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VAANI KAPOOR: BEING A PART OF 'SHAMSHERA' WAS NOTHING SHORT OF A DREAM TEAM

Decision on specific vaccine for 'precaution' dose expected soon: Govt

NEW DELHI: There have been extensive deliberations on whether the precautionary (third) dose of Covid vaccine for health care and frontline workers and citizens above 60 years with comorbidities should be the same as the first two doses and a decision is expected soon, the government said on Thursday.

Addressing a press conference, ICMR Director General Dr Balram Bhargava said the government will issue clear cut recommendations on this before January 10, when administering of the precautionary dose to healthcare and frontline workers and those above 60 years with comorbidities will begin. "We are having an extensive debate (on which vaccine to be given as a precautionary dose). We've had a series of meetings in NTAGI (National Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation) yesterday, the day before and today."

We are deciding what is the population that will require this vaccine which includes frontline workers, healthcare workers and 60 plus with comorbidities. What are new vaccines available and which vaccine can be given in terms of safety and in terms of efficacy," Bhargava said. "So, we are analysing all the data that is available in terms of which vaccine can be given...whether it is going to be the same one or it is going to be different one. Before January 10 we will have to clear cut recommendations on the same."

The drug controller and the NTAGI are meeting and that decision will be taken," he said. According to the 'Guidelines for COVID-19 vaccination of children between 15-18 years and precaution dose to healthcare and frontline workers and 60 years + population with comorbidities' issued by health ministry, prioritisation and sequencing of the "precaution dose" for them would be based on completion of nine months from the date of administration of second dose, which is 39 weeks.

They will be able to access vaccination for the precaution dose through their existing Co-WIN account, the guidelines which will come into effect from January 3 stated. Eligibility for the precaution dose will be based on the date of administration of the second dose as recorded in the Co-WIN system, which will send an SMS for availing the precaution dose when it becomes due, the guidelines stated. **AGENCIES**

HIGHLIGHT OF THE WEEK

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- 2 AFSPA extension in Nagaland total violation of human rights: Naga groups**
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Govt did not freeze bank accounts of Missionaries of Charity: MHA



NEW DELHI: The Union Home Ministry on Monday clarified that the government has not frozen the bank accounts of Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity (MoC) and the State Bank of India has informed that MoC has sent a request to freeze its accounts.

The Ministry also said that the renewal application under Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) for the renewal of FCRA registration of Missionaries of Charity (MoC) was refused on December 25, 2021 for not meeting the eligibility conditions under FCRA 2010 and Foreign Contribution Regulation Rules (FCRR) 2011. It also said that no request or revision application has been received from MoC to review this refusal of renewal.

The MHA clarification came after West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Monday tweeted that the central government froze all bank accounts of the MoC on Christmas and over 22,000 patients and employees have been left without food and medicine. "While the law is paramount, humanitarian efforts must not be compromised", she further said in her tweet message.

The officials in the Home Ministry further said that Missionaries of Charity (MoC) was registered under FCRA vide Registration No 147120001 and its registration was valid up to Oct 31, 2021 only. The validity was subsequently extended up to December 31, 2021 along with other FCRA Associations whose renewal application was pending, they added.

However, while reviewing the MoC's renewal application, some adverse inputs were noticed. In consideration of these inputs on record, the renewal application of MoC was not approved, the officials further said, adding that the FCRA registration of MoC is valid up to December 31, 2021 and it did not freeze any accounts of MoC, rather the State Bank of India has informed that MoC itself sent a request to freeze its accounts, the Ministry added further. **AGENCIES**

PM wanted BJP-NCP tie-up for Maha government, I rejected offer: Pawar

MUMBAI: A fresh political row erupted after Nationalist Congress Party President Sharad Pawar reiterated that Prime Minister Narendra Modi was keen for an NCP-Bharatiya Janata Party alliance government in Maharashtra after the October 2019 Assembly polls threw up a fractured verdict.

Pawar referred to his meeting with the PM on November 20, 2019, at the release of a coffee table book, "Ashtavahani" launched by The Indian Express Group's 'Loksatta' Marathi daily, and released by Bharat Force MD Baba Kalyani, as part of the NCP supremo's 81st birthday celebrations. At that time, Pawar had confirmed how Modi wanted NCP-BJP to "work together" and even offered a central Cabinet berth to his daughter and Baramati MP Supriya Sule. "There was a dis-

ussion about an alliance... I had told the PM right in his office that it was not possible... I would not like to keep them in the dark," Pawar recalled the incident.

NCP National Spokesperson and Minority Affairs Minister Nawab Malik endorsed the statement saying it happened in Parliament House and he was also present then. "Yes... There was an offer from the PM and we discussed it in our party and decided against it... Then Pawar Saheb conveyed it to the PM," Malik said. Pawar felt that the BJP offer may have come as there were frictions between the Congress-NCP at that time, but the Shiv Sena had come forward for the three-party alliance which was ultimately sworn-in as the Maha Vikas Aghadi government headed by Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray on November 28,



2019. On whether the NCP chieftain -- just three days after his meeting with PM -- had 'sent' his nephew Ajit Pawar to form the 80-hour long, two-legged government sworn-in early morning with BJP's Devendra Fadnis as the CM, Pawar quipped: "If that was so, then I would not have left the job incomplete!" Reacting, Sena

MP Sanjay Raut said that there was "complete transparency" at that time when the three parties were finalising the nitty-gritties of the government formation with nail-biting political suspense. "We all were aware of who's talking what and with whom... We even had knowledge of what was happening on the Devendra Fadnis-Ajit

Pawar front... Later, he and other MLAs returned to the fold," said Raut with a sly glint. "The BJP had made this offer, but we know about it... In fact, they were desperate to come to power at all costs and ready to join hands with any party... But they did not succeed," Raut added. However, in a guarded response, Leader of Opposition (Council) Pravin Darekar said that certain things may have happened owing to political exigencies at that time, but wondered "why the issue was being raised now".

The BJP suffered one of its biggest political setbacks in November 2019 when it failed to take along Shiv Sena President Uddhav Thackeray on the issue of power-sharing and virtually called him a 'liar' publicly. Simultaneously, there were backdoor efforts to woo Thackeray, even through

middle-of-the-night phone calls from central BJP leaders, attempts to lure away Sena-NCP legislators, etc. Pawar recalled that Thackeray changed his position as "the BJP did not honour what was agreed upon between them", and finally the NCP decided to back the Sena chief as the CM. Giving full marks to Modi for putting in a lot of hard work to complete any task, attention to the administration, strongly implementing policies in his own style, Pawar said "if the problems of the masses are not solved, there will be no impact, which is where he lags". Regarding the upcoming Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, Pawar predicted a '50-50' chance and the manner in which the PM has announced many projects indicates the BJP could face a serious situation there. **AGENCIES**

Form dedicated anti-narcotic force, will help co-ordination, Shah tells states

NEW DELHI: Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Monday asked all states to set up a dedicated Anti-Narcotics Task Force (ANTF) under the Director General of Police, which will also function as state Narco-Coordination Centre (NCORD) secretariat.

Chairing the third meeting of the apex-level committee of the Narco Coordination Centre (NCORD) here, he said that "in the 75th year of Independence, we have to ensure to make the resolve to bring about the vision of 'Drug-Free India' given to us by Prime Minister Narendra Modi". Noting that the government has adopted zero tolerance policy against narcotics, considers drug abuse a major threat to national security and that can only be dealt with overall coordination, he stressed that there is a need for better coordination between all drug law enforcement agencies and intelligence agencies, not only at the national level but also between the Centre and the states.

He said the central NCORD unit under the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) will work as effective mechanism for



information exchange between various institutions and agencies, while an effective system has to be put in place to stop increasing use of Dark Net and crypto-currency in illegal drugs trade and to prevent illegal drug cultivation, the agencies can use drones, satellites and other technology. Describing drug-trafficking as a borderless crime, he said that drugs, valued at Rs 1,881 crore, have been seized between 2018 and 2021, which is three times higher than the value of drugs seized between 2011 and 2014.

He also said that a Narcotics Training Module should

be prepared at national level so that police, Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) personnel, prosecutors and people from other departments can be trained under it. To stop misuse of dual-use prescription medicines, a standing Inter-Ministerial Committee under Ministry of Health and Family Welfare should be formed which should have officials from the Department of Pharma, the National Medical Commission, the NCB, and industry experts.

He also said that special efforts should be made by all coastal states and Union Ter-

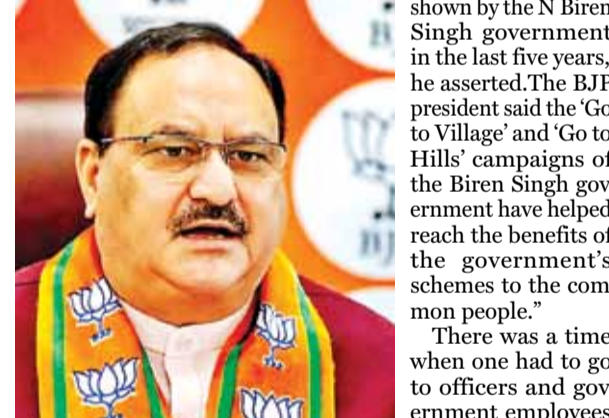
ritories and state NCORD Committee meetings should have all stakeholders like Coast Guard, Navy, Ports Authority etc. Directions were given for the arranging scanners and related equipment for scanning of incoming and outgoing containers at all ports, whether government or private. During the meeting, an elaborate spread of awareness campaign against drugs was suggested along with setting up of de-addiction centres in all major prisons.

The Home Minister also directed that all personnel, all Central Paramilitary police forces and state police forces should participate in the Modi government's oath campaign of drug-free India and ensure that all their personnel become a part of it. He also added that this campaign should be completed by January 12, 2022 on the Swami Vivekananda Jayanti which is celebrated as National Youth Day. The meeting was organised by the NCB and the Union Home Secretary, Secretaries of related ministries, the DGs of all CAPFs, Chief Secretaries and DGPs of states participated. **AGENCIES**

Congress gave NE "insurgency, instability, inequality": Nadda

IMPHAL: The Congress gave the Northeast the three 'I's of "insurgency, instability and inequality" while the BJP came forth with a plan for infrastructure development, innovation and integration, asserted BJP president J P Nadda on Thursday, attacking the grand old party over repeated shutdowns and economic blockades when it was in power in most states of the region.

Addressing a rally of the youth in Manipur's Kakching, Nadda extolled the Narendra Modi government for steps taken by it for the welfare of young people. Nadda told the gathering that the "double engine" BJP governments at the Centre and in Manipur ensured peace, prosperity and protection of people in the restive state, which was once plagued by "misgovernance" under Congress where "bandhs and blockades" were a way of life. "We work for the unity and stability of the country as



shown by the N Biren Singh government in the last five years," he asserted. The BJP president said the 'Go to Village' and 'Go to Hills' campaigns of the Biren Singh government have helped reach the benefits of the government's schemes to the common people. "There was a time when one had to go to officers and government employees to get the work done, but under Biren Singh government employees are visiting common people to ensure their work is done without fuss," he said. Nadda said he was sure the youth of Manipur will chose stability over insurgency, prosperity over divisive policy, peace over encounters and sport over drugs. "We know the youth of Manipur have capability, talent and energy... PM Modi says the youth are the future of the country. You are our hope, our strength through which Modiji's dreams will fructify," he said. He highlighted the work done by the Centre for development of vocational skills among the youth.

The vision of the government is to make the youth the job givers instead of job seekers," he said. India, he asserted, has become the second largest hub in start ups in the world under the 'start up India' initiative of the Modi government. India has the maximum number of young people engaged in start-ups for which the government has invested over Rs 50,000 crore. Congratulating more than 5,600 entrepreneurs involved in start-up enterprises in Manipur, he said the state government has allotted Rs 114 crore for the purpose. Nadda also came down hard on rival political parties, calling them "directionless", and saying their only aim was to criticise the BJP and Narendra Modi. **AGENCIES**

'Try and demolish mosque if you can': Pak Chief Justice gets a warning

NEW DELHI: Warning Pakistan Chief Justice Gulzar Ahmad and Sindh province Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah of dire consequences, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) Secretary General for Singh, Rashid Mahmood Soomro, has said that the party want allow implementation of the courts order to demolish an illegally constructed mosque in Karachi, Friday Times re-

ported. The Pakistan Supreme Court had ruled that a mosque, shrine and cemetery built near Tariq Road in Karachi were encroaching on public park land, and ordered on Tuesday that the constructions be brought down. Soomro posted a video on Twitter, which went viral by late Wednesday, daring authorities to raze the

mosque. "Mr Chief Justice the mosques are not orphans... Mr Chief Minister the mosques are not orphans... If you have the courage, then show it and try bulldozing the mosque," Soomro goaded, as per the report.

He warned, "We will stop you on the way [to the mosque]... If mosques are demolished, your offices will also be demolished." Khawaja

Shams, the counsel for the mosque's administration, argued that the land was obtained legally through auction from the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC). The District Municipal Corporation (DMC) maintained that the land was still zoned for public amenities. Gulzar Ahmad had chastised the district administration for unfettered developments across the city.

India rejects China renaming places in Arunachal; says 'invented' names do not alter status

NEW DELHI: India on Thursday strongly rejected China renaming some places in Arunachal Pradesh and asserted that the state has "always been" and will "always be" an integral part of India and that assigning "invented" names does not alter this fact.

India's reaction came in response to Beijing announcing Chinese names for 15 more places in Arunachal Pradesh which the neighbouring country claims as South Tibet. "We have seen such. This is not the first time China has attempted such a renaming of places in the state of Arunachal Pradesh. China had also sought to assign such names in April 2017," External Affairs Ministry

spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said. "Arunachal Pradesh has always been, and will always be an integral part of India. Assigning invented names to places in Arunachal Pradesh does not alter this fact," he said. Bagchi was responding to a media query on reports that China has renamed some places in Arunachal Pradesh in its own language. China's Ministry of Civil Affairs announced on Wednesday that it had standardised in Chinese characters, Tibetan and Roman alphabet the names of 15 places in Zangnan, the Chinese name for Arunachal Pradesh, according to state-run Global Times. This is in accordance with regulations on geographical



names issued by the State Council, China's cabinet, it said in a report. Among the official names of the 15 places, which were given exact longitude and latitude, eight are residential places, four are mountains, two are rivers and one is a mountain pass, the report said.

This is the second batch of standardised names of places in Arunachal Pradesh given by China. The first batch of the standardised names of six places was released in 2017. China claims Arunachal Pradesh as part of South Tibet. The eight residential places in the second

batch are Sengkezung and Dalgungzong in Cona County of Shannan Prefecture, Manigang, Duding and Migpain in Medog County of Nyingchi, Goling, Damba in Zayu County of Nyingchi, and Mejag in Lhunze County of Shannan Prefecture, the Global Times report said. The four mountains are Wamo Ri, D u Ri, Lh nzhub Ri and Kunmingxingzong Feng, it said.

The two rivers are Xenyogmo He and Dulain He, and the mountain pass is named Se La, in Cona County. The report quoted Lian Xiangmin, stated to be an expert with the China Tibetology Research Centre in Beijing, claiming that the announcement is part of the national survey on place names

that have existed for hundreds of years. China's renaming of the places in Arunachal Pradesh came in the midst of the lingering eastern Ladakh border standoff that began in May last year. Following the standoff, India bolstered its overall military preparedness along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Arunachal Pradesh sector as well. Eastern Army Commander Lt Gen Manoj Pandey said in October that China has increased the intensity of its military exercises and deployment of troops in its depth areas opposite the LAC in the Arunachal Pradesh sector.

He said that India has correspondingly readied contingency plans to deal with any eventualities. **AGENCIES**

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No fresh covid curbs in Delhi for now, 'yellow alert' to continue

NEW DELHI: The DDMA on Wednesday decided that Covid-related restrictions imposed in Delhi under the 'yellow alert' will continue for the time being and authorities will monitor the situation for a while before deciding on fresh curbs, official sources said. The decision was taken at a meeting chaired by Lt Governor Anil Bajjal, who is also the chairperson of the Delhi Disaster Management Authority. It was attended by Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and experts. The DDMA on Tuesday declared a 'yellow alert' under the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) in the city amid a spike in coronavirus cases following the emergence of the virus' Omicron variant. The 'yellow alert' entails restrictions like night curfew, closure



of schools and colleges, opening of shops selling non-essential items on an odd-even basis, halved seating capacity in Metro trains and buses, among

HIGHLIGHT

DELHI DISASTER MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY IN WAIT-AND-WATCH MODE; WILL MONITOR SITUATION FOR A WHILE BEFORE DECIDING ON FRESH CURBS

other things. The DDMA has decided that curbs imposed under the 'yellow alert' will continue in the national capital for now, the sources said. The authorities are in favour of monitoring the situation for some more time and to avoid imposing further restrictions under 'amber alert', they said. An 'amber alert' is declared when the positivity rate is recorded at

one per cent or above for two consecutive days. "It was discussed that most Covid cases are asymptomatic and mild and there are fewer hospitalisations, which indicates that the situation is not that bad," a source said. During the meeting, it was also decided to ensure strict implementation of restrictions imposed under the 'yellow alert'. In case the situation worsens, emergency measures may be imposed, the sources said.

On Tuesday, Delhi recorded 496 fresh COVID-19 cases, the highest since June 4, while the positivity rate stood at 0.89 per cent, according to health department data. The total number of Omicron cases in the city stood at 165, the data stated. **AGENCIES**

Delhi Police prepare for battle against Omicron



NEW DELHI: The police in the national capital have rolled up their sleeves to fight a possible battle against the new strain of novel coronavirus, Omicron. Special CP (Welfare), Shalini Singh, on Wednesday held a meeting with all the district and unit heads and other stakeholders to check the overall preparedness in the wake of a possible community spread of Omicron. The official emphasised on strict adherence to the revised SOPs issued recently by Delhi Police Commissioner Rakesh Ashana on health welfare of police personnel.

Under the revised SOP, DCPs and unit heads have been designated as nodal health officers (NHOs). The NHOs have been directed to ensure that an officer of the rank of inspector or above per-

sonally meets the hospitalised personnel or their kin on a regular basis till he/she gets fit. In case of outstation case, video conferencing with the ailing person or his/her family members should be ensured. Sharing details about the latest directions, Delhi Police PRO Chinmoy Biswal said that all the eight wellness centres and two Covid care centres in Rohini and Shahdara will be activated for any medical emergency. District/unit heads should take stock of oxygen cylinders, concentrators, sanitisers, masks, preventive medicine etc., and keep all equipment in ready condition.

They should also liaise with the doctors for counselling the personnel in prevention and cure of infection," the directions read. **AGENCIES**

Rise in Covid cases due to international flights coming in: Satyendar Jain



NEW DELHI: Amid a spike in COVID-19 cases in the city, Delhi Health Minister Satyendar Jain on Wednesday said many international travellers, who have tested negative at the airport, are testing positive for the virus after a few days and infecting others during the period. "The cases have increased due to international flights. Even during the earlier wave, the cases rose with flights coming in," the minister told reporters. Jain also said preparations for the vaccination of children and booster doses for the elderly in the first week of January have been completed and up to three lakh people can be vaccinated on a daily basis. Delhi on Wednesday reported a massive jump in daily COVID-19 infections with 923 fresh cases, the highest since May 30.

After six months, the positivity rate crossed 1 percent to reach 1.29 percent. The national capital also recorded 238 Omicron cases. There were 165 cases of the new variant a day earlier. "There are many people who are testing negative at the airport and they are allowed to go home. The district authorities are in touch with them. After reaching home, they are tested again and they come out positive. In the process, they are also infecting their family members," Jain told reporters. **AGENCIES**

Delhi set to ring in New Year in chilly weather; cold wave to severe cold wave likely till Jan 3

NEW DELHI: A cold wave swept Delhi on Thursday as people in the city gear up to ring in a chilly New Year with the weather department predicting similar conditions till January 3. The minimum temperature at the Safdarjung Observatory, considered the official marker for the national capital, dropped sharply to 3.4 degrees Celsius, four notches below normal. On Wednesday it was 8.4 degrees Celsius. The automatic weather stations at Delhi's Ayanagar and Narela on Thursday recorded a minimum temperature of 3.8 degrees Celsius and 3.2 degrees Celsius, respectively. Delhi had experienced cold wave conditions on December 20 and 21 when the minimum temperature settled at 3.2 degrees Celsius, the lowest this season so far, and 4 degrees

HIGHLIGHT

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Celsius. Thereafter, two back-to-back western disturbances and the resultant slowing down of cold northwesterly winds and cloudy conditions gradually pushed the minimum temperature up to 9.8

degrees Celsius. Clouds trap some of the outgoing infrared radiation and radiate it back downward, warming the ground. The IMD has predicted cold wave to severe cold wave conditions in northwest India till January 3.

The weather department predicted the minimum temperature will start increasing from January 4 under the influence of an active western disturbance which is likely to cause fairly widespread rain and snow over Jammu and Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh between January 4 and 7. It will also lead to "light to moderate scattered to fairly widespread" rain over Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh Delhi, north Rajasthan and west Uttar Pradesh between January 5 and January 7. **AGENCIES**

North Delhi civic body transforming 'dhalaos' sites into libraries, book banks

NEW DELHI: As part of the 'Swachh Bharat' initiative, the North Delhi Municipal Corporation has been converting many of its 'dhalaos' or dumpsites into libraries and book banks, officials have said. The NDMC has taken many other innovative steps such as beautification of compactors under the cleanliness initiative. It is being done to motivate citizens, especially the young generation, to manage their waste sensibly.

At Sector-3 of Rohini Zone, a dumpsite has been converted into an English language coaching centre for poor children. People can also donate books there to help the needy

students, a senior official said on Wednesday. Officials said the 'dhalaos' which have been closed are being converted into vibrant spaces such as libraries and book banks to promote education, especially for the underprivileged. The North Delhi Municipal Corporation has waste compactors at 76 locations. The civic body said that it has taken the initiative of beautifying compactors by converting them into 'compactor vatika'. It would be like a mini-garden with grass and flower plants, motivational slogans painted on boards and also selfie-points to encourage citizens get involved in waste management, the NDMC said. **AGENCIES**

Delhi HC, district courts to work only through virtual mode Jan 3-15



NEW DELHI: In view of the sudden spurt and spike in Covid-19 cases in Delhi and issuance of yellow alert, the Delhi High Court and the district courts in the national capital will hold hearings only through the virtual mode from January 3 to 15, it was announced on Thursday. As per the instructions of Delhi High Court's Chief Justice D.N. Patel, the courts will take up the matters, as per the existing arrangement with regard to the listing of cases, through videoconferencing mode. "I

have also consulted with the esteemed members of the Administrative and General Supervision Committee of this Court.

They all are also of the view that immediate steps are required to be taken to safeguard the health and well-being of all the stakeholders while also ensuring that the justice delivery system remains functional. The inputs have also been taken from the President of Delhi High Court Bar Association as well as from the Chairman of Coordination Commit-

tee of All District Court Bar Associations of Delhi and other senior office bearers. As expected, they, too, have assured fullest cooperation on behalf of the Members of the Bar," the Chief Justice said. The present grim scenario has left us with no other viable option, he added. The video-conferencing links of the courts shall be made available on the website.

The Principal District and Sessions Judges, in consultation with the DG (Prisons), shall make necessary arrangements for extension of remand of undertrial prisoners. Wherever required, such prisoners may be produced through video-conferencing, according to the office order released on Thursday. The arrangement will continue till January 15 when it will be reviewed. Welcoming the step, on behalf of North Delhi Lawyers Association (NDLA), advocate Vineet Jindal said: "I welcome this step but directions to pass adverse orders shall be there on non-attending of VC by either party to conduct effective hearings. **AGENCIES**

AAP's Atishi accuses MCD, MHA of extorting money from traders

NEW DELHI: Alleging corruption in the BJP-led MCD in Delhi, AAP MLA Atishi said on Wednesday that BJP councillors are extorting money from traders using showcase notices, while the civic body and the Home Ministry are conniving to kill small businesses. "The BJP, which has been collecting commercial property taxes, conversion fees and parking fees for many years, has abruptly refused to grant licences to shops and restaurants in unauthorised areas and issued showcase notices to poor traders. The party is on a quest to extort as much money as it can in its last three months in power," she alleged in a press conference on Wednesday.

Atishi went on to say that previously, health and trade licences were issued to shops, dhabas and restaurants via the MCD, but now it has been transferred to the MHA, "which is only



granting licences to those who are in officially notified area." "We all know that over 75 per cent of these establishments are in unauthorised colonies. These are the same colonies which become major election topics every term, as the BJP, the Prime Minister, as well as the Home Minister make promises to regularise and authorise these colonies," the MLA from Kalkaji added. She alleged that they first send such frivolous notices and then charge huge sums of cash to revoke them. **AGENCIES**

Amid yellow alert, Delhi Metro struggles to curb passenger numbers

NEW DELHI: Even two days after a yellow alert was declared in the capital, Delhi Metro is yet to implement the restrictions imposed by the Delhi government in the wake of the rising Covid-19 cases, as more than 50 per cent passengers continue to board the public transport with several still travelling standing. "Most of the people still do not know about the curbs and continue to board the metro. The situation will get under control within two-three days," a DMRC official told IANS.

Passengers IANS talked with cited office attendance as one of the reasons, while others said with Delhi Transport Corporation buses too running with just 50 per cent passengers, "we have no other option left". Meanwhile, a few passengers said that they are taking all the possible precautions while commuting and going about their work and socialising before the New Year kicks in. The Delhi government on December 28 announced restrictions under yellow alert under which Delhi Metro is supposed to run with only 50



per cent seating capacity and passengers are not allowed to travel standing up. This decision was taken after the city's Covid-19 positivity rate continued to be above 0.5 per cent for two consecutive days. However, long queues were seen outside of different metro stations across the city as people continued to go about their daily lives as usual.

To curb this, the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) on Thursday announced to have reduced capacity down to 200 per train from the usual 2,400. An eight-coach Metro train can generally carry about 2,400 passengers, which comprises approximately

250 standing passengers and 250 seating passengers per coach. With present restrictions of 50 per cent seating and no standing, each coach can now accommodate only about 25 passengers, the DMRC said in a release. "Therefore, an eight coach train can now accommodate approximately 200 passengers only." "As this is less than 10 per cent of a train's normal carrying capacity, it advised: "Therefore, travel only if absolutely essential. Also keep extra time in your commute by the Metro as entry has to be regulated to ensure compliance with the guidelines which is resulting in the queue's outside stations." **AGENCIES**

Shop owner in Delhi's Karol Bagh fined Rs 50,000 for opening shop on wrong day

NEW DELHI: A shopkeeper in central Delhi's Karol Bagh was on Thursday slapped a Rs 50,000 fine for violating Covid norms by opening a shop on 'Even Day', which led to a large gathering at the spot.



The challan was issued two days after the Delhi government imposed a yellow alert, in view of the rising Covid cases, under which restrictions included shops selling non-essential

Singh, who runs the shop in Beedanpura area of the leading market.

The SDM, accompanied by Civil Defence volunteers, were on a surprise inspection when they caught Prem Singh running the shop on day he was not supposed to. "Shop was found open on an Even Day. It was the reason behind issuing the challan. The challan was issued for Rs 50,000," said an official.

Shopkeepers have to follow the odd-even alternate day operations and restrictions imposed by the Delhi government. Buyers are also being asked to follow the anti-Covid protocols. Meanwhile, the weekly market, fruit market and other markets were shut in Seelampur area of east Delhi for alleged violation of Covid norms, including functioning on the road side. **AGENCIES**

Irate commuters vandalise bus, injure cop in south Delhi, 6 held

NEW DELHI: Angry over being denied aboard a bus due to the 50 per cent occupancy limit in the national capital, a group of people on Thursday morning blocked a road and vandalised buses following which six people were arrested and a minor detained, police said.

Of the six arrested, four are male and 2 females. Another minor girl was apprehended. A case has been registered against them under relevant sections of the Delhi Prevention of Defacement of



Property Act, Prevention of Damage to Public Property Act, and the Indian Penal Code. Additional District Commissioner of Police, South, Harsh Vardhan said that at around 8.15 a.m., several calls regarding traffic jams by public near

Jamia Hamdard on MB Road were received and a police team was dispatched to the spot.

According to the police, when the team reached the spot, they found that some bus commuters were instigating other people to sit on the road as the bus drivers and marshals were not allowing more passengers aboard due to the latest guidelines. "The police tried to convince the agitated public to allow the traffic to pass but in vain," he said. After sometime, the protesters began vandalism,

breaking window panes of 4-5 buses and in order to bring the situation under control, the protesters were removed with help of women police staff, amid a scuffle. "No incident of lathi charge or force was used. In the process, one police person also sustained injury," the official said.

The conductor of one of the vandalised buses said that even on Wednesday, people were angry and were forcibly trying to get inside the bus, but, things turned violent on Thursday. **AGENCIES**

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No lockdown in Bengal for now, says Mamata



KOLKATA: West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee on Thursday said there will be no lockdown-like situation in the state for now. "I would like to tell you that there will not be any lockdown in the state right now. During Covid, everything was stopped and it led to a situation where the common people were the worst sufferer. The government doesn't want to walk on the same path again," she said. She, however, said the government is carefully considering every possible situation and keeping a close watch on the developments. "There was absolutely no scare of the virus for the last six-eight months and so all the hospitals and safe houses were closed in many places. We will take the decision after carefully considering every possible situation," she said.

Expressing her concern over the people who are coming from Britain, she said: "People who are coming from Britain are tested Omicron positive. They are getting irritated

in the testing process but they should cooperate with the government and the health department. "Amid the health experts' worries about the New Year celebration, fearing the gathering of people might contribute significantly to the spread of the virus, the Chief Minister said: "How can I stop the New Year celebration programme? However, we are keeping a watch on the situation. I ask all the people to be conscious about the situation and behave rationally."

She also asked everyone to behave responsibly in the Gangasagar Mela too. "I cannot stop the fair but people should be conscious," she added. On Wednesday, the chief minister had said that the state government was mulling to impose total restrictions again. Speaking at an administrative meeting in South 24 Parganas, Banerjee had dropped broad hints that the state government might impose restrictions on schools and local trains to contain the spread of the virus.

All political parties want UP polls be held as per schedule: CEC Sushil Chandra

LUCKNOW: Chief Election Commissioner Sushil Chandra on Thursday said all political parties in Uttar Pradesh want the Assembly elections to be held according to schedule while ensuring Covid protocol. The CEC also asked the state to step up coronavirus vaccination. The number of polling booths will be increased and the voting time enhanced by an hour, he said, adding that polling officials will be vaccinated and those eligible will be given a booster dose. Chandra said some parties have also expressed concern over hate speeches, paid news and "biased" officials. On a three-day visit to Lucknow to review preparations for the elections slated to be held before mid-March, Chandra held a series of meetings with representatives of political parties as well as state and district-level officials.



The Allahabad High Court had on December 23 suggested the Union government defer the Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections due to a possible Omicron-led third Covid wave. "I have been told that 86 per cent of people in the state have got the first dose and 49 per cent the second shot of Covid vaccine. We have been assured that in 15 to 20 days, all eligible people will get their first dose. We have asked for increasing vaccination," he told reporters on the last day of his visit.

HIGHLIGHT

ALLAHABAD HIGH COURT HAD ON DECEMBER 23 SUGGESTED THE UNION GOVERNMENT DEFER UTTAR PRADESH ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS DUE TO A POSSIBLE THIRD COVID WAVE

He said because of the pandemic, the number of polling booths in the state will be increased by 11,000 to maintain proper social distancing. "Earlier, a booth was made for 1,500 voters. But keeping in mind the Covid pandemic, the number of voters in each booth has been reduced to 1,250. Because of this, the number of polling booths has increased by 11,000. So, a total of 1,74,351 polling booths will be set up," he said. Chandra said besides the Naxal-infested areas, polling time will also be increased by an hour across the state. Polling officials will be vaccinated and those eligible will be given a booster dose, he said. Thermal scanners and masks will be provided at all polling booths and special care will be on maintaining social distancing and proper sanitisation, he said. Chandra said all officers on poll duty will necessarily have to be fully vaccinated and orders have been issued to give the status of frontline workers to the officers related to the elections.

Women should unite, fight for their rights: Priyanka



FIROZABAD (UP): Congress General Secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra said on Wednesday that if women become aware of their rights and unite, the day is not far when they would have a sizeable presence in the Parliament. Speaking at a 'Shakti Samvad' programme here, Priyanka said that leaders know that they would give votes in the name of caste, and hence they do not bother about fulfilling their promises. The Congress leader said that after she launched the campaign for women, other political parties have begun recognising the power of female votes.

"The time has come to elect a party that does not talk about caste and wants to empower you. If you unite and vote on issues, leaders will also stop taking you for granted," she said. Priyanka said that the government is increasingly opting for privatisation, which means that the benefits of reservation will slowly dry up. "The government is working for the benefit of its rich friends, while the poor are suffering. Farmers and women are suffering because prices are rising," she said.

The Congress leader further said that if women vote for Congress, they will be voting for their empowerment. Earlier, Priyanka had visited the home of a woman who makes bangles. She chatted with the women there and had tea with them.

'Trinamool outsourced polls to event agency': Fadnavis takes dig at Prashant Kishor



PANAJI: The Trinamool Congress has virtually outsourced elections to an event management agency, BJP's Goa poll in-charge and former Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis said on Thursday, taking potshots at the Prashant Kishor-led Indian-Political Action Committee, without naming him.

"For them, elections are an event. They have outsourced elections to an event management company. Now elections are also being outsourced," Fadnavis told the public meeting in the Mayem assembly constituency in North Goa. "In the BJP, workers fight elections, workers make efforts, plan. Leaders contest elections on the faith of these workers. They (Trinamool), on the other hand, outsource elections to an agency. This agency fights elections on their behalf and are keeping their bags open to buy and sell. They are trying to catch whichever goat comes their way and take him along. Such attempts are happening," he added.

Fadnavis also took on the Congress and the Aam Aadmi Party, claiming that the former was crumbling across the country, while accusing the latter's national Convenor and Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal of merely posturing. "The

mask behind the Delhi model fell when during Covid, not a single patient visited Arvind Kejriwal's mohalla clinic, because the mohalla clinics do not treat anything other than common cold, fever and dysentery. When people started dying one after the other they realised that the mohalla clinic is an eyewash and nothing else," he said. "No one speaks about the grand old party, Congress, these days. Because no one is willing to stay in that party. I feel barring Digambar Kamat the party does not have a single MLA.

"Pratapsingh Rane has announced that he will not contest. So there is only one MLA. This is the state of the Congress," he said. He claimed that the Congress' top leaders did not inspire faith anymore. "This is the state of the Congress in the entire country, not just Goa. Everybody is deserting Congress because no one has faith in the Congress leadership. Congress has part-time leaders, not full-time leaders. They go to Italy, England, London, Malaysia, Thailand and in the remaining time they indulge in politics."

Win in K'taka civic polls response to BJP's divisive agenda: Cong



NEW DELHI: After setback in Chandigarh Municipal polls, the Congress has achieved a good result in the Karnataka civic polls. The party claims to have won 500 wards which is more than the ruling BJP in the state.

The Congress said that the government tried to divert attention on various issues by polarising voters, but the public replied through ballot. Party General Secretary Incharge of the state Randeep Singh Surjewala said that, "Congress exhibited a stupendous performance winning a large number of seats in 58 Urban Local Bodies. It has won 500 Wards, against 435 by the ruling BJP. JD(S) victory was limited to 45 Wards only." "Manufactured issues

like anti-conversion law and management of temples are not what people are going to be taken in with. Progressive Kannadigas realise that such issues are meant to serve no one but divisive forces. Every second that the spurious and corrupt Bommai Govt continues, it is an anathema to development and progress," he said.

Surjewala said, "the Party expresses deep gratitude to all our Kannadiga brothers and sisters for their blessings, foresight & the faith reposed in the Congress Party in the Local Body Elections. The Party records special accolades for all the Congress workers and leaders, who reached out to the masses and are the guiding light of party's victory." "The Congress claimed that the vote share in these Local Body polls also indicate a huge slide in the popularity of the BJP in the state. The vote share of the Congress came up to 42.06 per cent, whereas for BJP and JD(S) it stood at 36.9 per cent and 3.8 per cent respectively."

Homeless, shelter-less to get subsidized food soon: Govt

NEW DELHI: The Centre is set to bring out a scheme soon that will provide subsidized rations to homeless people and those who don't have ration cards. "That process is on, and the development of a system is in its final stages. Then it will be put to trial. The whole system is basically to capture all homeless, shelter-less destitute, who might not have ration cards," Secretary, Food and Public Distribution, Sudhanshu Pandey told a media conference on Thursday.

"The state governments may not have issued them the ration cards for reasons of either lack of identity or lack of home address. All these issues will be addressed," Pandey said. The new and upcoming system that is going to be institutionalised will really fill in the last gap of that most vulnerable section population, the last missing link would also be covered, said an official from the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution.

Vaccination for 35L in 15-18 age group from Jan 3: Guj Minister

GANDHINAGAR: Gujarat Health Minister Rushikesh Patel on Thursday said 35 lakh individuals in the 15-18 age group were identified for vaccination against Covid-19 in a mega drive that will be carried out from January 3-9. The health teams will administer these vaccine doses at schools and other places. The Gujarat government will be setting up camps at schools to carry out the vaccination process for 15 to 18 age group. Online registration for vaccination will start from January 1. "Around 35 lakh children have been identified in the age group of 15 to 18 for vaccination against Covid-19. These children will be administered only Covaxin doses," Patel told the media. "Students who don't go to school will be administered vaccines on January 8-9 for which online registration on Cowin portal will start from 1st and 3rd January," added the health minister.

"Besides, health workers, frontline workers and 60 plus people will be administered the precautionary dose from January 10. Those above 60 and with comorbidities can take the vaccine as per the advice of their doctors, for which they will not be required to produce any medical certificate," he said. "Till now, from December 1 to December 30, we have carried out over 18 lakh tests including the Rapid Antigen and RT-PCR tests. Positivity ratio has been found to be 0.79 per cent," Patel added. The minister also announced that the prevailing Standard Operating Protocols guideline, restrictions and relaxations, which were effective till December 31 has been extended to January 7.

UP's first water sports complex comes up in Gorakhpur

GORAKHPUR: Uttar Pradesh on Thursday got its first water sports complex at Ramgarh Tal here in Gorakhpur. Inaugurated by Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, the water sports complex at the lake is the first in the state which has been constructed by the public sector. The complex, spread on a 5-acre area near the over 1,700 acre Ramgarh Tal, offers facilities of boating, water biking, and skiing.

Officials said that the people of Purvanchal will also be able to indulge in adventure at the water sports complex on the lines of water adventure sports in Goa. Sportsmen will be able to get training for international water sports here. Regional tourism officer Ravindra Kumar Mishra said: "The floating jetty is almost ready and the building work is also completed. The complex building is in five acres of land. With the help of complex, international level sportsmen will be trained. It has been planned to take help of Veer Bahadur Singh Sports College for this purpose. The youth of Purvanchal will be able to take international level water sports training here."

Parties that ruled UP in past didn't care for health of Dalits, minorities: Adityanath

GORAKHPUR: Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on Wednesday said most of the children who died of encephalitis in the eastern districts of the state in the past were Dalits or from the minority communities and the political parties that "used them as vote banks" did not care for their health. He also said the fatalities caused by the deadly disease were kept in check since 2017. "Purvanchal was hit by



encephalitis since 1970 and a large number of children used to die due to it. Most of them were Dalits or from the minority communities. After independence, the parties that ruled the state used these people as vote banks but did not care for their health," the chief minister said at an event here. Before 2017, there was only one medical college - Baba Raghav Das (BRD) Medical College - in the area and it was in a pathetic condition as only 40 doctors were working against the 90 posts and there was a huge dearth of nursing and paramedical staff, he said. But now, there are a number of medical colleges in the area and a regional virology centre and a super-specialty department in the BRD Medical College were inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who also dedicated an AIIMS and a fertiliser plant to the people of the region this month, Adityanath said. Listing the achievements of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government such as construction of airports, educational institutes, medical colleges and expressways, he said with the One District, One Product (ODOP) scheme, Uttar Pradesh is exporting its products and the image of the state has changed from one of "mosquito and mafia" to that of a safe destination for businesses and industry.

Next 2-4 weeks critical, warns Telangana health department

HYDERABAD: Telangana's health department on Thursday cautioned people to remain alert for next 2-4 weeks in view of the surge in Covid-19 cases and the fast spreading new variant Omicron which could mark the beginning of the third wave of the pandemic. Director of public health and family welfare Dr G. Srinivasa Rao said the coming 2-4 weeks will be critical for the state and for the entire country due to the spike in cases. "Omicron has already spread in the community. Everybody is vulnerable but it is in the hands of every person to protect himself," he said.

The official said for the last 2-3 days, Telangana recorded a minor jump in the number of cases. He pointed out that states like Delhi and Maharashtra were witnessing a big surge. The official referred to the massive surge being witnessed in countries like the United States and Europe.

Shah dares Opposition to stop Ram temple construction

LUCKNOW: Union Home Minister Amit Shah launching a scathing attack from the Ram Janam Bhumi, on Friday dared opposition parties to stop the construction of the Ram temple, and asked people who was responsible for keeping "Ram Lalla in a tent".

Shah addressing a public meeting after visiting the under-construction Ram temple site, he alleged that the Modi government at the Centre and Yogi Adityanath's in the state, unlike previous Samajwadi Party and Bahujan Samaj Party governments, had restored the pride in faith. Shah asked people not to forget those who ordered firing at 'kar sevaks'.

"Jo rokna chahte they main kehna chahta hun rok sake to rok lo. Kisi mein rokne ka dam nahi (Those wanted to stop the construction, I want to tell them if they want to stop



then stop. Nobody can dare to stop it," said Shah, adding that a university and a proposed international airport in Ayodhya would be named after Lord Ram. The Union minister asked the audience to think why "Ram Lalla had to live in a tent so far? Who stopped the construction so far? Who stopped Ram Navami celebrations? Who stopped Deepotsav? Who ordered cancharge on Ram Bhaktas?"

Besides visiting the construction site, Shah accompanied by Nriytra Gopal Das, the head of the Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra which is overseeing the Ram temple construction, also reviewed other development projects in Ayodhya. At the Ram temple site, Shah sought blessings for Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and prayed for BJP's victory in the upcoming assembly polls.

Underlining that the country was "lucky" to have Modi as its prime minister, Shah said, "SP-BSP ke sashan mein bua babua ke sashan mein humari astha ke pratikon ka samman nah hota tha. Aj Narendra Modi ji aur UP mein Yogi ji astha ko gaurav pradan karne ka kaam kar rahe hain. (During SP and BSP governments, symbols of faith were not respected. However, today, Narendra Modiji (at the Centre) and Yogi ji in Uttar Pradesh are working to restore the pride of faith.)"

On the recent UP raids on businessmen, Shah wondered why SP chief Akhilesh Yadav was troubled (Bhai Akhilesh

apko kya taklif hai?) and alleged that the smell of the "Samajwadi itra" was spreading across the state.

"Aaj jab raidain chal rahi hain to unke pet mein gubar ho raha hai... mitron apki takleef hai, in kale dhan walon ke yahan raid dali apko taklif hai... Modi ji ko raid dalmi chahiye ki nahi chahiye? (Today raids are going on. Why are they troubled? Friends, are you troubled? Do you feel that raids should be conducted on those who have acquired black money? Do you feel that Modiji should order such raids?)" Shah asked the audience.

Continuing his attack on Akhilesh, Shah dared him to roll back Article 370, which gave special status to Jammu and Kashmir, and triple talaq. "Akhilesh Babu, if your second generation also comes, neither Article 370 is going to come back nor the triple talaq," Shah said. In 2019, the Central government scrapped Article 370 and bifurcated the state into two union territories.

Shah said there used to be three "Ps" during the SP government - "pariwarvaad", "pakshpaat" and "palayan" - and today there were three "Vs" - "vikas, vyapar" and "sanskritik virasat". Ayodhya was the biggest example of the three Vs, he said. Listing development works undertaken by the BJP government in Ayodhya and other cities, Shah said a medical college would be named after Raja Dasharath, father of Lord Ram.

The Union minister praised Adityanath for ridding the state of the "mafia rule" and Modi for preventing the entry of terrorists into the country from Pakistan.

Policymakers must deal with Omicron seriously

The Omicron variant is galloping across the U.S. and many countries in Europe at a pace never seen since the pandemic began. If the United States set a new record of fresh cases on a single day on December 27 with over 0.54 million cases, the seven-day average is at 2,40,400 cases a day, a 60% increase compared to the previous week. At least seven countries in Europe — Britain, Denmark, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain — are witnessing a similar trend this week. While Omicron has emerged as the dominant variant in a few countries, it has not completely displaced the Delta variant. The twin threats from the two variants are responsible for fresh cases reaching record numbers in many countries. The Omicron variant has a superior ability to cause breakthrough infections in fully vaccinated people and also cause reinfections in people who have been previously infected. Early data from South Africa and the United Kingdom suggest a reduced risk of severe disease requiring hospitalisation particularly among those fully vaccinated and previously infected. But it is still too early to draw conclusions as there is an inevitable lag between infection and hospitalisation, and the protection offered by vaccines against Omicron in older and other vulnerable populations is still not clear. India has been witnessing a surge in cases in many States. The total number of Omicron variant cases reported in India is inching closer to 1,300 and has already been reported from 22 States. There is no reason to believe that the variant will behave differently in India. The highly transmissible nature of the variant and its ability to cause breakthrough infections and reinfections, and the fact that people with no travel history or contact with international passengers have tested positive for the virus should alert policymakers to take the Omicron threat seriously.



RAJENDRAN NARAYANAN ALLEGES THE GOVERNMENT HAS MADE SEVERAL DUBIOUS CLAIMS TO PUSH THE AADHAAR PROJECT

The efficiency myth of Aadhaar linking

The Union Government hastily passed a Bill to link voter IDs with Aadhaar cards. Such arbitrary approaches without sufficient deliberation have become the norm, it seems. The Government claims that the move will prevent frauds and remove duplicate IDs. But as evidenced by a report by journalist Kumar Sambhav, such a move violates an individual's Right to Privacy, enables voter profiling and excludes genuine voters — perils that have also been outlined in a statement issued by the Rethink Aadhaar campaign and endorsed by many organisations. Aadhaar was, among other things, purportedly meant to improve efficiency in welfare programmes. However, there are important lessons to learn from the dubious claims made by the Government in Aadhaar linking for welfare delivery which have a strong bearing on the new proposal.



an "assumption" while the other claims are also on shaky grounds.

Cash transfers in many welfare programmes, such as payment of MGNREGA wages, are done using the Aadhaar Payment Bridge System (APBS). For this to work, it is mandatory to link workers' Aadhaar with their MGNREGA job cards and their bank accounts where the Aadhaar number of the worker becomes their financial address. The Union Government has repeatedly made claims on savings in welfare programmes due to Aadhaar. These have been methodically debunked by Jean Drèze and Reetika Khara, among others. But the Government continues claiming that "the estimated cumulative savings/benefits due to Aadhaar in MGNREGA till March, 2021 is Rs 33,475 crores." Two Right to Information responses seeking the methodology used to arrive at such savings are relevant. In a recent response, the Government said the "Ministry has been reporting DBT Mission on the estimated DBT savings under the scheme on the assumption that 10% of the wages in the year could be saved." In an earlier response, it had said: "Savings are in terms of increasing the efficiency and reducing the delay in payments etc." The savings due to Aadhaar, therefore, appear to be

Wage payment delays in MGNREGA have been persistent. An analysis of more than 18 lakh wage invoices for the first half of 2021-22 by LibTech India demonstrated that 71% of the payments were delayed (called stage 2 delays) beyond the mandated period by the Union Government. Nearly 7 lakh invoices in our sample were done through the APBS; 11.65 lakh were account-based payments where the workers' name, account number, and the IFSC code of their bank were used to transfer money. Figure 1 compares the time taken by the Union Government (stage 2) in transferring wages for the two payment methods. The axes represent the number of days taken for two kinds of payments. The 45-degree line shows the percentiles of stage 2 for APBS and the dots represent the percentiles of stage 2 for account-based payments. When dots are below the line, the account-based payments are quicker. Barring a few cases, the dots are practically on or below the line. This is perhaps the first large sample empirical evidence demonstrating that the Government's claim of Aadhaar having "reduced payment delays" is unfounded. Indeed, there is nothing inherent in the APBS that makes transfers faster.

The government's claims on "increasing the efficiency" is also questionable. Efficiency for whom and how is such efficiency related to accountability? Between 2015 and 2019, there was intense pressure on field-level bureaucrats to increase Aadhaar linking. A recently completed study of nearly 3,000 MGNREGA workers by Anjor Bhaskar and Preeti Singh shows that 57% of job cards of genuine workers were deleted in a quest to show 100% linking of Aadhaar with job cards. Doing such plastic surgery on numbers to show efficiency gains is unethical and sets a harmful precedent.

Another key concern is the opacity surrounding APBS and the consequent dilution of accountability. Cash transfers through both the payment methods can fail. The most common reason for payment failures in account-based payments is when the account number of the worker in the system is incorrect. This can be rectified at the block. However, the most common reason for payment failures through the APBS is enigmatically called "Inactive Aadhaar." This has nothing to do with an individual's Aadhaar being inactive but happens when there is a software mapping failure with the centralised National Payments Corporation of India, the clearing house for APBS. Workers and officials alike are clueless on resolving these payment failures.

Moreover, there are several cases of misdirected payments in APBS when the Aadhaar number of one person gets linked to somebody else's bank account so her money gets credited to somebody else's account. These are very hard to detect as these will appear as successful transactions on the dashboard. As per UIDAI, its functions include "setting up of facilitation centres and grievance redressal mechanism for redressal for grievances of individuals." However, no such mechanisms exist.

So, on at least three counts — timely payment of wages, efficiency gains and grievance resolution — there appears no basis to justify APBS in MGNREGA. These prompt us to move beyond tech-

nological alibis for good governance and emphasise the need for a push towards constitutional propriety and accountability for technologies. The mathematician Cathy O'Neil cautions us on how some algorithmic models and technologies for social policies can be at odds with fairness. She writes: "Fairness is squishy and hard to quantify. It is a concept. And computers for all their advances in language and logic still struggle with concepts... Programmers don't know how to code for it..." Indeed, compromising on fairness, people were coerced into using Aadhaar which had no pilot or independent cost-benefit analysis. No feedback has been collected on the user experience of the recipients or from field-level bureaucrats. Further, it is time to overhaul the nomenclature for recipients of welfare measures. Calling them "beneficiaries" subtly transforms the state from being an institution meant to uphold constitutional rights to sounding more like a charitable institution. Instead, people should be referred to as "rights holders". This will likely help us better interrogate whether technologies have imbibed democratic principles of transparency, accountability and participation.

When Aadhaar's use in welfare — for which it was purportedly intended — is itself shrouded in opacity, unreliability, and exclusions, we must be very worried if it is linked to voter IDs as it will further hollow out government accountability. It will fundamentally alter the citizen-State relationship. This must concern everyone as thousands of crores of taxpayers' money have been spent on it. The Law Minister said that linking Aadhaar with voter ID is "voluntary". But given the prior experience of Aadhaar in other spheres, this will be another example of what Cathy O'Neil refers to as the "authority of the inscrutable."

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FIVE OBSERVATIONS

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT THE OMICRON VARIANT

- WHAT IS THE OMICRON VARIANT?**
The Omicron variant of COVID-19 has been called a variant of concern by WHO based on the evidence that it has several mutations that may have an impact on how it behaves.
- HOW DID THE OMICRON VARIANT DEVELOP?**
When a virus is circulating widely and causing numerous infections, the likelihood of the virus mutating increases. The more opportunities a virus has to spread, the more opportunities it has to undergo changes.
- WHERE IS THE OMICRON VARIANT PRESENT?**
The Omicron variant has now been detected in many countries around the world. WHO reports that Omicron is probably in most countries, even if it hasn't been detected yet.
- IS THE OMICRON VARIANT MORE CONTAGIOUS?**
Omicron is spreading more quickly than other variants. Based on the information available, WHO believes it is likely that Omicron will outpace the Delta variant where there is COVID-19 transmission in the community.
- IS THE NEW VARIANT MORE SEVERE**
Early findings suggest that Omicron might be less severe than the Delta variant, but more data is needed and WHO warns that it should not be dismissed as "mild".



KABIR TANEJA ON HOW THE GULF IS POISED TO BECOME KEY PLAYER IN THE REGION

GCC is vying for influence over Afghanistan

On December 19, Pakistan hosted a special session of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to address the crisis in Afghanistan. The Taliban, which took over Kabul in August after a 20-year-long war with the U.S., also attended. Saudi Arabia added weight to Pakistan's call for the meeting. The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is peaking with no basic amenities available for its population and a harsh winter ahead. While Pakistan hosted the OIC, India played host to foreign ministers of Central Asian states where Afghanistan topped the agenda as well. All the attending countries — Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan — also OIC members, chose to prioritise deliberations with New Delhi. Within the OIC, there have been other fissures at play too, specifically among the Gulf states, that are now spilling over on the issue of Afghanistan and determining influence over the country's new regime led by the Taliban.

The centrality of Saudi Arabia's presence during the OIC session comes after Riyadh maintained a certain distance over the developments involving the U.S., the Taliban and the erstwhile Afghan government of President Ashraf Ghani. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Pakistan were the only three countries that had officially recognised the previous Taliban government in 1996, until its fall in 2001. However, that was a



different era, and 20 years is a long time in geopolitics. Fast forward to the 2010s, and it was the small but rich state of Qatar which became the mediating force on Afghanistan. Doha hosted the official Taliban political office from 2013 to allow negotiations with the U.S. In the early 2010s, Saudi funding found its way into Afghanistan, as Salafist and Wahhabi ecosystems attempted to anchor themselves, although, many argue, unsuccessfully.

Qatar's new role on Afghanistan gave it significant diplomatic and political visibility the world over. India's first point of official public diplomatic contact with the Taliban took place in Doha when Ambassador Deepak Mittal met Sher Mohammed Abbas Stanikzai, head of Taliban's political office, there in August 2021. However, this was not the only geopolitical flashpoint Doha was get-

ting deeply involved in. In West Asia, Qatar's growing clout and ambition alike was causing unease in the traditional power centres in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, specifically on issues such as the Qatari leadership's support for political Islam and organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

Fundamental changes

In 2017, these fissures broke the levee within the Gulf Cooperation Council, as the UAE and Saudi Arabia initiated an economic blockade against Doha in the hope of reigning the Kingdom in and disallowing it from pursuing its geopolitical designs that were challenging the long-held power status quos. This four-year long impasse ended in 2021.

However, these four years created fundamental changes within the larger Arab Gulf construct. Qatar mitigated risk and moved closer towards Turkey and Iran. In 2017, Turkey moved troops to Qatar, to make sure that the monarchy of the Al Thani family survives any attempt against it, before protecting the state itself. Today, both Qatar and Turkey are bidding to operate a landlocked Afghanistan's airports under the Taliban regime.

For the Gulf specifically, Qatar's punching-above-its-weight approach in geopolitics was also making it more powerful and influential with Washington D.C. To mitigate this, the Saudis played a central role during the recent

OIC special session. They repaired their broken relationship with Pakistan, where Riyadh had repeatedly cold-shouldered the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan. During this period as well, Doha played its cards, and in 2019, at the height of Islamabad-Riyadh tensions, offered an economically ailing Pakistan a \$3 billion bailout. However, Pakistan's dubious 'kingmaker' status in Afghanistan and influence over the Taliban has now made Rawalpindi's agency on the issue inexorable. This is highlighted by the UAE's recent decision to allow former Afghan government officials find sanctuary in the country, but reportedly curb their participation in political activities, including on social media.

The Arab Gulf is poised to become an important player once again in an Afghanistan under the shadow of the Taliban. In 2015, Narendra Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit the UAE in 34 years. Abu Dhabi is expected to be his first foreign visit in January 2022. Over the past decade, India has recognised the importance of middle powers in the Arab Gulf to a fast-evolving global order, from fighting against terrorism to newer diplomacy challenges such as Afghanistan.

Kabir Taneja is Fellow, Strategic Studies Programme, Observer Research Foundation. Views are personal

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BOOKS: REVIEW

Self-awareness is the key to better survival



HUMRA QURAIISHI

Exploring Life - Knowing Spiritual Aspects of our Life' is a large sized volume. Perhaps, in keeping with life, with all its various dimensions and multi-layered aspects. But what stands out is the way this book has been designed. Informal layout, far away from any of the formal strains. Well spread out are the graphics and drawings and the written content. Making it an easy relaxed read, without any

strain on the eyes, nor on the nerves!

Written by the former retired bureaucrat, Balvinder Kumar, it carries his thoughts and opinions and observations on every aspect to life and living. Two aspects hold out. He focuses on death in that matter-of-fact, realistic way. This is what he writes about death: "We must learn the art of accepting death and dying gracefully...The fact is, by not acknowledging and discussing death, we cause more harm to ourselves. Our quality of life would be improved considerably if only we could embrace death gracefully. We must take death and dying as a natural phenomenon in life and re-

We must learn the art of accepting death and dying gracefully...The fact is, by not acknowledging and discussing death, we cause more harm to ourselves

move our inhibitions." And what is also offbeat are his thoughts on something as basic as our self awareness. How very little we care to know about our own selves! Perhaps, if we understood ourselves, we would be more at ease, would be able to grasp the various setbacks and the



Title of the book - 'Exploring Life - Knowing Spiritual Aspects of our Life.' Author - Balvinder Kumar Designed - Ishign Design Studio Pages - 285 Price - Rs 995

Kumar, also focuses on the connected reality that in this day and age no one teaches us self-awareness! This, when it is of prime significance, holds the key to better survival.

This book makes one sit back and ponder and introspect. As one reads through, the various aspects to our very basic survival hold out. Nudging one to read and re-read.

The forte of this book is, perhaps, in the simple, forthright and stark way it has been put together. The author is not trying to impress the reader. He is trying to connect and bond with the reader. In the hope that hundreds could benefit by the simple philosophy to everyday living. How I wish, the price of the book could have been less, so that many more amongst us could afford to buy this valuable book.

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NEWSBRIEF

Belagavi Trade Fair 'Asmite' sees a record sales: K'taka minister

BENGALURU: The sales at the recently held 'Belagavi Trade fair' -Asmite- stood at a record high of about Rs 60 lakh, C.N.Ashwath Narayan, Minister for Skill Development, Entrepreneurship and Livelihood, stated on Monday. In the six-day fair (December 15-20) organised for products made by women of Self Help Groups, (SHGs) as many as 140 stalls were installed, including seven food stalls. In all, they have achieved sales of Rs 60 lakhs, including the order bookings, he said. Yashoda SHG from NRLM Vijayapura which is engaged in making jute bags which attained first place has made sales worth Rs 1,26,900. Mata Savitri Bai SHG of Belagavi which makes cotton bags and quilts with Rs 1,19,558, Chamundeshwari SHG, Mysuru which does wood inlay with Rs 1,13,830, Sri Revansideshwar SHG, Bagalkote which makes Ilakal sarees with Rs 1,00,626, Janavani matha SHG, Belagavi which makes jewelry and paintings with Rs 87,420 are in the following spots. **AGENCIES**

E-commerce, pharma to revive demand for packaging paper: Crisil

NEW DELHI: A strong revival in consumer spending amid waning impact of the Covid-19 pandemic will help the paper packaging industry bounce back with a revenue growth of 15 per cent this fiscal, ratings agency Crisil said. The industry had reported a decline of 8 per cent in the previous fiscal. Besides, the agency said that capacity utilisation and operating leverage will also improve and, together with continued high realisations and almost stable raw material prices will help in improving the operating profitability of packaging paper players this fiscal. **AGENCIES**

New SEBI norms may impact capital raising plans of some unicorns

NEW DELHI: Inability to raise money for future unidentifiable acquisitions would impact capital raising plans of some unicorns, experts said after SEBI announced new IPO norms. Yash Ashar, Partner and Head, Capital Markets, Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas, said the companies impacted are particularly those which may not have any other use of capital and where the existing shareholders are not keen to sell. SEBI, at its recently-concluded last board meeting for 2021, among other proposals, made certain changes to the issue structure of an IPO in India. These include restricting the quantum of issue proceeds a company can use for unidentified inorganic growth, as well as restricting the number of shares that can be offered by selling shareholders and increasing the lock up of shares subscribed by anchor investors. "Inability to raise money for future unidentifiable acquisitions would impact capital raising plans of some



unicorns, particularly where such companies may not have any other use of capital and where existing shareholders are not keen to sell," Ashar said.

Ashar said large amount of flexibility to use funds is a hallmark of those listing their equity shares on international stock exchanges, and investors vote with their feet when they are not happy with the use of such funds, including any new

acquisition which they don't like. These amendments are mainly a reaction to several IPOs earlier this year and follow after consultation papers were issued by SEBI. These proposed changes to the law could have long-term impact, he added.

"The regulator could have prescribed additional and more detailed continuous disclosures and monitoring, keeping in mind the existing requirements, includ-

ing shareholder approval for proposed acquisitions. These changes may impact the plans of the issuers planning to list on Indian stock exchanges," Ashar said. SEBI has prescribed changes in the Draft Red Herring Prospectus (DRHP) filed on or after notification in the Official Gazette. In the conditions for objects of the issue, it said where the issuer company in its offer documents sets out an object for future inorganic growth but has not identified any acquisition or investment target, the amount for such objects and the amount for general corporate purpose (GCP) shall not exceed 35 per cent of the total amount being raised.

The amount so earmarked for such objects where the issuer company has not identified acquisition or investment target, as mentioned in objects of the issue in the draft offer document and the offer document, shall not exceed 25 per cent of the amount being raised by the issuer. **AGENCIES**

I would like Reliance's story to be told in the book which has no final chapter: Mukesh Ambani



NEW DELHI: Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL) Chairman and Managing Director Mukesh Ambani has predicted that India will become one of the top three economies in the world and Reliance will become one of the strongest and most reputed Indian multinational companies in the world. Speaking at the Reliance Family Day event, Ambani shared imperatives or must-dos that all at Reliance must embrace and make it a way of life. "We must never become complacent of what we have achieved in the past. Companies that

become laid-back because of their previous achievements become footnotes in a history book.

"I would like the story of Reliance to be told in that book which has no final chapter and one which is continually updated with records of bolder initiatives and more glittering successes and where successive generations create ever greater societal value and contribute to India's growth," Ambani said. "This is the only way for today's and tomorrow's leaders to earn the right to call themselves the true inheritors of

the legacy of Dhirubhai Ambani," he added. "We must continuously revisit, iterate, re-iterate and communicate the common philosophy of 'WE CARE' that guides and inspires Reliance," Ambani said on the second imperative. "This common purpose creates a shared identity for every old and new member of Reliance Family. It strengthens their sense of belonging and their feeling of pride in working for one of the world's great companies," he added. Ambani added that Covid has taught some important lessons.

"The first lesson is health first. Covid has made all of us more health conscious and fitness conscious. Health is true wealth. "We have now begun to realise it more acutely than ever before," he added. The second lesson is safety first, he said. "The pandemic has taught us that the safety of each and every one is inseparably linked to safety of all. In other words, no one is fully safe in this world unless all of us are fully vaccinated with vaccines that work," Ambani said. **AGENCIES**

Raids at industrialist Piyush Jain's premises in Kanpur concludes



NEW DELHI: The raids, which started on December 22, on the premises of Kanpur perfume trader Piyush Jain is finally over, the Directorate General of Goods and Services Tax Intelligence (DGGI) has said. Several documents, huge cash, gold and other precious materials were recovered during the searches which concluded

on Wednesday. On Wednesday morning, Pratyush Jain—son of Piyush Jain—was seen locking the house and leaving with the DGGI team for further interrogation.

Zakir Hussain, the Additional Director of DGGI said that they have recovered Rs 19 crore more in cash besides gold and other things. The team was at Jain's

residence at Chhipati Mohalla of Kannuj for the past eight days. "It is Piyush Jain's house. This will be closed for few days. His son Pratyush locked the house and he has the key. For the time being we are taking him and will free him after making panchamas of articles recovered from the house," said the official.

Notably, the counting of notes was on for the past five days with the help of State Bank of India officials and 20 note counting machines. The notes were put in big cartons and sealed by the team. The financial intelligence teams had to take help of extra labourers and a truck to take the cash to SBI branch. **AGENCIES**

Adani's world's biggest coal basin heads for export amid protests

NEW DELHI: Just six weeks after the Glasgow climate summit (COP26), where the world agreed to phase down coal, Australia is opening the world's biggest new coal basin, the Galilee Basin in Queensland. Coal giant Adani is commencing its first exports of coal from the Carmichael mine.

Adani says the first coal for export is "being assembled" at its coal port in Bowen, the North Queensland Export Terminal. Adani plans for the mine to be Australia's biggest, but has faced 10 years of opposition from Wangan and Jagalingou traditional owners and climate campaigners. Responding to the development, Joseph Sikulu, 350.org Pacific Co-ordinator, recently returned from COP26, says: "Just last month I was at the Glasgow



climate summit when global governments pledged to phase down coal. Adani is doing the opposite of this agreement.

"Adani and the governments who enabled them are throwing a wrecking ball at global efforts to protect the Pacific from the impacts of climate change. But we won't let them, we stand in solidarity with the Wangan and Jagalingou people. "We are in the fight of our lives to stop dangerous climate change. We simply cannot

afford for Adani's mine to expand to 60 million tonnes per year. We will fight to keep every single tonne of coal in the ground where it belongs." Julien Vincent, Executive Director of Market Forces said: "People power has kept tens of millions of tonnes of Adani's coal in the ground.

"We'll keep fighting to prevent as much climate-wrecking coal from being mined and burned by Adani as we can. "At this point in the climate crisis, every tonne of coal counts if we are to avoid catastrophic climate impacts like mega fires and superstorms. Adani plans to pour fuel on the fire, continuing to build the Carmichael mine to be Australia's biggest, as well as new coal mines and plants overseas. **AGENCIES**

Bajaj Auto to invest Rs 300 cr for new EV making unit



NEW DELHI: Two-and-three wheeler manufacturer Bajaj Auto on Wednesday announced an investment of Rs 300 crore for a brand-new unit at Akurdi for manufacturing EVs. The company said it has commenced work for the new unit. The company said the unit will have a production capacity of 500,000 EVs per annum. Notably, Akurdi (Pune) is also the site of the original Chetak scooter factory that made Bajaj Auto a household name in India.

"In 2001, Bajaj 2.0 took off on the roaring Pulsar, in 2021 Bajaj 3.0 arrives on the charming Chetak. Going forward, for the Bajaj portfolio, except for implementing one state-of-the-art ICE platform that is currently under development, all our R&D drive train resources are now laser focused on creating EV solutions for the future," said Rajiv Bajaj Managing Director, Bajaj Auto. "This alignment reflects our belief that light Electric Vehicles for sustainable urban mobility is an idea whose time may finally have come. **AGENCIES**

ITC commissions 14.9MW solar plant in TN

CHENNAI: Multi-business company ITC Ltd on Tuesday said it has commissioned a 14.9 MW solar power plant in Dindigul, Tamil Nadu. According to the company, the 14.9 MW solar power plant was built at an outlay of Rs 76 crore thereby meeting 90 per cent of the company's power needs in Tamil Nadu from renewable sources. ITC plans to meet 100 per cent of the entire grid electricity requirements from renewable sources by 2030 and contribute meaningfully to combat the threat of climate change, the company said.



endeavours that comprehensively address the threat of climate change. Our large-scale investments in renewable energy assets are an integral part of our low carbon strategy aimed at making a meaningful contribution to a net zero economy," Sanjiv Rangrass, Group Head - ITC Life Sciences & Technology, Central Projects, EHS & Quality Assurance said. ITC's renewable portfolio comprises 138 MW of wind power plants and 14 MW of

solar plants with 53MW of additional solar capacity under execution.

Currently, projects are also underway in other sources of renewable energy like biomass boilers. The company has made investments of over Rs 1,000 crore in renewable energy assets to date. Renewable energy powers 20 factories, nine hotels, and six office buildings of ITC in Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttar

Pradesh, Delhi, Bihar, Haryana, West Bengal, and Punjab. In 2018, ITC became the first private sector entity to wheel renewable energy across states through the Inter-State Open Access mechanism. Currently, ITC's 46MW Wind power plant in Andhra Pradesh supplies power to over 15 ITC establishments in eight states. This has led to a higher renewable energy utilisation for the company. Besides investing in new renewable energy assets, ITC, as part of its Sustainability 2.0 agenda aims to achieve a 50 per cent reduction in specific emissions and a 30 per cent reduction in specific energy consumption by 2030 over a 2014-15 baseline.

Such efforts in decarbonising energy consumption through low-carbon energy solutions will be met through large-scale digitalisation and R&D initiatives, cross-sectoral collaborations, and partnerships. **AGENCIES**

Experts stress collaborative approach to deal with challenges in decarbonisation of heavy industries



NEW DELHI: Fundamental changes, including road mapping, technical as well as economic intervention, are crucial to decarbonise the cement industry in India which is one of the major emitters of greenhouse gases, experts have said. At a three-day online workshop, jointly

organised by The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), LeadIT Secretariat and the Strategic Partnership for the Implementation of Paris Agreement (SPIPA), they called for "better partnerships between governments and industries and research institutions" to deal with challenges

in decarbonisation of heavy industries, the organisers said in a statement. The Leadership Group for Industry Transition (LeadIT), launched by Sweden and India at the UN Climate Action Summit in New York in 2019, along with local partner TERI, is working towards preparing a sectoral roadmap for the cement and steel sector by facilitating dialogues as well as technical and methodological guidance.

"The Indian industry has made important progress in reducing energy emissions but to attain (long) term sustainable growth more fundamental changes are required," a statement quoted TERI director general Vibha Dhawan as having said. **AGENCIES**

Aluminium industry asks govt not to impose anti-dumping duty on import of Caustic Soda



NEW DELHI: The Aluminium Association of India has urged the Finance Ministry not to impose any anti-dumping duty on import of Caustic Soda originating in or exported from friendly nations of

Japan, Iran, Qatar and Oman. The Association in a letter to Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said that in view of the existing tariff and non-tariff barriers on Caustic Soda imports already in place,

and in the best interest of Indian Aluminium Industry, no anti dumping duty be imposed.

"At this juncture with revival of economy and post pandemic industrial activity back on track, any further restriction on one of the major raw materials for Aluminium will hamper the economic viability of Indian Aluminium industry to the extent of closure of operations thereby affecting the overall economy.

The burden of any additional tariffs will be detrimental for the sustainability and cost competitiveness of the Aluminium industry as unlike other industries,

it cannot pass through the burden of escalated cost to the end consumers as the global Aluminium prices are governed by London Metal Exchange, AAI said.

The BIS Standards are therefore a significant non-tariff trade barrier in place to safeguard the domestic Caustic Soda industry and reduce imports of Caustic Soda based on the quality standards, AAI said. The association pointed out that India's Caustic Soda production and consumption centres are in different regions. Majority of India's domestic production of Caustic Soda (Non-Captive) is in the Western region of the country, mainly in Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. **AGENCIES**

requisite BIS license for exporting Caustic Soda to India.

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GlobalBees is latest unicorn with \$111.5mn raise in round led by Premji Invest

NEW DELHI: GlobalBees, a leading roll-up e-commerce company, has secured \$ 111.5 million in series B funding led by Premji Invest. The round also saw participation from existing investors, including SoftBank and FirstCry, while Steadview Capital became the latest investor to back the company. With this latest investment, GlobalBees' valuation stands at \$ 1.1 billion.

The company plans to use the proceeds to further strengthen its product portfolio and expedite its efforts towards product innovation, customer experience, hiring talent and scaling companies.



The company is now 100 plus people strong. The company is in advanced talks with 20 plus companies to strengthen its portfolio of digital first brands. Speaking on the development, Nitin Agarwal, GlobalBees CEO said, "With this investment, we are well set up to become India's largest brand platform." GlobalBees was

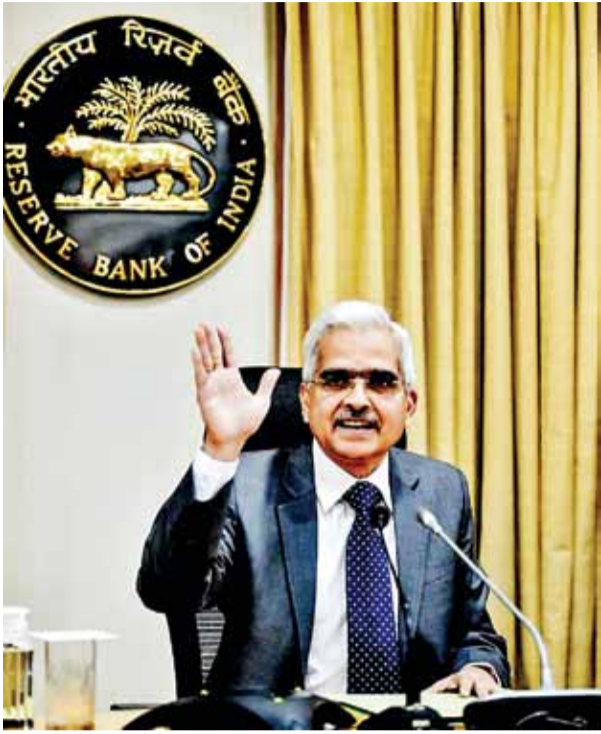
founded in May 2021 and has a diverse portfolio of companies across categories such as Homecare, Beauty and Personal Care, Nutrition & Wellness, Fashion Jewellery, and Eyewear in just 7 months. GlobalBees plans to invest in 100 plus brands across verticals over the next three years, including fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), sports, home organisation, and lifestyle.

The company has offices in Delhi and Bengaluru and has developed assets and expertise in marketing, technology, supply-chain & logistics and product innovation and more. **AGENCIES**

ALSO READ | CHINA BANS TATTOOS IN NATIONAL FOOTBALL TEAM * P8 | US CDC WARNS AGAINST CRUISE TRAVEL AS OMICRON DRIVES UP COVID-19 CASES * P8

RBI flags Omicron threat to growth; says banks strong enough to face challenges

MUMBAI: Though the economy has steadily gained momentum and remained resilient since the second quarter of the current fiscal, the Omicron variant of coronavirus remains the major challenge along with rising inflation pressures, says the Reserve Bank in its second financial stability report. In the foreword to the report released on Wednesday, RBI Governor Shaktikanta Das notes that after the destructive second wave in April-May 2021, the growth outlook has progressively improved, though there are headwinds from global developments and more recently from the Omicron virus.



A stronger and sustainable recovery hinges on the revival of private investment and shoring up private consumption, which unfortunately still remain below their pre-pandemic levels, he notes. Admitting that inflation remains a concern as it is by the build-up of cost-push pressures, Das has called for stronger supply-

side measures to contain food and energy prices. Noting that the financial institutions have remained resilient amidst the pandemic and stability prevails in the financial markets cushioned by policy and regulatory support, the governor is confident that the strong balance sheets of banks with higher capital

A stronger and sustainable recovery hinges on the revival of private investment and shoring up private consumption, which unfortunately still remain below their pre-pandemic levels, Governor Das notes

and liquidity buffers will help mitigate future shocks. Quoting the stress tests on banks, the governor has also warned that gross NPAs may jump to 8.1-9.5 per cent by September 2022 from 6.9 per cent in September 2021. The governor concluded by reiterating the Reserve Bank's resolute commitment to ensure a robust and efficient financial system that supports strong, sustainable and inclusive growth with macro-economic and financial stability. AGENCIES

NEWSBRIEF

Rs 500 cr one time settlement package announced for Kerala cashew industry

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: After several rounds of discussions between Kerala government, banking officials and the cashew industry, a one-time settlement package has been announced which will provide succour to the tune of Rs 500 crores, a state minister said. The one-time money spinning cashew industry in Kerala has been in shambles due to high cost of production, unavailability of raw nuts, and not to mention the Covid pandemic and for long they have been seeking assistance from the Pinarayi-Vijayan led Left government since 2016. The first intervention by the Vijayan government came in 2019 and since then there have been regular meetings with all concerned. State Industries Minister P. Rajiv on Thursday said this scheme would benefit those in the cashew business who have availed a loan of up to Rs 10 crore. According to the new package, interest will be waived of on all loans up to Rs 10 crores taken by the cashew industry. Besides this those who have taken loans for sums up to Rs 2 crore can close their account by paying 50 per cent of the capital. AGENCIES

Indian equities settle steady; Nifty PSU bank falls

MUMBAI: The Indian equity indices S&P BSE Sensex and NSE Nifty50 settled largely steady on Thursday. The Sensex and Nifty settled at 57,794 points and 17,203 points, respectively, down just 0.02 per cent and 0.05 per cent from their previous close. During the session, Nifty PSU bank indices fell as RBI expects NPAs to rise further in 2022. Among the stocks, Bajaj Auto, Reliance Industries, JSW Steel, Tata Steel, Maruti Suzuki were some of the top losers, falling 1.9 per cent, 1.6 per cent, 1.6 per cent, 1.4 per cent, 1.1 per cent, respectively. During the session, NTPC, IndusInd Bank, HCL Technologies, Titan, and Cipla were the top gainers. "Domestic bourses witnessed a choppy session lifted by gains in IT and healthcare stocks on the day of the monthly F&O expiry," said Vinod Nair, Head of Research at Geojit Financial Services. "Banking stocks, especially PSUs, were under pressure as RBI's financial stability report suggested a surge in bad loans with NPAs rising from 6.9 per cent in September 2021 to 8.1 per cent in September 2022 under the base case scenario." AGENCIES

RBI warns of bad loan spike, pencils NPAs at 8.1-9.5 pc by Sep

MUMBAI: Gross bad loans of banks may rise from 6.9 per cent in September 2021 to 8.1-9.5 per cent by September 2022 if the Omicron variant strikes the economy hard, as per the financial stability report of the Reserve Bank released on Wednesday. The report also said that the rising stress level in the retail loan portfolio of banks the mainstay of bank credit for many years now was led by home loans, which grew in double-digits so far this fiscal. While asset quality improved, with gross non-performing assets (GNPA) and net NPA (NNPA) ratios declining to 6.9 and 2.3 per cent, respectively, in September 2021, the slippage ratio inched up during the same period as private sector banks showed a higher rate of deterioration in asset quality, as per the report. But, based on the stress tests, the report warns that the GNPA ratio may rise to 8.1 per cent

Government notifies sale of electoral bonds through SBI



NEW DELHI: In a significant notification ahead of the Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, Goa, Punjab, Manipur and Uttarakhand scheduled early next year, the Finance Ministry said on Thursday that the State Bank of India (SBI) has been assigned to issue and encash electoral bonds through its 29 authorised

branches from January 1-10 next year. The electoral bonds shall be valid for 15 calendar days from the date of issue and no payment shall be made to any payee political party if the bond is deposited after the expiry of the validity period, according to an official statement. "The electoral bond deposited by an eligible political party in its account shall be credited on the same day," it read. The Centre had notified the Electoral Bond Scheme in 2018. As per the provisions of the scheme, electoral bonds may be purchased by a person who is a citizen of India or incorporated or established in India. A person being an individual can buy electoral bonds, either singly or jointly with other individuals. "Only the political parties registered under Section 29A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 (43 of 1951) and which secured not less than 1 per cent of the votes polled in the last general elections to the House of the People or the Legislative Assembly of the state, shall be eligible to receive the electoral bonds," the Finance Ministry statement said. The electoral bonds shall be encashed by an eligible political party only through a bank account with the authorised bank. AGENCIES

MEAI-Goa Chapter urges Sawant for early resumption of mining

MUMBAI: The Goa chapter of Mining Engineers' Association of India (MEAI) has written to Chief Minister Pramod Sawant, appealing for immediate resumption of mining to address the unemployment crisis and earn much-needed revenue for the state.



The industry body, through the letter, pointed out that auction is not suitable for sustainable mineral development in Goa, owing to the peculiar land-related legacies in the state, and pending matter in the court. Further, auction will make

the mines unworkable owing to adverse cost implications and reduced mining business, thus affecting state royalty and mineral revenues. It also expressed apprehensions regarding the current efforts of the state government to

identify and grant the mining blocks/greenfield leases through auction process as there is little clarity about the procedures like 'exploration' which is fundamental for working out the feasibility of business and for ensuring the fair and competitive auctioning process.

Calling auctioning of mining leases against the spirit of ease of doing business and unfeasible due to pending legal case in the Supreme Court since 1998 regarding concessionary rights, MEAI, in the letter to the Chief Minister, observed that it would be

unfair if the state of Goa is not granted extension as per MMDR 2015 i.e., Grant of 50 years as compared to rest of India. It strongly demanded necessary legislative amendment prospectively to the Concessionary rights and/or Legislative amendment to the Goa, Daman & Diu Concessions (Abolition & Declaration as Mining Leases) Act, 1987 (Goa Concessions Act), in order to legally give an extension of lease life to the leases in accordance with MMDR 2015 apart from presenting the same in the Court. AGENCIES

Use bamboo for bio-ethanol to reduce fossil fuel dependence: Minister



NEW DELHI: Emphasising the the bamboo sector's unexplored potential, Union Minister Dr Jitendra Singh on Thursday said that it can be used

for making bio-ethanol, which would reduce dependence on imported fossil fuel, thereby achieving the goal of Aatmanirbhar Bharat in the petroleum sector. In his address at the day-long national-level workshop on bamboo development organised by the NITI Aayog, he said the bamboo sector is going to be a key driver of economic growth in the post-Covid times. He said the country has a huge resource of bamboo and it will become an important source of livelihood in the coming years. Highlighting the increasing popularity of bamboo products and the

scope of its entrepreneurship, he said, across the country, except northeastern parts, there is a lack of exploring the commodity. Terming bamboo "green gold", he said bamboo can be utilised in every aspect of life and it is environment friendly. NITI Aayog Vice Chairman Dr Rajiv Kumar said: "Bamboo is a natural product that can benefit many industries. The need of the hour is to work on increasing the supply and meet the growing demand for bamboo and its products. There is a strong need to promote the bamboo sector across all states with the development of entrepreneurship amongst

farmers and the youth. NITI Aayog Member Dr V.K. Saraswat said that the construction sector in India presents tremendous growth opportunities for bamboo, owing to its unique features. "Its versatility as a substitute offers a chance to protect forests; it has immense economic and business potential." NITI Aayog CEO Amitabh Kant said: "From the point of view of job creation and ecological and economic development in India, bamboo has enormous potential for enhancing the quality of life, for both urban and rural communities." AGENCIES

RBL Bank depositors protected, unanswered questions remain: AIBEA

CHENNAI: Depositors of the RBL Bank Ltd need not worry about the safety of their money as Section 45 of Banking Regulation Act will protect their interests, said a top leader of All India Bank Employees' Association (AIBEA). He also said the branch expansion by RBL Bank within a short span of time -- from 92 branches in 2010 to 196 in 2015 and 462 in 2021 resulted in increased operational expenses, deposits as well as loans and finally the non-performing assets (NPA).



Allaying fears of RBL Bank depositors on the safety of their money C.H. Venkatachalam, General Secretary, AIBEA told IANS: "Section 45 of the Banking Regulation Act gives the depositors the necessary protection." As per Section 45 of the Banking Regulation Act, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has the power to apply to the Central Government for suspension of business by a banking company and to prepare a scheme of reconstitution of amalgamation.

It may be recalled, sometime back, Tamil Nadu based Lakshmi Vilas Bank (LVB) was amalgamated with DBS Bank when the former's financial position went bad. While the LVB shareholders did not get anything, the funds of the depositors were safe. "The RBI may impose a moratorium and some other conditions on withdrawal of deposits when it amalgamates a weak bank with another. But the depositors will not lose out," Venkatachalam said. The RBI on its part said the

bank's financial condition is stable. "As per half yearly audited results as on September 30, 2021, the bank has maintained a comfortable Capital Adequacy Ratio of 16.33 per cent and Provision Coverage Ratio of 76.6 per cent. The Liquidity Coverage Ratio (LCR) of the bank is 153 per cent as on December 24, 2021 as against regulatory requirement of 100 per cent," the RBI said. Venkatachalam and IANS had queries about the safety of depositors monies. AGENCIES

BRICS Bank to admit Egypt as new member



BEIJING: The BRICS New Development Bank (NDB) on Wednesday announced that it will add Egypt as its new member. Egypt is the fourth new member admitted into NDB, after Bangladesh, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Uruguay, further expanding the bank's global outreach.

"We are delighted to welcome Egypt into NDB's family. We look forward to supporting its investment needs in infrastructure and sustainable development," said Marcos Troyko, President of the NDB. The NDB will provide Egypt with a new platform to foster cooperation with BRICS countries on infrastructure and sustainable development, as well as with other emerging economies and developing countries. AGENCIES

FY22's fiscal deficit expected to come in at 6.6 pc of GDP: Ind-Ra

NEWDELHI: Higher tax and non-tax revenue collections this fiscal are expected to more than offset the shortfall in disinvestment revenue, leading to the fiscal deficit coming in at 6.6 per cent of GDP in FY22, or 20 basis points lower than the budgeted target, India Ratings and Research (Ind-Ra) said on Thursday. As per the agency, the data relating to the Union government finances show that tax collections so far have immensely benefitted both from growth and inflation. "While the GDP growth is benefitting due to the lower base of last year, higher inflation (GDP deflator) has led to the economy registering higher nominal GDP growth and thus helping higher tax collections. "The GDP deflator growth in 1QFY22 was highest at 9.7 per cent and second highest at 8.4 per cent in 2QFY22 in the quarterly series of 2011-12 base. As a result, the nominal GDP growth came in 31.7 per cent in 1QFY22 and 17.5 per



cent in 2QFY22." According to the agency's estimates, the gross tax revenue collection in FY22 is expected to be Rs 5.9 trillion higher than the budgeted figure, with the share of corporation tax being 28.4 per cent, income tax 16.3 per cent, GST 14.7 per cent, custom duty 14.2 per cent, excise duty 22.4 per cent and others 3.9 per cent. "As a result, the share of direct tax in the expected additional gross tax revenue collection works out to be 44.7 per cent and that of indirect tax 55.3 per cent. On the whole, the share of direct taxes in the gross tax revenue of FY22 is expected to increase to 48.9 per cent in FY22 from 45.8 per cent in FY21." AGENCIES

FCI to do away with open storage completely by March 2022



MUMBAI: The Food Corporation of India (FCI) on Thursday declared that it would do away with open storage completely and go for only CAP (covered and plinth) storage by March 2022. There have been numerous cases across India where large number of foodgrains have been destroyed after exposing to elements, especially rains, as the food stocks were stored in the open by FCI after procurement. The statutory body said it augmented storage capacity by 69 lakh metric tonnes (LMT) capacity (which includes warehouses of FCI or Central Warehousing Corporation or State Warehousing Corporations or state warehouses) by increasing stack height without incurring capital expenditure. "Moreover, an action plan has been finalised to convert CAP capacity with 105 LMT covered and scientific storage in consultation with state governments of Punjab, Haryana and Mad-

hya Pradesh. Work for it has started," FCI CMD Atish Chandra told the media. "Action plan implementation for evacuation of entire stock in CAP by March 2022 and discarding use of open storage from rabi marketing season (RMS) 2021-22 has started," Chandra said. The FCI has also gone in for standardisation of storage infrastructure and third-party assessment of warehouses by Quality Control of India (QCI) to improve storage. Union Food Secretary, Sudhanshu Pandey, said, "In RMS 2021-22, there was an all-time high procurement of wheat of 433.44 LMT, an increase of 11 per cent as compared to 2020. Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir recorded their best-ever procurement." "Overall, 49.19 lakh farmers benefited with an MSP value of more than Rs 85,603 crore," he added. AGENCIES

SJVN to invest Rs 60,000 cr for harnessing 5,097-MW hydropower in AP

MUMBAI: State-owned power producer SJVN Ltd on Wednesday said it will invest Rs 60,000 crore to harness 5,097 megawatts (MW) of hydropower in Arunachal Pradesh. SJVN Chairman and Managing Director Nand Lal Sharma held a meeting on Wednesday with Arunachal Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Chowna Mein in New Delhi to discuss a road map to develop hydroelectric projects, according to a statement. "SJVN Ltd will invest Rs 60,000 crore to harness 5,097 MW of hydropower in Arunachal Pradesh," the company said in the statement. He said that pursuant to the efforts of Union Power Minister R K Singh, the Arunachal Pradesh government has accepted the allotment of five hydroelectric projects having a total capacity of 5,097 MW to SJVN, for which a memorandum of understanding will be signed shortly.

The projects, namely Etalin Hydroelectric Project (HEP) (3,097 MW), Attunli HEP (680 MW), Emini HEP (500 MW), Amulin HEP (420 MW) and Mihumdon HEP (400 MW), are located in the Dibang basin of Arunachal Pradesh. Sharma said he has always advocated the concept of the Integrated River Basin Development Approach, wherein the allocation of hydro projects in one single river basin to one developer will enable optimum utilisation of manpower, infrastructure and financial resources. He expressed satisfaction that this novel concept has been accepted by the Government of Arunachal Pradesh in the allocation of these projects. **AGENCIES**

Defer GST rate hike on textiles, footwear: CAIT to FM



MUMBAI: The Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT) has urged Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman to defer the implementation of GST rate hike on textiles and footwear. The proposal is to increase the rate of tax from 5 per cent to 12 per cent on textiles and footwear.

In a letter to the minister, CAIT termed the move as 'illogical' and 'beyond the canon of GST tax structure', particularly at a time when the domestic trade in the

country is on the verge of recovery from the colossal damage caused due to the last two spells of Covid-19. "It is noteworthy to mention that the GST collection across the country is increasing every month and as such any increase in tax rates without consulting the stakeholders will run contrary to the 'ease of doing business' call of Prime Minister Narendra Modi," the letter read.

"Therefore, we shall request you to defer the implementation of tax rate hike for

HIGHLIGHT

IT IS NOTEWORTHY TO MENTION THAT THE GST COLLECTION ACROSS THE COUNTRY IS INCREASING EVERY MONTH AND AS SUCH ANY INCREASE IN TAX RATES WITHOUT CONSULTING THE STAKEHOLDERS WILL RUN CONTRARY TO THE 'EASE OF DOING BUSINESS' CALL OF PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI'

certain period and meanwhile constitute a task force under the chairmanship of the Chairman, Central Board of Indirect Taxes, comprising representatives of trade and senior officials of the government to discuss the issue at length and arrive at a consensus," it added. **AGENCIES**

India's real GDP growth in FY22, FY23 to be 9 pc: ICRA

NEW DELHI: Ratings agency ICRA on Tuesday said it expects the Indian economy to maintain a real GDP growth of 9 per cent each in FY22 and FY23, amidst the uncertainty ignited by the fast-spreading Omicron variant of Covid-19. The rating agency highlighted that the available data for Q3FY22 does not offer convincing evidence that the Monetary Policy Committee's (MPC's) criteria of a durable and sustainable growth recovery has been met, to confirm a change in the monetary policy stance to neutral in February 2022. The data for October-November 2021 does not point to a broad-based of the growth recovery in India," ICRA Chief Economist Aditi Nayar said.

"After the higher-than-expected net cash outgo sought under the second supplementary demand for grants, the pace of actual Government spending is likely to determine whether the pace of GDP growth meaningfully exceeds 6-6.5 per cent in Q3FY22." The agency also said that similar to the trend in Q2FY22, the volumes of seven



of the 13 high frequency indicators rose above their pre-Covid levels in October-November 2021, including GST e-way bills generation, non-oil exports, rail freight traffic, Coal India output, electricity generation, petrol consumption and ports cargo traffic.

However, the volumes of six of the 13 high frequency indicators contracted in October-November 2021 relative to October-November 2019, in line with the trend in Q2FY22, suggesting that the recovery is yet to broad-base. As per the agency, the subset trailing their pre-Covid performance in October-November 2021, includes scooter production, domestic airline passenger traffic, vehicle registration, diesel consumption, passenger vehicle production and motorcycle production. **AGENCIES**

Traders body opposes odd-even scheme for Delhi markets

NEW DELHI: Traders' body CAIT on Wednesday wrote to Delhi Lieutenant Governor Anil Bajjal, terming the 'odd-even' scheme for shops impractical and called for markets in the national capital be divided into various zones to open at different timings for smooth conduct of trade. In its letter to Bajjal on the Covid restrictions in Delhi, the Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT) claimed that the "restrictions announced so far have been announced in haste without having a discussion with traders and other stakeholders of Delhi".

Contending that traders of Delhi have suffered huge losses in last two years and are running into great financial crunch, CAIT argued that smooth conduct of trade may be kept in mind while deciding restrictions. "In particular we would

CAIT argues that smooth conduct of trade may be kept in mind while deciding restrictions

like to mention that the 'Odd-Even' scheme is not practical and extremely irrelevant. In fact it only causes extreme inconvenience to the public at large," the traders' body observed. With regard to the Odd-Even scheme, it argued that if consumers want to purchase two different products and those goods are dealt with by shopkeepers having odd and even numbers, the consumers will have to visit the market on both days. "Instead of curbing the movement of the people, it only causes people to move out more frequently," CAIT stated. **AGENCIES**

Over 4.67 crore ITRs filed on new e-filing portal: Centre

NEW DELHI: Over 4.67 crore Income Tax Returns (ITRs) have been filed on the new e-filing portal of the IT Department as on December 27, the Ministry of Finance said on Tuesday. According to the ministry, more than 15.49 lakh ITRs were filed on December 27 and "this number is likely to increase further as the due date of 31st December, 2021 is approaching".

"Out of 4.67 crore ITRs filed for AY 2021-22, 53.6 per cent of these are ITR1 (2.5 crore), 8.9 per cent are ITR2 (41.7 lakh), 10.75 per cent is ITR3 (50.25 lakh),



25 per cent are ITR4 (1.17 crore), ITR5 (5.18 lakh), ITR6 (2.15 lakh) and ITR7 (0.43 lakh)," the ministry said in a statement. "Over

48.19 per cent of these ITRs have been filed using the online ITR form on the portal and the balance have been uploaded using the ITR cre-

ated from the offline software utilities." As per the statement, over 3.91 crore returns have been verified, out of which more than 3.35 crore are through Aadhaar-based OTP.

"In the last three days itself, 27.7 lakh Aadhaar OTP requests have been generated on new e-filing portal. Taxpayers are advised to complete e-verification at the earliest in pending cases." "Of the e-verified ITRs, more than 2.88 crore ITRs have been processed and over 1.07 crore refunds for AY 2021-22 have been issued." **AGENCIES**

India's fisheries sector records 10.87 pc growth



NEW DELHI: The country's fisheries sector, which has seen double-digit average annual growth of 10.87 per cent since 2014-15, has recorded fish production of 142 lakh tons in FY 2019-20, which has become a new record, an official said. This record has given a strong signal that the sector has immense potential for growth, the official said. "Moreover, it has been instrumental in sustaining the livelihoods of over 28 million people in India especially for marginalised and vulnerable communities and has contributed towards encourage socio-economic development," the official added.

India is the second largest fish producing country in the world accounting for 7.56 per cent of global production and contributing about

Fisheries and aquaculture continue to be an important source of food, nutrition, income, and livelihood for millions of people

1.24 per cent to the country's Gross Value Added (GVA) and over 7.28 per cent to the agricultural GVA. Fisheries and aquaculture continue to be an important source of food, nutrition, income, and livelihood for millions of people. Export earnings from the fisheries sector has been Rs 46,662.85 crore during 2019-20 with the sector providing livelihood support to about 280 lakh people at the primary level and almost twice the number along the value chain. **AGENCIES**

T'gana urges Centre to reconsider GST hike on textiles, handlooms

HYDERABAD: The Telangana government has demanded the Centre to reconsider the decision of increasing GST on textile and handloom sectors. In a letter to Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, Telangana's Industry Minister K.T. Rama Rao has appealed her not to take this proposal forward in the GST Council meeting which will be chaired by her on Friday. He said the industry and weaver community have staged several protests demanding the Union government to waive off the 5 per cent GST on handloom products and its raw material, instead the Centre is planning to increase it to 12 per cent from January 1, 2022, which will strike a death knell to the industry and lakhs of people will lose their jobs.

The textile and handloom sector provide the second highest employment in our country. This sector is already bearing the brunt of Covid-19 and the Union government has not even provided any relief to the sector. Considering the current scenario, the Centre must extend additional advantages and incentives to the sector, said KTR, as the Minister is



popularly known. He added that the increase in GST will impact about 80-85 per cent of the handloom and textile production. As it is, cost of raw materials, yarn, chemicals, packaging material and transportation have gone up substantially post-Covid. In addition to these costs, the increase in GST will further escalate the production costs by 15 to 20 per cent. "This would adversely impact the de-

mand, which is essential for the survival of the industry. Due to this there is danger of many textiles and apparels units closing down. There is every possibility of 15 lakh people losing their jobs in the handlooms sector due to the increase in GST, the Minister said.

"This will put an additional burden on the middle-income groups, which usually buy garments with a budget of Rs 1000," he added. KTR said the

Central government, which had failed in fulfilling the promise of providing two crore jobs every year, must withdraw the decision to increase the GST as it would impact the employment of crores of people in the handlooms and textiles sector. Considering the Covid-19 infection, the Centre must extend all support to handlooms and textiles sector. But on the contrary, it was serving a death knell on the sector through a hike in GST which is highly condemnable, he added.

Due to the Central government's policies, the country was registering marginal growth in the sector compared to smaller countries like Bangladesh. All this despite there being tremendous scope for growth in the sector and the decision to increase GST will affect getting international investments, KTR said. The Minister added that the farmers have already taken to the streets and forced a rollback of ill-conceived farm laws. He urged the Centre to immediately withdraw the decision to increase GST on textiles and handlooms otherwise weavers of this country will repeat what their farmer brethren have done. **AGENCIES**

ICAI to oppose proposal to introduce three non-CA members in disciplinary committee

GUWAHATI: The Institute of Chartered Accountants of India has said it will oppose the Centre's proposal to introduce three non-CA members into ICAI's disciplinary committee, arguing that the move will impact fair judgement. The government, through the Chartered Accountants, Cost and Works Accountants and the Company Secretaries (Amendment) Bill, 2021, has proposed the inclusion of two CAs and three non-CAs in the ICAI disciplinary committee. At present, the panel comprises two non-CA nominees and three ICAI members. The bill has been sent by Lok Sabha to a Parliamentary standing committee for scrutiny. We oppose the proposal and will present our case before the standing committee when we are invited for hearing, ICAI vice-president Debasish Mitra told PTI on the sidelines of a programme here on Wednesday. **AGENCIES**

Mills shutting down in Bengal over low ceiling price of raw jute



KOLKATA: Several jute mills in West Bengal have begun suspending operations after failing to procure raw jute, the price of which has been capped at Rs 6,500 per quintal by the central government, industry sources said. At least 10 mills have closed down, impacting 15,000-20,000 workers, and more closures are due in the next few months, they

said. Tepon International India Ltd, which manages the Hanuman Jute Mill in Howrah, has issued a notice for temporary suspension of work from Wednesday due to non-availability of raw jute at the ceiling price fixed by the Jute Commissioner. The Centre had recently turned down the request of jute mills to revise the raw jute fair price to Rs 7,200

per quintal in line with the current domestic and international prices. This could lead to a shortfall of supply of environment-friendly packaging bags, as farmers may get discouraged to produce more, one source said.

If raw jute price settles at Rs 6,500 per quintal farmers' price realisation will suffer and discourage higher production, he said. The jute regulator, however, believes there is ample raw jute in the market, but under the control of hoarders, and fixing a ceiling price will help supplies to mills. Earlier, Indian Jute Mills Association (IJMA) representatives had met Union Textile Minister Piyush Goyal and urged him to consider relaxing the ceiling price. **AGENCIES**

IIT Roorkee ranks 5th in Atal Ranking of Institutions on Innovation Achievements

NEW DELHI: Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Roorkee has been ranked fifth in the Atal Ranking of Institutions on Innovation Achievements (ARIIA) by the Ministry of Education, improving four places from its last year's rank. Minister of State for Education Subhas Sarkar announced the results on Wednesday.

As many as 1,438 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) including all IITs, NITs, and IISc, among others, participated in the third edition of ARIIA rankings as compared to 674 HEIs during last year. Sarkar congratulated the top performers in various ARIIA ranking categories,



emphasising that the institutions should focus on the quality of innovations and research to achieve the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' in the true sense.

Associate Dean of Innovation and Incubation, IIT Roorkee, Rajat Agrawal, said: "This improvement shows that IIT Roorkee is moving in the right direc-

tion for making the Institute an innovation savvy campus. 18 startups were established during the evaluation period. The filing of patents increased by 50 per cent and four technologies were commercialised during the same period."

"The filing of IP by startups in the incubation facility of the institute also increased by 100 per cent. These improvements in different aspects of Innovation and Entrepreneurship helped IIT Roorkee improve four positions in this year's ranking," he added. ARIIA endeavours to systematically rank education institutions and universities primarily on innovation-related indicators. **AGENCIES**

Weak rural demand dents several large-cap stocks in 2021

BEIJING: Even as Indian equity markets gave handsome returns in 2021, many large-cap companies have failed to display healthy performances. Market participants believe large-cap stocks are safe as they have low risks associated with them and they usually give steady returns in the long-run. Some of the stocks in that category are ITC, Hero MotoCorp, Bajaj Auto, HUL and Maruti Suzuki.

Accordingly, disruptions in economic activities, particularly in rural pockets, during the pandemic have hurt the prospects of their businesses as a high percentage of demand for these companies is generated from rural India. "Overall economy recovered well in 2021, while few sectors witnessed turbulence post the second



Covid wave, which severely impacted the rural economy," said Mitul Shah Head of Research - Institutional

Desk at Reliance Securities. "This led to lower rural consumption during 2021 and companies with rural centric

products like HUL, Hero MotoCorp, M&M, Maruti etc witnessed impact on profitability. This caused their

underperformance." According to Anup Gupta of IIFL Securities: "There were both demand and supply side disruptions in the economy."

"Auto and consumer goods sales declined due to rising costs for metals and other raw materials." A rise in edible oil prices also dented consumer goods' markets, Gupta said. Edible oil, particularly palm oil, is widely used in manufacturing consumer goods. In 2021, Hero Motocorp shares declined 22 per cent, Bajaj Auto slumped eight per cent, HUL over two per cent, and Maruti Suzuki over five per cent, while ITC stocks gained just one per cent, exchange data showed. Notably, in the same period the benchmark domestic indices - Sensex and Nifty rose over 20 per cent. **AGENCIES**



PARINEETI:

2021 has bolstered my belief in picking subjects that are ahead of the curve

Actress Parineeti Chopra credits 2021 for bolstering her belief in picking subjects that are ahead of the curve as she showcased her acting prowess through films like 'Sandeep Aur Pinky Faraar', 'The Girl On The Train' and 'Saina'. She said: "It's a year filled with gratitude for me. 2021 was the year I had been waiting for, having taken the biggest plunge of my career in the form of 'Sandeep Aur Pinky Faraar', 'The Girl on the Train' and 'Saina' and thankfully, each one of them paid off." Parineeti added: "2021 made me realise that audiences expect me to be clutter-breaking and I couldn't agree with them more; I am more thankful to them for showering me with all the love for my performances." "It's been a year that has bolstered my belief in picking subjects that are remarkably ahead of the curve and present me in the most unique way on screen. Parineeti feels blessed that the makers, producers and her fans didn't give up on her, and pushed her to do her best work. Parineeti will be seen next in films like 'Uunchai' with Amitabh Bachchan, and 'Animal' opposite Ranbir Kapoor. AGENCIES

I am more thankful to them for showering me with all the love for my performances



POTPOURRI

Vaani Kapoor: Being a part of 'SHAMSHERA' was nothing short of a dream team

Actress Vaani Kapoor is happy how 2021 shaped up for her and is now looking forward to the New Year as her next movie 'Shamshera' is set to hit the screens. She says being part of the upcoming film was no shot of a dream team. Talking about 2021, Vaani said: "It's been a wonderful year for me as an artist. Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui gave me the love and appreciation of audience which has just elated my heart. And what a great high to finish 2021 on." "I am truly looking forward to my journey ahead in this world of cinema that I now call home." Vaani will be seen next opposite Ranbir Kapoor in YRF's 'Shamshera' that is set to release on March 18, 2022. She said: "With 'Shamshera' set to release, I am very excited to bring another side of my acting forward for the audiences. Being a part of 'Shamshera' was no short of a dream team too. Working with a director like Karan Malhotra was just so great as an actor, I learnt so much from him. Vaani also heaped praise on her co-star Ranbir Kapoor. "Ranbir Kapoor my co-star, it was just beautiful working with an actor of his calibre. Working with YRF after a couple of movies also makes it even more special." AGENCIES

Justin, Hailey Bieber say they're 'ready for parenthood'

LOS ANGELES: Pop singer Justin Bieber and super-model Hailey Bieber think it's their "destiny" to have kids together. A source told Us Weekly: "Babies are definitely on the brain." Bieber, who previously dated fellow pop star Selena Gomez, and Baldwin are both keen to start a family, and they are "definitely ready" for the challenge of parenthood, reports femalefirst.co.uk. The insider explained: "They both feel like it's their destiny to have kids together and they are definitely ready." The 'Sorry' hitmaker has



earlier spoken about his ambition to become a dad one day. Bieber admitted earlier this year that he hoped to "squish out a nugget" before the end of 2021. Bieber said: "My intention for 2021 is to continue to set goals and have fun while doing them. Make sure I put my family first and hopefully we squish out a nugget." Bieber subsequently said that he wanted to "start trying" at the end of 2021. And in response, his wife said: "We shall see." Baldwin has also spoken of her ambition to have kids with Bieber. However, in an interview in 2018, the model insisted that they weren't in a rush to start a family. She explained at the time: "I love kids and I can't wait to have my own, I would say that now, that's a closer reality, but definitely not anytime soon." AGENCIES

UK plans Omicron 'surge hubs' in hospitals as cases remain high



TEMPORARY STRUCTURES CAPABLE OF HOUSING AROUND 100 PATIENTS WILL BE ERRECTED IN THE GROUNDS OF EIGHT HOSPITALS ACROSS THE COUNTRY, SAYS NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

LONDON: Britain's health service on Thursday announced to set up a number of new so-called "surge hubs" named after English nursing pioneer Florence Nightingale around England as part of "war footing" plans to tackle a potential wave of Omicron variant related COVID-19 hospital admissions. The National Health Service (NHS) said temporary structures capable of housing around 100 patients will be erected in the grounds of eight hospitals across the country, with work starting this week. These Nightingale surge hubs are aimed at improving NHS resilience if the ongoing record number of COVID-19 infections coincides with a surge in hospital admissions. Hospitalisations have so far remained at relatively manageable levels even as daily COVID-19 infections driven by the Omicron variant hit 183,037 on Wednesday as delayed figures from the holiday period were added on. "Given the high level of COVID-19 infections and increasing hospital admissions, the NHS is now on a war footing," said NHS national medical director Professor Stephen Powis. "We do not yet know exactly how many of those who catch the virus will need hospital treatment, but given the number of infections we cannot wait to find out before we act and so work is beginning from today to ensure these facilities are in place," he said, urging the public to play their part by getting their booster vaccine doses. "The science is clear. Two doses of vaccine do not provide enough protection against Omicron so if you have not yet had a life-saving booster do not delay any longer," he added. AGENCIES

'My family is everything to me': Quinton de Kock hangs his boots from Test cricket

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa wicketkeeper-batter Quinton de Kock on Thursday bid adieu to Test cricket with immediate effect, citing his intentions to spend more time with his growing family. The sudden decision comes after the Proteas' first Test match against India in Centurion, where the visitors won by 113 runs and took a 1-0 lead in the three-match series. The 29-year old De Kock made his Proteas Test debut against Australia in 2014. In 54 matches, he amassed 3 300 runs with a high score of 141 not-out, at an average of 38.82 and strike rate of 70.93. He also has six centuries and 22 half-centuries under his belt. "De Kock has cited his intentions to spend more time with his growing family for the timing and reason for his relatively early retirement from the format. He and his wife, Sasha, are anticipating the imminent birth of their first-born child in the coming days," the Cricket South Africa (CSA) said in a statement. The former Test captain's talent as a wicketkeeper set him apart on the world stage, with 232 dismissals, including 221 catches and 11 stumpings. De Kock has also taken the third-most catches in the inaugural ICC World Test Championship - 48 in 11 matches (47 catches and 1 stumping) and has a personal best of six dis-



missals in an innings, against England in Centurion in 2019. "This is not a decision that I have come to very easily. I have taken a lot of time to think about what my future looks like and what needs to take priority in my life now that Sasha and I are about to welcome our first child into this world and look to grow our family beyond that. My family is everything to me and I want to have the time and space to be able to be with them during this new and exciting chapter of our lives," the CSA statement quoted De Kock as saying. "I love Test cricket and I love representing my country and all that it comes with. I've enjoyed the ups and the downs, the celebrations and even the disappointments, but now I've found something that I love even more. In life, you can buy almost everything except for time, and right now, it's time to do right by the people that mean the most to me." AGENCIES

China bans tattoos in national football team

NEW DELHI: Chinese footballers will need to undergo the painful process of having tattoos removed or risk being snubbed by the national team following a new order banning the body work, Daily Mail reported. The General Administration of Sport (GAS) has gone a step further than it did in 2018 when players were forced to cover up tattoos to continue playing. In their latest move, GAS has outlawed tattoos altogether and wants any player with pre-existing tattoos to get them removed in order to 'set a good example' for the Chinese society, the report said. "The national team and the U-23 national team athletes are strictly prohibited from having new tattoos, and those who already have tattoos are advised to remove them themselves," the GAS statement said. "If there are special cir-



cumstances agreed by the team, (players) must cover up the tattoos during training and matches," it added. China has previously waded into the appearance of its players with a women's football match in 2018 called off after players were told that they were prohibited from playing with dyed hair, the report said. Tattoos have been treated with disdain in China but their popularity has increased among young adults, including many footballers. Zhang Linpeng of Guangzhou FC is one such player known throughout Chinese football for his extensive ink work. But new rules look set to prove problematic for younger players with any fresh tattoos likely to result in expulsion from the national team, the report said. AGENCIES

US CDC warns against cruise travel as Omicron drives up Covid-19 cases



WASHINGTON: The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has called on people to avoid cruise travel, regardless of vaccination status, as more Covid-19 cases driven by the Omicron variant have been identified on cruise vessels. "The Covid-19 Travel Health Notice level has been updated from Level 3 to Level 4, the highest level. This reflects increase in cases onboard cruise ships since identification of the Omicron variant," said the CDC. Even fully vaccinated travelers may be at risk for getting and spreading Covid-19 variants, the agency added. "The virus that causes Covid-19 spreads easily between people in close quarters on board ships, and the chance of getting Covid-19 on cruise ships is very high, even if you are fully vaccinated and have received a Covid-19 vaccine booster dose," said the CDC. It is especially important that travelers who are at an increased risk of severe illness from Covid-19 avoid travel on cruise ships, including river cruises worldwide, regardless of vaccination status, the agency added. A total of 88 vessels are under CDC's investigation or observation for Covid-19 outbreaks. Four other vessels are also being monitored by the CDC, according to data released on the agency's website on Wednesday, Xinhua news agency reported. AGENCIES

Cambodia vows to strengthen ASEAN's centrality for security

PHNOM PENH: Cambodia, the incoming chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for 2022, vowed to strengthen the bloc's centrality in order to maintain and uphold security, peace and prosperity, Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn said. Speaking during a briefing here, Sokhonn said the country will reinforce multilateralism and multilateral processes through ASEAN-led mechanisms and concerted actions that will remain open, transparent, inclusive and rules-based, reports Xinhua news agency. He said the kingdom will also foster mutual trust, respect, interest, and understanding in accordance with the principles and objectives laid out in the UN Charter, ASEAN Charter, and Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, among others. "ASEAN Centrality will be further strengthened in the face of rising anti-globalization sentiments, unilateralism and protectionism, while promoting the ASEAN Way, unity in diversity, caring and sharing community, and the culture of peace," he said. Sokhonn, who is also a Deputy Prime Minister, said Cambodia will promote ASEAN's spirit as a united family.



He added that the kingdom will also do its best to reenergize and expand bloc's partnerships with external partners in order to maintain regional peace and stability, and to enhance the ASEAN community building efforts. Commerce Minister Pan Sorasak said Cambodia will endeavour to steer ASEAN's collective efforts to promote an action-oriented approach that is based on openness, honesty, good faith, solidarity, and harmony within the bloc, so as to effectively address the common challenges facing the region. "Also, a foreseeable priority for us is to ensure more satisfactory outcomes of ASEAN efforts to emerge stronger from the Covid-19 pandemic. "In this regard, Cambodia commits to working closely with ASEAN and develop-

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