

THE ASIAN AGE

NEW DELHI SUNDAY 1 MARCH 2020



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Actresses walk out of 'French Oscars' after Polanski wins top awards



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Idiosyncrasies are part and parcel of celebrity status



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WINDOWS



South Korean ambassador Shin Bongkil along with his wife pays obeisance at the Golden Temple in Amritsar on Saturday. — PTI

'Will fight sedition case against Kanhaiya legally'

New Delhi: The CPI on Saturday said it will fight both "legally and political" the sedition case against its leader Kanhaiya Kumar and alleged that the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government in the national capital had "succumbed to political pressure". The Delhi government on Friday gave a go-ahead to the police to prosecute former JNUSU president Kumar and nine others in connection with a sedition case. **More on Page 13**

UK official at centre of Priti row quits

London: The top civil servant in the UK Home Office at the centre of a row over a strained relationship with Indian-origin home secretary Priti Patel resigned from his post on Saturday and said he plans to sue the government over his "constructive and unfair" exit. **More on Page 10**

Visa of German IIT student cancelled

Chennai: The Union government has reportedly cancelled the visa of Jakob Lindenthal, a German exchange student from Indian Institute of Technology-Madras, who was sent back in December over his anti-CAA stand. **More on Page 3**

COUNTERPOINT



I prefer Rajya Sabha... we need to buy just a few MLAs, not lakhs of voters!

WEATHER

Max: 27°C
Min: 16°C
RH: 88%
Rain: 2mm

Forecast: Cloudy sky

ASTROGUIDE

Vikari: Uttarayanam
Tithi: Phalguna Bahula Shashthi til 11.16 am
Star: Bharani: till 6.40 am
Varjyam: 7.48 pm to 91.33 pm
Durmuhurtam: 4.46 pm to 5.32 pm
Rahukalam: 4.30 pm to 6 pm
SUNSET TODAY 6.20 PM
SUNRISE TOMORROW 6.46 AM
MOONRISE TOMORROW 10.35 PM
MOONSET TODAY 11.17 AM

Protests over CAA, ILP; Net suspended Curfew in Shillong after 2 killed in clash

MANOJ ANAND with agency inputs GUWAHATI, FEB. 29

Curfew was imposed in trouble-torn areas of Shillong and mobile Internet services were suspended on Saturday following a violent clash between members of Khasi Students Union (KSU), an influential tribal students body, and non-tribals in the Ichamati area of East Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya leading to two deaths. The violence followed a meeting against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and implementation of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) regime in the state. Ichamati, which is close to the border with Bangladesh, has a majority non-tribal population. "The administration

VIOLENCE FOLLOWED a meeting against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and implementation of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) regime in the state

decided to impose curfew in trouble-torn areas after reports of clashes and two vehicles being torched by some miscreants. We also arrested eight persons from Ichamati who were directly involved in the violence which killed one person and injured several others. They are named in the FIR," said Claudia A. Lyngwa, the superintendent of police, East Khasi Hills district. He claimed that the situation was tense but under control. Police said that the violence began after a meeting organised by KSU in Ichamati. "At about 3

pm, after the meeting, clashes broke out between KSU members and local non-tribals of the area. Thereafter, KSU members burnt a haystack at the edge of the market and attempted to burn a house. Non-tribals retaliated and stoned a bus carrying KSU members," the police said in a statement.

Several KSU members and policemen were injured in the clash. Vehicles were also vandalised by the mob. It is still unclear what prompted the group to attack those present in the meeting. Most of Meghalaya is covered under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution and hence it is out of the purview of the CAA. Yet, amid local pressure, the state Assembly had passed a **Turn to Page 4**

DELHI RIOTS Death toll 43, over 250 hurt

Delhi police failed, act against lapses: Tiwari

Received many distress calls: MP

SHASHI BHUSHAN NEW DELHI, FEB. 29

While the BJP high command and party spokespersons have either remained silent or subtly endorsed the role of Delhi Police in handling the riots that erupted in northeast Delhi on February 25, Delhi BJP chief Manoj Tiwari on Saturday fired the first salvo, saying "police failed to assess the situation" and demanded "action for the lapses." Mr Tiwari, a member of Parliament from northeast Delhi, is the first saffron leader to back the claims of many riot victims and echoed the wails that went unheeded despite repeated phone calls to the police control room and even directly to senior cops. Coming down hard on Delhi Police, whose commissioner of police Amulya Patnaik didn't visit the riot-hit areas even once, said, "Aaklan lagane mein chuk ho gayi. Unhone (police) socha hoga ki jaise Shaheen Bagh me chal raha hai waise hi yaha bhi log shanti se baithenge (Police failed to anticipate



Tiwari

'Goli Maro' slogan raised inside Rajiv Chowk station

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 29

The venom of hate mongering which was spilled during the Delhi poll campaigning continues to spread in the national capital. Only the slogans have become more chilling, dangerous, and they have come closer. Inside Rajiv Chowk Metro station on Saturday, some opposing and targeting those protesting against the Citizenship Amendment Act began shouting, "Desh ke

gaddaar ko, goli maro saron ko (Kill all the traitors). During Delhi polls, Union minister Anurag Thakur and his men had raised the slogan, "Goli maro saalo ko." "Saalo ko" has now been changed to "saron (all) ko."

Six men, wearing saffron T-shirts and kurta, started the sloganeering when a train was about to halt at the Metro station on Saturday. After disembarking the train, they continued chanting pro-CAA and provocative slogans **Turn to Page 4**

Thousands attend funeral



Locals and relatives of Aamir, who died in communal violence of Northeast Delhi, carry his mortal remains during a funeral procession in Old Mustafabad on Saturday. — PTI

are sitting peacefully in Shaheen Bagh, protester like anti-CAA protestors **Turn to Page 4**

Covid: S. Korea reports more than 800 new cases

Seoul, Feb. 29: South Korea reported its biggest surge in new coronavirus cases on Saturday as concerns grew of a possible epidemic in the US and the World Health Organisation raised its risk alert to its highest level. South Korea has reported more than 800 new coronavirus cases, bringing the country's total infections to 3,150, the Korea Centers for Disease Control and

US: 3 new cases unrelated to travel

In the US, officials are worried that coronavirus is spreading through communities on the west coast, after three patients — one in Oregon, one in California and one in Washington — were infected. However, None had recently travelled overseas. **More on Page 11**

Prevention (KCDC) said on Saturday. The country first said there were 594 new cases but later reported that an additional 219 new cases had been confirmed. Together they logged a record daily increase in infections since South Korea confirmed its first patient on 20 January. The virus has rapidly spread across the world in the past week, causing stock markets to sink. — AFP **More on Page 11**

US, Taliban sign historic peace deal to end war

Agreement lays out timetable for US troop withdrawal from Afghan

Doha, Feb. 29: The United States signed a landmark deal with the Taliban on Saturday, laying out a timetable for a full troop withdrawal from Afghanistan within 14 months as it seeks an exit from its longest-ever war.

The agreement is expected to lead to a dialogue between the Taliban and the Kabul government that, if successful, could ultimately see an end to the grinding 18-year conflict.

Taliban fighter-turned-dealmaker Mullah Baradar signed the accord alongside Washington's chief negotiator Zalmay Khalilzad, at a gilded desk in a conference room in a luxury Doha hotel. The pair then shook hands, as people in the room shouted "Allah-u-Akbar" (God is greatest).

US secretary of state Mike Pompeo looked on as the two inked the deal, after urging the insurgents to "keep your promises to cut ties with Al Qaeda". Under the agreement, the militants agreed not to allow Al Qaeda or any other extremist group to operate in the areas they control.

"On the eve of signing the "comprehensive peace agreement", President Donald Trump urged the Afghan people to embrace the chance for a new future.

The US was "working to finally end America's longest war and bring our troops back home", he said, and added, "If the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan live up to these commitments, we will have a powerful path forward to end the war in



US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad (left) and Taliban co-founder Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar sign a peace agreement during a ceremony in Doha on Saturday. — AFP

WHAT'S THE AGREEMENT?

- Within the first 135 days of the deal, US will reduce its forces in Afghanistan to 8,600, with allies also drawing down their forces proportionately.
- The US will also lift sanctions against the Taliban and work with the UN to lift its separate sanctions against the group.
- The deal also provides for a prisoner swap. Some 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 Afghan security force prisoners would be exchanged by 10 March, when talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government are due to start.

Afghanistan and bring our troops home."

But the position of the Afghan government, which has been excluded from direct United States-Taliban talks, remains unclear and the country is gripped by a fresh political crisis amid contested election results. The signing comes after a week-long, partial truce that has mostly held across Afghanistan, aimed at building confidence between the warring parties and showing the

Taliban can control their forces. The United States and its Nato allies will withdraw all their forces from Afghanistan within 14 months if the Taliban abide by the terms of the accord. After an initial reduction of troops to 8,600 within 135 days of Saturday's signing, the US and its partners "will complete withdrawal of all remaining forces from Afghanistan" within 14 months. — Agencies **More on Page 3**

India backs step to bring stability, peace

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 29

India on Friday said it backs all opportunities that can bring stability in Afghanistan and end violence in the region.

MEA affairs spokesperson Raveesh Kumar said: "India's consistent policy is to support all opportunities that can bring peace, security and stability in Afghanistan; end violence; cut ties with international terrorism; and lead to a lasting political settlement through an Afghan led, Afghan owned and Afghan controlled process. India will continue to extend all support to the government and of Afghanistan."

Tax raids on Baghel aides now Centre vs state issue

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY BHOPAL, FEB. 29

Chhattisgarh chief minister Bhupesh Baghel on Saturday turned the tax raids on his close aides, including his deputy secretary Soumya Chourasia, into a Centre vs state issue.

Taking strong exception to the manner in which the raids were conducted on some party leaders and bureaucrats in the state without prior information, chief minister Baghel cancelled his Cabinet, which was scheduled for Saturday afternoon in state capital Raipur, to visit national capital Delhi to brief the Congress high command on the development.

But, his flight had to force land in Jaipur due to bad weather. Chief minister Baghel returned to Raipur late in Saturday evening, without meeting Congress leaders, as he has to receive President Ram Nath Kovind in Raipur on Sunday.

"The chief minister suspended his journey to Delhi and is returning to Raipur from Jaipur late in the evening," Chhattisgarh Congress media chief S.N. Trivedy told this newspaper. **More on Page 3**

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SHORT TAKES

Dhankhar seeks info on funds

Kolkata: West Bengal Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar has demanded information from the state government on alleged misuse of public funds on an advertisement campaign against the CAA and the authorities who sanctioned it, official sources said on Saturday.

Man arrested for making hoax call

New Delhi: A 19-year-old man was arrested on Saturday for allegedly making a hoax call regarding a communal clash in south Delhi's Neb Sarai area, the police said.

Matter of serious concern: Amartya

Bolpur, West Bengal: Nobel laureate Amartya Sen said on Saturday that India is a secular country and people cannot be divided on religious lines.

2 BJP MPs detained in KOLKATA

Kolkata: BJP MPs Soumitra Khan and Subhas Sarkar were detained by the police for some time when they went to visit a party member, who had allegedly faced atrocities by Trinamul Congress workers, at Thakurpukur in the city on Saturday.

Wails break eerie silence in riot-hit capital

VINEETA PANDEY NEW DELHI, FEB. 29

The eerie silence that had been prevailing in the violence-hit Old Mustafabad was shattered by the cries and wails as bodies of the riot victims, released by the authorities started arriving Saturday morning.



People carry a tricolour during a peace march to protest against communal violence in northeast Delhi on Saturday. — BIPLAB BANERJEE

The entire locality was out on the road to mourn the death of these two boys even as others are keeping fingers crossed for their 'missing'. Both men and women have bore the brunt of the violence that continued even after National Security Advisor Ajit Doval toured the riot hit area twice.

"He (Doval) had said nothing will happen, but that same night petrol bombs were hurled at our homes, bullets were fired and acids were thrown," said Asif. Nadeem said more than 400 calls were made to PCR for help in one hour but cops refused to come.

"You wanted Azadi, now take Azadi" was how they responded when we called them (police)," said Nadeem. His neighbour Ram Singh (name changed) arranged safe passage for more than 200 Muslims trapped in violence.

"They were outsiders but there were many local boys too who were involved in arson, loot and violence. I could never think that our own boys will kill people here,"

broke down Ram Singh while narrating the horrific three days that changed their life. He accused the "right-wing" groups of this.

He explained Shiv Vihar area has about 80,000 people out of which 4,000 are Muslims. Gali No 7 of Shiv Vihar, which has taken the maximum brunt, is an interesting mix of Hindu and Muslims who have lived in harmony for years, Ram Singh claimed.

With their belonging completely charred, children are worried about their future. "Modiji says beti bachao, beti padhao. How do we study now? Our admit cards are burnt. We have no certificates, no proof, no notes, no copies, no books," said Fatima, a Class 10 student.

Women are much more traumatised and claimed there were acid attacks and gangrapes too. "One girl was gang-raped and is missing," claimed Nazma (name changed) as she showed a photograph of a girl recuperating from an acid attack in nearby government hospital.

Independent verification of such claims is impossible at this point of time as men and women are huddled in various corners. People are desperate to return to their homes but are not allowed by Rapid Action Force and police at this point of time.

spread criticism of the CAA and its consequences in the recently concluded Delhi assembly polls, the amendment Act will feature prominently in BJP's campaign in West Bengal, where assembly polls are lined up early next year.

Amid speculations that the BJP's West Bengal unit is divided over the CAA, the BJP leadership — party president J.P. Nadda and Mr Shah — will also be meeting party leaders, including state unit office bearers, asking them not to express divergent views and "confuse the cadre."

He will also release a chargesheet — drafted by the BJP — against the state government, "clearly listing out the injustices done by the government against the people of West Bengal."

This will be Mr Shah's first visit to the state after the CAA was implemented across the country. The BJP's proposed campaign however comes close on the heels of the "Didi Ke Bolo" campaign, a brainchild of Prashant Kishor, for the Trinamul following the ruling party's poor performance in the Lok Sabha election last year.

According to the state BJP, the initiative will highlight and protest against the "injustice" to the people by the Trinamul government. "Through this campaign we plan to directly connect with more than 5 crore voters in West Bengal over the next six months. This campaign will provide the people of West Bengal a platform to express their anger with the Mamata Banerjee led TMC government and hold it accountable for its misrule.

During the campaign the BJP workers will conduct a massive door-to-door campaign across the state and organise meetings in every village and ward to discuss the chargesheet with the people directly," the party said.

Congress hits out at 'biased' police

New Delhi: The Congress on Saturday accused the Delhi police of carrying out a "one-sided" investigation into the violence in the national capital and urged the Supreme Court to appoint an amicus curiae to scrutinise all such cases in which protesters and activists were being slapped with serious charges.

Senior leader and party spokesperson Anand Sharma also said the situation is far from normal and an atmosphere of fear is still prevailing in the national capital. Sharma alleged that the police "which allowed Delhi to burn for four days" is carrying out a "one-sided" investigation. He said in the name of action it should be seen against whom the action is being taken.

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Kapil Delhi BJP's face of Hindutva?

SHASHI BHUSHAN NEW DELHI, FEB. 29



Kapil Mishra

Is the controversial BJP leader Kapil Mishra, accused of instigating the Delhi riots, emerging as the Hindutva face of the national capital? Amidst chants of "Jai Shri Ram" and "Bharat Mata ki Jai", Mr Mishra participated in a peace march organised by an RSS-backed NGO, Delhi Peace Forum, at Jantar Mantar on Saturday.

Giving a communal overtone to the march, participants held placards that read, "Delhi against jihadi violence." To drum up support of the majority community, huge posters of the slain constable Ratan Lal, the IB staffer Ankit Sharma and Dinesh Khatik, a Dalit who was killed in the riots, were put up on the stage.

Though he did not deliver any speech and sat in the third row, Mr Mishra appeared to be the main attraction of the TV channels and the participants.

The organisers of the peace march did not seem to be too pleased with Mr Mishra's presence. Some claimed that he was not invited and came on his own. However, Mr Mishra stole the thunder by requesting the people over Twitter to reach Jantar Mantar to participate in the peace march.

His supporters shouted, "Dekho dekho kaun aaya, sher aaya, sher aaya (see who has come, it is the tiger)" as soon Mr Mishra reached Jantar Mantar.

Mr Mishra, a former AAP MLA who contested unsuccessfully from the Model Town Assembly constituency on a BJP ticket, was first seen seated in the front row below the stage but later moved to the third row. He did not address the gathering nor try to go on the stage.

According to sources, after seeing Mr Mishra in the front row the organisers contacted the BJP city unit to request it to ask him to move back. "We

messaged Mr Mishra to move back by a few rows. After our request he was seen sitting in the third row," said a Delhi BJP office-bearer.

Later in the evening, Mr Mishra tweeted a video of the march waving the Tricolour and said, "Look at the crowd today at Jantar Mantar, 'tum kitna bhi jhooth phailao, ye public hai sab janti hai' (No matter how much you lie, the people know everything)."

According to the organisers, the people whose family members were killed or houses and shops were burnt during the riots participated in the peace march.

Mr Suresh Khatik said that his brother Dinesh was shot dead when he went out on February 24 to Shiv Vihar to buy milk for his one-and-a-half-year-old son.

Mr Kamal Sharma said his two restaurants in Bhajapura were burnt by mobs. "Those who used to eat at my restaurants for the last three years set them on fire," he added.

The speakers, who included some retired Army officers, said that the Citizenship Amendment Act was not against any Indian citizen irrespective of their religion. Before the march began, homage was paid to those killed in the riots. Afterwards, those in the march raised slogans against the rioters and demanded their arrest. Thousands of people marched from Jantar Mantar to Connaught Place shouting slogans.

BJP plans to campaign in Bengal on CAA plank

RAJIB CHOWDHURI with bureau inputs KOLKATA, FEB. 29

After "Save Bengal", it is "Aar Noi Annay" (no more injustice). Eyeing the Municipal elections in the run up to the Assembly elections in West Bengal, the BJP is going to launch a fresh and grand campaign with a target to reach out to five crore people in the next six months to strengthen its votebank and corner the ruling Trinamul Congress in its wake of the CAA.

Union home minister Amit Shah, who will arrive Kolkata on Sunday on a day-long tour, will kick-start the "Aar Noi Annay" campaign at the BJP's mega rally at Shaheed Minar Ground in heart of the city in support of the CAA. A "massive rally" on the CAA will be addressed by Mr Shah at Kolkata's Shaheed Maidan on Sunday.

Notwithstanding the wide spread criticism of the CAA and its consequences in the recently concluded Delhi assembly polls, the amendment Act will feature prominently in BJP's campaign in West Bengal, where assembly polls are lined up early next year.

Amid speculations that the BJP's West Bengal unit is divided over the CAA, the BJP leadership — party president J.P. Nadda and Mr Shah — will also be meeting party leaders, including state unit office bearers, asking them not to express divergent views and "confuse the cadre."

He will also release a chargesheet — drafted by the BJP — against the state government, "clearly listing out the injustices done by the government against the people of West Bengal."

Anti-CAA Bengali actress quits BJP

AGE CORRESPONDENT KOLKATA, FEB. 29



Subhadra Mukherjee

Actor-turned-politician Subhadra Mukherjee, who has worked in several movies and telly soaps, quit the BJP on Saturday in protest of the carnage that took 42 lives in Delhi.

Sending her resignation West Bengal BJP president and Midnapore MP Dilip Ghosh she made it clear that she would not continue in a party which has faces like Anurag Thakur and Kapil Mishra who have come under the scanner for their provocative speeches triggering the riot.

Subhadra also offered to tender her resignation in person if her decision would not be accepted by the party.

The actor, who joined the BJP in 2013, said, "The BJP's style of organisation attracted me to the party then. But in recent years, I have noticed that things are not going the right way. I felt that a sense of hatred and judging people by their religion is taking

over the ideology of BJP. After giving several thoughts, I have decided to quit."

Blaming the incidents in the national capital behind her decision to quit, Ms Mukherjee questioned the inaction against BJP leader Kapil Mishra and Union minister Anurag Thakur for the "hate speech."

"Several innocent people were killed in the violence. Innumerable houses were burnt. The riot has created a division among the people. BJP leaders like Thakur and Mishra are still free as they have not faced any action from neither the party nor the police for their hate speech. The riot scenes have shocked

Visa of German student cancelled

AGE CORRESPONDENT CHENNAI, FEB. 29

The Union government has reportedly cancelled the visa of Jakob Lindenthal, a German exchange student from Indian Institute of Technology-Madras, who was sent back to his country in December over his anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) stand.

According to reports, Jakob Lindenthal has been intimidated by the Indian Embassy in Germany about the cancellation of his visa. Lindenthal, a student of the Technical University-

Dresden, joined the physics department of IIT-M in July 2019, and was sent back Germany after he attended an anti-CAA rally carrying a poster that made a reference to Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler. On December 26 last year, criticizing CAA, he went onto say that anti-CAA demonstrations in India showed that political freedom and rule of law needed the support of millions of people. Meanwhile, IIT-M administration has denied any link to the cancellation of the visa by saying it was decided by emigration agencies.

me. I decided to not to continue with a party which can not take a strong decision against its own leaders already

on the dock." Although, the Bengal BJP leader hailed the CAA, she, however, slammed its misuse.

Squabbling in K'taka Cong delays revamp

VINAY MADHAV BENGALURU, FEB. 29

Unable to cope up with internal squabbling, the Congress party has decided to put Karnataka into the list of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, where appointment to prominent posts are still pending.

Meanwhile, to comfort former minister D.K. Shivakumar, who is waiting in the wings to become KPCC president, the party high command dispatched AICC General Secretary Gulam Nabi Azad, who is close to Shivakumar.

made a surprise visit to Shivakumar's residence on Saturday morning, enroute Airport.

Assuring that the party was behind him, he asked Shivakumar to wait for sometime, citing the examples Congress ruled Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, which were also facing similar leadership issues. The party was having five states, including Karnataka in mind, where the leadership issues would be sorted out together.

With that, appointment for KPCC as well as party decision to whether divide Congress Legislature Party leader and Leader of Opposition in Assembly has been put on hold for at least one



D.K. Shivakumar

month, till budget session in Karnataka and Parliament Session in New Delhi is over.

The leadership squabble in Karnataka is an open secret for the last five years. Old loyalists of party have been cribbing since then, as Siddaramaiah supporters are dominating entire party. Added to injury, AICC General Secretary and

Karnataka in-charge K C Venugopal also supported Siddaramaiah group. Venugopal's dislike for Shivakumar is also an open secret as Shivakumar, since his NSUI days is close to Venugopal's arch rival in Kerala Ramesh Chennithala. The Old Congressmen were helpless as Venugopal and Siddaramaiah had blessings of Rahul Gandhi.

Soon after coming out of jail, decks were cleared for Shivakumar to become KPCC President. At the same time, AICC president Rahul Gandhi, who had taken break from active politics returned. Shivakumar's candidature had been cleared by Sonia Gandhi.

PARTICULARS OF OWNERSHIP IN RESPECT OF THE ASIAN AGE FORM IV. Table with 7 rows of publication details and a declaration at the bottom.

SHORT TAKES

Searches unravel hidden cloud servers

Chennai: Searches in the premises of a prominent Chennai based business group has unravelled the presence of hidden cloud servers and unaccounted income exceeding ₹400 crore, the Income Tax department said here on Saturday. The diversified group, said to have reported a turnover of more than ₹1,000 crore, deals in non-ferrous metal processing in lead, copper and aluminium and has business interests in other segments as well like plastic manufacture and financing. "The highlight of the search is the discovery of hidden cloud servers other than the servers regularly used by the group for accounting, containing unaccounted transaction details, often referred by the group as kacha accounts," the Income Tax department said.

I'm being treated like terrorist: Azam

Sitapur, UP: Jailed Samajwadi Party MP Azam Khan on Saturday alleged that very inhuman treatment was meted out to him, "just like a terrorist." "Bahut amanviya bartav hua hai mere saath," Khan who was taken from Sitapur jail to Rampur court on Saturday morning in connection with a hearing told newsmen from a police van. "Just like a terrorist," he shouted as he was being whisked away. Khan's legislator wife Tanzeen Fatima and their son and disqualified MLA Abdullah Azam were also taken to Rampur amidst tight security for a hearing in another case. The three were shifted to Sitapur jail from Rampur on Thursday. A court had sent them to judicial custody till March 2 in a fake birth certificate case after they surrendered before it on Wednesday.

Youth arrested for Rajdhani bomb hoax

New Delhi: A youth, who falsely claimed that there were five bombs in the New Delhi-Dibrugarh Rajdhani Express sending security forces into a tizzy and delaying the train, has been arrested, the railways said on Saturday. A railway spokesperson urged people to not misuse emergency services and social media sites which not only impacts authorities but others too. "The youth who tweeted that there are five bombs in the New Delhi-Dibrugarh Rajdhani Express has been arrested within 18 hours. Kindly do not misuse emergency services and social websites which not only impacts us but others too," a railway spokesperson said in a tweet.

MP MULLING RESERVATIONS FOR MUSLIMS

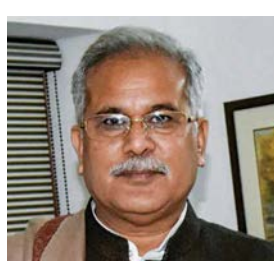
RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY BHOPAL, FEB. 29

Madhya Pradesh water resources minister Hukum Singh Karad Saturday hinted at a move by his government to provide reservation to Muslims in educational institutions in the state. The minister told reporters at Agra-Malwa in Madhya Pradesh, "We are in the process of preparing a detailed agenda for minorities. I cannot say much on it, but I can say that the relaxation we are planning (for minorities) will be much more than what Maharashtra has announced". A ruling Congress leader here disclosed to this newspaper that the state government will soon announce reservation for Muslims in educational institutions in the state. The opposition BJP here however declared that the party will fight tooth and nail any such move by the state government to provide reservation on religious lines. "We will oppose such a move in the Assembly and on the streets. Reservation on religious lines is unconstitutional," said BJP spokesman Rajneesh Agrawal. He said that the ruling Congress had now started showing its true character by resorting to vote bank politics in the form of appeasement of minorities.

Tax raids rattle Baghel govt

CM says move 'political revenge', an attempt to destabilise him

RABINDRA NATH CHOUDHURY BHOPAL, FEB. 29



Bhupesh Baghel

Chhattisgarh chief minister Bhupesh Baghel on Saturday turned the tax raids on his close aides, including his deputy secretary Soumya Chourasia, a Centre vs state issue. Mr Baghel, who rushed to Delhi to 'consult legal experts' and brief the Congress high command on the whole development, took strong exception to how raids were conducted on some party leaders and bureaucrats in the state without prior information. "The IT raids were conducted in Chhattisgarh without informing the state government. This is unethical and against the spirit of federalism," Mr Baghel said reacting to the tax raids.

He further said that an atmosphere of fear has been created in the state following the tax raids at several places in Chhattisgarh, which con-

tinued for the third day on Saturday. He appeared particularly upset with tax authorities for targeting his deputy secretary dubbing it 'political revenge' and an attempt to destabilise his government. "We have never stopped IT raids because the state had prior information about it. However, this time the state government was not taken into confidence by the tax authorities before conducting raids," he added.

The IT sleuths were forced to wait at Ms Chourasia's residence in Bhillai, nearly 30 km from Raipur in Chhattisgarh, for around 50 hours for not being able to find her and later sealed her home on Saturday. The Congress staged a demonstration at the IT office in Raipur to protest the raids. Meanwhile, Mr Baghel cancelled his cabinet meeting, scheduled to be held at Raipur on Saturday afternoon, and rushed to Delhi brief to the Congress high command and get a legal opinion on the issue. However, his flight force landed at Jeypore in Rajasthan owing to bad weather, Chhattisgarh PCC media wing chief S.N. Trivedy told this newspa-

per. "Mr Baghel was scheduled to meet Congress interim president Sonia Gandhi in Delhi at six in the evening on Saturday. But, his flight landed at Jeypore due to inclement weather. His flight will resume its journey to Delhi after being cleared by air traffic control," he added.

In another development, two CBI teams landed in Raipur from Delhi in the wake of reports that the tax raids had unearthed non-political funding. Interestingly, the Chhattisgarh government has earlier announced to bar CBI from entering the state.

The raids were also conducted on houses of senior Congress leader and Raipur mayor Ejaj Dhebar, former chief secretary of the state and chairman of Chhattisgarh unit of Rera Vivek Dhand, kin of IAS officer Anil Tuteja, liquor baron Pappu Bhati and local TV channel promoter Guru Charan Singh Hora.

CPI rallies behind Kanhaiya Kumar, targets BJP & AAP

AGE CORRESPONDENT NEW DELHI, FEB. 29



Kanhaiya Kumar

The CPI on Saturday said it will fight the sedition case against its leader Kanhaiya Kumar both "legally and politically".

The party also alleged that the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government in the capital "succumbed to political pressure."

The Delhi government on Friday gave a go-ahead to the city police to prosecute Kumar, a former JNU student leader, and nine others in connection with a four-year-old sedition case, as the ruling AAP denied the persistent BJP charge of blocking the proceedings in the matter. "The national secretariat of the Communist Party of India (CPI) will fight legally and politically the sedition charges against party national executive member and former president of the JNU Students' Union (JNUSU) Kanhaiya Kumar."

"The party is confident that Kanhaiya Kumar will come out unscathed as the charges are false and politically motivated," the CPI said in a statement. The party feels that it is unfortunate that the Arvind Kejriwal government has "succumbed to political pressure and granted permission to prosecute Kumar", it said.

Taking on the AAP government in Delhi, the CPI statement added, "It may be recalled here that the chief minister (Kejriwal) himself had, in the beginning, said that there is no case of sedition against Kanhaiya and videos were doctored. We are yet to ascertain why this sudden

change of heart has happened."

The party said that it will soon secure a copy of the Delhi government's standing counsel's recommendations which had not given sanction for the prosecution. "The party vehemently opposes the move to implicate Kanhaiya Kumar in a false sedition case and urges all its units and mass organisations to protest peacefully against the prosecution move," the statement added.

Congress leader P. Chidambaram also criticised the AAP government for giving the go-ahead to the police to prosecute Kanhaiya. "Delhi Government is no less ill-informed than the central government in its understanding of sedition law. I strongly disapprove of the sanction granted to prosecute Mr Kanhaiya Kumar and others for alleged offences under sections 124A and 120B of IPC," he tweeted.

PM says serving 130cr is matter of importance for his govt

Ensuring justice my priority: Modi

Allahabad, Feb. 29: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday said ensuring that all citizens get benefit and justice is the government's responsibility and also the base of 'sabka saath, sabka vikas and sabka vishwas'.

"It is the responsibility of the government that every person is benefited and every person gets justice. This is the base of sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwas," he said reciting a Sanskrit shloka at a mega camp for distribution of assistive devices among people with disabilities and senior citizens. Mr Modi said serving 130 crore people of the country is the priority of his government.

Hitting out at previous governments, he said they did not care for the people with disabilities but his dispensation was thinking about their problems and finding ways to reduce their issues.

During previous governments, very few such camps used to be organised, he said. "In the last five years, our government held around 9,000 camps in various parts of the country. In the five years of the previous government, equipment to people with disabilities worth less than ₹380 crore were distributed, while our government gave equipment worth more than ₹900 crore, which is two-and-half times more," he said.

"I am of the view that these equipment will only assist your 'buland hausla' (strong confidence). Your real strength is your patience, capacity (saamarthya) and mind (maanasa)," he said.



Prime Minister Narendra Modi distributes mobility aids to 'divyangs' in Prayagraj on Saturday. UP governor Anandiben Patel and CM Yogi Adityanath are also seen. - PTI

PM lays stone for 296km long e-way

Chitrakoot (UP), Feb. 29: Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday laid the foundation stone of the 296-km-long Bundelkhand Expressway to be built at a cost of ₹15,000 crore and said it will prove to be the development expressway of the region.

The expressway will pass through Uttar Pradesh's Chitrakoot, Banda, Hamirpur and Jalaun districts. It will link the Bundelkhand region, considered to be one of the most backward areas of the country, to national capital Delhi through the Agra-Lucknow Expressway and the Yamuna Expressway.

"The project will put Bundelkhand on the development expressway. It will definitely

change peoples lives in this entire region," the prime minister said after laying the foundation of the expressway here by pressing a button.

"To come up at a cost of around ₹15,000 crores, this project will create thousands of job opportunities and connect the common people with facilities in bigger cities," he said.

Be it the Bundelkhand Expressway, the Purvanchal Expressway or the proposed Ganga Expressway, they will all increase connectivity in Uttar Pradesh and increase job avenues, Modi said.

The prime minister said that a provision of ₹3,700 crore has been made for the Uttar Pradesh Defence Corridor in this year's budget.

India reacts cautiously to US-Taliban peace accord

AGE CORRESPONDENT with agency inputs NEW DELHI, FEB. 29



Raveesh Kumar

In a guarded reaction to the peace deal between the US and the Taliban, India Saturday said that its policy has consistently been to support all opportunities that can bring peace, security and stability in Afghanistan and ensure the end of terrorism.

Ministry of external affairs spokesperson Raveesh Kumar said: "India's consistent policy is to support all opportunities that can bring peace, security and stability in Afghanistan; end violence; cut ties with international terrorism; and lead to a lasting political settlement through an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled process. We note that the entire political spectrum in Afghanistan, including the government,

democratic polity and civil society, has welcomed the opportunity and hope for peace and stability generated by these agreements." "As a contiguous neighbour, India will continue to extend all support to the government and people of Afghanistan in realising their aspirations for a peaceful, democratic and prosperous future where the interest of all sections of the Afghan society are protected," he said. Days before finalisation of the peace deal, India had conveyed to the US that pressure on Pakistan to crack down on terror networks operating from its soil must be kept up though Islamabad's cooperation for peace in Afghanistan is crucial.

INDIAN COUNCIL OF WORLD AFFAIRS
Sapru House, New Delhi

REQUIRES RESEARCH FELLOWS

Applications are invited for the appointment of Research Fellows (Six) with requisite experience & qualifications for undertaking research, on a contract of two years at fixed gross monthly lumpsum remuneration. The existing vacancies in the Council are for the following specializations : China; Russia; Central Asia; Persian Gulf; West Asia and Europe. However, scholars specializing in other fields of international affairs, strategic analysis and diplomatic history are encouraged to apply. Applications in sealed covers addressed to Deputy Director General, ICWA must be received at ICWA, Sapru House by 20 March, 2020. Intimation of application may be emailed to ddgoffice@icwa.in. Application forms, terms & conditions, qualifications etc. are available at: www.icwa.in.

DELHI POLICE SHANTI SEWA NYAYA

HELPS US SERVE YOU BETTER

MOBILE APPS

BUYING OR SELLING SECOND HAND GOODS

MAY TURN OUT TO BE TRAPS

Verify the buyer/seller before accepting or making any payment

Prospective buyer/seller in hurry of payment is a likely fraudster

Don't click on any link or scan a QR code while accepting payment. Money may get debited instead

Avoid making/accepting advance payment, it may be a trap to cheat

Immediately report on <https://cybercrime.gov.in> or www.cybercelldelhi.in

e-mail to CP, Delhi at : cp.amulyapatnaik@delhipolice.gov.in

Write to : CP, Delhi at P.O. Box No. 171, GPO, New Delhi

FOR IMMEDIATE POLICE HELP CALL 112 TO SHARE INFORMATION CALL 1090

SHORT TAKES

2 women injured in acid attack

Ambala: Two women sustained severe burn injuries when an unidentified youth threw acid on them in this district of Haryana on Saturday, police said. The victims were identified as Sonia (28) and her relative Binder (23), police said, adding the women were rushed to MM Medical College at Mulana. The incident took place in Alawpur village when the women were on a morning walk, they said. A youth came on a motorcycle and threw acid on them. He then fled the spot, police said. Passersby helped the women after they heard their cries, they said. Police said they have registered a case and investigation was underway. — PTI

4-year-old killed in Assam flat fire

Silchar: A four-year-old boy died after a fire broke out in a residential building at Ambikapatty area of south Assam on Saturday, police said. The child, identified as Raj Nath, was with a domestic help when the blaze erupted in the flat on the fourth floor of the building around 1 pm, they said. Raj Nath was already dead by the time the fire fighters reached the spot, a police officer said. The 40-year-old domestic help, recovered in a critical condition, was admitted to Silchar Medical College Hospital, he said. Investigation has been initiated to ascertain the cause of the fire, officials said. — PTI

Rare vulture is rescued in Odisha

Bhubaneswar: An endangered vulture species, which was rescued in Nayagarh district, was on Saturday brought to Nandankanan Zoological Park (NZP), on outskirts of Bhubaneswar. The rare bird of prey popularly known as 'Himalayan vulture' or 'Himalayan griffon vulture' is aged around four years old. However, the gender of the vulture is yet to be identified. The ailing bird has been kept in quarantine for treatment. With arrival of the vulture, the number of endangered vulture species has increased to 3 at the zoo. Worth mentioning, the Himalayan griffon vulture is an Old World vulture in the family Accipitridae. The particular species is found along the Himalayas and the adjoining Tibetan Plateau. However, it is suspected to have flown to Odisha after losing its direction due to dense fog. The locals had found the injured vulture near a poultry farm.

HC CLARIFIES ON PASSPORT FOR FOREIGNERS

Kolkata: Foreigners can apply for Indian citizenship without a valid passport from the country of origin if they can furnish proper reasons for not possessing one, the Calcutta high court has ruled. Justice Sabyasachi Bhattacharyya disposed of a petition by granting the petitioner liberty to file an application before the authority as contemplated in Rule 11 of the Citizenship Rules 2009, upon furnishing explanation for the non-availability of the passport. The court noted that Clause 9 of Form III of the citizenship application requires the passport particulars of the applicant to be filled in and the documents to be attached with the application includes a valid foreign passport. Passing the order, the court observed that although the rule "contemplates that an application shall not be entertained unless the application is made in Form III, such provision does not make the availability of a passport a mandatory requirement". It further said that the "Form given with the Rules or the Rules themselves cannot override the provision of the statute itself, under which the said Rules are framed, which does not stipulate such a mandate on the applicants for citizenship under Section 5(1)(c) of the 1955 Act mandatorily to carry a passport". The court said that under such circumstances, it cannot be held that a passport is mandatory. — PTI

Materials worth ₹100cr gutted in Chennai fire



Firefighters attempt to douse a blaze at an oil warehouse in Chennai on Saturday. A fire broke out at a chemical warehouse here on Saturday and spread quickly across the facility, damaging raw materials worth about ₹100 crore, a top Fire and Rescue Services official said. As many as 32 fire tenders, including six which were foam based, were used and about 500 personnel deployed to douse the fire, he said. — PTI

SC bench to decide on Art. 370 pleas today

New Delhi, Feb. 29: A five-judge Constitution bench of the Supreme Court will pronounce on Monday its order on whether petitions challenging the constitutional validity of the Centre's decision to abrogate Article 370 be referred to a larger bench.

The petitions are heard by a five-judge bench presided by Justice N.V. Ramana and comprising Justices S.K. Kaul, R Subhash Reddy, BR Gavai and Surya Kant.

The Constitution bench had reserved the order on a batch of petitions on January 23. During the hearing of the case last month, the Central government had said that the abrogation of Article 370 allowed the accession of Jammu and Kashmir to the Indian Union and added that the move is "irreversible".

However, advocate Dr Rajeev Dhavan, appearing for one of the petitioners, said that the Centre deliberately imposed the President's rule in the erstwhile state and downgraded its status to a Union Territory using Article 3 of the Constitution of India. Several petitions have been filed in the Supreme Court challenging the Central government's decision of withdrawing Jammu and Kashmir's special status.

The Central government by its August 5, 2019 decision had scrapped the Article 370 of the Constitution of India, which conferred special status to the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. — ANI

Goli maaro slogan at Delhi Metro

Continued from Page 1 like "Shoot all the traitors". Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) personnel, responsible for the security of the Delhi Metro, intercepted the protesters and handed them over to the Delhi Police. While some commuters joined the CAA supporters in their sloganeering, others were quick to get their cameras out to make videos. Many at the station were seemingly taken aback by the spontaneity and the unusual choice of the venue. "On Saturday, at about 10:25 hours, six youths were seen shouting slogans at Rajiv Chowk metro station, Delhi. They were immediately intercepted by CISF personnel & thereafter handed over to Delhi Metro Rail Police officials for further action. Metro Rail operation remained," the CISF said in a statement.

A senior CISF official said the youths were raising pro-CAA slogans. DCP (Metro) Vikram Porwal said, "We have detained six men and they are being questioned". A video of the sloganeering has gone viral on social media. Anuj Dayal, Executive Director, Corporate Communi-

Teenage girl raped, set on fire in Telangana district

Hyderabad, Feb. 29: A man allegedly raped and set a 17-year-old girl afire in Suryapet district of Telangana after being warned not to harass her with his proposal, the Telangana state police said on Saturday.

The teenage girl, who received 50 per cent burns, is now undergoing treatment at a state-run hospital in the city of Warangal. Doctors treating the victim said her condition is now stable, but she is in a state of trauma.

The 21-year-old man, warned by people not to harass her, allegedly went to her house on Friday night forcibly took her out to a bushy area nearby before raping and setting her ablaze.

She was alone at home when the incident took place, they said. Neighbours informed police about the incident. Following a complaint

MP: Tribal woman is gangraped, 2 arrested

Raisen, Feb. 29: A 40-year-old tribal woman was allegedly raped by three men in Madhya Pradesh's Raisen district, the police said on Saturday.

Udaipura police station in-charge Indraraj Singh said two of the accused have been arrested.

According to the woman, she set out for Saikheda in Silwani tehsil on Friday evening. A tractor driver gave her lift upto Boras village where she waited for a bus.

As the bus did not turn up till 10 pm, Kunwar Lal, a local resident, offered to put her up at his house for the night and she accepted his offer, she told police.

Lal then called his friends Manju Gaud and Preetam Bediya. They drank liquor and allegedly raped her, Singh said.

While Lal and Gaud were arrested for alleged gang-rape, Bediya was absconding. Further probe was on, the police officer added. — PTI

POCSO Act has been registered. Efforts were on apprehend the accused, police said. — PTI

Woman gives birth to sextuplets, 2 die

Sheopur (MP), Feb. 29: A 23-year-old woman on Saturday gave birth to sextuplets in Madhya Pradesh's Sheopur district, though two of the newborns died shortly after, a doctor said.

Four boys and two girls were born prematurely and underweight to Badoda resident Murti Mali over a span of 35 minutes, with the two girls weighing just 390 grams and 450 grams, said Sheopur District Hospital Civil Surgeon Dr R.B. Goyal.

"They were born in the 28th week of pregnancy. The two girls, who were

extremely underweight, died a little while later. The four boys weigh between 615 grams and 790 grams. They are being treated at the Sick Newborn Care Unit here," he said.

Goyal said the woman found out she was going to give birth to sextuplets only after a sonography was conducted on Monday morning.

Talking to PTI, Bhopal's leading gynaecologist Dr Meeta Agrawal said this was a rare case as "chances for multiple gestations to happen spontaneously is very rare." — PTI

Service robot to assist people with household chores Student develops 'household' robot

AKSHAYA KUMAR SAHOO BHUBANESWAR, FEB. 29

Rudranarayan Samal, a Class IX student of IFCO DAV school, at Paradip in Odisha has become the talk of the town as he has succeeded in crafting and developing a basic version of a service robot.

The service robot, as Rudranarayan claims, will assist him and his family members with some of the household chores.

He said he assembled a few electronic gadgets, thermocol and cardboard to create the service robot. With non-collision sen-

sors, it has been designed in such a way that it responds to almost all queries in a manner the Bluetooth-connected devices respond.

Recently, a realistic humanoid robot 'Sophia' was developed by Hong Kong-based company Hanson Robotics, which is capable of displaying human-like expressions and interacting with people. It was designed for research, education, and entertainment, and helps promote public discussion about Artificial Intelligence ethics and the future of robotics.

It is Sophia's invention which inspired Rudra to



Class 9 student Rudranarayan Samal with the robot

come up with this project, though this is not a homogenous model. He discussed the project with his teacher and then decided to go on with his plan. Be it for children's amusement or helping elders, the robot will serve a purpose to everyone, feels

Rudranarayan. "I have created this multifunctional robot so that it can be used for carrying small goods. It can also act as a waiter and help elders in their homes by serving food. This apart, it is designed to answer all questions," said the student.

Explaining more on his upcoming project ideas, the young genius says he has planned to develop a 'third eye' for visually handicapped people and a smart chair for the divyngs. He has also designed organic farming equipment for the benefit of farmers.



Nripendra Mishra, the chairman of the Ram Temple Construction Committee, along with senior VHP leader Champat Rai, during their inspection at Ramjannabhoomi Nyas kaaryashala in Ayodhya on Saturday. — PTI

Two killed in Shillong violence

Continued from Page 1 resolution to demand an Inner Line Permit regime to regulate the entry of non-locals. The home ministry is yet to issue a notification. The powerful KSU, which is also the part of North East Students Organisation (NESO), and other tribal groups have been pushing for LLP and spearheading a movement to mount pressure on the government to regulate the entry of non-locals in the state. Police said that a taxi driv-

er, Lurshai Hynniewta from Sohra area, who was injured in the clashes, succumbed to injuries in a hospital. "Four members of KSU were injured — two were sent to Ichamati CHC and discharged, two were referred to Sohra CHC. One local taxi which had gone to collect the KSU members from the Ichamati market after the clashes was damaged." The areas under curfew include Police Bazar, Jail Road, Keating Road, Polo, the whole of Jaiaw,

Mawkhar, Mawprem, Misohsun, Wahingdoh, Umson, Lumdiengiri, Qualapatty, Sunny Hills, Cantonment, Boucher road and Mawlang Hat. The state administration decided to suspend mobile Internet services for 48 hours in West Jaintia Hills, East Jaintia Hills, East Khasi Hills, Ri Bhoi, West Khasi Hills and South West Khasi Hills districts. Meghalaya chief minister Conrad Sangma has made an appeal for peace.

CAMPUS POLITICS

Discuss issue with HC CJ, Speaker to Kerala govt

AGE CORRESPONDENT THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, FEB. 29

Kerala Legislative Assembly Speaker P. Sreeramakrishnan on Saturday said the state government should take up the matter regarding ban on campus politics with high court chief justice.

Mr Sreeramakrishnan said the government should apprise the chief justice of the actual situation in the campuses. The Speaker would also take up the matter at his level.

The Kerala high court on Wednesday had banned strikes, gherao, marches, demonstrations and protests that adversely affected "academic atmosphere" in educational campuses. The court directive came after hearing about 20 petitions that were filed by a cross section of college managements in Kerala over a period of three years.

Reacting to the ban at a press conference here, the Speaker said banning campus politics and student organisations' agitations, will only result in depriving the young generation from discussing contemporary socio political issues. Today the campuses are projecting the state of affairs in the country across the globe.

Mr Sreeramakrishnan said had there been no glorious intervention of campuses, the polity would have been bereft of progressive and democratic values.

The Kerala government has already decided to take the legal route. Higher education minister K.T. Jaleel said the government would file an appeal soon.

Parambir Singh takes charge as Mumbai top cop

SONU SHRIVASTAVA MUMBAI, FEB. 29

The Maharashtra government on Saturday appointed senior IPS officer Parambir Singh as the new Mumbai Police Commissioner.

Incumbent Mumbai police commissioner Sanjay Barve retired from the service on Saturday. Mr Singh, who was heading Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB), had given a clean chit to deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar in connection with alleged irrigation scam in December last year.

Appointment of Mr Singh was announced a day after the state home minister and NCP leader Anil Deshmukh ruled out granting third extension to Mr Barve. A senior officer of the home department said that a high-level meeting was held with the chief minister Uddhav Thackeray, deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar and home minister Anil Deshmukh over the appointment of new commissioner of police for Mumbai on Friday late evening. The NCP had pushed Mr Singh's name for new city police chief.

"My predecessor Sanjay Barve has done a good job. Our priority will be to tackle street crimes and ensuring safety of women. I have had an old association with Mumbai Police," Mr Singh said.

An official of the home department said that Hem-ant Nagrare, Bipin K. Singh, D. Kanakaratanam, S.N. Pande, Sanjay Pande and Parambir Singh were in the list placed before the government for selecting the new city commissioner.

Maharashtra home minister Anil Deshmukh said, "As the commission-



Parambir Singh

er of Mumbai Police is retiring today. Parambir Singh has been appointed on his place. Mr Singh's appointment has come after discussion with the honourable chief minister Uddhav Thackeray."

According to a statement issued by the state government, Bipin K Singh alias Bipin Bihari, the Additional Director General (ADG) of the ACB, has been assigned the additional charge as the DG of the anti-graft agency.

In his career, Mr Singh had served as DCP in several important zones in the financial capital of the country. He also served as Superintendent of Police (SP) of Chandrapur and Bhandara districts and as the Additional Director General of Police (Law and Order) in the state. During Mr Singh's tenure as Thane Police Commissioner, police had arrested fugitive Underworld don Dawood Ibrahim's younger brother Iqbal Kaskar from Mumbai in 2018.

About the women's protests underway at Morland road in Nagpada, the new commissioner said there was nothing wrong with the same. "There is nothing wrong unless the protests become an obstruction for people or illegal. It would be good if these protests are continued in a constitutional manner," he said after taking charge.

Sop opera for a welfare state

During his election campaign YSR Congress chief Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy had promised a slew of welfare schemes — Navaratnalu (nine gems). The nine promises created unprecedented hope among the electorate and propelled Mr Jagan Mohan Reddy to the seat of power in Andhra Pradesh. Will these freebies ruin the work culture or help the wheel of economic activity turn? These are some of the questions facing the Chief Minister.



PROMISES TO KEEP: File photo of Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy during his swearing-in ceremony.

— ASIAN AGE

N. Vamsi Srinivas

This (election manifesto) is the Bhagavad Gita, Bible and Quran for me, my party workers and my government functionaries," announced Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, showing a single sheet of paper to thousands of his jubilant followers who were cheering him at his swearing-in ceremony in May last year.

On the day Mr Jagan Mohan Reddy released the YSR Congress manifesto, a few months earlier, he had highlighted how brief the manifesto was. All promises were listed in a single sheet of paper unlike the booklets that other political parties print to showcase their promises to people.

The nine promises, for which his poll managers coined the term 'Navaratnalu' or nine gems, created unprecedented hope among the Andhra Pradesh electorate as was evident from the massive mandate they gave Mr Jagan Mohan Reddy — 151 Assembly seats out of 175 and 22 Lok Sabha seats out of 25.

Is implementation of the welfare initiatives as simple as compiling them on a single sheet of paper?

Does Mr Jagan Mohan Reddy have a philosophy behind these initiatives and a long-term vision to realise them, or has it been done with an eye on the 2024 general elections? Will these freebies, as a non-beneficiary of these initiatives rues, ruin the work culture or actually help the wheel of economic activity turn? These are some of the questions facing the Chief Minister.

The nine initiatives can be summarised as follows:

- Rythu Bharosa, cash assistance for farmers
- Fee reimbursement
- Aarogyasri, state bearing the cost of medical treatment
- Jalayagnam, strengthening of irrigation network
- Gradual prohibition on liquor sale
- Amma Vodi, a cash incentive to mothers to send children to school
- YSR Aasara, loan waiver to women thrift groups and cash incentive to women aged above 45
- Pedalanderiki Illu, housing for poor on saturation mode
- Pension Pempu, enhanced pension to citizens above 60

Except for irrigation projects and prohibition, the rest of the promises fall in the category of direct benefit transfer, or cash incentive in general terms, that would roughly take about ₹30,000 crore of the state Budget every year. Some of the initiatives are part of existing schemes, some are centrally-sponsored and others are the Chief Minister's brainchild, but all bear his imprint either in terms of enhanced allocations

THE CHIEF MINISTER BROUGHT OUT THE DISHA INITIATIVE TO ENSURE SPEEDY JUSTICE TO VICTIMS AND TOUGHER PUNISHMENT TO ENSURE SAFETY OF WOMEN. TO EVERYONE'S SURPRISE, THE EMOTIONALLY CHARGED CHIEF MINISTER ANNOUNCED HIS APPRECIATION OF HIS TELANGANA COUNTERPART K. CHANDRASEKHAR RAO AND THE POLICE FOR DELIVERING INSTANT JUSTICE BY KILLING THE FOUR ACCUSED IN THE DISHA RAPE AND MURDER

SOME OF THE INITIATIVES ARE PART OF EXISTING SCHEMES, SOME ARE CENTRALLY-SPONSORED AND OTHERS ARE THE CHIEF MINISTER'S BRAINCHILD, BUT ALL BEAR HIS IMPRINT EITHER IN TERMS OF ENHANCED ALLOCATIONS OR IMPROVED IMPLEMENTATION METHODOLOGY.

or improved implementation methodology.

For instance, Basavaraju Prasada Rao, a septuagenarian from Nellore district, to his pleasant surprise found a state-appointed volunteer handing over his senior citizen's pension of ₹2,250 at his doorstep relieving him of the burden of either depending on his children to draw money from the bank and bear silently with the pilferage or go all the way to the local office to collect pension. Like him, about 59 lakh pensioners receive money at their doorstep every month.

Similarly, Kamalamma, a native of Madakasira in Anantapur district, died of cancer when a hospital in Hyderabad refused to honour the health insurance scheme of the then AP government as it was applicable only in Andhra Pradesh. Another cancer patient, Raghavendra Prasad of Kovurnagar in the same district, was fortunate enough to get treatment in Bengaluru, which is close by, after Mr Jagan Mohan Reddy extended the Aarogyasri health insurance to cover medical treatment availed outside the state.

PHILOSOPHY

According to Team Jagan, the 3,648-km padayatra covering the length and breadth of the state in 341 days perhaps gave a new dimension to the thoughts of Mr Jagan Mohan Reddy, then Leader of the Opposition. The extra mile he walked more than his father and late chief minister Dr Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy did translate into an extra thrust on addressing the problems from the roots while attending to the people's immediate needs. "Our focus is to handhold a generation to prosperity," explains Mr G.V.D. Krishna Mohan, State Communications Adviser. Children who just join school today have to study for at least 20 years and equip themselves to face the world in 2040 and beyond. "We can't even imagine how the world would have technologically advanced," he adds.

HUMAN CAPITAL

The Chief Minister, according to his aides, realised that the failure to invest in building human capital left the country behind China, which was on par with India way back in 1981 on all parameters of development but went on to achieve five times India's GDP by investing in education and health. "Some accuse the Chief Minister of doling out freebies to win over the electorate and ruining the economy," says Dr P.V. Ramesh, additional chief secretary to the Chief Minister. The so-called free market economies like the US bear 48 per cent of the health cost, and 22 per cent of the UK Budget goes only to government hospitals, he said adding that spending on health is an investment in human capital. In various review meetings, the Chief Minister has attributed the perennial problem of poverty to the ever-increasing health cost of people of which only

20 per cent is borne by the government. This is apparently to defend his focus on huge spending on Aarogyasri and extending the health care benefit not just to the Below Poverty Line families but all those whose annual income is less than ₹5 lakh per annum.

According to the health indices released by the Centre, AP fared badly in various parameters including 30 per cent premature marriages of women and 25 per cent teen pregnancies. Lack of access to proper medicare still kept infant mortality at a high rate of 34 out of 1,000.

The Chief Minister, Dr Ramesh says, has embarked on a ₹14,000-crore health infrastructure improvement programme.

EDUCATION

Contrary to the general perception, Andhra Pradesh fares poorly in education parameters. "For instance, the gross enrolment ratio in elementary education during Mr Chandrababu Naidu's regime was 83.2 per cent, far below the national average of 96.9 per cent," says Mr Duvvuri.

An expert in finance and energy sectors, he was part of the Chief Minister's think tank that was involved in drafting the manifesto. Incidentally, his father D. Somayajulu rendered similar services to Dr Rajasekhara Reddy.

Explaining the philosophy behind the YSR Congress government's flagship programmes, Mr Duvvuri says making English medium of instruction compulsory in elementary education, Nadu-Nedu (now and then) a programme aimed at improving the infrastructure in schools, Amma Vodi, a ₹15,000 per annum cash incentive to mothers and fee reimbursement are investments on a generation.

Notwithstanding dues of crores of rupees to the agencies providing the mid-day meal scheme, the Chief Minister changed the menu to make it tastier and healthier.

"We have witnessed a nine per cent increase in attendance last month after changing the menu," says Ch Sridhar, director of the mid-day meal scheme in the school education department.

The Chief Minister announced Nadu Nedu for schools also wherein ₹4,500 crore would be spent in the next four years to improve infrastructure in schools and of which ₹900 crore would be spent on capacity building of teachers.

AGRICULTURE

As per the rural finance inclusion report of the Nabard, the average monthly income and expenditure of farmers in Andhra Pradesh hovered at about ₹5,200 between 2014 and 2019 and the disposable surplus income with farmers was almost nil.

On the other hand, the ratio of indebtedness is as high as 77 per cent against the national average of 47 per cent.

While Dr Rajasekhara Reddy ushered in a new concept of free power to the farm sector, successive governments including that of Mr Naidu, who once was a hard critic of the initiative, were left with no option but to continue the programme.

Mr Jagan Mohan Reddy has come up with a proposal to build 10,000 MW solar power capacity to meet the needs of the farm sector apart from providing cash incentive of ₹13,500 per acre every year under the Rythu Bharosa scheme to 46.5 lakh farmers.

The Chief Minister however was criticised for including the Central assistance of ₹6,000 and Mr Naidu demanded that the government give the promised assistance of ₹12,000 over and above the Central assistance.

THE NAVARATNALU

- 1 Rythu Bharosa, cash assistance to farmers
- 2 Fee reimbursement to students
- 3 Aarogyasri, state bearing the cost of medical treatment
- 4 Jalayagnam, strengthening of irrigation network
- 5 Gradual total prohibition on liquor sale
- 6 Amma Vodi, again a cash incentive to mothers to send their children to school
- 7 YSR Aasara, loan waiver to women thrift groups and cash incentive to women of various sections aged above 45 years
- 8 Pedalanderiki Illu, housing for poor on saturation mode
- 9 Pension Pempu, payment of enhanced pension to senior citizens above 60 years

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Immediately after the gruesome rape and murder of a veterinary student in Hyderabad, the Chief Minister brought out the Disha initiative to ensure speedy justice to victims and tougher punishment to ensure safety of women. To everyone's surprise, the emotionally charged Chief Minister announced in the Assembly his appreciation of his Telangana counterpart K. Chandrasekhara Rao and the police for delivering instant justice by killing the four accused in the Disha rape and murder. "The father of two girl children, he was emotionally upset on the increasing incidence of attacks on women and children," home minister M. Sucharitha points out. Many of the welfare initiatives are women-centric in that the cash incentives will go to women who the Chief Minister has repeatedly said in public speeches would be more concerned and judicious in spending.

Despite the state reeling under severe financial crunch, the Chief Minister is keen on achieving total prohibition in a phased manner with the strong belief that it improves the living standards of a family.

The efforts are yielding results, with the consumption of liquor going down by at least 25 per cent.

"The government took over the retail sale of liquor in October last and consumption since then till the end of February was 117.55 lakh cases. This was against 154.79 lakh cases for the corresponding period in 2018-2019," says D. Vasudeva Reddy, managing director of AP Beverages Corporation Limited.

Schemes good, need good governance

AGE CORRESPONDENT

The principal Opposition Telugu Desam openly criticises Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy for what it terms the "complete neglect" of industry and infra sectors, while his own partymen wonder under their breath if "overdoing" the welfare initiatives will leave state finances in such a bad shape that there will not be adequate funding for the 'Navaratnalu', the nine welfare initiatives, down the line.

Chief Minister Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, while building his image as messiah of the poor hasn't done much to counter the narrative of his critics that he is anti-development. Some political analysts have even taken exception to what they describe as "misrule."

"The welfare initiatives of Mr Jagan Mohan Reddy are undoubtedly good but they will yield results only when there is good governance," says Prof. K. Nageshwar, noted political analyst. For instance, the Amma Vodi scheme is aimed at encouraging mothers to send their children to school by compensating them for the loss of their wages with a financial assistance of ₹15,000 per annum.

"It is equally important to impart quality education in schools that have all basic amenities," points out Prof. Nageshwar. On the agriculture front, merely handing out ₹13,500 per annum under the Rythu Bharosa scheme will prove counter-productive in the absence of a climate that is conducive to making agriculture viable, he says adding that the Chief Minister's focus should be equally on creating economic activity. He found fault with "politics of vengeance" pursued by the Chief Minister.

The initial days of Mr Jagan Mohan Reddy's tenure were marred by a setback to the construction sector, a major area of economic activity, due to the stoppage of sand supply. Then came the suspension of all irrigation project works, revisiting of power purchase agreements (PPAs), rumours over the relocation of KIA Motors and, above all, the proposal of dividing the capital between Visakhapatnam, Amaravati and Kurnool.

"Higher capital expenditure is an indication of a healthy economy but that is completely missing. On the contrary, the revenue expenditure is high and increasing," says former finance minister and senior TD leader Yanamala Ramakrishnu. The annual salary bill of ₹8,000 crore on so-called volunteers is a sheer waste as it is nothing but doling out a cash incentive to YSR Congress workers, he alleges. The government's finance managers have a different story. Countering the TD argument, Chief Minister's special secretary Krishna Duvvuri says: "We are left with a legacy that is better explained in statistics — enhanced debt of ₹2.58 lakh crore from ₹97,000 crore in 2014 and unpaid bills of ₹70,000 crore." The power sector was the worst hit during the TD's rule, he said adding that the liabilities went up from ₹21,000 crore in 2014 to ₹70,000 crore in 2019. In the same period, arrears payable by the power utilities to producers went from ₹2,500 crore to ₹21,000 crore. "Does clearing bills of ₹20,000 crore by us in the last eight months not amount to prudent financial management," Mr Duvvuri asks.

Defending the revisiting of PPAs, the special secretary said the previous government had entered into agreements to purchase power at a higher cost of ₹5 or more per unit when it is available at ₹2.50. "While the Centre and industry may look from the perspective of the government not honouring the previous agreement, we are worried over the future of the power utilities," he points out.

The government also attributes financial stress in the state to the general recession as reflected in a mere 1.22 per cent growth in tax revenues and 4.5 per cent GDP growth. The GDP growth rate reached 4.5 per cent because of the 14.5 per cent increase in government spending, without which the actual growth would have been 3.3 per cent. While hoping for the revival of the economy, the finance managers are confident that prudent spending would help sustain it. "The Chandrababu Naidu government borrowed ₹5,000 crore through the Civil Supplies Corporation before the elections and spent the money on his Pasupu Kumkuma poll sop. This is unremunerative expenditure," said Mr Duvvuri.

He does not mention that the YSR government also doled out a sop in the form of the Amma Vodi scheme just before Sankranti in January. Even ruling party MLAs admitted that a majority of women beneficiaries spent the money on buying clothes for the family members, just as they did with Pasupu Kumkuma incentive.



THE ASIAN AGE

1 MARCH 2020



Krishna Shastri
Devulapalli

Off the beaten track

10 reasons why I want to be reborn a South Hero

It was after three gruelling days of prayer to Swami Nithyananda that God finally appeared before me. "What boon do you seek?" he said. "And hurry up, I have this thing with Jaggi." Getting over my initial surprise that He wasn't a She, I replied without hesitation. "I want to be reborn a ... er ... South Hero, My ... er ... Lord." "You sure?" God said. "Don't be hasty. I am God. If I wish, you could be reborn as Mukesh Ambani's driver, the touch-up guy at Victoria's Secret shows..." "I'm absolutely sure, Prabhu," I said. "I have put years of thought into this."

"Could you give me one reason?" said the Almighty. "How about I give you 10?" I said. "In no particular order, though." "I am listening," said God, looking at his fake Rolex, a gift from a devotee. "Well, for starters, I've always fancied the idea of being bathed in milk by loving fans."

"Seriously?" said God. "It's no big deal. Sticky, actually. And the #*#*s water it down." "Then, I have always wanted a family whose sole purpose is being the supporting cast to my life. Appearing en masse in the large living room of our mansion in the middle of verdant fields, standing approvingly in the background as my awesome life unfolds, and disappearing discreetly when I'm singing with the heroine in Prague or Vienna as Western civilization looks on in bewilderment."



"True," said God. "That is a good one." "Actually, there's my next reason," I said. "Under the current scenario of travel restrictions for us brown folk, who but a South Hero can go to exotic locations, dance on busy streets with east European background dancers, wear outrageous clothes, hold up traffic, without being shot in the patootie with a bazooka?"

"Good point," said God. "Then the retirement thing. The post of South Hero is the only one where one retires only when one dies. In fact, thanks to advances in the field of CGI and taxidermy, maybe even after. Rumour has it that one South superstar who had a Sankranti release actually died three years ago. They are hailing it as his best performance yet."

"Next?" said God. "The heroines." I said. "They get younger and younger and younger. It's brilliant. In fact, one hero, as we speak, has delayed his comeback project because he is waiting for his heroine to be born. I think they are going in for a C-section because the teasers are out."

"Hmmm," said God. "Have you ever seen the bad guys that attack a South Hero in a fight sequence?" I said. "I've seen a couple. My wi-fi has been down. The Dthritrashtra-Sanjaya Network is up for sale, as you know."

"They always come in a queue, Swami." I said. "The South movie henchman, to my knowledge, is the only man in India who follows the queue system. The first guy comes, the hero dispatches him, then the second, repeat, then the third ... I tell you, it's awesome." "You make a good case," said the Omnipotent. "But hurry up, Amish just texted me."

"Okay," I said. "Then, the chief adversary. In my current life as writer, do you know how diabolical and ruthless my chief adversaries, my editor and my publisher, are? They make Goebbels look like Pandari Bai."

"So what are you saying?" "The main villain in every south film is a moron. He is completely clueless. A langur on downers could outwit the guy. The best part is, the idiot doesn't even know Telugu or Tamil because he's from Bombay. So the happy ending is a foregone conclusion for the South Hero."

"True," said God. "I do feel sorry for Kelly Dorji, Neil Nitin Mukesh, Jackie Shroff." "Well, here are three reasons in one shot," I said. "When the going gets tough, South Heroes get to deliver alliterative 'punch' dialogues that make no sense at all. They say things like 'I have great taste-u. You are bloody waste-u. If I hit you, you are paste-u'. Also, they sport cool prefixes like 'Thunder & Lightning Hero' or 'Young Rootless Intergalactic Star' before their names. And, finally, when they are arthritic and toothless, they get a shot at being CM ... where are you going, God?"

"My Uber has arrived, son," said God. "So are we on?" I said. "Yes," said God, waving. "But let me give it a try first."

Krishna Shastri Devulapalli is a humour writer, novelist, columnist and screenwriter

Saffron takeover?

The Narendra Modi government is reportedly contemplating some sort of an interim government or an advisory council in Jammu and Kashmir with the help of Altaf Bukhari, Muzaffar Baig, Dilawar Mir, and a few others from Jammu region. The Centre is reportedly keen to undertake the delimitation

Amit shy, so Doval's the troubleshooter

of Assembly seats by early 2022, with 50 constituencies in Jammu and 40 in the Kashmir Valley. The big question doing the rounds in Lutyens' Delhi is whether such a plan can work without the three former chief ministers Farooq Abdullah, Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti? Enthusiastic elements in North and South Blocks point to the past when Sheikh Abdullah was imprisoned for almost two decades.

Framing concern

When Sonia Gandhi addressed a press conference over the Delhi riots, many party leaders were unable to recall the last time the AICC chief — for over 20 years since 1998 — conducted a press briefing

from 24, Akbar Road. So eager was the Congress leadership to be seen in the same frame as her that nine chairs were placed on the dais. The ninth chair placed for Shaktisinh Gohil almost teetered off the stage. The leaders who sat with Gandhi included Manmohan Singh, Ghulam Nabi Azad, A.K. Antony, Randeep Surjewala K.C. Venugopal, P. Chidambaram and Ahmed Patel. Many leaders who couldn't find space on the dais sat with reporters. These included Rajeev Gowda, Mallikarjun Kharge and P.L. Punia.

Shakhas and leaves

The BJP's choice of V.D. Sharma as the Madhya Pradesh party head has generated a lot of interest in party circles. Sharma is per-



By WAQYANAWIS

ceived to be close to Suresh Soni, an influential RSS leader. Many had

thought Shivraj Singh Chouhan would get the post or Rakesh Singh would get another term in office. Sharma's appointment is seen as the RSS's growing clout over the BJP organisation.

Berth pains in Cong

There are many anxious souls in the Congress as the Rajya Sabha poll dates draw closer. Reports of Sonia Gandhi traveling out in the first half of March and Rahul Gandhi returning to the country have rattled a section of the party's old guard who were confident of securing berths in the Upper House. In Karnataka, veteran Mallikarjun Kharge is a contender while in Haryana, Kumari Selja is a hopeful. But Congress insiders claim if

Rahul gets a chance to have a decisive say in selecting Congress nominees for Rajya Sabha, loyalty may not be on premium and Kharge may find himself getting upstaged by Rajiv Gowda.

CMs to be tested

Now that Delhi elections are done and dusted, the Bharatiya Janata Party leadership is said to be giving a hard look at some of its party-ruled states. Three states — Haryana, Assam and Uttarakhand — are under the scanner, where the performance of the chief ministers is being evaluated against many parameters. BJP sources say, however, that an assessment does not mean the chief ministers of these states would necessarily be uprooted.

The writer is a keen observer of the goings-on in backrooms of power

Subhani



Delhi loved and lost. Will it love again?



Shreya Sen-Handley

No More Mansplaining

How was it for you? This last month of love? I so ap on my soapbox in Sherwood Forest and asked the squirrels gathering around me. The one that appeared to be sweeping the forest floors in search of nuts, with a dark ring of fur round his neck that could have been a muffler, and whiskers like a little black tache, nodded vigorously. It had been a good month — he'd felt the love.

Four thousand, five hundred and fifty miles away in Delhi, so had chief minister Arvind Kejriwal. His incumbent party had swept the Delhi state elections, winning 62 seats to the ruling party's paltry eight. Analysts explained that it was a vote for status quo, for efficiency, or a slap in the face of the rampaging BJP. But I'd like to think it was a vote for solidarity. For love.

Delhi = Love?? Pull the other one! That's not an emotion we associate with our cut-throat capital, accounting for 40 per cent of rapes and 33 per cent of all crimes against women in India. As a 21-year-old working in television there, I'd been molested, swindled, stalked, and nearly killed (with a karai — honest). Twenty years later, in 2016, I returned to Delhi to further disasters when the hotel fried my electronic devices to a crisp, barring me from both my money and contacts. When they failed to compensate or help, I turned to the peeps who'd invited me over, to find them as perverse. "You're calling me at seven in the morning? Jaante hain main kaun hoon?" one huffed.

Panic-stricken, I began to call one barely known Facebook friend after another to see who might assist. Before long I had a host of offers from unexpected quarters of their company, cars and phones!

If the kindness of strangers saved my bacon, it was also this generosity that led Delhi'ites in their thousands to turn out in support of the protesting women of tenacious Shaheen Bagh, and JNU and Jamia students, under attack from right-wing goons. With love so unexpectedly given precedence, it was no wonder that Delhi went on to democratically sweep out hate.

A college in Kutch too was painting the town red. Not with satin hearts and red velvet cupcakes, but with blood. The principal of this Hindu sectarian institution, which prohibited menstruating women from participating in regular activities, suspected a large percentage of her students of lying to her so they could study unhindered (the gall! the depravity!). She ordered 68 of them to strip to prove their period-free status. The students complained and the enforcers were arrested. Briefly.

That might make educational institutions think twice before humiliating harmlessly ovulating students again, but will it make even a dent on the taboo around menstruation? Not while "godmen" like Swami Krushnaswarup get away with decreeing that menstruating women who cook will be reborn as dogs, and the men who eat their cooking, as bullocks. The word you want is the

British "pillock", Dasji; many muck heaps worse than a harmless bovine, and the perfect name for brain-dead bigots like you.

Talking of British pillocks, BoJo lulled Brit-Indians into thinking they were feeling the lurrvvve when he scooped Narayana Murthy's son-in-law Rishi Sunak into the blubbery bearhug of his Cabinet. Especially chuffed that he'd replaced Pakistani-origin Sajid Javid as Chancellor of the Exchequer, it only dawned on desis later that Rishi is as much of a privileged-and-not-parting-with-it toff as farcically malevolent Jacob Rees-Mogg. With his pots of money and perfect coiffure, I cannot see Rishi generously doling out love. Nor government largesse to the 15 million living in poverty in the UK. But he might win Hair of The Year yet and make us proud.

Nor will I hear a word against Pakistanis. Especially the kind that glower at you from behind the steering wheel till you bring up biryani. Subcontinental taxi drivers, with whom I have a heart-to-heart on every trip out of the Sherwoods, are my Best Ever Friends (not counting squirrels). "What on earth is going on in your country?" they cry. "Hah! What about yours?" I reply. And we both guffaw.

Of course, if British Indians were celebrating the appointment of an apparently normal desi to the Cabinet, they were right, as the other

BoJo lulled Brit-Indians into thinking they were feeling the lurrvvve when he scooped Rishi Sunak into the blubbery bearhug of his Cabinet. It only dawned on desis later that Rishi is as much of a privileged-and-not-parting-with-it toff as Jacob Rees-Mogg.

two are Priti Patel and Cruella, sorry, Suella Braverman. Priti hates the marginalised, the sick and the poor, and in pole position to help them all in shiny new Brexit Britain, she delights in making their lives a misery instead. From one brown gal to another, Priti, I'm not gonna beseech you to look into your heart, because you don't have one. Yet, look into your past and see if you can't find people who were ostracised when they first arrived, but through industry and the occasional opportunity sparked by the kindness of strangers, worked their way to where YOU are now. Remember, pretty please, and consider paying it forward.

So, if in these weeks of love, you didn't feel it in the air, if your town was painted the wrong sorta red, have I got the month for you! For this is the month of warlike Mars, for the Ides of March, when the self-serving get their comeuppance. Cook up revenge all this month with a, er, vengeance, and don't wait to serve it cold. Fan the flames of your rage at the fundamentalists, the brutish politicians and their circles of greed. Then burrrrrn 'em with your democratic rights. Speak up, March. Vote.

Do as Delhi did. You may never hear me say that again!

P.S. As it turns out, you really won't hear that from me again. Two days after I submitted my paean to Delhi's love and kindness, it has descended into a hell of rioting and murder, and its worst self. Its true self? Prove us wrong, Delhi. Rise again.

Shreya Sen-Handley is the author of the recently published *Strange: Stories, the award-winning Memoirs of My Body, and a forthcoming book of travel misadventures*

LETTERS WHITHER PEACE?

Now that once-sworn enemies, the United States and Afghanistan, have signed a peace pact, many people in Afghanistan must be praying that the country does not return to its early days of zero democracy, zero women's rights and clan violence. The international community, on the other hand, is hoping that the treacherous Taliban will not launch fresh attacks on American targets, in a repeat of the deadly September 11 attacks that claimed around 3,000 lives.

Arun Malankar
Mumbai

WRONG PRIORITIES

AS INDIA'S GDP growth rate slipped to 4.7 per cent in the third quarter of the fiscal, experts like former RBI governor Raghuram Rajan have said that it is Narendra Modi's political and social agenda (read his sole focus on electoral politics, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, Kashmir, Ayodhya and the NRC) that is to blame for the mess. "Unfortunately, this drift has continued a pace of slowing growth, which was precipitated initially by some actions the government took such as the demonetisation and a poorly rolled out GST reform," Rajan said. But who's listening to intellectuals?

Bhagwan Thadani
Pune

BAD TASTE

THE LOYALTY of every judge in our country has to be only to the very sacred Constitution of India. The recent eulogising of the PM by Supreme Court judge Arun Mishra was in utter bad taste. Justice Mishra, who is due to retire on September 2, went well overboard with his Modi love. But his love may be motivated by worldly gain. We all saw how then Chief Justice of India P. Sathasivam was rewarded by Mr Modi with an appointment on August 31, 2014, as governor of Kerala within weeks of his retirement.

Aires Rodrigues
Ribander, Goa

REAL REASON

IT IS SURPRISING that the Arvind Kejriwal-led Delhi government on Friday gave the go-ahead to prosecute former Jawaharlal Nehru University students' union president Kanhaiya Kumar for sedition. Pertinently, Mr Kejriwal, himself, as well as Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi and CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury were among nine booked on sedition charges in 2016 when they visited campus and supported Mr Kumar soon after he was arrested. Perhaps, Mr Kejriwal wants a quick resolution of the matter on behalf of Mr Kumar, hence the decision.

S.S. Paul
Chakdaha, West Bengal

APOCALYPSE NEXT

THE VIRUS has spread. News reports two days ago confirmed cases of coronavirus (CoVID-19) in Hokkaido, Japan. Meanwhile, Iran has emerged as the new epicentre of the virus with 43 deaths and counting. Is apocalypse nigh? Beware, world.

Kushal Kumar
Panchkula, Haryana

Every Monday the best letter of the week wins ₹500. Email: letters.asianage@gmail.com.

The govt's grand garage sale of Air India



Manish Tewari
State of the Union

Air India is going under the hammer for the second time in two years. This is after the previous attempt in March 2018 failed to elicit any buyers. As the economy slows and the government cannot finance key welfare schemes due to falling tax revenues, one way to shore up government finances is by disinvesting India's public sector units. This disinvestment also assumes significance given that the government has fallen short of its ambitious disinvestment target of ₹1.05 lakh crores for the current fiscal.

The government recently issued the Preliminary Information Memorandum for Inviting Expressions of Interest for the Strategic Disinvestment of Air India. The primary purpose of this document is to show how the airline is a burden on the Indian state, and should be sold regardless of the offer price. In fact, the document has been designed in a manner so as to sell off the airline to a preferred oligarch for a pittance. A close analysis of the Preliminary Information Memorandum betrays the government's intentions clearly. Neither has the market value of the airline been

stated, and nor have assets such as landing slots and bilateral rights been valued. The book value of an enterprise can be markedly different from its market value. A book value in a sense represents a historical cost, or the purchase cost adjusted for depreciation while market value is the true value of the enterprise that can be realised in the open market. Calculation of the market value of Air India is essential while going into a negotiation so that the government can get the best deal possible. Concealing the market value from the Indian public, however, is the best way to sell the airline off for a pittance, in return for favours from a crony capitalist. This is exactly what the Preliminary Information Memorandum does. It conceals the market value of Air India, and continuously obsesses over its book value, which stands at almost a negative ₹3 lakh crores. It is this figure that the government wants the public to internalise, so that any monetary compensation over and above seems like a fair deal for the airline.

The government wants to portray an image of worthlessness, despite Air India possessing prime assets that are worth at least ₹5 lakh crores. International disinvestment best practices clearly lay out processes for divest-

Why is the government in such a hurry to sell Air India, and who does it ultimately want to sell our flagship carrier to? Air India is not the property of any one government. Selling the airline requires a larger national consensus.

ing companies with a negative book value, to try and extract as much value as possible from its physical assets, creditors and tangible assets such as landing slots. Despite there being clear processes, the Preliminary Information Memorandum sticks to the airline's book value to further the government's agenda. Not only does the government try to mislead the public by only quoting Air India's book value in its Preliminary Information Memorandum, but it also does not reveal the value of Air India's tangible assets such as landing slots and bilateral rights. Air India's total valuation must include not only quantifiable assets such as aircrafts and real estate, but also its slots at international airports, bilateral rights and code share agreements. Air India Limited is the owner of prime real estate in urban Indian centres including the iconic Nariman Point office in Mumbai which alone is valued at around a couple of thousand crores. While real estate assets are more easily quantifiable, it is the other tangible assets that need to be properly valued before a sell off.

Air India has at least 4,486 slots per week at airports in

India for domestic air travel, and 2,738 slots for international travel out of which 1,838 are in India and the rest are all over the world, including long-haul flights that go to prominent locations such as JFK Airport in New York, London's Heathrow and Paris' Charles de Gaulle. Landing slots at prominent airports such as these can fetch the airline anywhere up from tens of millions to hundreds of millions of dollars. And it is these slots that have not been appropriately valued in the Preliminary Information Memorandum to hoodwink the public into believing that the airline is worthless.

In addition, Air India possesses bilateral rights that are very valuable. Air India's major revenue generating segment is its international travel segment, and its bilateral rights are a distinct competitive advantage against private players. Further, Air India is the only airline in the country with a repair and engineering department, which has huge scope but suffers from a lack of resources.

While the Preliminary Information Memorandum lists all of these bilateral rights and landing slots, it does not value any of these separately, keeping the country in the dark about the true market value of India's flagship carrier. And while the citizenry is in the dark about Air India's true value, the government wants to sell the country's flag carrier for a paltry sum of some ₹20,000 crores. This, despite a simple back of the envelope calculation suggesting that the airline could be worth some ₹3.6 lakh crores to 5 lakh crores if valued properly using inter-

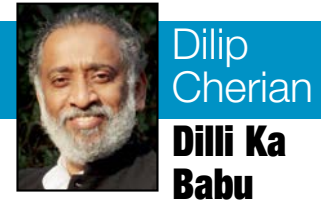
nationally accepted best practices.

The attempt to sell the airline has gone on despite instances that point to the airline's worth to the Indian state. It was none other than our national carrier that went into the epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan not once but thrice to evacuate Indians in distress who could not leave due to the lockdown in the city. Not only has Air India helped Indians in need, time and again, from the Kuwait evacuations in 1990 to the Yemen evacuations of 2015, but Air India has been instrumental in servicing India's strategic and humanitarian requirements both domestically and globally.

The incumbent government has already laid the foundation to sell Air India for a pittance by confusing the public with financial jargon and by deliberately concealing infor-

mation in the Preliminary Information Memorandum. As the government makes one concession after the other to sell the airline, including reducing the debt by more than half to ₹23,286 crores from ₹60,000 crores and inviting expressions of interest for a 100 per cent stake instead of the originally planned 76 per cent stake, it begs the question as to why the government is in such a hurry to sell the airline, and who it ultimately wants to sell our flagship carrier to? Air India is not the personal property of any one government. Selling the airline requires a larger national consensus along with greater transparency.

The author is a lawyer, Member of Parliament and former Union information and broadcasting minister. The views expressed are personal. Twitter handle @manishtewari



Dilip Cheria
Dilli Ka Babu

PRIVILEGED CONNECTIONS

There was quite a splash last month in the power corridors when a babu hosted a "mundan" (head toning) ceremony for his daughter which was attended by President Ram Nath Kovind, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, home minister Amit Shah, several Union ministers, chief ministers of several states, dozens of secretaries, and various former ministers, etc. The guest list was practically the who's who of the capital's power wielders. Confused?

But Diwakar Nath Misra is no run-of-the-mill joint secretary. He is the son-in-law of Supreme Court judge, Justice A.K. Mishra, and the party was held at the judge's residence, a connection that may explain this unprecedented turnout, which we, by the way, love.

Mr Misra is a very fine 2000-batch IAS officer of the Assam-Meghalaya cadre and worked in the petroleum ministry before his current assignment. He was also the secretary of the oil industry development board.

NOBODY GETS TO LEAVE

The Narendra Modi PMO is pretty much like the hotel in the well-known Eagles song: "You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave!"

Despite leaving the PMO at the end of his tenure as principal secretary to the Prime Minister, Nripendra Misra clearly remains a Narendra Modi favourite. When he quit the PMO at the end of the Modi sarkar's first term, Mr Misra did not fade away into the sunset. A few months later, the Prime Minister appointed Mr Misra as the head of the executive council of the prestigious Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. And now, he has been made head of the committee that will oversee the construction of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya. No doubt, Mr Misra's long experience as a bureaucrat in Uttar Pradesh and the perception that he enjoys Mr Modi's complete trust will come in handy.

Similarly, another ex-PMO babu, Bhaskar Khulbe, a West Bengal cadre officer of the 1983 batch who retired as the secretary to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has made a quiet comeback in the PMO as adviser to Mr Modi in the rank and scale of secretary. Mr Modi will now have two advisers, the other being Mr Khulbe's batchmate Amarjeet Sinha from Bihar who retired as secretary, rural development. Both will join the expanding stable that now includes principal secretary to the PM Dr P.K. Mishra, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and principal adviser to the PM P.K. Sinha, all of whom run the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) of 48 senior officials.

All of this provides a clear clue on how Mr Modi likes to staff his PMO — with babus who fulfil his key criteria of loyalty and trust and continuity too.

A TECHNICAL CHANGE, OR MORE?

Can a paramilitary force be given the status of a civil service? The Modi sarkar has answered with an emphatic "yes"! It has decided to bring all Central Armed Police Forces into one Indian Central Armed Police Service (ICAPS). Further, all future recruitment of officers for the paramilitary forces will be through the civil service exam conducted by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC).

The change of name, sources say, is intended to reflect the change in the status of the Central police forces, and to bring them on par with the other civil services. The change was recommended in December last year by a committee headed by the border management secretary of the ministry of home affairs, which had received the proposal from the UPSC in 2017.

The decision is also intended to end the hierarchy between civil officials and Central police force officers. However, some IPS officers are of the view that the name change is a mere technicality and will not make much of a difference unless the proposed ICAPS cadre are made interchangeable so that officers of one paramilitary force can be deployed to other forces and vice versa.

A bad time for India, but with bad leadership



Aakar Patel

India's economic growth has slowed down further to 4.7 per cent in the third quarter of the current financial year. This is the slowest in six years. The finance minister says that this is not a poor number and is an indication of stability, meaning she is relieved that it hasn't got worse. Her bureaucrats have assured the country that this is as bad as it gets, and have called it a "bottoming out" meaning that growth will naturally escalate on its own from here on. Unfortunately, this is not true. While releasing this data, the Narendra Modi government also revised the figure for the previous quarter (Q2, 2019-20) up from 4.55 per cent to 5.1 per cent and for the first quarter from 5 per cent to 5.6 per cent. This means that the figures for the last eight quarters are 8.1 per cent for Jan-March 2018, 7.9 per cent, 7 per cent, 6.5 per cent, 5.8 per cent, 5.6 per cent, 5.1 per cent and now 4.7 per cent. This is not a bottoming out. This is eight straight quarters, meaning two full years of consecutive decline in growth. And this is even if we accept the government's figures, which many around the world are now sceptical of. The government itself says that its full year growth for 2019-2020 will be 5 per

cent and that means that Nirmala Sitharaman expects growth in the current quarter to slow further to 4.6 per cent.

Outside of the formal sector, data has been difficult to collect credibly in India. Further, the formal sector has been hammered over the last year. It has had two consecutive quarters of negative growth in both sales and profit. The Centre for the Monitoring of the Indian Economy says that corporate sales declined by 1.2 per cent in the October-December 2019-20 quarter (having declined by 2.8 per cent before that) and profits before tax shrunk by 10 per cent (compared to a shrinkage of 60 per cent in the previous quarter). None of this is an indication of bottoming out and it would be stupid of the finance minister to herself believe what she is saying to cheer up the rest of us, that we will naturally start growing from here on.

Some of the other details that came out were that gross fixed capital formation, meaning investment, was minus 5.2 per cent over the previous year. It was minus 4.2 per cent in the previous quarter. Government expects that for the full year it will be negative, meaning less money invested this year than the last. Electricity production has shrunk and that is one of the best indicators that the economy is in deep trouble. China's ministers have a similar problem of poor data (though better than India's of course) to monitor economic growth. To simplify this, one of the leaders, Li Keqiang, developed a respected method of assessing growth and it was merely to look at three easily reliable numbers: railway cargo volume, bank

loans and electricity consumption.

On all three, India is trending negative. The manufacturing sector contracted again, which is astonishing given that the primary focus of economic growth by Narendra Modi himself was his fancy Make In India scheme. Not only is it not delivering, manufacturing as a percentage of our GDP is actually shrinking.

Unemployment is at 8 per cent now and has been hovering around that figure for a long time. The government has refused to release its own figures on this because they show that this is the worst performance on this front by any government in five decades. There is further trouble down the line for the government. It has refused to release the data it has already collected and now it also has the problem of collecting household data.

In Hyderabad earlier this month, enumerators from the National Sample Survey Office collecting data on how much families spend on domestic travel were confronted and stopped from working. People are genuinely fearful of the linkages between the National Register of Citizens and this is the fault of Mr Modi and Amit Shah for not having assured people. The NSSO joint director in Hyderabad said she would not be able to deliver the survey to the government in the time frame given and it is possible that it may not be delivered at all: such is the atmosphere in the country today.

Without the data, the government will have no meaningful way of corrective action. You can only do the right thing when you know what the wrong thing is. The Narendra Modi

government has put itself in a position where its ideological agenda on citizenship is now directly affecting its ability to tweak and take corrective measures on the economy. The other truth is that the Indian government has given up its focus on economic growth because it is not something Mr Modi has been able to fully understand. This explains the extraordinary focus on divisive politics by the BJP even at a time when the world's most important man was visiting India.

The coverage across the world that we have received for the violence in New Delhi is among the worst in decades. Our reputation is mud and will need to be rebuilt. And we have to do so in a period which is going to be turbulent. Global trade has taken a hit this quarter with the coronavirus. Stock exchanges across the world have been battered. The National Population Register data collection begins in four weeks time. But several states, including incredibly BJP-controlled Bihar, have said they will reject Mr Shah and Mr Modi's NPR scheme. The government will also face neighbourhood level agitations like in Hyderabad once the enumerators fan out, producing more turmoil.

India is in the worst position economically and socially that it has been in for a very long period. I would say this going back to 30 years ago when we had both the Babri movement and the pre-liberalisation crisis happening at the same time. And this time, we do not have the leadership to be able to steer us through it.

Aakar Patel is a writer and columnist

India is in the worst position economically and socially that it has been in for a very long period... And this time, we do not have the leadership to be able to steer us through it.



A.G. Noorani

The RSS is not amused with Modi's cult of personality

There is no way the BJP will (or, indeed, can) split from the RSS. Splits are between equals. The BJP is a creature of the RSS. Without it the BJP will collapse. Not only does the RSS provide the muscle, cadres who constitute the indispensable foot soldiers during elections, but also the top officials. BJP general secretary Ram Madhav was an official of the RSS which seconded him to the party; thus riveting its control of the BJP. Narendra Modi may be a lifelong pracharak (activist) of the RSS, but he could not have become Prime Minister without its full support.

So why pose any question about an impossible split? It is because the RSS has begun loudly cracking the whip. It has always had an ambivalent attitude towards its political wing's leaders. It got removed two presidents of the Jan Sangh, the predecessor to the BJP, and one of the BJP, L.K. Advani. His crime was to praise Jinnah in the visitors' book at the Quaid's mausoleum in Karachi. The sack was swift and brutal.

The RSS was not amused to see Modi build a cult of personality from the very outset. But it shrewdly assessed both cost and benefit. It now had its own man in power to do it many favours, a man committed to its ideology of hate,

But here comes the rub — it did not like to see him get bigger than the boots it provided; especially if his capacity to deliver was disturbingly on the decline. The state of the economy is worrisome, as is the state of political setbacks.

In Maharashtra, it was ousted by its ally, the Shiv Sena, which grabbed power in a coalition with the Congress and NCP. It had to pay court to Sonia Gandhi in New Delhi and accept the much-derided word "secular" in their joint declaration. What drove the Shiv Sena to this pass were inputs from its cadres complaining that the BJP was slowly cutting away their ground in Maharashtra, exploiting the affinities of their ideologies. The BJP lost the polls in Jharkhand and most resoundingly in New Delhi. Reports from Uttar Pradesh warn that installing the bigot Yogi Adityanath as chief minister has proved counterproductive. All this combined to make the RSS more receptive of its cadres' warning: "we are losing ground thanks to the BJP."

For an organisation wedded to a revoltingly coarse ideology, the RSS has always revelled in an ambiguous approach. RSS general secretary Suresh "Bhaiyaji" Joshi sounded the alarm on February 10 by distancing the Hindu community at large from

the BJP. The BJP, he asserted, was not "synonymous" with the Hindu community; implying that the RSS alone could speak on its behalf. What was left unsaid is that the RSS can choose or even create a different political instrument. This was said in 1981 too, when the RSS' Nana Deshmukh advocated support for the Congress. Joshi pointedly cited the Durga Puja pandals being headed by members of the then ruling party in West Bengal, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), incredibly enough.

This warning to the BJP is coupled with a clear overture to others: "we are ready and willing to make a deal with you too." On February 26, RSS supremo Mohan Bhagwat urged members to widen their sphere of activities among the people regardless of religion, caste, language or region.

The RSS English weekly *Organiser* published a scathing account of the BJP soon after the Delhi electoral debacle, writing that Modi or his Man Friday Amit Shah "cannot always help out" in state elections. The subtext, of course, is that only the RSS can. All ambiguity was shed with this explicit censure: "The RSS and the BJP have always believed that the organisation is more important than the leader. But in the current BJP most people feel that only

Modi and Shah can win them elections. This is a very bad trend."

The RSS will keep a close eye on this. The BJP and Modi himself will silently chafe as the RSS tightens the screws. The true character of the RSS emerges from an affidavit filed in 1948 by two of its most senior officials. One was the brother of the then supremo M.D. Deoras, the other its supremo during the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992.

What both stated in a solemn document is a good revelation of the RSS' true character. They frankly said that the "aims [and] objects [of the RSS] are distinguished from policy by providing two independent clauses in the Constitution. It is common knowledge that policy is not a permanent feature and changes or is changed from time to time. It is evident that this clause was included in the Constitution so as to protect the organisation from the misconceived allegations and charges. That is why faith in evolution and peaceful and legitimate means is expressed. So also tolerance towards all [faiths]. ... [I]t does not indulge in politics, i.e. day-to-day politics, though Sangh has a political philosophy within its wide sweep of cultural work. It is possible for Sangh to change this policy and even participate in politics."

By arrangement with Dawn

IN BRIEF



Mediterranean diet might be panacea for ageing: Study

Minnesota: Switching to a Mediterranean diet might hold the key to slowing down the ageing process, as revealed by the latest research. Researchers at the University of Minnesota Medical School discovered that olive oil in the Mediterranean diet potentially has the ability to extend human lifespan and can also mitigate the onset of ageing-related diseases. Their research findings were recently published in *Molecular Cell*. Early studies on the diet suggested red wine was a major contributor to the health benefits of the Mediterranean diet because it contains a compound called resveratrol, which activated a certain pathway in cells known to increase lifespan and prevent ageing-related diseases. However, work done by researchers suggested that it is the olive oil's fat and another component of the Mediterranean diet that is actually activating this pathway. According to researchers, merely consuming olive oil is not enough to elicit all of the health benefits. The team's studies suggest that when coupled with fasting, limiting caloric intake and exercising, the effects of consuming olive oil will be most pronounced. "We found that the way this fat works is it first has to get stored in microscopic things called lipid droplets, which is how our cells store fat. When the fat is broken down during exercising or fasting, for example, is when the signalling and beneficial effects are realised," said the lead researcher Doug Mashek. The next steps for their research are to translate it to humans with the goal of discovering new drugs or to further tailor dietary regimens that improve health, both short-term and long-term. — ANI



Air pollution may be linked with poor kidney health

Washington: Living in areas with higher levels of air pollution is associated with an increased risk of developing kidney diseases, according to a study. Researchers from the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in the US said the findings may be especially important for parts of the world with higher air pollution, such as India and China. It is known that breathing in air pollution can have detrimental health effects beyond the lungs, but few studies have shown how it impacts the kidneys, which act as filters for the blood, they said. The study, published in the *Journal of the American Society of Nephrology (JASN)*, examined information on 10,997 adults across four sites in the US who were followed from 1996-1998 through 2016. The researchers estimated the monthly average levels of tiny particles of air pollution — called fine particulate matter — based on participants' home addresses. Researchers noted that fine particulate matter comes from a variety of sources including fossil fuel combustion, industrial processes, and natural sources. They found that exposure to higher amounts of fine particulate matter was associated with a higher degree of albuminuria — a marker of kidney dysfunction — at the start of the study as well as a higher risk of developing chronic kidney disease over time. "As rates of chronic kidney disease rise worldwide, it is important to understand whether and how exposure to air pollution plays a role," said Matthew F Blum from Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. — PTI

Experiencing stress makes you socially active and connect with other people

Stress has some positive effects

Pennsylvania, Feb. 29: While stress can certainly lead to negative health outcomes, a new study by Penn State researchers suggests that stress also benefits people socially. "Our findings suggest that just because we have a bad day, that does not mean it has to be completely unhealthy," said David Almeida, the lead researcher of the study. "If stress can actually connect us with other people, which I think is absolutely vital to the human experience, I think that is a benefit. Stress could potentially help people deal with negative situations by driving them to be with other people," Almeida added. Researchers further asserted that while the negative effects of stress — such as heart disease, compromised immune function and depressive symptoms — are well-documented, they were curious if there were potential benefits to stress, such as emotional support.



The team found that experiencing stress made people both more likely to give and receive emotional support from others. "This was true on the day they experienced the stress as well as the following day. "Looking at the current research, I realised that a lot of studies looked at how emotional support is beneficial to other health outcomes. But not many looked at the determinants of social support," said another researcher Hye Won Chai. "We thought that stress

could be a facilitator in these interpersonal exchanges," he added. The study was published in the journal *Stress and Health*. The researchers interviewed 1,622 participants every night for eight nights. They asked the participants about their stressors and whether they gave or received emotional support on that day. Stressors included arguments, stressful events at work or school, and stressful events at home. The researchers found that on average, participants were more than twice as likely to either give or receive emotional support on days they experienced a stressor. Additionally, they were 26 per cent more likely to give or receive support the following day. The researchers said that while this effect, on average, was found across the participants, it differed slightly between men and women. "Women tended to engage in more giving and receiving emotional support than men," Chai said. "This supports previous findings that women tend to seek more emotional support from other people when they are stressed. In our study, men were also more likely to engage in emotional support on days they were stressed, but to a lesser extent than women," Chai added. The researchers said they were surprised that stress was linked to people not just receiving emotional support, but giving it, as well. Almeida said he initially thought that giving emotional support was the stressor itself. But, he reconsidered when they discovered the effect lasted through the next day. "We saw that someone experiencing a stressor today actually predicted them giving emotional support the next day," he said. "This made me think that it is actually possible that stress helps to drive you to other people and allows it to be ok to talk about problems — your problems, my problems," Almeida added. The lead researcher also said that the results could help practitioners enhance and design better interventions for targeting stress. "The findings suggest that an intervention geared toward social interaction rather than an individual may be very beneficial. If we are naturally being drawn toward other people when we are stressed to get help, then interventions may benefit by incorporating the people around us," Almeida further said. — ANI

Unique treatment for brain cancer among kids found

Washington, Feb. 29: A group of researchers have come up with a unique combination treatment method to combat Medulloblastoma — the most common type of brain cancer that affects children. This deadly disease arises from biological abnormalities in neural stem cells or neuronal precursors during the embryonic development of the child. The clinical challenges of treatment resistance and tumour recurrence in patients with medulloblastomas appear to be related to the presence of cancer stem cells within medulloblastoma tumours. Brazilian researchers working in the Cancer and Neurobiology Laboratory at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, UFRGS), its university hospital (Hospital de Clinicas de Porto Alegre, HCPA), and the Children's Cancer Institute (Instituto do Cancer Infantil, ICI) in Porto Alegre, in collaboration with Canadian scientists working at the Hospital for Sick Children and the University of Toronto, analysed gene expression in medulloblastoma tumours from patients.

The deadly disease arises from biological abnormalities in neural stem cells or neuronal precursors during the embryonic development of the child. Clinical challenges of treatment resistance and tumour recurrence in patients appear to be related to the presence of cancer stem cells within medulloblastoma tumours. They demonstrated that all medulloblastoma tumour subtypes express two stem cell markers, namely the proto-oncogene protein BMI1 and the cell surface protein CD133. When DNA is in a tightly compacted chromatin state, the expression of genes that promote cell differentiation is reduced, thereby keeping cancer cells in a stem cell-like state. Accordingly, this team of researchers treated medulloblastoma cells with an epigenetic compound that inhibits histone deacetylase (HDAC) activity, leading to chromatin relaxation, and found that they could thereby reduce BMI1 and CD133 expression and hinder tumour cell viability. Further analysis of tumour samples revealed that the expression of these "stemness" markers appeared to be associated with the activity of the mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK)/ERK intracellular signalling pathway. To test the importance of MAPK/ERK signalling in carcinogenesis, the researchers examined the effects of inhibiting MAPK/ERK in medulloblastoma cells. They found that MAPK/ERK inhibition reduced the cellular content of stemness markers and decreased cancer stem cell formation in culture. Importantly, these anti-tumour effects were potentiated when the tumour cells were exposed to HDAC inhibitors and MAPK/ERK inhibitors at the same time. According to the lead author of the article reporting these findings, Dr Mariane da Cunha Jaeger, "these findings suggest that combining HDAC and MAPK/ERK inhibitors may be a novel and effective approach to preventing medulloblastoma cell proliferation by altering the tumour stem cell phenotype". The study findings will be reported in an upcoming issue of the *Journal of Molecular Neuroscience*. — ANI

Omega 3 supplements do not protect against cancer, finds new study

Washington, Feb. 29: A new research has shown that supplements based on Omega-3 fats do not have a protective effect against cancer and could even potentially increase the chances of its onset, albeit marginally. Consumption of omega 3 fats is widely promoted globally because of a common belief that it will protect against, or even reverse, diseases such as cancer, heart attacks and stroke. According to two systematic reviews carried out by researchers from the University of East Anglia, omega 3 supplements might only lead to a slight reduction in coronary heart disease mortality and events, but they can marginally increase the risk of prostate cancer. However, both beneficial and harmful effects are small. Simply put, the findings say that if 1,000 people took omega 3 supplements for around four years, three people would avoid dying from heart disease, six people would avoid a coronary event (such as a heart attack) and three extra people would develop prostate cancer. The sister systematic reviews are published today in the *British Journal of Cancer* and the *Cochrane*

Database of Systematic Reviews. Omega 3 is a type of fat. Small amounts are essential for good health and can be found in the food that we eat including nuts and seeds and fatty fish, such as salmon. Omega 3 fats are also readily available as over-the-counter supplements and they are widely bought and used. The research team looked at 47 trials involving adults who didn't have cancer, who were at increased risk of cancer, or had a previous cancer diagnosis, and 86 trials with evidence on cardiovascular events or deaths. More than 100,000 participants were randomised to consume more long-chain omega-3 fats (fish oils), or maintain their usual intake, for at least a year for each of the reviews. They studied the number of people who died, received a new diagnosis of cancer, heart attack or stroke and/or died of any of the diseases. Lead author Dr Lee Hooper, from UEA's Norwich Medical School, said: "Our previous research has shown that long-chain omega 3 supplements, including fish oils, do not protect against conditions such as anxiety, depression, stroke, diabetes or death." — ANI

Antioxidant dose doesn't improve male fertility

Washington, Feb. 29: In recent study researchers have found that antioxidant supplements do not improve semen quality among men with infertility. Antioxidant supplements are commercially available to help treat male infertility, but research on its effects on semen quality and rates of pregnancy and live birth are limited. The study published in *Fertility and Sterility* also found that antioxidant sup-

plements likely do not improve pregnancy and live birth rates. The new study reports on results from the Males, Antioxidants, and Infertility Trial (MOXI), a double-blind, randomised, placebo-controlled clinical study conducted at nine sites across the United States. The study enrolled 171 couples where the male partner had at least one abnormal reading on an

mal fertility test results. Men received a placebo or an antioxidant supplement containing vitamins C, E and D, selenium, l-carnitine, zinc, folic acid and lycopene for at least three months and up to six months. MOXI was supported by NICHD's Reproductive Medicine Network. The study team found no statistically significant differences in sperm concentration, mobility, shape and DNA quality; the female partners had nor-

DNA quality between the placebo and antioxidant groups after three months. Furthermore, live birth rates did not seem to differ at six months between the antioxidant (15 per cent) and placebo (24 per cent) groups. However, the authors note that per the study design, recruitment was stopped before it reached the desired number of participants because no benefits were seen in the antioxidant group. — ANI

After obesity surgery, more patients returning for another

New York, Feb. 29: As more Americans turn to surgery to lose weight, more of them are also returning for a second operation because the first isn't working. Last year, an estimated 15% of the 252,000 obesity surgeries in the US came after a previous surgery. That compares to 6% of the 158,000 surgeries in 2011, according to a surgeons' group. Weight loss surgery has proven to be an effective way to treat obesity and related conditions like diabetes. Methods vary, but the operations generally shrink the stomach to limit how much people can eat without feeling sick. Many people achieve significant weight loss but results aren't assured: It's still possible to overeat, restrictive devices can slip and stomachs can stretch back out and patients can regain weight over time. That was the case for Kerrie Dutton, who had her first surgery four years ago. At first, Dutton said she couldn't eat much without feeling sick, as expect-

ed. She quickly dropped about 100 of her 320 pounds. Then gradually, her stomach started stretching, and she was able to eat more again. "Going into the second year, I noticed that my weight was creeping up pretty quick," said the 29-year-old Dutton, who lives on New York's Long Island. Dutton's first operation was a newer procedure that cuts away part of the stomach and leaves a narrow sleeve-like pouch. In October, she ended up converting to a more established surgery that reduces the stomach substantially more. In the US, guidelines generally reserve weight loss surgery for the severely obese — people with a body mass index of 40 or higher — or those with a BMI of 35 and over who have a related health problem like diabetes or high blood pressure. And the obesity problem in the US isn't getting better. About 4 in 10 American adults are obese and nearly 1 in 10 are severely obese, according to the latest survey by government researchers.



The American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery doesn't provide a breakdown on which procedures are leading to subsequent operations. Dr John Morton, a past president of the group and surgeon at the Yale School of Medicine, said it's primarily patients who got an adjustable and removable band that restricts the size of the stomach. The band's popularity in the US has waned significantly over the years. ReShape Lifesciences, a medical

device company that bought the Lap-Band system in 2018, said it doesn't believe removal of its bands has been fuelling second surgeries. Dr Mark Watson, who does banding at UT Southwestern Medical Centre in Dallas, said another surgery could be avoided with proper care of the band, which may need adjustment to work. Contributing to the growing number of returning patients is the sleeve, which now accounts for 61% of US procedures. Surgeons say many patients opt for the sleeve because it seems less complicated and less drastic than the bypass, which staples the stomach into a small pouch and shortens the intestinal tract. Some surgeons are beginning to acknowledge the sleeve may not be the best option for some, such as those who are severely obese. "It's been too broadly applied," said Dr Stacy Brethauer, a Columbus, Ohio, surgeon and former president of the American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery, which tracks trends in procedures. Since the sleeve is relatively new,

Here's how curb on calories may increase lifespan



Los Angeles, Feb. 29: Restricting food-calorie intake may help reduce levels of inflammation throughout the body, delay the onset of age-related diseases, and increase lifespan, according to a study which provides the most detailed report to date of the cellular effects of a calorie-restricted diet in rats. While the benefits of caloric restriction have been widely studied, the new results, published in the journal *Cell*, showed how it protects against ageing by shedding light on the chemical processes happening at the cell-level under the diet. "We already knew that calorie restriction increases life span, but now we've shown all the changes that occur at a single-cell level to cause that," said Juan Carlos Izpisua Belmonte, study senior author from the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in the US. "This gives us targets that we may eventually be able to act on with drugs to treat ageing in humans," Belmonte said. The researchers said caloric restriction has been shown in animal models to be one of the most effective interventions against age-related diseases like cancer, dementia, and diabetes. Although scientists know that individual cells undergo many changes as an organism ages, they have not known how caloric restriction might influence these changes, the study noted. In the current research, Belmonte and his team compared rats which ate 30 per cent fewer calories with those on normal diets. They said the animals' diets were controlled from age 18 months through 27 months. Belmonte and his team isolated and analysed a total of 1,68,703 cells from 40 cell types in the 56 rats at both the start and the conclusion of the diet. These cells came from fat tissues, liver, kidney, aorta, skin, bone marrow, brain and muscle, they said. The researchers then used single-cell genetic-sequencing technology to measure the activity levels of different genes in each of these cells. They also assessed the overall composition of cell types within the tissues, and also compared old and young mice on each diet. According to the study, many of the changes that occurred as rats on the normal diet grew older didn't occur in the rodents on a restricted diet. The scientists said even in old age, many of the tissues and cells of animals on the diet closely resembled those of young rats. About 57 per cent of the age-related changes in cell composition seen in the tissues of rats on a normal diet were not present in the rats on the calorie restricted diet, they added. "This approach not only told us the effect of calorie restriction on these cell types, but also provided the most complete and detailed study of what happens at a single-cell level during ageing," said co-corresponding author Guang-Hui Liu from Chinese Academy of Sciences. Some of the cells and genes most affected by the diet were related to immunity, inflammation, and fat metabolism, the researchers said. According to the scientists, the number of immune cells in nearly every tissue studied dramatically increased as control rats aged, but was not affected by age in rats with restricted calories. They said in brown adipose tissue — one type of fat tissue — a calorie-restricted diet reverted the expression levels of many anti-inflammatory genes to those seen in young animals. "The primary discovery in the current study is that the increase in the inflammatory response during ageing could be systematically repressed by caloric restriction" said study co-author Jing Qu from the Chinese Academy of Sciences. — PTI

A controversial defence minister gets a fair reckoning



Ajith Pillai
review

Biographers tend to be unduly sympathetic towards their subject. But Congress politician and former Union minister, Jairam Ramesh, in his avatar as a chronicler, cannot be found guilty of donning hagiographic bifocals while unravelling the jigsaw puzzle called V.K. Krishna Menon. As he notes in the introduction of *A Chequered Brilliance: The Many Lives of V.K. Krishna Menon*, the subject of his biography was a multi-layered character much admired and equally despised. The sum of all the parts that made this rather controversial individual is what Ramesh captures through his book.

Given the luxury of 725 pages by his publishers, the author has had the space to explore Menon's life in considerable detail. And in this exercise Ramesh has been helped by archival material including copious notes and documents preserved in Delhi's Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. Also, the several letters exchanged between Jawaharlal Nehru and Krishna Menon before and after Independence was a valuable resource in exploring the latter's role in the freedom struggle as well as in the nascent Indian government.

As Ramesh points out at the outset, those who disliked Menon and his dismissive and abrasive ways had rather uncharitable things to say about him. He was variously referred to as "Rasputin", "Mephistopheles, Lucifer, Svengali, Evil Genius... the World's Most hated Diplomat and Sombre Porcupine". But for those who knew the other Krishna Menon he was Jawaharlal Nehru's intellectual "soulmate and sounding board" between 1935 and 1964. He also

Ramesh's discovery of V.K. Krishna Menon (1896-1974) is not only a delightful look at the latter's chequered journey from Calicut to London but also a study of the personalities and movements in England that helped India in its struggle for Independence

campaigns vigorously for India's Independence in the West, particularly in Britain, where he mobilised opinion against the Raj among political parties, parliamentarians, trade unions, literary figures and the media. And this he did doggedly for almost three decades.

After India's Independence, Menon continued to be in the headlines for both the right and wrong reasons. Thus, he had a key role in the Korean armistice of 1953 and for defusing tensions between US and China in 1955. His record-breaking speech in the UN in 1957 — lasting eight hours — elucidating India's position on Kashmir is often remembered as Menon's crowning diplomatic achievement.

However, brickbats followed soon after the accolades. He was humiliated and disgraced for his role as defence minister between April 1957 and his eventual resignation on October 31, 1962. The debacle in the Sino-Indian conflict that happened during his charge is often attributed to Menon's inept and insensitive handling of the defence ministry as well as the armed forces.

The turn of events that led up to the Chinese war reveals the low morale within the armed forces at that time. Indeed, the era was marked by much bad blood in the

higher echelons of the three services over appointment of favourites of the defence minister to top posts. Matters finally came to a head when then Army Chief, General K.S. Thimayya, submitted his resignation in 1959 but was persuaded by Nehru to stay on till his term concluded in 1961.

However, issues raised in Thimayya's resignation letter pertaining to Krishan Menon's conduct were scooped by the *Statesman's* "political correspondent". The sensational story not only created a furore in Parliament but led to MPs demanding Menon's resignation from the cabinet. Interestingly, opposition to the defence minister also came from within his own Congress Party.

But how did the Army Chief's letter addressed to the Prime Minister leak to the media within hours of it being delivered? Ramesh's book offers this information: "For over five years the *Statesman* had a military correspondent who wrote on defence matters from time to time. This correspondent was no journalist really. He was none other than J.N. Chaudhuri, a top Army officer whose articles would appear occasionally under the byline 'By Our Military Correspondent'... My conclusion is that Chaudhuri was in the loop on Thimayya's resignation and instead of writing the story himself, passed it on to the paper's political correspondent."

The damage was done. From then on Krishna Menon became the target of persistent political attack. Indeed, such were the misgivings about the armed forces that in January 1961 there were rumours that a disgruntled army led by Thimayya may well stage a coup leading to a military takeover. According to then principal defence secretary S.S. Khera,

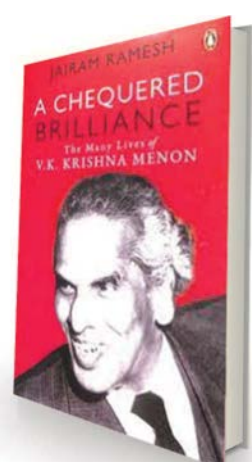
this "news" even reached Nehru and home minister Govind Ballabh Pant. Speculation was rife that January 30 — the anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination — was the day when the Army would strike. Thimayya's order to move a division from Ambala to Delhi had apparently fuelled the rumours.

This and other nuggets find their way into Ramesh's work which is not wanting in detail. One delightful aspect that is recorded in depth is the intellectual bonding and ideological camaraderie that existed between Jawaharlal Nehru and Krishna Menon. In fact, the latter, despite his brilliance, would not have flourished but for the trust reposed in him by the former.

As for Menon, not many would know that he was regarded as "brilliant" when he attended the London School of Economics by none other than Professor Harold Laski, noted economist and political theorist who went on to serve as the chairman of the British Labour Party. Neither is it widely known that Menon was among the three who launched Penguin Books in 1936, and that he was the first editor of its non-fiction imprint, Pelican. Among the books published under his editorship was Bernard Shaw's *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism & Fascism* and Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo*.

More than anything else, Jairam Ramesh's discovery of V.K. Krishna Menon (1896-1974) is not only a delightful look at the latter's chequered journey from Calicut to London but also a study of the personalities and movements in England that helped India in its struggle for Independence.

The writer is a Delhi-based author and journalist



A CHEQUERED BRILLIANCE: THE MANY LIVES OF V.K. KRISHNA MENON

By Jairam Ramesh
Penguin Viking, ₹999

A Murshidabad manor tells a protofeminist tale



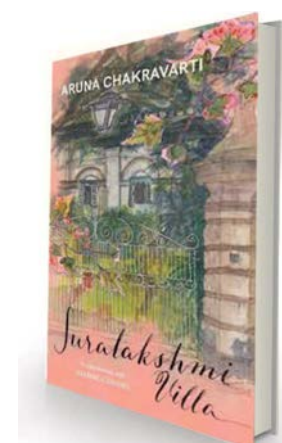
Kushalrani Gulab
review

That's how evocative this book is: unconsciously evocative actually, because history is merely the backdrop of the story, though without it the book would be meaningless. *Suralakshmi Villa* swings back, forth and sideways in time between the 1930s and the 1990s through the lives of several people over several generations, all centred on and around Dr Suralakshmi Chaudhury, the woman who owns the villa named for her by her parents.

Suralakshmi's mother, Lakshmi, was extraordinarily ahead of her pre-Independence times. When her oldest daughter was widowed at the age of 16, Lakshmi insisted that none of her five daughters would be forced into an arranged marriage. They would make their own decisions about everything: careers, marriage, children.

Much later, in a village that was once the capital of the Goud kingdom of Bengal, four girls live in

the stinking ruins of a palace that has become a tenement for poor



SURALAKSHMI VILLA

By Aruna Chakravarti
Picador India, ₹650

Muslims. None of the women here have agency over their own lives; they are mere possessions. Sexually abused by her father, Eidun is whisked to safety and a career in nursing by Suralakshmi after a botched abortion, but Jeeni is married off within a day at the age of 11 to save her from the same fate. Meroo is married to the village barber who treats her like dirt and unattractive Ojju, still unmarried at 21, takes out her frustration on her mother, Ruksana, a woman soaked in misery thanks to the many still-born babies to her name.

At other times and other places in the novel, you meet Kingshuk, the son Suralakshmi abandoned. Pratul, Suralakshmi's cousin who had been rescued by her father from a life of small-mindedness and neglect in his village joint family, and Tara, the daughter of a judge, who marries Pratul and becomes

Suralakshmi's best friend. There are lots of other people, each with some role to play in and around Suralakshmi's life — not to mention Suralakshmi Villa itself, which picks up the story of our heroine whenever her family and friends have no explanation for what goes on in Suralakshmi's head.

The only person you seldom hear from directly in this novel is Suralakshmi herself. This means that, like the characters in the book, you get no privileges in your understanding of Suralakshmi other than what the villa has to say. But you don't really need to know Suralakshmi well. You just need to know that *Suralakshmi Villa* is an unusual and understated novel that will one day creep into your dreams.

Kushalrani Gulab is a freelance editor and writer who dreams of being a *sanyasi* by the sea

Less than halfway through Aruna Chakravarti's *Suralakshmi Villa*, you realise the book will haunt you. You know that years later, you will wake from a deep afternoon nap on a sticky summer day, trying frantically to recall when you visited Murshidabad and wondering why your brain can only dredge up scraps of an afternoon at the ruins of the Goud palace in Malda, when it will suddenly strike you that you've never visited these places, only read about them in a book.



Venezuelan journalist Ariana Neumann's first book, a memoir describing her father, Hans Neumann's extraordinary wartime existence, as a Czech Jew moving freely throughout Berlin is the talk of the reading circle. *When Time Stopped: A Memoir of My Father's War and What Remains* (Simon & Schuster) is a chillingly sad reconstruction of the Holocaust, from the point of view of one family, seen through a daughter's eyes.



Being a wannabe, being a writer, being a bit or a lot of both



Neha Bhatt
review

In the thick of the lit-fest season, when literary folk enjoy a spot in the sun, Namita Gokhale's metafictional novel examining the thorny writing life comes as a marvellously timely read. *Jaipur Journals* is set in the annual Jaipur Literature Festival, in and around the venue The Diggi Palace, offering both a delicious ring-side view and behind-the-scenes glimpses of "the greatest literary show on earth". It works because it taps, ever so gently, into the messy lives of the lonely and somewhat mysterious tribe of writers, with delightful insights and enough drama to make it worthy of a cinematic dramedy. Perhaps some day?

In *Jaipur Journals*, multiple stories and perspectives are linked into a single narrative, with a quirky set of characters colliding, as it were, at the literature festival. As co-founder of the Jaipur Literature Festival, Gokhale has obviously seen it all up close: the authors and their devoted audience, the literary squabbles and the schmoozing, the panels and the parties, the hyperbole and the hypocrisy, the sparks on stage and drama off stage. To her credit, Gokhale writes this novel with a gaze that is remarkably dispassionate, throwing open a literary cocoon to artful scrutiny, revealing, layer by layer, the many inse-

curities and vulnerabilities of the people that populate it. At the centre of the book is the 70-something "failed novelist" Rudrani Rana, who carries around with her her life's most precious creation: the manuscript of her "private masterpiece" titled UNSUBMITTED. Haunted by her past and painfully guarded about her future, Rana is fearful of sending out into the world the very book she has devoted herself to. On the train to Jaipur, she meets a writer as young as she is old: 12-year-old Anura, who's attending the festival for a Young Adult session, invited to read from her self-published book of dystopian fiction. Rana, meanwhile, is a festival regular and something of a truth-teller: "This was her third year now, and she knew her way around the crowds,

she knew how to tell the speakers what she thought of them, how to debunk their hubris, bring them back down to earth." And just like that, both writers, one weary and wise, the other curious and hopeful, are linked instantly in ways more than they will ever know.

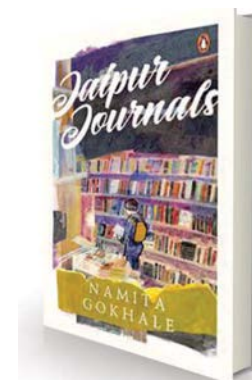
Through the lens of the popular literature festival, Gokhale pries open the politics of the literary world to look at not just the writing life, but our collective contemporary concerns — rising hatred, jarring jingoism, widening polarities, blurring boundaries — and how we engage with them in literature and in life. How do we make sense of it all, within and outside of the writing community?

Largely unfolding over five days of the festival, the narrative moves between private and public spaces where the carefully arranged masks come off briefly: the colourful tents that host the panel discussions, the author's lounge and the press terrace, the posh hotel rooms occupied by the speakers and the humbler guesthouses by the attendees, the saucy parties and the pink city's tourist hubs.

The charming and familiar setting helps build the novel into a piece of well-observed-and-for-the-moment social commentary, as a string of incidents set off in motion certain life changing events. We meet the mysterious

Betaab, a poet and thief who has a moment on the dance floor where he steals the evening singing Faiz Ahmad Faiz's *Bol ki lab azaad hain tere* to thunderous applause. We run into the fiery feminist icon, the gender fluid writer Zoya Mankotia who begins to question what she stands for after she receives an anonymous letter accusing her of "intellectual pretensions". We follow academic and aspiring novelist Gayatri Smyth Gandhi's messy romantic and professional pursuits at the festival. And we fall for the kind and passionate Anirban M, a graphic crossover artist who befriends Rudrani Rana, she who seems like the odd one out, worthy of the centerstage but hovering on the margins. These are characters feel lived in with solid backstories, although some of the other quieter characters and their subplots feel a bit underdeveloped. Even so, in the middle of a month that carries with it a heaviness that is all too pervasive, I was grateful for *Jaipur Journals* — to dip into it felt reassuring, its world familiar yet with depths untold, as it reminded me that the writerly life, though lonely, holds so much life, even in death.

Neha Bhatt is an independent journalist and book critic based in Delhi. She tweets @nehabhatt70 and @bookishbadish on insta.



JAIPUR JOURNALS
by Namita Gokhale
Penguin, ₹499

WE RECOMMEND

The Welsh National Opera's *Migrations*, a series of six stories exploring migration from different angles, is composed by Will Todd and opens on October 3, 2020. Shreya Sen-Handley (*Memoirs of My Body, Strange*) is one of the six writers, and the first South Asian woman to have written a libretto for an international opera. She focusses on the experiences of the first Indian doctors in Britain.

Other than Jeet Thayil and Amit Chaudhuri, not so many Indian/Asian writers of either sex have had an opportunity to write international opera. Jeet Thayil is the author of the libretto for the opera, *Babur*, commissioned by Opera Group,

UK, with music by Edward Rushton. The world premiere of *Babur* took place in Switzerland in 2012. Shreya Sen-Handley

Amit Chaudhuri made his Royal Opera debut in 2016/17 as librettist for Ravi Shankar's *Sukanya*, which received its posthumous premiere in a co-production between The Royal Opera, London Philharmonic Orchestra and Curve, Leicester.

Shreya may very well be the third notable librettist. Effectively then, it is three cheers for Shreya Sen-Handley! Way to go, Shreya!



Shreya Sen-Handley

IN BRIEF

DR Congo: Militia fighters kill 24

Bunia (DR Congo): Militia fighters in Democratic Republic of Congo killed 24 people and injured 12 others, a local official said Saturday, the latest bout of unrest in the violence-wracked north-eastern province of Ituri. The killings took place late Friday in the province, where some 700 people have died since a surge in communal violence in 2017. The government on Friday signed a peace deal with one of the local armed groups, the FRPI (Patriotic Resistance Forces in Ituri), who have been active in the area for two decades.

Fire: Paris station partly evacuated

Paris: Paris police reported a fire Friday near the Gare de Lyon train station, which was partially evacuated amid violent protests against a Congolese singer due to give a concert nearby. "Avoid the area and allow the emergency services to intervene," the police said on Twitter, adding later the fire had been brought under control and was "being extinguished." Police said they had intervened to stop protesters who set alight garbage bins and scooters, releasing a thick, black smoke cloud over the city centre. The police on Twitter reported "unacceptable violence by people who have violated the ban on protesting on the sidelines of a concert". It posted a video of what it said was "scandalous behaviour" by protesters shown wielding large roadworks barriers to prevent firefighters from getting to the blaze.

Pak: 20 killed as train, bus collide

Karachi: A horrific collision between a speeding train and a passenger bus at an unmanned crossing killed at least 20 people, including children, and left scores injured in Pakistan's southern Sindh province, officials said. The accident took place on Friday at the Kandhra railway crossing, near the Rohri railway station in the province, when the '45 Up Pakistan Express' train coming from Rawalpindi towards Karachi collided with the passenger bus. Sukkur Commissioner Shafiq Ahmed Mahesar confirmed that at least 20 people, including children, died in the incident, adding that the casualties could rise as the condition of several of the injured was critical. "We have shifted at least 60 injured people to hospitals in Rohri and Sukkur," he said. "The bus, carrying more than 50 passengers, was going from Sukkur to Punjab," senior Sukkur police official Jamil Ahmed said. "It was a horrible accident. So strong was the impact of the train hitting the bus that it was split into three parts," he said. The bus was dragged around 150-200 feet by the train, Ahmed said.

MUHYIDDIN IS MALAYSIA PM, MAHATHIR OUT

Kuala Lumpur, Feb. 29: Malaysia's Mahathir Mohamad lost a power struggle Saturday with a little-known ex-interior minister to be the country's new prime minister in a shock twist that will return a scandal-plagued party to power. Muhyiddin Yassin will be sworn in on Sunday, royal officials said, after a week of turmoil that followed the collapse of a reformist government and Mahathir's resignation as premier.

"The process to appoint the prime minister cannot be delayed because the country needs a government for the well-being of the people and the nation," a palace statement said.

The king appoints the premier, and rival candidates had this week been seeking to show they commanded majority support from MPs. As well as ending the premiership of Mahathir, at 94 the world's oldest leader, it means there will be little hope of his designated successor Anwar Ibrahim becoming prime minister. Muhyiddin's coalition is dominated by the multi-ethnic country's Muslim majority, and includes the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the scandal-plagued party of disgraced ex-leader Najib Razak.

Anti-Putin protest



An opposition supporter carries a placard depicting Russian President Vladimir Putin during a march in memory of murdered Kremlin critic Boris Nemtsov in downtown Moscow on Saturday. Thousands rallied in central Moscow to call on President Vladimir Putin not to stay in power indefinitely, in the first major protest by the Russian opposition since the Kremlin chief announced controversial plans to change the Constitution. The rally marked five years since the assassination of opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, but its organisers also want the event to send a message to Putin after he proposed major constitutional changes. — AFP

John Ratcliffe is new Intel chief

Washington, Feb. 29: US President Donald Trump announced Republican lawmaker John Ratcliffe as his intelligence chief Friday, sparking fresh controversy over a crucial position that has lacked a permanent office holder for months. The 53-year-old Trump loyalist was nominated as director of national intelligence after Dan Coats stepped down in July last year, but withdrew from consideration after strong criticism of his credentials from Democrats and a tepid response from key Republicans. Trump instead named counterterrorism expert Joseph McGuire as acting director, overseeing the 17 agencies of the intelligence community including the CIA and National Security Agency. But he forced McGuire out on February 20 after a senior intelligence official told Congress in a closed briefing that the Russians were again supporting Trump's bid for re-election. The revolving door continued to spin as Trump appointed another loyalist, Richard Grenell, two weeks ago. But the former ambassador to Germany had no relevant experience and was viewed as highly political. Some intelligence experts view the latest nomination as a tactic by Trump to ensure that Grenell stays on beyond the statutory limit for "acting" directors who haven't been approved by the Senate.

Trump's 'Remain in Mexico' policy blocked: A federal appeals court on Friday blocked a key asylum policy of Donald Trump's administration which has forced many applicants to wait in Mexico while their claims are processed, delivering a blow to the US president's signature crackdown on migration at the southern border. The policy, known as "Remain in Mexico", has been used to send tens of thousands of asylum seekers from Central America back to Mexico, but was placed on hold by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco. The court ruled that the policy "is invalid in its entirety" under US law concerning migrant rights and UN refugee protocols, and should be blocked "in its entirety". — AFP

McGahn had been called last year to testify in the impeachment investigation of Trump, particularly on allegations that Trump illegally obstructed the Russia political interference probe. But McGahn refused to appear on Trump's instruction, with the White House citing Trump's executive privileges. The issue provoked a rare constitutional showdown in which the judiciary was asked to rule on the power struggle between the two other branches of government — the executive and legislative. — AFP

PRISON | WRITER

Politics today is nothing more than a collective swindle, says Demirtas

Jailed Kurdish leader's books fly off shelves

Istanbul, Feb. 29: He may be languishing in jail but with his books flying off the shelves, Kurdish politician Selahattin Demirtas has joined an illustrious line of Turkish prison writers. A former presidential candidate and persistent thorn in the side of Turkey's current leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Demirtas has spent more than three years in jail and faces up to 142 years more if convicted of ties to Kurdish militants, which he denies. "I am engaged in a major battle of wills because I am a political prisoner and this is motivating me to expose my creativity," Demirtas said in written responses sent to agencies through his lawyers from his cell in western Edirne city. Despite the possible sentence hanging over him he has found some consolation in his ever-growing number of readers as sales of his books, written in Turkish, reach into the hundreds of thousands. His first book, *Seher* (Dawn), was published in 2017—a collection of short stories that contain glimpses into daily lives of ordinary people including women characters whose voices often go unheard. It has turned into a runaway success, translated into 16 languages with 240,000 copies printed. Demirtas has followed up with another short story collection "Devran", and now a full novel, "Leylan". "I would without hesitation choose literature" over politics, Demirtas he said. **Naive:** The charismatic politician, who founded and led the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), was once nicknamed the "Kurdish Obama" by some admirers for his rhetorical skills. But the 46-year-old former lawyer was detained in the sweeping crackdown that followed a failed coup in July 2016, which Erdogan's critics say was used as a pretext to remove opponents and civil society activists. "Today politics is nothing more than a collective swindle. We are jailed because my friends and I are not involved in this fraud ring" Demirtas said. "Literature is, however, a more naive, cleaner domain," he said, where "every reader is at least free to make his own decisions". — AFP

Intra-Afghan talks by Mar. 10

It will be first face-to-face meet of the representatives since the 9/11 attack

Washington, Feb. 29: The intra-Afghan peace talks, involving representatives from the Afghan government, the Taliban and various other groups, will be held in Norway's capital Oslo by March 10, officials here said on Saturday, as the US signed a landmark agreement with the Taliban in Doha to bring peace in the war-torn country. This will be probably for the first time since the 9/11 attacks that the representative of a duly elected Afghan government and the Taliban would be meeting face-to-face for peace talks. "The parties will be meeting in Oslo. That negotiation will kick off as soon as each of the various components of that can get their negotiators to Oslo. We certainly expect it to be in the first half of March. — PTI

- **THE TALIBAN SAID** on Saturday that they had ordered a complete one-day halt to attacks in Afghanistan ahead of the signing of a historic deal to withdraw American troops.
- **THE US HAS** committed to make an initial reduction in its forces in Afghanistan to 8,600 as part of its agreement with the Taliban.
- **THE UNITED STATES** "will not hesitate to nullify" its historic deal with the Taliban if the insurgents renege on their security guarantees and commitment to hold talks with the Afghan government, US Defense Secretary Mark Esper said Saturday.
- **NATO CHIEF JENS Stoltenberg** was in Afghanistan on Saturday for meetings with officials as he was to participate in a Kabul media conference, the NATO statement said.

UK Home office chief Philip quits

London, Feb. 29: The top civil servant in the UK Home Office at the centre of a row over a strained relationship with Indian-origin Home Secretary Priti Patel resigned from his post on Saturday and said he plans to sue the government over his "constructive and unfair" exit. Philip Rutnam, Permanent Secretary in the department led by 47-year-old Patel, said there had been a vicious and orchestrated campaign against him over the last 10 days and pointed the finger of blame at the minister. The Home Secretary (Patel) categorically denied any involvement in this campaign to the Cabinet Office. I regret I do not believe her, he said in a statement. Even despite this campaign, I was willing to effect a reconciliation with the Home Secretary, as requested by the Cabinet Secretary on behalf of the Prime Minister. But despite my efforts to engage with her, Priti Patel has made no effort to engage with me to discuss this, the statement said. Rutnam said his experience formed part of a wider pattern in



Philip Rutnam

government and that he plans to take legal action on the grounds of constructive dismissal. I believe that these events give me very strong grounds to claim constructive, unfair dismissal, and I will be pursuing that claim in the courts. My experience has been extreme, but I consider there is evidence that it was part of a wider pattern of behaviour, his statement adds. The resignation comes just days after he and Patel had issued a joint statement in an effort to quell media reports of discord within the Home Office. The Home Secretary and Permanent Secretary are deeply concerned about the number of false allegations appearing in the media, a UK Home Office spokesperson said on Monday. — PTI

India says it will back agreement

New Delhi, Feb. 29: In a guarded reaction to the peace deal between the US and the Taliban, India on Saturday said its consistent policy has been to support all opportunities that can bring peace, security and stability in Afghanistan and ensure end of terrorism. External Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Raveesh Kumar said India will continue to extend all support to the Afghanistan as a contiguous neighbour, in a clear reference that the Pakistan-occupied-Kashmir belongs to India. After months of negotiations, the US and Taliban signed a landmark peace deal in Qatari capital Doha on Saturday, effectively drawing curtains to the United States' 18-year war in Afghanistan since 2001. India's Ambassador to Qatar P Kumaran was among a host of diplomats present at the ceremony where the deal was inked. — PTI

Turkey destroyed a 'chemical warfare facility' in Syria: Official

Istanbul, Feb. 29: A Turkish official said Saturday that Turkey destroyed a chemical warfare facility after dozens of its soldiers were killed by Syrian regime fire in the last-rebel enclave of Idlib province. The Turkish army destroyed overnight "a chemical warfare facility, located some 13 kilometres south of Aleppo, along with a large number of other regime targets," the senior official told reporters on condition of anonymity. However, the Syrian Rights, which relies on sources inside the war-torn country, said that Turkey instead hit a military airport in eastern Aleppo, where the monitoring group says there are no chemical weapons. Thirty-three Turkish soldiers were killed in an air strike by Russian-backed Syrian regime forces in the Idlib region on Thursday, the biggest Turkish military loss on the battlefield in recent years. The latest incident has raised further tensions between Ankara and Moscow, whose relationship has been tested by violations of a 2018 deal to prevent a regime offensive on Idlib. As part of the agreement, Ankara set up 12 observation posts in the province but Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces — backed by Russian air power — have pressed on with a relentless campaign to take back the region. — AFP



Migrants wait to pass the buffer zone the Turkey-Greece border at Pazarkule, in Edirne district on Saturday. — AFP

WHALE OF A TIME FOR BERNIE LOOK-ALIKE

Los Angeles, Feb. 29: Up until a few years ago, Jeff Jones was going about his life, minding his own business and enjoying his passion for music. Then Bernie Sanders burst onto the national political stage, prompting many to do double takes on seeing Jones, who bears a striking resemblance to the Democratic presidential candidate. "Around 2015, people started asking if anyone told me I looked 'sorta like' Bernie Sanders," Jones, who wears glasses and sports a tuft of white hair like Sanders, said at a recent rally in California for the Vermont senator. "This happened so often that my youngest daughter Robin suggested I make an 'I am not Bernie' shirt as a gag." With Sanders riding high in the polls for the presidential nomination, Jones, who lives in Los Angeles, has been making much use of his "I am not Bernie" shirt as he attends rallies for the candidate, gladly posing for pictures with wide-eyed voters. When asked, Jones, who at 77 is a year younger than his doppelgänger, even manages to imitate Sanders' demeanor, hunching his shoulders, tousling his hair and lifting his arms as he scowls. "I'm a Bernie fan," says Jones, who was a registered Republican until the 2016 elections that saw Donald Trump win the presidency. He said he considers the resemblance to Sanders an "accident of nature" and is good-humored about it. "It's just a gag... and I've turned down requests to play Bernie characters and for shoots and this sort of thing," he said. — AFP

TURKISH TROOPS KILLED IN SYRIA ARTILLERY STRIKE

Ankara, Feb. 29: Turkey's Defense Ministry said one of its soldiers was killed and two were injured by Syrian government shelling, the latest fatality after 33 Turkish troops were killed in an airstrike in Syria earlier this week. The announcement late Friday also said Turkish forces hit Syrian government targets and a number of Syrian troops were neutralised. Syrian government forces have been on a weeklong offensive into Idlib province, the country's last rebel stronghold, which borders Turkey. Thousands of Turkish soldiers are deployed inside rebel-controlled areas of Idlib province. — AFP



A picture of Demirtas's publisher Emir Ali Turkmen says he has received threats from nationalists for publishing the jailed politician's books. — AFP

IN BRIEF

Qatar confirms 1st corona case

Doha: Qatar has confirmed its first case of coronavirus, state media reported Saturday, after a 36-year-old Qatari man who was evacuated to Doha from Iran tested positive. Qatar on Thursday repatriated a number of its citizens from Iran — which is battling the worst outbreak outside China — and confined them to a 14-day period of quarantine, the government said. The health ministry said the infected patient had been admitted to hospital. "This had been expected because of the virus's spread across the region and other countries, alongside the exponential increase in the number of cases," the health ministry said, according to the Qatar News Agency. Iran on Saturday reported nine new deaths from the novel coronavirus. — AFP

Kim's warning if virus hits N. Korea

Seoul: North Korean leader Kim Jong-un warned top party officials of "serious consequences" if they fail to prevent an outbreak of Covid-19 in the country, state media reported Saturday. The impoverished nation, with a weak and ill-equipped healthcare system, has closed its borders to prevent the spread of the disease into its territory. Kim told a meeting of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea that the fight against the virus was a "crucial state affair for the defence of the people" that required maximum discipline, according to the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA). "In case the infectious disease spreading beyond control finds its way into our country, it will entail serious consequences," KCNA quoted Kim as saying.

Bahrain threatens legal action

Dubai: Bahrain on Saturday threatened legal prosecution against travellers who came from Iran and hadn't been tested for the new Covid-19, and also barred public gatherings for two weeks as confirmed cases across the wider Mideast grew to over 520. The nation has shut down flights to halt the spread of the virus. Bahrain's Interior Ministry said in a statement that 2,292 people had come from Iran before the announcement of the outbreak there. The ministry "affirmed that the required legal proceedings would be taken against anyone who returned from Iran in February and didn't call to make appointments for the tests". It highlighted that preventing the outbreak of the infection is the responsibility of individuals and society as a whole.

Free transport in Luxembourg

Luxembourg: Luxembourg on Saturday became the first country in the world to offer free public transport, as the small and wealthy EU country tries to help less-well-off workers and reduce road traffic. Some cities have already taken similar measures. But the transport ministry said it was the first time such a decision covered an entire country. The free transport, flagged as "an important social measure", affects approximately 40 percent of households and is estimated to save each one around 100 euros per year. Transport workers were concerned about what impact it would have on their jobs. "We don't yet know what will happen to our positions, said a ticket seller.

Fourth origin unknown virus case in US

Heightens outbreak fears but Trump downplays risk, accuses Dems and press of stirring up hysteria

Los Angeles, Feb. 29: US health officials reported a fourth case of novel Covid-19 of unknown origin, indicating the disease was spreading in the country. The latest case is a boy under 18 in Washington State who tested "presumptive positive," local authorities said without releasing further details about the patient. He is currently in home isolation in Snohomish County. The high school he attends will be shut until March 3 while it is deep cleaned, the Washington State Department of Health said.

In neighbouring Oregon, authorities said Friday that an adult who had had contact with people at an elementary school had been hospitalised and was also considered "presumptive positive". The school will be closed until March 4 as it undergoes a deep clean, officials said, adding they would talk to employees and parents. Earlier Friday, Californian health authorities said an older woman was confirmed infected with unknown origin — the second such case in the northern part of the state.

"This new case indicates that there is evidence of community transmission but the extent is still not clear," said Sara Cody, director of public health for Santa Clara County. "What we know now is that is here, present at some level, but we still don't know to what degree," she added.

Dems' 'hoax': Prez The latest infections have heightened fears of an outbreak across the country. President Donald Trump, however, downplayed the risk in the US at a campaign rally in South Carolina, accusing Democrats and the press of stirring up hysteria. "We are preparing for the worst," he said. "My administration has taken the most aggressive action in modern history to prevent the spread of this illness in the United States."

He called the Covid-19 the Democrats' "new hoax." "The Democrats are politicising the Covid-19. They're politicising it," he said. "They don't have any clue. They can't even count their votes in Iowa." — AFP



Military vehicles spray disinfectant as part of preventive measures against the spread of the Covid-19, on a road near Dongdaegu railway station in Daegu, South Korea on Saturday. — AFP

MEETING OF SE ASIAN LEADERS POSTPONED

Washington, Feb. 29: The United States has postponed a meeting of leaders of southeast Asian nations that was set for Las Vegas in mid-March due to the spread of the Covid-19, a senior Trump administration official said Friday. President Donald Trump had invited the leaders of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations to meet in the US this year after he skipped their annual meeting last year, which was held in Thailand. Trump sent national security adviser Robert O'Brien to the meeting in his place. A senior Trump administration official said the US had consulted with its ASEAN partners before it made the difficult decision to postpone the meeting. — AP

With White House effort, states set to get test kits

Washington, Feb. 29: Federal health officials scrambled Friday to get Covid-19 testing up and running in every state, as the Trump administration signalled it may also involve a 70-year-old defence law to guarantee the availability of protective gear should the virus spread. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said two more Americans tested positive for the virus out of the group of quarantined passengers on the Diamond Princess cruise ship. The World Health Organisation upgraded the risk level from the virus to "very high" as it continued to spread around the globe. Two days after the White House abruptly shifted gears from President Don-

ald Trump's initial assurances of minimal US fallout to an all-out mobilisation under Vice President Mike Pence, the administration's messaging still wasn't completely seamless. Trump administration political appointees and non-partisan career government scientists both agree that the current risk to Americans is low, although that could quickly change. But some political officials are continuing to offer assurances that concerns will blow over soon, while the scientists are emphasising preparations for circumstances as yet unknown. "I acknowledge that this could change. I acknowledge the situation could deteriorate. I acknowledge the risks," White House economic adviser Larry Kudlow told reporters Friday. Later in the day Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell signalled that the central bank would cut interest rates to support the economy if needed. On Capitol Hill, lawmakers of both parties are working on a spending bill to be unveiled early next week and expected to be two to three times more than the \$2.5 billion the White House had requested for anti-virus efforts. Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar called attention to the breadth of options under consideration, telling reporters the administration may invoke the 1950 Defence Production Act to ensure production of needed supplies for anti-virus effort. — AP

Washington, Feb. 29: Health officials reported the first US drug shortage tied to the viral outbreak that is disrupting production in China, but they declined to identify the manufacturer or the product. The Food and Drug Administration said late Thursday that the drug's maker recently contacted officials about the shortage, which it blamed on a manufacturing issue with the medicine's key ingredient. Regulators stressed that alternative medicines are available to treat patients. The FDA previously said it had reached out to 180 drug manufacturers and asked them to check their supply chain and report any potential disruptions. The agency also said it had identified 20 drugs produced or sourced exclusively from China, but it declined to name them. "The FDA has good reason to not release names of drugs facing potential shortages," said Rosemary Gibson, writer of the book "China Rx" on that nation's role in American health care. "People might rush to buy it and that would create a worse situation," said Gibson, a senior adviser at

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bioethics research group The Hastings Center. "In the context of shortages globally, you have to be very careful. More than 83,000 Covid-19 cases have been reported worldwide, nearly 79,000 of them in China. Government officials there have severely restricted travel and imposed strict quarantine measures to try and stop the virus from spreading. Restrictions on movement of people and goods have been imposed by at least 90 nations, and that's disrupting flow of drugs and raw materials." — NICOLETTE LOUISAINT executive director, Healthcare Ready

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US issues curbs on travel to Italy

Washington, Feb. 29: The US government advised Americans to reconsider travel to Italy due to the spread of a new virus is the final blow to the nation's tourism industry, the head of Italy's hotel federation said Saturday. "A US government advisory urging Americans to reconsider travel to Italy due to the spread of a new virus is the final blow to the nation's tourism industry, the head of Italy's hotel federation said Saturday. "sustained community spread" of the virus there. More than 5.6 million Americans visited Italy in 2018, the second highest of all nationalities after Germans. — AFP

S Korea reports 813 more cases

Seoul, Feb. 29: South Korea confirmed 813 more Covid-19 cases on Saturday, the biggest increase to date for the country and taking the national total to 3,150 infections with four additional deaths. Authorities also reported the country's first case of reinfection — a 73-year-old woman who tested positive for a second time after her recovery and release from hospital last week. The illness recurred "as her immune system had declined," said Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC) official Kwon Jun-wook. At least 10 reinfection cases have already been reported in China, Kwon added. More than 90 percent of the new cases were in Daegu, the centre of the country's outbreak, and its neighbouring North Gyeongsang province, KCDC said in a statement. Three women in the

- FORTY-SEVEN more people have died of the virus in China.
- DEATH TOLL in the country rises to 2,835.
- NO. OF confirmed cases climbs to 79,251.
- 427 FRESH cases and 47 deaths on Friday.
- 2,885 PEOPLE discharged from hospital.

Daegu area and one man died of the illness, taking the national toll to 17, the statement added. All were aged in their 60s or older. The national total is expected to rise further with screening of more than 260,000 people associated with the Shincheonji Church of Jesus, a secretive entity often accused of being a cult that is linked to around half of the country's cases. — AFP

Nine deaths in Iran, total at 43 210 reported dead, ministry in denial

Tehran, Feb. 29: Iran on Saturday reported nine new deaths from the novel Covid-19 and 205 fresh cases in the past 24 hours, bringing the overall tolls to 43 dead and 593 infected. "The total number of cases is 593 and the overall deaths 43 up until midday today," health ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour told a televised news conference. "We have had 205 new cases of Covid-19 within 24 hours," he added, including 22 cases in a new outbreak in the province of Golestan.

Thousands to be tested Iran is preparing for the possibility of tens of thousands of people getting tested for the new Covid-19 as the number of confirmed cases spiked again Saturday, an official said, underscoring the fear both at home and abroad over the outbreak in the Islamic Republic. The virus and the Covid-19 illness it causes have killed 43 people out of 593 confirmed cases in Iran,

official death toll stood at 34 on Friday afternoon, with eight new deaths reported over the previous 24 hours. Health ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour accused BBC Persian of joining the Islamic Republic's regional enemies in a "race to spread lies" about Iran. "Iran's exemplary transparency in publishing information on the Covid-19 has stunned many people," Jahanpour tweeted. — AFP

Health Ministry spokesman Kianoush Jahanpour said. But the number of known cases versus deaths would put the virus' death rate in Iran at over 7 per cent, much higher than other nations. That's worried experts at the

World Health Organisation and elsewhere that Iran may be underreporting the number of cases. Yet even as Iran sends spray trucks and fumigators into the streets, officials are trying to downplay the virus' reach. — Agencies

CHINA EXPERTS IN TEHRAN TO CONTAIN SPREAD

Beijing, Feb. 29: The Covid-19-hit China, which is grappling to contain the outbreak amidst rising death toll and number of infected cases, has sent a group of experts to Iran to help combat the spread of the disease in the country. The Chinese experts are on their way to Iran, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hua Chunying said on Friday. "We must fight together," Hua was quoted as saying by the state-run China Daily. During his telephonic conversation with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif earlier, State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi said China will continue to provide assistance to Iran in curbing the epidemic and treating the sick, the report said. — PTI



Shinzo Abe

ABE PLEDGES EMERGENCY FIGHT PLAN

Tokyo, Feb. 29: Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe on Saturday pledged another emergency package to tackle the Covid-19, appealing for cooperation as he faces criticism over drastic prevention measures. The plan comes as the government ramps up its response to the virus, which has infected at least 230 people across the country and been linked to five deaths. "We will swiftly compile a second emergency package" by using reserve funds worth over 270 billion yen (\$2.5 billion) in around 10 days," Abe told a news conference. In mid-February, the government set aside an initial 15.3 billion yen for the fight against the virus, including money to boost testing, strengthen inspections at borders and support manufacturers of face masks.

"On my own responsibility, I will take the best possible measures against various issues," Abe said Saturday. He also vowed to speed up the introduction of legislation aimed at easing the impact of the virus on people's lives. But Abe added that "we cannot score a victory in this battle only with the government's efforts". "It is not easy to battle against the enemy that you can't see or know well," he said. — AFP

Mexico confirms first 3 cases of infection

Mexico City, Feb. 29: Mexico's health ministry said the country has confirmed three cases of the Covid-19, becoming the second Latin American nation after Brazil to be hit by the outbreak. The three men — two in Mexico City and one in the northern state of Sinaloa — are all believed to have visited northern Italy, the epicentre of the virus in Europe. "Probably all the three were infected from the same source. All three are imported cases," Jose Luis Alomia, general director of epidemiology at the Ministry of Health, said. In Mexico, two more suspected cases are under analysis. — AFP

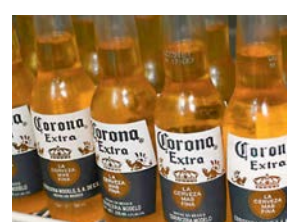
● TWO MORE people tested positive for the novel Covid-19 in Pakistan on Saturday, taking the total number of the infections in the country to four. Earlier, two people tested positive in the country on February 26.

● QATAR HAS confirmed its first case of Covid-19 after a 36-year-old Qatari woman who was evacuated to Doha from Iran tested positive. Qatar has repatriated a number of its citizens from Iran and confined them to a 14-day period of quarantine.

CLAIMS REFUTED Owner affirms sales strong despite epidemic's global spread Virus: Corona Beer doesn't lose fizz

New York, Feb. 29: Confusion between Covid-19 and Corona beer has been a punchline of questionable taste during the outbreak, but for the brand, the matter may be no joke. The phrase "38% of Americans" was trending Friday on Twitter following a survey showing that proportion of beer drinkers "would not buy Corona under any circumstances now," according to public relations firm 5W. But Constellation Brands, which owns the Mexican-heritage beer label, disagreed, releasing a statement saying that sales have

stayed strong in the US even as the virus has spread internationally, and dismissing the question as a non-issue. "Our thoughts and prayers go out to those affected by this terrible virus and we hope efforts to more fully contain it gain traction soon," said Bill Newlands, chief executive of Constellation. "We've seen no impact to our people, facilities or operations and our business continues to perform very well." But the brand also got an earful on social media for an awkwardly-phrased advertising campaign to plug new hard seltzer offerings in the US. The beverages, in four "delicious" flavours, will be "coming ashore soon", according to the spot posted to Twitter that got 7.3 million views on the Corona USA page. "Given what's hitting the news right now, this seems



Corona beer bottles. — AFP

in remarkably poor taste," one critic posted. "Pretty sure Corona has always had poor taste," another replied. 5W, the public relations firm that released the survey of 737 US beer drinkers, also found that 16 percent were confused about whether Corona beer is related to the virus. "While the brand has claimed that consumers understand there's no linkage between the virus and the beer company, this is a disaster for the Corona brand," Ronn Torossian, founder and CEO of 5W. 5W lists several other beverage companies as clients

on its website, including 1800 Tequila and Sparkling ICE. In an email, Torossian denied that the company works for any Corona competitors. The survey results were supported by a report from market analysis firm YouGov that pointed to an uptick in internet searches for phrases like "Corona beer virus" that was weighing on brand reputation. Brand favourability for Corona dropped from 75 percent in early January to 51 percent in late February, according to daily consumer surveys taken by YouGov. — AFP

IN BRIEF

Gaga drops video for *Stupid Love*

Los Angeles: Lady Gaga dropped the video for her new single *Stupid Love* at midnight Friday. The sci-fi looking video, heavy on the color pink, starts off with an explanation of why Gaga and her dancers appear to be on another planet. "The world rots in conflict. Many tribes battle for dominance. While the Spiritual ones pray and sleep for peace, the Kindness punks fight for Chromatica," it reads. Gaga and her backup dancers then dance around a barren landscape which looks like outer space. In the song she sings, "You're the one that I've been waiting for/Gotta quit this crying/ Nobody's gonna heal me if I don't open the door/ Kinda hard to believe/ gotta have faith in me," while wearing a shiny hot pink space suit. — *Agencies*

Suotamo welcomes his daughter Bacca

Los Angeles: *Star Wars* actor Joonas Suotamo and his wife Milla Pohjasvaara have become parents to their second child. The 33-year-old actor, best known for voicing Chewbacca in the franchise, shared the news on social media on Friday, saying his daughter was born earlier this week. "We have some exciting news: we were blessed to welcome the newest member of our family! Our little princess (or senator, or general, or whatever she wants to be!) was born this week and is doing great," Suotamo wrote alongside a photo of the newborn. The Finnish actor has named the newborn Bacca after his character from the sci-fi series. He had taken over the reins of the beloved character from Peter Mayhew with 2017's *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*. The actor and Pohjasvaara are already parents to son Aatos, who Suotamo said, "is gonna have to get used to there being two little ones in the house now." — *PTI*



Prince Harry records song with Bon Jovi

London: Rock royalty met the Royal Family when the Duke of Sussex got behind a microphone with Jon Bon Jovi. They met at Abbey Road Studios, where the US rocker is re-recording his song *Unbroken with the Invictus Games Choir*. The prince — who will step down as a working royal at the end of March — posted a video of both men in a recording booth. Bon Jovi said he looked forward to working with the "artist formerly known as prince". Both men greeted each other warmly on the steps of the world-famous London studio synonymous with the Beatles. — *PTI*

LEVINE SORRY FOR 'UNPROFESSIONAL' CONCERT IN CHILE

Los Angeles: Maroon 5 frontman Adam Levine has tendered an apology for the band's lacklustre performance in Chile. Levine and Maroon 5 were heavily criticized for their gig during the country's Vina del Mar Festival on Thursday. Chilean fans of the band took to Twitter to express their frustration with the pop group. A video has also gone viral that shows Levine leaving the stage and complaining to the organisers, "That was a TV show. That was not a concert". The 40-year-old singer on Friday took to his Instagram story to apologise to the fans, saying sound issues made it difficult for them to perform at the concert. "To be totally frank, there were some things holding me back sonically last night, and I let them get to me. It impacted how I was behaving onstage, which is unprofessional and I apologise for that. "I struggled a lot and sometimes it's really hard for me to mask the struggle. For that, I let you guys down and I apologise... Last night wasn't our best and, for that, all I can say is that I'm really sorry," Levine said. — *PTI*



Adam Levine



Chimpanzees seen playing at Alipore Zoological Garden in Kolkata on Saturday. — *PTI*



Janelle Monae at the Vivienne Westwood fashion collection in Paris on Saturday. — *AP*



Karrie Martin poses at the Impact Awards at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel on Friday. — *AP*



Doria Tillier at the 45th edition of the Cesar Film Awards ceremony in Paris on Friday. — *AFP*



Pope Francis cancels event for 3rd day after cold

Vatican City: Pope Francis canceled official engagements for the third day in a row Saturday as he battled an apparent cold. The 83-year-old pope, who lost part of a lung to a respiratory illness as a young man, has never canceled so many official audiences or events in his seven-year papacy. Francis is, however, continuing to work from his residence at the Vatican's Santa Marta hotel and is receiving people in private, the Vatican press office said. On Saturday, those private meetings were with the head of the Vatican's bishops' office, Francis' ambassadors to Lebanon and France and a Ukrainian archbishop. Canceled were his two planned official audiences — formal affairs in the Apostolic Palace where Francis would have delivered a speech and greeted a great number of people at the end. Those were to include an audience with an international bioethics organization and with members of the scandal-marred Legion of Christ religious order. On Sunday, Francis is expected to leave the Vatican with top Holy See bureaucrats for a week of spiritual exercises in the Roman countryside, an annual retreat that the pope attends at the start of each Lent. Francis last appeared in public on Wednesday, when he was seen coughing and blowing his nose during an Ash Wednesday Mass. — *AP*

'Lightning points to scale of volcanic plume'

Jakarta: The 2018 eruption of Anak Krakatau in Indonesia was remarkable in many ways. It will be remembered, obviously, for the sudden flank collapse that triggered the tsunami which killed over 400 people on the nearby coastlines of Sumatra and Java. But the event also has been the source of many scientific insights that could inform future hazard assessments. And a new possibility is the potential for the frequency of lightning seen at an eruption to give a simple guide to the height of a volcano's towering plume. It's information that could be of interest to airlines trying to find safe routes for their planes.



A phreatomagmatic eruption occurs when water comes into direct contact with magma.

Anak Krakatau had a huge eruption cloud that climbed 16-18km into the sky and which then levelled out into the classic anvil shape familiar from meteorological thunderstorms in the tropics. Driving this tall convection column was the particular circumstances of the eruption. When the wall of the volcano failed, it allowed seawater to come into direct contact with magma. The result was a series of spectacular explosions that sent steam and ash rushing upwards. — *Agencies*



Disciples of Odissi Guru Ratikant Mohapatra perform their traditional dance during an event at Bharat Bhawan in Bhopal on Friday. — *PTI*

Belgian scientists bake cake using insect fat as butter substitute

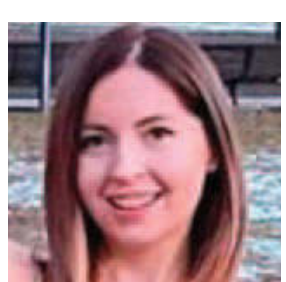
Ghent: Belgian waffles may be about to become more environmentally friendly. Scientists at Ghent University in Belgium are experimenting with larva fat to replace butter in waffles, cakes and cookies, saying using grease from insects is more sustainable than dairy produce. Clad in white aprons, the researchers soak Black soldier fly larvae in a bowl of water, put it in a blender to create a smooth greyish dollop, and then use a kitchen centrifuge to separate out insect butter. "There are several



Researchers at Ghent University swapped regular butter for insect butter positive things about said Daylan Tzompa Sosa, research. "They are more sustain-

3 dead after dry ice stunt at blogger's party goes wrong

Moscow: Three people have died after dry ice was poured into a swimming pool at a party in Moscow on Friday. The victims were connected to Instagram influencer Yekaterina Didenko, who was celebrating her 29th birthday at the pool complex in the city's south. Dry ice had been dumped in the pool after guests exiting the sauna complained it was too warm. Ms Didenko's husband is reportedly among the



dead. In an earlier video message, the blogger, looking shaken and distressed, said he had been been

rushed to intensive care. All the victims are said to be aged about 30. A member of the emergency services told Ria news agency that the partygoers had ordered 25kg of dry ice to cool down the pool at the Devyaty Val (Ninth Wave) complex. Several guests who had been in the sauna died into the water to cool off. Immediately the swimmers started to choke and several lost consciousness. — *Agencies*

Actresses walk out after Polanski wins at Cesars

Filmmaker is wanted in US for rape of 13-year-old teenager

Paris: Roman Polanski won best director for *An Officer and a Spy* at a fractious ceremony for the French Oscars, the Cesars, that ended in walkouts and recrimination in Paris early Saturday. The entire French academy had been forced to resign earlier this month amid fury that the veteran — wanted in the US for the statutory rape of a 13-year-old girl in 1977 — had topped the list of nominations.

Protesters chanting "Lock up Polanski!" tried to storm the theatre where the ceremony was being held before being pushed back by police firing tear gas. And France's culture minister Franck Riester had warned that giving the maker of *Rosemary's Baby* a Cesar would be "symbolically bad given the stance



Adèle Haenel (above) was among several actresses to leave after Polanski's win. Activists hold a banner reading 'Polanski: Best rapist 2020 award' during a protest. — *AFP*

director of her first film, Christophe Ruggia, of sexually harassing her when she was only 12.

Actress and comedian Florence Foresti, who was presenting at the ceremony, did not return to the stage after Polanski's award was announced. She later updated her Instagram story to a black screen with the word "disgusted".

Polanski's film also picked up best costume design. "Distinguishing Polanski is spitting in the face of all victims. It means raping women isn't that bad," Haenel had said in the run-up to the Cesars. Polanski, 86, and the entire team of his historical drama had boycotted the ceremony, fearing a "public lynching". *An Officer and a Spy* is based on the Dreyfus affair which divided France in the late 19th century when a Jewish army officer was wrongly prosecuted for spying. — *AFP*

Boris Johnson, Carrie engaged, expecting baby

London: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his partner Carrie Symonds announced their engagement on Saturday and said they are expecting a baby later in the year. A spokesperson for the couple said the couple are "very pleased" to make the announcement.



Boris Johnson and Carrie Symonds

Mr Johnson, 55, and conservationist Ms Symonds, 31, became the first unmarried couple to occupy Downing Street when they moved in last year.

"The Prime Minister and Miss Symonds are very pleased to announce their engagement and that they are expecting a baby in the early summer," the spokesperson said. Symonds is also the youngest partner of a UK Prime Minister in 173 years. Talk of a Downing Street wedding bells had gathered momentum after it emerged in court documents earlier this month that Johnson and his Indian-origin ex-wife Marina Wheeler had agreed a divorce settlement.

The details of the financial settlement have not been made public.

Johnson and Wheeler, who married 25 years ago before their separation last year, have four grown-up children — Lara, Milo, Cassie and Theodore.

This will be Johnson's third marriage. He met his first wife, Allegra Mostyn-Owen, while they were students at Oxford University and they married in 1987.

The marriage was annulled in 1993 and he wed Wheeler later that year.

The last child born to a sitting UK prime minister belonged to David and Samantha Cameron, who welcomed Florence Rose Endellion into their family in August 2010. — *PTI*