richer' economic development model, an impending demographic disaster and shrinking fiscal autonomy for elected State governments in a politically and culturally diverse democracy will inevitably propagate nativistic sub-nationalism among the various States of India. Until the economic playing fields for the various States are levelled and much greater fiscal freedom provided to the States, "don't protect but create jobs" will only remain a topic of a hollow lecture and moral sermons.

Praveen Chakravarty is a political economist and a senior office bearer of the Congress party. Views expressed are the author's own



RAMESH POKHRIYAL 'NISHANK' EXPLAINS HOW INDIA HAS GRADUALLY BECOME THE PHARMACY OF THE WORLD

India to be global leader in post-Covid era

By virtue of extensive immunity due to oral vaccination, the last polio case was reported in India in January 2011. Subsequently, India was declared polio-free in 2014. The Government of India observes National Vaccination Day every year on March 16 to convey the importance of vaccination to its people. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the significance of this day becomes even more pertinent. The firm conviction of Prime Minister Narendra Modi ensured that Aatmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) has its own COVID-19 vaccine. I also congratulate my colleague Dr Harsh Vardhan and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare for their perseverance and hard work. Indians will finally become healthier than before. This will help India emerge as a global leader in the post-COVID-19 era.

The Prime Minister realised early on that the challenges being posed by the pandemic would require a global solution. As most developed nations ramped up their efforts to vaccinate their respective populations, the developing countries ran dangerously behind, which could have meant another year of humanitarian and economic crisis for them. While developed countries engaged in vaccine nationalism, it became imperative that a universal, equitable, and affordable supply of vaccines was ensured for developing countries. I am proud that our initiative of making vaccines widely available for other developing countries firmly established India as the 'pharmacy



of the world' and sent out the message that medical products must be dealt with as global public goods. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have been leading global efforts to mitigate the challenges by supplying medicines and generic drugs to other countries. This shows that while becoming aatma nirbhar, we are proving our mettle at the global level. As of March, we have supplied vaccines to over 70 countries while ensuring that our domestic demand is met.

I am proud that our educational institutions took the lead and transformed the challenges into opportunities. The IITs came up with incredible innovations like low-cost portable ventilators, affordable

AI-powered COVID-19 test kits, drones for sanitisation, and cheap and effective PPE kits and masks. With the help of these innovations, we were able to provide healthcare facilities to our people. We even exported this equipment to different countries, which reflects our long adage philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam.

Research and innovation

As we now step into a post-COVID era, it becomes more imperative to strengthen research and innovation. Through the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, we have already taken a step forward in this direction. The NEP aims at improving the research and innovation landscape

in India. It proposes that higher education institutions (HEIs) should focus on research and innovation by establishing start-up incubation centres, technology development centres and interdisciplinary research. The HEIs should also focus on developing mechanisms and organising competitions to promote innovation among student communities. To attain the highest global standards in education, the NEP also recommends setting up Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities, which will be on a par with IITs and IIMs.

Before the commencement of the next academic session 2021-22, the National Research Foundation (NRF) will be established under the Principal Scientific Adviser, which will transform India's research culture. I am glad that an outlay of ₹50,000 crore for the next five years has been allocated for NRF in the Budget.

The world will remember us for initiating the largest education reforms and emerging from the pandemic as a global leader. By taking the COVID-19 vaccine, the Prime Minister has given a solid boost to our vaccination drive and instilled confidence in the nation. I appeal to my dear citizens to come forward and be a part of the vaccine drive because it is only together that we can build a 'Swarnim Bharat (A Golden India)'.

Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank' is Union Education Minister, Government of India. Views expressed are his own

FIVE OBSERVATIONS

ON THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT'S LATEST VEHICLE SCRAPPAGE POLICY

- ECONOMIC GAINS, MORE JOBS EYED**
The new policy announced by Transport Ministry, after the move for a green tax on ageing and polluting automobiles, promises economic benefits, a cleaner environment and thousands of jobs.
- IMPLEMENTATION WILL TAKE TIME**
It will take until April 1, 2022 for vehicles belonging to the govt and the public sector to be scrapped, another year to identify junk heavy commercial vehicles and pinpoint other vehicles by 2024.
- FITNESS CHECKING IS A TOUGH TASK**
It will be no easy task to put in place a credible system of automated fitness checking centres with help from States to assess whether commercial and private vehicles are usable after 15 and 20 years.
- UNFIT VEHICLES MUST BE OFF ROAD**
Enforcement will be key to get vehicles scrapped once they are found unfit for use and to stop them from moving to smaller towns. States must also provide road tax and registration concessions.
- INCENTIVES ACT AS STIMULUS**
The Centre must have incentives that reward manufacturers of vehicles that are the most fuel-efficient. The industry, meanwhile, should sweeten the deal with genuine discounts on new vehicles.



BOOKS: REVIEW

Why UK is considered safe haven for fugitives?

A new book on some high-profile as well as lesser-known Indian extradition cases attempts to decode why the UK is considered a safe haven for those wanting to escape the law in India.

"Escaped: True stories of Indian fugitives in London", released worldwide on Monday, tracks 12 cases involving alleged offenders wanted in India to stand trial for offences ranging from loan defaults to murder.

The book, by London-based journalists and researchers Danish and Ruhi Khan, includes a recap of the more recent cases involving former Kingfisher Airlines boss Vijay Mallya and diamond merchant Nirav Modi, wanted in India on fraud and money laundering charges, as well as some historic ones including those of former Indian Naval officer Ravi Shankaran and musician Nadeem Saifi.

"These 12 cases were chosen as much for the significance of the allegations against them as for the interesting arguments raised during their hearings and the observations made in their judgments," said Danish Khan.

"We have studied in much detail many other extradition cases, have had long interviews with experts and pored over case laws and parliamentary reports to understand the principles underlying the extradition process that we explore in our last chapter," he said.

As journalists covering the recent court cases in London, the couple said they drew on their own observations and reporting and also dug into British archives, old newspaper records and parliamentary reports to review cases dating back to the 1950s that have had a significant impact on the India-UK extradition policy. "We have used investigative

The book, authored by London-based journalists and researchers Danish and Ruhi Khan, tracks 12 cases involving alleged offenders wanted in India to stand trial for offences ranging from loan defaults to murder

reporting and eye-witness accounts to bring to life the stories of the flamboyant billionaire Vijay Mallya and diamond czar Nirav Modi. We have also made extensive use of the British archives and historical newspapers reports to bring into focus the less heard but extremely important and intriguing stories of other fugitives that throw a spotlight on India over the past seven decades — whether it is the underworld-



Escaped: True Stories of Indian Fugitives in London
By Danish Khan & Ruhi Khan; Penguin; 380 pages; Rs399

cricket-Bollywood nexus or the Indo-Pak diplomatic wars," said Ruhi Khan.

Among some of the past extradition cases is that of a key lieutenant of Dawood Ibrahim, Iqbal Mirchi, who set up a base in London at a time when the Middle East was the most popular destination for underworld dons and it proved a good choice as he was successful in his fight against being extradited to India.

The authors say they have tried to take a close look at how Mirchi built his empire, rising from the mohallas of Bombay to London's millionaire row.

The book similarly tracks the lives of all these fugitives who "escaped" from India, many winning their battle against extradition and others carrying on a long-

drawn legal fight to stay on in the UK.

Danish Khan is a journalist and historian living in London. He has been covering the UK and Europe for Times Now, ET Now and Mumbai Mirror for a decade. Prior to that, he worked as a journalist in Mumbai. Danish was awarded the Martin Senior scholarship and the Amersi Foundation scholarship at the University of Oxford, where he is also involved in the Global History of Capitalism Project. He has taught history at the University of Oxford and Stanford University.

Ruhi Khan is a London-based independent journalist. She has written on extradition cases for the Wire. She has worked with NDTV and Mumbai Mirror in India and been a curator at Twitter UK. Ruhi was a Jefferson Fellow at the East West Center, US, and a recipient of the Mary Morgan Hewitt Award for Women in Journalism. She is an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) scholar at the London School of Economics and Political Science and also edits the Media@LSE Blog.

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'E-commerce players bypass FDI norms' JSW Steel eyes 45mtpa capacity

RELIANCE RETAIL INFORMS GOVT ABOUT FOREIGN CAPITAL IN THE INVENTORY-BASED BUSINESSES

NEW DELHI: Billionaire Mukesh Ambani's Reliance Retail on Thursday told the government that complex legal structures have been used by some firms to bypass the country's e-commerce rules which from the very beginning do not allow foreign capital in the inventory-based model.

At a meeting called by the Commerce Ministry on allegations that foreign online retailers created complex structures to bypass foreign investment rules and damage small traders, Amazon urged the government not to issue any clarification until investigations into its business practices had been concluded, sources said.

At the meeting, Reliance Retail's representatives said foreign investment is allowed only in pure technical infrastructure/platform that facilitates the meeting of buyer with sellers.

Such platforms cannot act as sellers themselves, directly or indirectly, adding some foreign companies have used complex legal structures to exploit loopholes or creative interpretation



of the policy that violate the policy in spirit.

Such legal creativity includes creating a multi-level company structure to hide the real relationship between the marketplace entity and the sellers, they said.

According to sources, they alleged that these marketplace entities are engaged in the control of inventory and are their largest sellers.

The continued violation creates the doubts about legal sanctity of the policy especially in the mind of new e-commerce players and so it is imperative that the rules are clarified to an extent that these are not subject to such creative interpretation, the officials told the meeting.

Sources said they suggested that the scope of group company be widened to include

affiliate and associate companies and misuse of B2B e-commerce by either controlling the inventory or providing deep discounts through selected sellers by the way of capital dumping be prevented.

Amazon officials, on the other hand, said any clarification in the FDI policy will entail unemployment, ridicule India's foreign investment policy and impact consumers.

They said any claims or complaints of violation can be investigated by the relevant agencies and so no clarification is merited as of now, sources said.

Reached for comments, an Amazon spokesperson welcomed industry consultations initiated by the DPIIT and the opportunity for a constructive and continuing dialogue with the government.

"We reiterated our strong, long-term commitment to India as we continue to onboard hundreds of thousands of MSMEs, building infrastructure and technology to empower and scale these local businesses," the spokesperson said.

"The FDI policy needs to be stable and predictable for investor confidence as any disruption in business will impact millions of livelihoods and jobs, have negative consequences on downstream suppliers and service providers including MSMEs, startups and offline stores which have barely recovered from the setback of COVID," the spokesperson added. **AGENCIES**

NEW DELHI: JSW Steel plans to achieve 45 million tonnes per annum capacity well before its target of 2030 as it marks its foray into the eastern region of the country with the acquisition of Bhushan Power and Steel Ltd (BPSL).

In a letter to BPSL employees, JSW Group Chairman Sajjan Jindal said "your contribution will be key in bolstering our ambitious growth plans of achieving 45 MTPA capacity well ahead of the 2030 timeline. The synergies we draw will also play a pivotal role in transforming the lives of millions of our stakeholders."

He further said JSW Steel has acquired Bhushan Power and Steel under the provisions of Insolvency Bankruptcy Code, 2016.

"I heartily welcome you all to the JSW Group where we are committed to building a strong and self-reliant India. This is an important milestone and it is the largest acquisition in the history of JSW Steel.

"This acquisition not only aligns with our core business and purpose but also establishes our presence and accelerates our growth vision in eastern India," he said.

For JSW Steel, the acquisition of BPSL marks its entry into the eastern region.



"You are joining us at a crucial juncture of our journey, it comes at a time when steel is required to build the post-pandemic infrastructure of our nation.

"The Eastern region of our country has had a long tradition of steel making... We will bring our experience in making world-class steel and our global consumer connect to manufacture products at the BPSL facility for key projects in India and around the world," he said.

In another development, JSW Energy on Friday said its board has approved a proposal for issuance of green bonds by its arm for raising \$750 million (around Rs 5,443 crore) from international markets.

The board approved issuance of green bonds by JSW Hydro

Energy Ltd (JSWHEL), the company said in a BSE filing. Funds up to \$750 million will be raised through issuance of non-convertible, senior, secured, fixed rate green bonds in the international markets, subject to market conditions and receipt of necessary approvals by JSWHEL, it added.

The JSW Energy board also approved the appointment of Munesh Khanna as an additional and Independent Director of the company with effect from March 26, 2021 for a term of 5 years, subject to the approval of the members of the company. JSWHEL is a 100 per cent subsidiary of the company and owns and operates the Karcham-Wangtoo (1000 MW) and Baspa II (300 MW) hydro-electric power plants in Himachal Pradesh.

NEWSBRIEF

Tributes paid to Marriott's global president and CEO

NEW DELHI: Around 250 people gathered outside JW Marriott, Aerocity, and held a walk to pay tribute to Arne Sorenson, Marriott's Global President and CEO who recently lost his life to pancreatic cancer. All Marriott properties in Delhi NCR participated in the event which turned out to be an emotional tribute to the man who commanded a lot of respect among Marriott staff across continents. The walk was organized by the team of JW Marriott New Delhi. After a brief address by Jatin Khanna and all the General Managers, the walk started at 7:30am from JW Marriott New Delhi and after a stretch of 2 kilometers covering the Aerocity complex, the walk concluded back at the hotel. The objective was honour Sorenson's love to remain fit. He never missed his day run no matter how busy his schedule. **FW BUREAU**

Man Industries wins Rs500cr contracts

NEW DELHI: Man Industries (India) on Monday said it has won new contracts worth Rs 500 crore in domestic and overseas markets. Its order book with these contracts stands at Rs 1,250 crore. "Man Industries (India) Limited, one of India's leading Large Diameter Pipe manufacturing companies, has announced today that the company has received new orders of approx Rs 500 crore in both domestic and export markets of oil and gas as well as water segments," the company said in a statement. The company said it has seen a strong growth trajectory with the addition of these orders and has successfully navigated the pandemic which has otherwise badly disrupted other sectors and industries. R C Mansukhani, Chairman, Man Industries (India) Limited, said, "We continue to demonstrate great value and customer confidence which is reflective in the faith that they continue to bestow upon us." **AGENCIES**

Visionet sees 50% growth this fiscal

NEW DELHI: Business process management firm Visionet expects 50 per cent year-on-year growth in 2021 and 2022 on account of higher demand for digitisation across several verticals, mainly in banking, finance and insurance segments. The company also plans to hire 1,500 people this year. "In 2020, we have grown by almost 60 per cent overall. In 2021, we are expecting over a 50 per cent plus growth rate and we are also forecasting a very strong growth rate of 50 per cent in 2022." **AGENCIES**

Bikano aims ₹2,500cr packaged foods biz

NEW DELHI: Leading packaged snacks brand Bikano on Wednesday said it is aiming to grow over two-fold to about Rs 2,500 crore in the next three years on the back of market expansion and strengthening of product portfolio.

The company, which largely gets its business from the northern markets, is now investing to expand in the southern and western markets.

Besides, the company is also expanding its portfolio by adding new product lines for the domestic markets and has introduced frozen food and ready-to-eat food (RTE), targeting the export markets. On growth prospects, Bikano Director Manish Agarwal told PTI: "We are aiming to reach Rs 2,500 crore business in the next three years".

Aggarwal expects Bikano to have a business of Rs 1,000 to



1,200 crore from its packaged snacks business this fiscal. "We are expecting to grow around 35 to 40 per cent in the next fiscal in the packaged food business," he said.

According to Agarwal, the market potential of packaged food segment is very high and the company is trying to harness it with its current product port-

folio and new launches. "The salty snacks market in India has witnessed a remarkable evolution and growth in recent years. With a wide proliferation of Indian flavoured packaged snacks, we have witnessed the introduction of multiple new product segments and diverse ethnic flavours," he said. **AGENCIES**

Tanishq unveils 'pay from home' service

KOLKATA: Jewellery major Tanishq on Saturday introduced 'pay from home' service in poll-bound Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Kerala and West Bengal to provide a convenient shopping experience to its customers, amid strict monitoring of cash movement by the authorities in the run-up to the assembly elections, an official said on Saturday.

The company expects that buyers will not defer their purchases with the availability of the cash collection facility at their residences, and this will help retain sales growth momentum, he said.

"This facility is an extension of various measures initiated for customers' convenience in the unlock period," Tanishq, VP (category, marketing & retail) Arun Narayan said.

It will enable customers to



complete the payment process in cash or through any electronic mode from the comfort of their homes during the election period, he said. The Election Commission has been keeping a strict vigil on the movement of cash and seized crores of unaccounted money in the poll-bound states.

The new service is being piloted in Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, Kerala, and West Bengal where elections will be held,

Narayan said. These states are among the key markets for the Tata group company, he said, adding that Assam is the only poll-bound state where the service has not been launched.

The company's future-first consumer initiatives included video calling to retail stores, virtual jewellery 'Try On' powered by chat and appointment-based shopping. For a transaction of Rs 2 lakh and above, KYC disclosure is mandatory. "Maximum cash collection can be Rs 1.99 lakh from a customer's home as we are unable to execute PAN verification at one's doorstep," he told PTI.

Meanwhile, Gem and Jewellery Export Promotion Council (GJEP) chairman Colin Shah, at an ICC event, said there is a need for faster adoption of the digital medium. **AGENCIES**

Swanrose to launch five new products

NEW DELHI: Betting on the health and hygiene segment, Swanrose India on Thursday launched a new hand sanitiser and plans to expand its portfolio in the coming months, according to a company official.

It plans to introduce five products in the health and hygiene segment this year and is also looking to enter the South America and the Middle East markets.

The company is a wholly-owned subsidiary of US-based Swanrose Inc.

On Thursday, the company introduced the hand sanitiser under the brand name "Just Human" in India and the US markets simultaneously, claiming that it will protect the users 24 hours from getting infected with coronavirus.

Swanrose Inc CEO Roshini Sanah Jaiswal said, "it is the first hand sanitiser to provide extended protection. The 24-hour efficacy is backed by GLP Lab certification".

"Just Human" 24-hour hand sanitiser is made in India with proprietary US technology. The product has got USFDA registration and DCGI clearance in India, she added.

Presently, the company is getting its hand sanitiser manufactured here through a third party contract manufacturer from Punjab.

Initially, the company expects monthly sales of 1.5 crore from the Indian market.

"We are not one product company. Our vision is to grow," she said, adding a couple of products are at the R&D stage, which will be intellectual property-protected products.

Swanrose started business in April 2020, by producing alcohol-based hand sanitisers. The first product launch was Aristocrat and Humaste, both alcohol-based hand sanitisers, in India and the USA.

Roshini Sanah Jaiswal is also the promoter and Chief Restructuring Officer of the Delhi-based liquor company Jagatjit Industries. **AGENCIES**

Seed industry upset on govt disallowing GM crops' trials

NEW DELHI: The seed industry on Wednesday expressed disappointment over the Centre's "regressive decision" to not allow scientific field trials of genetically modified crops, including Bt Brinjal, without considering the recommendations from states and Union Territories.

In his written reply to a query in the Rajya Sabha on Monday, Union Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar had said, "It has been decided that proposals of field trials of GM crops, including Bt Brinjal, will not be taken for consideration in the GEAC without recommendation of the concerned state/UT government."

Expressing disappointment over the minister's response on transgenic crop trials, Federation of Seed Industry of India (FSII) Executive Director Shivendra Bajaj said, "This further complicates the already cumbersome process of conducting field trials of transgenic crops in India."

As per the regulatory process, the Genetic Engineering



Appraisal Committee (GEAC) reviews the data submitted along with the application to conduct field trials and is the only body by law to review the safety of the submitted data and grant final approval for field trials, he said.

"It is not possible for the states to review the data and make decisions. GM crops undergo rigorous safety assessment and conducting scientific research trials is a crucial part of this safety assessment," he added. Bajaj said the proposed process further puts a question mark for science to progress in agricultural biotechnology, let alone commercialisation, and will lead to complete stoppage

of GM research in India. FSII and Alliance for Agri Innovation Director General Ram Kaundinya said, "This will jeopardise the huge investments made by the Indian private sector companies in this space as well as the investments being made by the government through public institutions."

Careers of thousands of students studying biotechnology will be finished, he said.

"If we do not use GM technology, we will also lose opportunities to save water and reduce fertiliser and pesticide consumption. This is a huge setback for science and technology in agriculture," he said. **AGENCIES**

Voltas eyes double-digit growth in AC sales

NEW DELHI: Tata Group firm Voltas is expecting a strong double-digit growth in sales of air conditioners this year on account of "buoyant summer" and hybrid working model adopted by people in the backdrop of the Covid pandemic, a top company official has said.

The company attained the pre-Covid sales numbers during the festival season last year and expects to continue with the positive momentum this summer. Voltas is also witnessing an increase in sales in smaller towns. Its present AC sales between the metros and non-metros are in the ratio of 55:45, but the company is expecting this number to be reversed in the future. Anticipating a major growth in demand from those markets, it has recently opened several brand shops.

When asked about growth, Voltas Managing Director and CEO Pradeep Bakshi told PTI: "We expect a strong double digit industry growth this summer."



"We were back to pre-Covid numbers during the festival season, and we will continue with this positive momentum in this summer of FY22 and beyond. Our Room AC business recorded a growth of 46 per cent over the corresponding quarter (non-Covid period) of the previous year. We expect this momentum to continue in the next few quarters," he added. Though the company has recently gone for the price hike due to inflationary pressure on the material inputs but is optimistic about sales.

"Even though the recent increase in prices of raw materials has translated into price hikes for a variety of white goods, we remain optimistic about consumer sentiments, due to pent-up demand and a buoyant summer," he added. This year, summer has already set in in many parts of the country, with the south and central region seeing temperatures rising in February, while the rest of the country is warming up in March. **AGENCIES**

Telecom sector headed for second round of consolidation

MUMBAI: Providing services like broadband connectivity, cable TV, enterprise solutions, and payment wallets is the need of the hour for telcos, and a second wave of consolidation is upon the industry, a rating agency said on Tuesday.

India Ratings and Research said the sector, which was battered following the aggressive entry of Reliance Jio, will continue showing signs of recovery amid conducive regulatory environment and maintained a "stable" outlook for the industry in FY22.

The second round of con-

solidation (Consolidation 2.0) is kicking-in in the industry, which will bring a transformation in the business models of telecom companies, leading to the evolution of incumbents from the providers of traditional voice-only services to complete digital solutions for households, it said.

Along with wireless mobility, telcos will have to provide services such as broadband connectivity, cable TV services (direct-to-home), enterprise solutions, e-payment wallets/platforms, music applications and over-the-top



transmission platform.

Such bundling of services along with the traditional wireless mobile services has become the "need of the hour" to ensure customer stickiness and widen the market footprint, the agency said.

It can be noted that the sector was once a very busy field with up to half a dozen operators to choose from. However, in the last five years, operators like Vodafone and Idea went for a merger, some retreated and some were also forced to go into bankruptcy because of the financial difficulties. A

Among the operators, it said Jio has strong or moderate presence in all the allied services, except enterprise segment where it is non-existent, while Bharti Airtel lacks broadcasting presence and Vodafone Idea does not have a presence in broadcasting, payment wallets and direct to home.

The increasing data usage and rising proportion of higher average revenue per user data customers in the overall subscriber mix indicate that, even without tariff hikes, the sector is structurally moving towards a higher- average

revenue per user regime, it said.

Competition intensity has alleviated over the last one year, as evident from narrowing of tariff differentials among telcos, it said.

Evolution of the industry over the coming quarters will remain a key monitorable since it will determine whether the Indian mobility market will remain a 3+1 player market or will transition to a 2.5+1 player market and how telcos will respond to the next phase of consolidation in the industry, the agency said. **AGENCIES**

ALSO READ | SOME STARS SHINE MORE THAN OTHERS * P8 | PROTESTERS RETURN TO MYANMAR STREETS * P8

Govt, RBI discuss PSBs privatisation

THE PRIVATISATION PROCESS WILL MOVE ON, CLARIFIES GOVERNOR SHAKTIKANTA DAS

NEW DELHI: The RBI is discussing public sector banks privatisation with the centre, Governor Shaktikanta Das said on Thursday and added that the "process will move on." Mr Das emphasized that a healthy banking sector, with a strong capital base and ethics-driven governance remained a policy priority.

The government is looking at overhauling the banking sector, which is reeling under a heavy load of non-performing assets that are likely to rise further in wake of the pandemic.

Meanwhile, the finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman had provided an assurance last week that not all banks will be privatised and wherever it happens, the interest of the employees will be protected.

The Governor also said the ongoing revival of economic activity should continue unabated, adding, "don't see downward revision in RBI's 10.5 per cent growth estimate for FY22. The RBI has predicted a growth rate of 10.5 per cent for India's GDP for the next year."

The RBI is committed to using all policy tools to support the economic recovery while preserving price stability and



financial stability, Mr Das emphasized. Admitting that the spike in new pandemic infections is a matter of concern, the governor said the country is equipped this time to tackle the situation. The country added 53,476 Covid-19 cases on Wednesday alone, marking the highest daily rise since October last year. In a separate development, India Ratings and Research said privatisation of two public sector banks can impact their ratings as the government support to the two entities will disappear.

The rating agency said the budget proposal to privatise the as yet unidentified PSBs "could lead to material negative

migration of the long-term issuer ratings (mapped to senior instruments such as infrastructure bonds) and the ratings on Tier 2 instruments of the identified banks". The impact will be more if the government chooses to privatise the weaker banks, which are yet to be consolidated, it added. Factoring in timely intervention from the government and minimal probability of default, the agency said it has a rating floor of "IND AA-" for senior instruments and Tier 2 instruments of banks, which are majority-owned by the government.

The agency explained that it establishes a long-term issuer rating and equates the

Committee set up to evaluate applications

MUMBAI: The RBI on Monday announced setting up a Standing External Advisory Committee (SEAC) for evaluating applications for universal banks and small finance banks under former central bank deputy governor Shyamala Gopinath.

The RBI had issued guidelines for "on tap" licensing of universal banks in the private sector in August 2016 and guidelines for "on tap" licensing of small finance banks in the private sector in December 2019. The guidelines indicated that the applications for universal banks and small finance banks will be initially screened by the Reserve Bank to ensure prima facie eligibility of the applicants. It was also stated that a

Standing External Advisory Committee, comprising eminent persons with experience in banking, financial sector and other relevant areas, will evaluate the applications thereafter and that the constitution of the SEAC will be announced by Reserve Bank. "The tenure of this SEAC will be for three years," the central bank said while announcing the five-member panel.

Revathy Iyer, Director, Central Board, RBI; B Mahapatra, former Executive Director, RBI and presently Chairman, NPCI; T N Manoharan, former Chairman, Canara Bank; and Hemant G Contractor, former MD, SBI and former Chairman, PFRDA, are members of the committee.

rating on senior issuances like infrastructure bonds and Tier-2 sub-debt to it.

The long-term issuer rating is arrived at a higher support-driven rating, factoring in the extraordinary distress support and the standalone credit profile of the issuer, which may factor in the ordinary ongoing support,

it added. In the case of hybrid instruments like additional tier-1 bonds, the rating is based on the standalone profile that factors in ordinary support from the government for PSBs as terms of these instruments could, under certain circumstances, prevent the support for servicing these instruments, it said. **AGENCIES**

ICICI-Videocon PMLA case: Deepak Kochhar gets bail

MUMBAI: The Bombay High Court on Thursday granted bail to Deepak Kochhar, husband of former ICICI Bank CEO Chanda Kochhar, in a money laundering case registered by the Enforcement Directorate (ED).

There was no likelihood of Kochhar absconding or tampering with evidence, the court held while granting him relief.

Kochhar had approached the high court after a special court in the city rejected his bail plea in December last year. Justice P D Naik of the high court, while granting bail to Kochhar on Thursday, directed him to furnish a personal bond of Rs three lakh.

The high court also directed Kochhar to surrender his passport before the special court in the city hearing the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) cases, and asked him to co-operate with the probe.

Kochhar was arrested by the ED in September last year under the PMLA in the alleged ICICI Bank-Videocon money laundering case.

The ED had registered the money laundering case following an FIR by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI)



against the Kochhar couple, Videocon Group promoter Venugopal Dhoot, and others for allegedly causing loss to the ICICI Bank by sanctioning loans to the Videocon Group of companies in contravention of the bank's policies.

Kochhar had argued that the ED had taken note of all the alleged proceeds of the crime in the case, so there was no chance of him creating any third party rights or interfering with the probe if out on bail.

He had also said in his bail plea that the entire case against him was based on documentary evidence, which was already in the ED's possession, and hence there was no question of him

tampering with the evidence. The ED's lawyers Hiten Venegaonkar and Additional Solicitor General Anil Singh had opposed Kochhar's bail plea, saying that the charges against him were serious.

ASG Singh had also said under the PMLA bail can be given only if the court has grounds for believing that the accused is not guilty and is not likely to commit any offence while on bail.

In his 94-page judgement, Justice Naik noted that Kochhar had been in custody for six months and co-accused in the case, including his wife Chanda Kochhar and Videocon Group promoter V N Dhoot, were already out on bail. **AGENCIES**



The Union Bank of India has bagged the prestigious Indian Banks' Association (IBA) award for "The best IT Risk Management & Cyber Security Initiatives - Large Bank" during the 16th Annual IBA Technology Awards-2021 event held virtually at Mumbai recently. PHOTO: DOMINICK RODRIGUES

Finacepeer eyes doubling loan book

MUMBAI: Google-incubated fintech player Finacepeer, which provides interest-free tuition fees to parents of school and college-going students, is planning to double the numbers of schools/colleges it taps to 9,000 by December and also grow its loan book two-fold to 1,000 crore.

Co-founder Sunit Gajbhiye, who started the company in 2017, claimed that serving around 4,500 schools/colleges, universities and coaching centres makes Finacepeer the largest in this segment.

Its immediate competition includes Avanse Financial Services, Grayquest Education Finance and Eduvance, among others.

Of the 4,500 institutions, over 3,000 are schools and coaching centres and a good



number of them came on board during the first seven months of the lockdown, he said.

Some of the top school chains which it serves include the Delhi Public School, GEMS Education, Birla Open Minds and Orchids, he said. During the first seven months of the pandemic, the company added over 1 million users/parents as

they were without income or faced pay-cuts.

"Since we started operations in 2017, we provided loans to 1.5 million students. We plan to double the number of schools/institutions to 9,000 by the end of the year and expect to double the loan book from a likely ₹500 crore by this April," Gajbhiye told PTI. **AGENCIES**

GST collections top Rs 1 lakh crore



GST COLLECTION HAS INCREASED. IF YOU SEE E-WAY BILL DATA, NUMBERS... ACTIVITIES HAVE INCREASED

NEW DELHI: Increased economic activities have resulted in higher GST collection which stood above Rs 1 lakh crore for five months in a row since October 2020, Minister of State for Finance and Corporate Affairs Anurag Thakur said in the Rajya Sabha on Tuesday.

Thakur, during Question Hour, said this could be possible on the back of the measures taken by the government to boost economic activities over the last year to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

"GST collection has increased. If you see e-way bill data, numbers... activities have increased," the minister said.

"GST collection has witnessed above Rs 1 lakh crore for a stretch of five months since October 2020... The GST collection during the period has been higher than the collection in the same period last year," he said.

On the economy, Thakur said V-shaped recovery is being seen as the third quarter GDP numbers are positive and trade is getting better.

The Indian economy had seen a contraction of 24.4 per cent in the June

quarter of FY21, impacted by COVID-19.

After two consecutive quarters of contraction, the country's GDP entered into a positive territory with a growth of 0.4 per cent in the October-December quarter of the current fiscal.

"When COVID-19 pandemic erupted... -24.4 growth rate was recorded in April-June... Modi government has initiated several good steps with a positive result and 0.4 per cent growth was in the third quarter," Thakur said.

He also listed various steps taken by the government during the pandemic to boost the economy, including stimulus packages under Aatmanirbhar Bharat programme, emergency credit line and loan moratorium.

As per a written statement from the Ministry, the GST collection in any particular month depends upon the total taxable value of goods and services supplied in that month.

Moreover, the number of e-way bills generated in the current fiscal is almost equal to the number of e-way bills generated last year in spite of a dip in the number of e-way bill generated during April and May 2020, the statement said.

The monthly GST collection trend and the generation of e-way bills are clear indicators of increase in the economic activity, it said. **AGENCIES**

NEWSBRIEF

Irdai asks insurers to be more transparent

NEW DELHI: Insurance sector regulator Irdai has asked all insurers to be more transparent in their health insurance claim settlement process and apprise the policyholders of reasons in case of denial of claims filed. It is essential that all insurers establish procedures to let policyholders get clear and transparent communication at various stages of claim process, Irdai said in a circular. "All the insurers shall ensure putting in place systems to enable policyholders track the status of cashless requests/claims filed with the insurer/TPA through the website/portal/app or any other authorised electronic means on an ongoing basis. **AGENCIES**

Niyto to apply for MF licence

MUMBAI: Niyto, a neobank, is keen to enter the asset management space and mulling to apply to Sebi for a mutual fund licence, a company official said on Thursday. The Bengaluru-based fintech firm, which started off with prepaid instruments, is targeting to more than double its user base to 5 million by the end of FY22 from the present 2 million on the back of new tie-ups with players in the financial services space. "We are keen to enter the AMC space and are in the process of exploring the idea of applying for a licence," its co-founder and Chief Technology Officer Virender Bisht told PTI. In December, Sebi had allowed fintech firms to apply for MF licences. Niyto had last year announced the acquisition of Goalwise, an MF distribution platform. The company already distributes insurance policies, has a presence in wealth management through an acquisition and also offers stock buying. **AGENCIES**

ESIC scheme adds 11.55L new members

NEW DELHI: Around 11.55 lakh new members joined the ESIC-run social security scheme in January 2021 as against 12.22 lakh in the previous month, official data showed on Thursday, giving a perspective on formal sector employment in the country. The latest data is part of a

report released by the National Statistical Office (NSO).

Gross new enrolments with the Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC) were 8.87 lakh in June 2020, 4.89 lakh in May and 2.63 lakh in April, showing the increase in enrolments after easing of the lockdown, the latest data



showed.

In July 2020, gross enrolments dipped to 7.63 lakh but improved to 9.5 lakh in August, 11.58 lakh in September and 12.09 lakh in October 2020. But it again dipped to 9.52 lakh in November 2020. The gross enrolments with ESIC improved to 12.22 lakh

in December 2020.

The government had imposed a nationwide lockdown on March 25 last year to contain the spread of coronavirus infections. Later, restrictions were eased for various economic activities in phases. The NSO report showed that gross enrolments of new subscribers with ESIC were 1.51 crore in 2019-20, compared to 1.49 crore in 2018-19. **AGENCIES**

ICICI Bank customers may break high-value transactions into EMIs

NEW DELHI: ICICI Bank customers can break their high value transactions of over Rs 50,000 into suitable EMIs directly on its internet banking platform to make their purchases more affordable, the lender said on Wednesday.

The facility is the first in the industry, the bank added.

It will be applicable on transactions up to Rs 5 lakh and will bear no additional cost on the customers.

Christened "EMI @Internet Banking", the facility will enable customers convert their high-value transactions up to Rs 5 lakh into easy monthly

instalments, ICICI Bank said in a release.

Customers can purchase gadgets or pay for their insurance premium or school fees in easy EMIs from their savings account using the internet banking platform, it said.

The bank has tied up with online payment gateways Bill-Desk and Razorpay to enable this facility.

To begin with, over 1,000 merchants in categories like online shopping portals, insurance, travel, education-school fees and electronic chains have been brought on-board. The bank endeavours to part-



ner with more payment gateway companies, merchants and add categories under this facility in the near future, ICICI Bank said. Customers can select tenures

of 3, 6, 9 or 12 months for the EMIs.

Sudipta Roy, Head- Unsecured Assets, ICICI Bank said: "We have observed that many of

our customers undertake high-value transactions for payments of insurance premiums, school fees, purchasing electronics, or paying for vacations through the bank's internet banking platform.

"Our latest offering of EMI @ Internet Banking brings in enhanced affordability for customers by providing them with flexibility of EMIs for high value transactions."

Roy hoped the facility will empower millions of bank's pre-approved customers to purchase or shop for their needs in contactless, instant, digital and secure manner. **AGENCIES**

IDBI Bank to focus on improving efficiency ratios, says MD

THE BANK WILL BE TARGETING TO IMPROVE NET INTEREST MARGIN TO 3%, RETURN OF ASSETS (ROA) AT ABOVE 0.60-0.70 AND COST TO INCOME RATIO TO BELOW 50%

MUMBAI: Having emerged from regulatory restrictions recently, IDBI Bank is now looking at growing business in a calibrated way with more focus on profitability and in improving efficiency ratios, its Managing Director and CEO Rakesh Sharma said.

On March 10, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) removed the LIC-controlled bank from its prompt corrective action (PCA) framework, which was imposed in May 2017, after it had breached certain regulatory thresholds, including capital adequacy, asset quality and profitability.

"With restrictions imposed by RBI gone, we will like to go in a calibrated way and grow the business in a more profitable fashion so that my efficiency ratios improve. Our

revenue, profitability and other ratios will certainly show improvement," Sharma told PTI in an interaction.

He said in the fiscal 2021-22, the bank will be targeting to improve net interest margin (NIM) to 3 per cent, return of assets (ROA) at above 0.60-0.70 and cost to income ratio to below 50 per cent.

In the nine months ended December 2020, its NIM stood at 2.79 per cent and cost to income at 54 per cent. "The depositors will now be seeing the strength of the bank. The bad phase is over and the bank is sufficiently strong," he said.

Sharma said during the last four years, when the bank was under PCA, the focus was on retail and priority sector lending. Currently, the share of retail loans in the bank's total



advances is 60 per cent and that of corporate loans is 40 per cent.

"Going forward we will not be stopping corporate business. We will start doing corporate business and will continue to do retail business. It will be a retail-focussed bank," he said.

During FY22, the bank is expecting around 8-10 per cent growth in mid and large corporate loan segments, and 12 per cent growth in retail and priority sector loans, he said.

Besides loan against property (LAP), the bank now wants to develop personal loans and

gold loans portfolio, where it has a small exposure at present, Sharma said. The bank doesn't see much stress in its loan book going ahead due to the better asset quality.

"Due to Covid, we could see minor stress in accounts. But the type of assets that we have built up in our bank, I don't foresee any problem," Sharma said.

Overall slippages in fiscal 2020-21 and the next fiscal will be less than 2 per cent, he added. In FY22, the bank is targeting a total recovery of Rs 3,500-4,000 crore. Sharma said the bank is well capitalised and there is no immediate need for raising funds. As of end-December 2020, the bank's total capital-to-risk weighted assets ratio (CRAR) stood at 14.77 per cent. **AGENCIES**

Dividend distribution
must for top-1,000
companies: Sebi

NEW DELHI: To strengthen corporate governance practices and disclosure requirements, Sebi on Thursday decided that top-1,000 listed firms should formulate a dividend distribution policy.

"Requirement for formulation of dividend distribution policy by the existing top-500 listed entities has been extended to the top-1,000 listed entities on the basis of market capitalisation," Sebi said in a statement after conclusion of its board meeting. In case of board meetings held for more than one day, Sebi said the financial results should be disclosed by listed entities within 30 minutes of end of the board meeting for the day on which such results are considered.

The regulator also cleared a proposal in relation to applicability, constitution and role of the risk management committee (RMC). Sebi said requirement to seek stock exchange approval for change of name of a listed entity has been dispensed with.

Also, the requirement to publish newspaper advertisements for the notice to board meetings where financial results are to be discussed and for quarterly statement on deviation or variation in use of funds, has been dispensed with. The timelines for submission of periodic reports -- statement of investor complaints, corporate governance report and shareholding pattern -- will be harmonised to 21 days from the end of each quarter, Sebi said.

Frequency of submission of compliance certificates relating to share transfer facility and issuance of share certificates within 30 days of lodgement for transfer, subdivision, among others have been revised from half-year to annual. To strengthen these corporate governance practices, Sebi board approved several amendments to the LODR (Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements) Regulations. **AGENCIES**

'India's on path of gradual recovery'

IMF HAILS GDP GROWTH, RETURN TO POSITIVE TERRITORY IN THE FOURTH QUARTER OF 2020

WASHINGTON: India's economy is on the path of gradual recovery, the International Monetary Fund has said ahead of its next month's spring meeting with the World Bank.

"India's economy is on the path of gradual recovery, real GDP growth, return to positive territory in fourth quarter of 2020. And that's for the first time actually since the start of the pandemic and it's supported by a pickup in gross, fixed capital formation," IMF's spokesperson Gerry Rice told reporters at a news conference here on Thursday.

"Beyond that, I can say that high frequency indicators including PMIs trade and mobility suggests a continued recovery in the first quarter of this year, '21; however, the recent emergence of the variants and localised lockdowns could pose risks to a sustained recovery," Rice said.

The IMF is scheduled to release its World Economic Outlook on April 6.

Separately, the chief of the Reserve Bank of India said a revival in India's economic activity should continue "unabated" despite a recent surge in coronavirus infections in many areas.

Central bank governor Shaktikanta Das called the increase a "matter of concern" but said India was better prepared to tackle the situation. With a vaccination drive underway, he added, the stringent lockdowns imposed last year might not be needed.



RBI GOVERNOR SAYS

- The revival of economic activity which has happened should continue unabated going forward
- This time around we have some additional insurance against the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic
- Internally, we have no such target of reaching a particular level of forex reserves

"The revival of economic activity which has happened should continue unabated going forward," Das said in comments to the Times Network's India Economic Conclave in the Indian capital.

"This time around we have some additional insurance against the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic."

Das said he did not foresee any downward revision in the growth forecast of 10.5% for fiscal year 2021/22, based on preliminary data, but final pro-

jections are to be published on April 7 after a review by the monetary policy committee.

India added 53,476 Covid-19 infections on Wednesday for the highest daily rise since Oct. 23, the health ministry said. Its tally of 11.8 million infection ranks India third-highest worldwide after the United States and Brazil.

The central bank chief emphasised again the need for an orderly evolution of the government bond yield curve, saying it could otherwise be an imped-

ment to economic recovery and also raise corporate borrowing costs.

Das said there was no fight between the central bank and the bond market and the two should continue to be co-operative and not combative.

Bond yields have traded with an upward bias after the government announced a higher-than-expected borrowing programme in the budget in early February.

Das reiterated the central bank support for the market through open market operations and other measures, to help the smooth execution of the borrowing programme.

Regarding forex reserves and the RBI's intervention in the currency market, Das said the central bank had endeavoured only to keep the currency stable, with reserves being built to avert a situation similar to the "taper tantrum" of 2013, when India faced massive outflows.

India's forex reserves of \$582.04 billion, now the fourth largest in the world, cover more than 1-1/2 years of imports.

Recently concern has been expressed at the need for such high reserves, which add to the RBI's holding costs and do not necessarily yield sufficient returns.

"Internally, we have no such target of reaching a particular level of forex reserves," Das said.

"It depends on so many factors, how the international situation develops. It is a very dynamic world and we will have to deal with it as the situation unfolds." **AGENCIES**

Casual dining chain Barbeque
Nation's IPO oversubscribedDOMINICK RODRIGUES
Mumbai

The initial public offer of casual dining chain Barbeque Nation Hospitality was subscribed 5.98 times on the last day of subscription on Friday.

The Rs 453-crore issue received bids for 2,99,01,510 shares against 49,99,609 shares on offer, as per NSE data. The category for qualified institutional buyers (QIBs) was subscribed 5.11 times, non institutional investors 3.10 times, and retail individual investors (RIIs) 13.13 times.

The IPO is a fresh issuance of equity shares of Rs 5 face value, aggregating up to Rs 180 cr and an offer for sale of up to 54,57,470 equity shares of face value of Rs 5 each by the selling shareholders.

The Company proposes to utilise the net proceeds from the fresh issue towards expansion and opening of new restaurants by the Company, prepayment or repayment of certain outstanding borrowings in part or in full availed by the Company on a consolidated basis and for general corporate purposes.

Kayum Dhanani, Managing Director, BNHL, highlighted the 'Barbeque Nation' restaurant chain's beginning with their first such restaurant opening in 2006 to reach 18 restaurants by 2012 through the efforts



of their founder - who was not a 'foodie' but 'loved to reach out to people's hearts through food'.

"We need to be sensitive to local needs," noted Dhanani while highlighting BNHL's Lucknow restaurant experience where their struggle to attract local diners ended when they recruited local chefs familiar with the popular local cuisine. "Today, our three restaurants in Lucknow bring in total Rs 3.25 crores business," he said.

The Barbeque Nation restaurant dining concept appealed to diners across India and led to its expansion of 164 restaurants (including 11 Italian restaurants) in 77 Indian cities, he said, adding "We started distributing our products across India and soon realized that we could open a +Barbeque Nation restaurant within every five kms radius of the country."

"Our focus is on continuous expansion in India," said Rahul Agrawal, CEO and WholeTime Director, BNH. "Our store growth CAGR rose to 167 in FY20 through strong guest focus culture and constant menu innovation with 47% bookings coming in through the BBQ Nation App. Our revenue was Rs 8,508 crores FY20 and EBITDA at Rs 1680 crores FY20. We raised equity capital of Rs - 1500 million in December '20 and January '21. Our delivery revenues were: Rs 261 million (FY20) and Rs 379 million in 8 months ended FY21."

While observing that the Covid pandemic affected the restaurant industry including BNHL with many restaurants closing down, he said BNHL reopened in June 2020 with newer ideas like its pioneering "Delivery In A Box" generating around 2.2 million downloads on its App. Emphasizing the high gap between EBITDA and PAT to being corrected over time, Agrawal said three BNHL outlets were shutdown during the pandemic due to landlord disagreements, while all its outlets - barring one - were co-owned/operated.

Axis Capital Limited, IIFL Securities Limited, Ambit Capital Private Limited and SBI Capital Markets Limited were the managers to the offer.

Forum to promote cooperative sectors

NEW DELHI: A cooperative development forum (CDF) has been formed under the chairmanship of former Union Minister Suresh Prabhu to revamp and revitalise the cooperative sector, which holds huge potential to push the country's economic growth.

"CDF has been formed to revamp and revitalise the cooperative sector to ensure that the sector grows in future," Prabhu said on Wednesday in a statement.

Prabhu, who is India's Sherpa to G20 and G7 and Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha), will be the forum's founding chairman.



The members of the forum include IFFCO Managing Director U S Awasthi, KRIBHCO Chairman Chandra Pal Singh Yadav, NCUI President Dileep Sanghani, National Cooperative Dairy Federation of India Chairman Mangal Jit

Rai, and NAGCUB Chairman Jyotindra Mehta.

Prabhu said that currently, the cooperatives in India have a total membership of 28 crore in banking, dairy, spinning, consumers, fertilisers, food processing, agriculture, supply-chains and many others, which connects all the villages through a large number of primary agricultural credit societies (PACS).

The forum, he said, will work on aligning itself with the vision of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Aatmanirbhar Bharat, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Aayushman Bharat, and PMUDAY. **AGENCIES**

Edelweiss buys 74% stake in Engie Group's India solar assets

MUMBAI: Edelweiss Infrastructure Yield Plus (EIYP), an alternative investment fund from the Edelweiss Group, on Thursday snapped up a controlling 74 per cent stake in French utility Engie Group's solar assets in India for a reported USD 550 million.

The Engie Group has 813 MW of operational solar assets in the country, and it plans to add up to 2 GW more over next couple of years, which once commissioned will be acquired by the EIYP, the fund said.

Though EIYP, managed by Edelweiss Alternative Asset Advisors (EAAA), did not disclose the value of the deal, a source



in the know of the deal told PTI that EIYP has paid USD 550 million for the 74 per cent stake in the assets, making it one of the largest deals in the domestic renewables space in the past one year.

"This partnership between EIYP and Engie is aimed at creating a high-quality solar platform of substantial scale with a plan to add 2 GW solar assets over the next couple of years. These assets will be de-

veloped by Engie and acquired by EIYP post-commissioning under the agreed terms," the fund said in a statement.

The investment has been carried out through Sekura Energy, which is the renewables-focused platform of EIYP that invests, acquires and operates assets in the domestic energy sector, the statement added.

EIYP is the largest yield-focused infrastructure AIF (alternative investment fund) in the country today and the only platform owning and operating assets in all three large infrastructure sectors -- transmission, solar energy and highways. **AGENCIES**

Railways suffers ₹34k cr revenue loss in 2020

SATISH HANDA
Chandigarh

In spite of the fact unlock was declared by the government when Railways brought several trains on the railway tracks during COVID-19 in order to improve economic slowdown which suffered heavy revenue loss worth Rs 34000 crore to railways during year 2020-21 (till January this year) as compared to the previous year 2019-20.

Information reveals target has been fixed by the Ministry of Railways to earn revenue worth Rs 6000 crore in all zones up to March 31, 2021 as such special trains were also introduced on all rail tracks across the country by railway administration.

According to data available with railways, drop about 6111 million passengers travelling in the trains was recorded during



year 2020-21 (till month January) as compared to previous year 2019-20 due to less movement of trains as well as passengers travelling in the trains on all routes due to epidemic outbreak in the country. Information also reveals, 518.21 million passengers had reserved their tickets through Passenger Reservation Centre with effect from 1st April 2019 to 31st January 2020 in which railways

earned revenue worth Rs 29003 crore, whereas the number of railway passengers booked tickets through Passengers Reservation Centre during the year 2020-21 reduced by 67.49% when railways earned revenue only Rs 8838 crore.

While having a look at the revenue collection of metro railway stations in the country, railways earned Rs 2443 crore in the year

2019-20 in which 3964 million passengers had travelled in the trains. Railway revenue collection reduced to Rs 293.03 crore in the year 2020-21 witnessing nearly 88.01% drop. Similarly, in non-urban areas revenue worth Rs 12792 crore was earned by the railways during the year 2019-20, which reduced to Rs 508.99 core in the year 2020-21 thus witnessing nearly 88.6% drop in revenue earnings.

According to a railway spokesman at Divisional Rail Manager office Ambala, Ministry of Railways has fixed a target to increase Rs 6000 crore extra revenue collection by the end of current financial year ending on March 31, 2021 to compensate losses incurred by railways due to COVID-19 and introduced several Express special trains on different routes charging higher amount of fare.

Pandemic pushes back \$5trn GDP goal by 3 yrs

MUMBAI: The pandemic-induced shocks to the economy which have already shaved off 15.7 per cent of the GDP from the previous year, will delay the ambitious target of becoming the third largest economy by three years to 2031-32 now, says a report.

Currently, the country is the fifth largest economy in the world behind Germany. The government has set a target of becoming a USD5-trillion economy by 2030.

"We now expect the domestic economy to emerge as the world's third largest economy in FY32, from FY29 earlier, due to the pandemic shocks. It should touch Japan's nominal GDP in 2031 (in USD terms) if it grows at 9 per cent and in 2030 if it grows at 10 per cent," a Bank of America (BoFA) Securities report said



on Monday.

The report however did not ascribe a size to either the domestic economy, which stood at USD 2.65 trillion in 2019-20, or to that of Japan, which in 2020 stood at USD 4.87 trillion.

This assumes a realistic 6 per cent real growth, 5 per cent inflation and 2 per cent rupee depreciation, the report added.

In 2017, BoFA had predicted that the country would emerge as the third largest economy in

2027-28 based on its assumption of the demographic dividend, growing financial maturity, and the emergence of mass markets. In their Monday's report, the house economist at the Wall Street brokerage said they find all these three phenomena strengthening now.

There are two other catalysts that support structural changes. For one, the RBI has effectively attained a silent revolution in re-achieving adequacy of forex reserves after almost eight years now. This should help stabilize the rupee by derisking the economy from global shocks.

Further, sustained policy easing is finally bringing down real lending rates that have been a drag on growth since 2016. The only main downside risk to sustained growth is the oil prices, especially if it trends at over USD 100 a barrel. **AGENCIES**

Bharat Gas
to merge
with BPCL

NEW DELHI: The board of privatisation-bound Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) on Monday approved the merger of its gas subsidiary, BGRL with itself in a bid to streamline corporate structure.

"The board of directors of the company at its meeting today, ie March 22, 2021, has considered and approved the Scheme of Amalgamation of Bharat Gas Resources Ltd (BGRL) with the company (BPCL)," the firm said in a stock exchange filing.

BGRL is a 100 per cent subsidiary of BPCL and its main business is gas sourcing and retailing.

The merger will streamline the corporate structure and consolidate the assets and liabilities of BGRL within BPCL.

Also, it will help in "availing easier financial support for the business" of BGRL and "more efficient utilisation of capital for enhanced development and growth of the consolidated business in one entity," BPCL said.

It will also improve management oversight and bring in operational efficiencies, cost savings and reduction of administrative responsibilities.

"The amalgamation is in the interest of the shareholders, creditors and all other stakeholders of the companies and is not prejudicial to the interests of the concerned shareholders, creditors or the public at large," it said. "No consideration in form of cash or shares is proposed to be issued as consideration for the amalgamation of BGRL with BPCL." **AGENCIES**

Economy set for bounce back but rising virus cases a big risk

NEW DELHI: Its recovery from the depths of the lockdown-induced recession was swifter than expected but a surge in coronavirus cases is threatening to hurt the Indian economy which is expected to grow at 11 per cent in 2021-22.

Exactly a year back, the government imposed what is touted as the world's most stringent lockdown to contain the spread of the pandemic. The lockdown brought the economy to a halt as factories were shut, trains were stopped and flights were suspended. This sent the economy into its worst-ever contraction of 24.4 per cent in the June quarter, followed by a -7.3 per cent shrinkage in July-September, pushing the economy into a rare recession.

However, the economy's rebound was better than expected, with GDP surpassing its pre-

pandemic level in the December quarter, growing 0.4 per cent year-on-year. The rebound led to ministers predicting a sharp V-shaped recovery. But the surge in coronavirus cases, despite the rollout of a nationwide vaccination drive, in recent weeks could hurt the recovery.

Unlike other COVID-hit regions like Europe, India has so far been reluctant to impose any more harsh restrictions. In many countries including India, second or third COVID wave has led to partial or localised lockdowns delaying the pace of recovery, said D K Srivastava, Chief Policy Advisor, EY India.

"It is the rate at which the population gets a vaccination cover, which will determine the performance of the economy in FY22. Fortunately, for India, the rate of vaccination is gathering momentum and a strong growth



supporting fiscal policy has also been put in place through Centre's FY22 budget. The expectation is that India would show one of the largest bounce backs in the growth rate in FY22," he said. Echoing similar views, ICRA Principal Economist Aditi Nayar said "COVID-19 infection

counts have risen in many Indian states in recent weeks, spurring fresh localised restrictions. If this trend proliferates, it would temper the extent of the base effect-led recovery anticipated in the immediate term, and may lead to some supply-side disruptions."

At this point, business confidence is improving significantly and it seems that we will be on track towards growth despite COVID and businesses have realised that we must learn to live with COVID and its impact as we fuel the economy for growth, said L Viswanathan, Partner at Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas.

To mitigate the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the economy, the government and the RBI came out with a series of packages in a phased manner totalling around Rs 30 lakh crore or 15 per cent of India's GDP.

Steps taken by the government to deal with COVID pandemic are resulting in a V-shaped economic recovery and the country is likely to witness double digit growth in 2021-22, Minister of State for Finance Anurag Singh Thakur said in Lok Sabha last week. He said

the government focused on saving lives during the pandemic without bothering about the fiscal deficit. In the next fiscal, the Budget has earmarked Rs 35,000 crore for vaccination and the government has assured to provide more if needed.

"The GST collection in the last five months was continuously more than Rs one lakh crore... Because of the steps taken by the government during COVID-19, V-shaped economic recovery is happening. And world over, agencies have stated India will witness double digit growth in 2021-22," he had said.

Soon after the pandemic hit the country, the government in March 2020 announced a Rs 1.70 lakh crore Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) to protect the poor and vulnerable from the impact of health crisis and lockdown. Other relief

measures were to the tune of Rs 22,000 crore.

It was followed by the Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan package in May 2020 largely focussed on supply-side measures and long term reforms. The five-part stimulus package announced by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman beginning May 13, 2020 comprised Rs 5.94 lakh crore in the first tranche that provided credit line to small businesses and support to shadow banks and electricity distribution companies.

The second tranche included free foodgrain for stranded migrant workers for two months and credit to farmers, totalling Rs 3.10 lakh crore. Spending on agri infrastructure and other measures for agriculture and allied sectors in the third tranche totalled to Rs 1.5 lakh crore. **AGENCIES**



Some stars shine more than others

Kangana Ranaut, Manoj Bajpayee, Dhanush top winners at 67th National Film Awards

Bollywood star Kangana Ranaut was named best actress for her roles in "Manikarnika" and "Panga" at the announcement of the 67th National Film Awards on Monday.

Manoj Bajpayee and Dhanush shared the best actor honour for their roles in "Bhonsle" and "Asuran", respectively. Director Priyadarshan's Malayalam film "Marakkar: Arabikadalinte Simham" was declared the best feature film and Sanjay Puran Singh Chauhan was named best director for Hindi film "Bahattar Hoorain" by the National Film Award jury, headed by filmmaker N Chandra, who said they judged the movies "not as gods but as parents".

Late actor Sushant Singh Raput-starrer "Chhichhore" was adjudged the best Hindi film. The award for the best film on social issues went to Marathi film "Anandi Gopal", the Nargis Dutt award for Na-



tional Integration was given to "Taj Mahal" and the best popular providing wholesome entertainment was given to the Telugu film "Maharshi". The Indra Gandhi award for first film went to Malayalam film "Helen" by Mathukutty Xavier.

Ayushmann Khurrana and Vicky Kaushal won the Best Actor National Award jointly for "Andhadhun" and "Uri: The Surgical Strike" respectively, and both actors are proud that their hard work

has paid off at such an early stage of their career.

Describing the experience as "truly humbling and hugely gratifying", Ayushmann said the honour was "a validation of my hard work, my belief system, my journey in movies and my reason to be an actor." He said director Sriram Raghavan deserved all the accolades "for creating a new genre of cinema for Indian audiences to enjoy", and that he was "truly fortunate" to be a part of Sriram Raghavan's vision. "As an artiste, 'Andhadhun' challenged me and made me a better actor," he added, promising to continue on the "journey to discover and back cinema that truly stands apart and brings people back into the theatres".

Vicky admitted he was too excited to describe how he felt. "Words might fall short to describe the happiness I'm feeling right now. For my work to be recognised by the honourable National Film Awards

Jury is truly a moving moment for me and my family. I wish to thank each and every member of the jury committee for finding me worthy of the prestigious Best Actor Award," he said. About Ayushmann, Vicky added: "I'm also very happy to be sharing the award with someone whom I admire, both as a person and as an actor".

Aditya Dhar won Best Director for "Uri", and he believes his key to success is not giving up. "Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm. Fifteen years of failures, rejections and hard work has led to this moment and it just can't get better than this. This is an honour I am going to cherish for the rest of my life. Being conferred with the National Award has been a dream since I understood what films meant to me," said Aditya,



thanking his family, producers, and the awards jury, and dedicating the honour to all the soldiers at the border. "You have selflessly dedicated your life to serve us and now it's our time to dedicate everything we have to serve you."

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's "Padmaavat" won big in the song and dance categories. Arijit Singh won Best Male Playback Singer for the song "Binte dil misriya

mein", and Bhansali won Best Music Direction (Songs). Kruti Mahesh Madya and Jyoti Tomar won the Best Choreography awards for the song "Ghoomar".

"I'm very happy and honoured. Music has always been a very important part of my life so this award is very special," said Bhansali..

"Pad Man" won the award for Best Film on Social Issue. Akshay Kumar stars in the film, co-produced by his wife Twinkle Khanna.

"I was in the midst of 'Mission Mangal' promotions when Tina (his wife Twinkle) called me asking if 'Pad Man' had actually won a National Award for Best Film On Social Issues. The tiredness of promotions vanished on hearing the news. I remember how, on the sets of 'Pad Man', Sonam and I got the news of winning our respec-

I want to create a beauty standard of my own: Bhumi

"I will change definition of what a quintessential Hindi film female actor is all about"



From playing an overweight girl in "Dum Laga Ke Haisha" to a character battling patriarchy in "Sonchiriya", actress Bhumi Pednekar says she refuses to abide by the image of the quintessential Bollywood actress.

Bhumi adds that she wants to change the way people think about women through these roles.

"For many, it has always been about the outer physical beauty. But gone are

those days when people were concerned (about only that). My thing was that it doesn't matter. I am going to change your definition of what a quintessential Hindi film female actor is all about," she says.

She adds: "We are all in this profession — the idea is to perform all these different parts and be part of these amazing stories that move people, bring about a change. That is exactly what I am going to do."

Bhumi says that she refuses to accept the "beauty

standard" set for women.

"I want to create a beauty standard of my own and that is exactly what I am trying to do. Through my cinema, I really want to bring about a change. I want people to love themselves, I want people to be more accepting of who they are, I want to entertain my audiences for sure and that is my number one priority. I want to leave them with a thought, a positive thought, a thought that will make their world a better place," she says.

AGENCIES

'Peaceful coexistence' key Pak foreign policy



ISLAMABAD: Underlining that peaceful coexistence is the cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy, President Arif Alvi on Thursday said that Islamabad desires peace, security and development in the South Asian region.

President Alvi made the comments while addressing the military parade at the parade avenue in Islamabad to commemorate Pakistan Day. The parade was held two days after it was postponed on March

23 due to "inclement weather".

Prime Minister Imran Khan was unable to attend as he is currently in quarantine after testing positive for COVID-19.

"Peaceful coexistence is the cornerstone of Pakistan's foreign policy. The situation warrants that the leadership of South Asia reject the politics of hate, prejudice and religious extremism to guide the region towards prosperity," Mr. Alvi said.

The President said that the

resolution of the Kashmir issue is imperative for ensuring peace in South Asia.

India has previously rejected all references to Kashmir by Pakistani leaders and has also asserted that Jammu and Kashmir is an integral and inalienable part of the country.

The Ministry of External Affairs last month said it desires normal neighbourly relations with Pakistan in an environment free of terror, hostility and violence and that the onus is on Pakistan to create an environment free of terror and hostility.

In his address, President Alvi said Pakistan wants to move forward with good intent and peace but "our desire for peace should not be construed as our weakness." Mr. Alvi said that Pakistan had the capability to defend its territorial integrity and befittingly respond to any misadventure.

"We will defend our independence at all costs," he said, adding that Pakistan desires peace, security and development in the whole region and it has also taken practical steps for that. AGENCIES

Protesters back in Myanmar streets

YANGON: Protesters against last month's military takeover in Myanmar returned to the streets in large numbers on Thursday, a day after staging a "silence strike" in which people were urged to stay home and businesses to close for the day.

Security forces sought to break up some of the protests by force. Social media accounts and local news outlets reported violent attacks on demonstrators in Hpa-an, the capital of the southeastern Karen state, as well as the eastern Shan state's capital of Taunggyi and Mon state's capital of Mawlamyine, also in the southeast. It was not clear if soldiers used live ammunition in addition to firing rubber bullets at the demonstrators.

According to Democratic Voice of Burma, a broadcast and online news service, two young men were shot and seriously wounded in Hpa-an.

Other protests on Thursday morning proceeded peacefully, including in Mandalay, the country's second-biggest

Shooting's power couple graces ISSF World Cup



city, and on a smaller scale in neighbourhoods of Yangon, the largest metropolis.

DVB also reported that another young man was killed and at least four other people wounded on Wednesday night in what it described as a crackdown by the army in Kyaukpadaung, a town in central Myanmar.

The military's February 1 seizure of power ousted the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi, whose party won a landslide election victory last November. It put the brakes

on the Southeast Asian nation's return to democracy that began when Suu Kyi's party took office in 2016 for its first term, after more than five decades of military rule. Myanmar's Assistance Association for Political Prisoners says at least 286 people have been killed in connection with the crackdown. It says 2,906 people have been arrested, charged or sentenced at one point in connection with resisting the coup, with most remaining detained. AGENCIES

Shooting's power couple graces ISSF World Cup

NEW DELHI: Shooting's power couple Peter and Roxana Sidis is back in India for the second time in two years.

Peter, who hails from Hungary, and his wife Roxana, who is from Romania, are in the national capital to take part in the ongoing ISSF World Cup at the Dr Karni Singh Shooting Range. The Sidis were here two years ago, when the venue played hosts to the World Cup, which also doubled as Tokyo Olympic Qualifications offering as many as 16 quota places.

Both of them arrived in the country with hopes of doing well in the tournament that carries ranking points.

While Peter, a multiple world champion and world cup medalist, who is "pleasantly surprised" by the following the sport commands in India, could not clear the qualification hurdle in the men's 10m air rifle on Friday, Roxana shone with a fine performance to make the final



of the women's 10m air rifle. With a total score of 628.7, the 28-year-old Roxana was placed sixth at the end of the 60-shot, six-series qualifications on Friday evening, while her decorated shooter husband could only manage a 15th-place finish in the men's 10 air rifle qualification.

Peter, a world champion in the 50m rifle 3 positions, also competes in the 300m rifle prone besides 10m. The 42-year-old Peter, a shooting legend, has competed in five Olympic Games — 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016 -- in the men's 10m air rifle, men's 50m rifle prone and men's 50m rifle 3 positions. AGENCIES

Injured Iyer exits bio-secure bubble



PUNE: Injured India batsman Shreyas Iyer has left the bio-secure bubble here after he was ruled out of the ongoing ODI series against England as well as the entire IPL starting next month even as he vowed to come back even stronger.

Iyer dislocated his left shoulder while fielding during the first ODI against England on Tuesday and he is set to undergo surgery, which will rule him out of action for a minimum four months.

"Shreyas iyer has exited the bio-bubble," the BCCI said on Thursday ahead of the second ODI here.

Earlier in the day, Iyer vowed to come back from the injury even stronger.

"You know what they say, the greater the setback, the stronger the comeback. I shall be back soon," Iyer tweeted.

"I've been reading your messages and have been overwhelmed by all the outpouring of love and support.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart to everyone." The 26-year-old Iyer is also unlikely to play for English county side Lancashire in their one-day tournament.

Lancashire had on Monday announced the signing of Iyer for the tournament starting on July 23.

Iyer suffered the injury in the eighth over of the England innings when he dived on a drive hit by Jonny Bairstow off pacer Shardul Thakur.

He looked in tremendous pain as he left the field clutching his shoulder.

On Tuesday, the BCCI had stated, "Shreyas Iyer subluxated (partially dislocated) his left shoulder in the 8th over while fielding. He has been taken for further scans." Iyer had led Delhi Capitals to the final in the previous edition of the IPL.

In his absence, the DC captaincy could be handed to either Rishabh Pant, Australian Steve Smith or senior off-spinner R Ashwin. AGENCIES

Manvir Singh equaliser helps India seal draw

DUBAI: India made a fine comeback in the second half to hold Oman 1-1 in a friendly here on Thursday.

India conceded a goal in the 43rd minute as Chinglensana Singh's clearance crossed the goalline after hitting goalkeeper Amrinder Singh.

Manvir Singh scored the equaliser in the 55th minute to help India pull off a rare draw against Oman. India head coach Igor Stimac handed debuts to 10 players. Oman squandered a penalty in the 27th minute

after Rowlin Borges committed a foul on Abdul Aziz Al Gheilani inside the box.

However, Oman scored when Al Aghbari sent a low cross which Amrinder could not collect cleanly. The ball hit Chinglensana and went in. India equalised five minutes before the hour mark when Bipin Singh's superb cross from the right flank which was headed home by Manvir.

Oman pressed hard for the winner but Amrinder was solid under the bar, effecting fine



saves in the 63rd and 65th minutes.

India were without their captain Sunil Chhetri but a young

side came up with an impressive show to hold higher-ranked Oman to a 1-1 draw in the first of their two international friendlies in Dubai. Manvir Singh's fine headed-goal in the 2nd half helped India share honours at the Maktoum Bin Rashid Stadium on Thursday.

India handed senior debuts to a record tally of 10 players during the hard-fought encounter, which marked their return to international football after 492 days.

Igor Stimac's men went down

trailing 0-1 after Zahir Al Aghbari's strike that followed a poor defensive error. Despite putting a strong show in the first half, the Blue Tigers headed to the break handing over the lead to Oman.

However, India came back strongly in the second half and secured the equaliser when Manvir Singh headed a lovely cross from young Bipin Singh who had scored the winning goal for Mumbai City FC in the Indian Super League final. AGENCIES

Monkey menace or human deprecation causing conflict?

DOMINICK RODRIGUES
Mumbai/Bengaluru

Monkeys harassing humans has always been a problem over years and the issue was highlighted recently in Bengaluru where the Karnataka Government voted to sterilize monkeys in this regard.

Yet as trees get chopped and forests denuded in the name of development and progress, the creatures of the wild have no place to go except citywards -- to fuel increasing incidents of monkey attacks on humans, claim wildlife officials and activists.

Mumbai has been witnessing over the decades leopards and huge pythons coming out of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park in Borivali suburb. A Russell's Viper created a rumpus of sorts in the IIT campus when it was discovered by horrified students. In one incident, retired ex-



presidency postmaster N M Kenikar was busy performing his morning puja in his flat when a monkey swung in through the window, clung to his feet, jumped on his bed and drank water from a container. However, when Kenikar attempted to set right a puja coconut upset by the monkey, the simian attacked him by biting and scratching

before fleeing the spot.

Kenikar complained to the police and was returning back home when he saw the same monkey fighting with a dog in the building. The monkey was caught by a hutment dweller and set free in the nearby forest, but seemed to have reappeared again when complaints came in about foodstuff disappearing

from households. The monkey was later trapped by a special "monkey squad" sent by the then DCF Vishwas Walke of the SGNPark, thus bringing the errant monkey's escapades to an end.

Walke said such monkeys were mostly captured and trained by gypsy "madaris" to perform tricks or beg for money, and often set free if unable to perform. Disoriented by their sudden freedom and far away from the forests, these monkeys resorted to survival the only way they could -- grab and run+ tactics, he said.

Yet another incident witnessed a monkey with a kitten leaping through the treetops in Bandra suburb of Mumbai and begging food from people. The monkey, which appeared to be suffering from a lump in his jaw, sat on a wall and ate an offered mango while the kitten mewed piteously to no avail. However,

when a crowd gathered, the monkey fled with his victim and was seen no more.

A friend owning property near Shimoga in Karnataka often went there from his Bengaluru business to rejuvenate his burntout body. However, the recreation ended up often as a nightmare with monkey gangs noisily raiding his areca plantation, he said.

The monkey issue became a subject of discussion recently in the Karnataka Legislative Assembly, where the Government highlighted plans to sterilize captured male monkeys in a bid to reduce attacks on humans and damage to agricultural crops in the state. About 12 doctors have been trained to sterilize the marauding monkeys and release them back in the wild again, officials said.

While the monkey sterilisation programme has been successfully conducted in Him-

achal Pradesh, the Karnataka Forest Department has taken up a programme to trap in cages the rampaging monkeys and sterilize them in a mobile van fitted with related medical equipment. Plans are also afoot to establish a Rs 25-lakhs rehabilitation centre (monkey park) for monkeys at Sagara forest division in Shivamogga district between 2020-21, the officials said.

However, adequate compensation in Karnataka for crops destroyed by monkeys also remains an issue with the affected farmers lamenting the amount given against their loss caused by the rampaging forest denizens that include also elephants, wild boar and deer. The Forest Department compensation of Rs 500 per acre is being described as "negligible" by the affected people in comparison to the cost of cultivation and prevailing prices of food crops.