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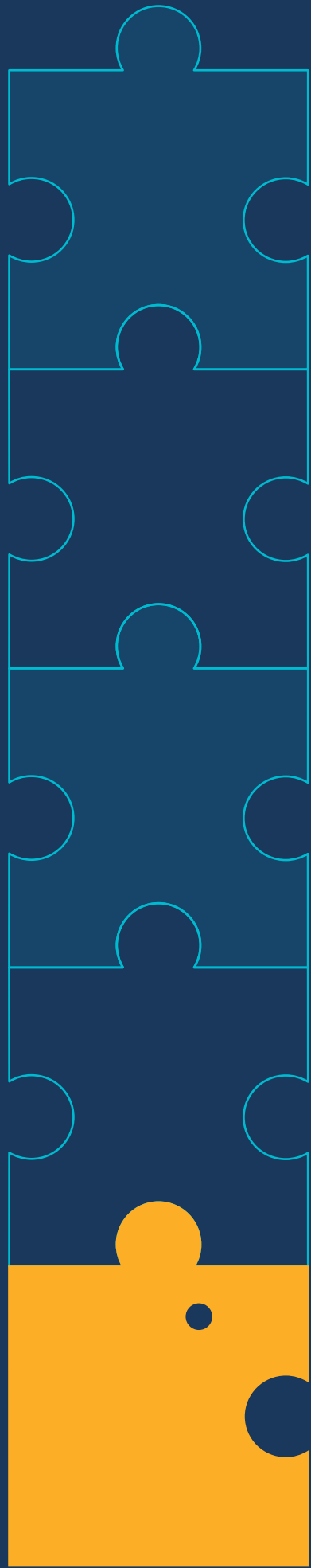
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on Sunday



**Cong. leader Abhishek Singhvi calls for removal of 'Modi tax' on fuel**  
Page 7



**Onus on India for progress in relations, says Imran Khan**  
Page 7



**42 girls abducted from Nigerian school two weeks ago released**  
Page 9

**Ashwin hits back at pitch critics, asks what a good surface is**  
Page 14



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NEARBY



**BPF joins Congress-led grand alliance in Assam**  
GUWAHATI  
The Bodoland People's Front has severed its ties with the ruling BJP in Assam and joined the Congress-led grand alliance. The announcement came less than a month before the three-phase Assembly polls.  
NORTH & EAST PAGE 5

**17-year-old stabbed for speaking up for sister**

NEW DELHI  
A 17-year-old boy was stabbed by a group of boys after he objected to the passing of lewd remarks against his sister on Friday, the police said. A case has been registered. A police officer said that they received a call around 1 p.m. regarding the stabbing of a boy in Kalkaji.  
NEWS PAGE 8

**Police search for journalist in rape case**

NEW DELHI  
A team of Delhi Police has reached Mumbai to arrest a TV anchor who is accused in a rape case reported in New Delhi last week. On February 23, a 22-year-old woman alleged she was raped by the man in a hotel room in the Chanakyaपुरी area.  
NEWS PAGE 8  
MAGAZINE 8 PAGES  
CLASSIFIEDS PAGES 4 & 5

## COVID-19 upsurge: Cabinet Secretary reviews situation

Maharashtra reports 8,333 new cases, contributing over half of country's 16,488

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

With Maharashtra, Punjab, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Telangana and Jammu & Kashmir reporting a high active COVID-19 caseload and an increasing trend in new cases last week, Cabinet Secretary Rajiv Gauba on Saturday reviewed the situation with their Chief Secretaries. The States have been advised not to lower their guard, enforce pandemic-appropriate behaviour and deal firmly with violations. They are also required to follow effective surveillance and tracking strategies in respect of potential super spreader events.

The Health Ministry said Maharashtra, Kerala, Punjab, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat had also shown a surge in new cases in the last 24 hours, taking the active caseload to 1,59,590. Maharashtra continues to report the highest daily new cases at 8,333, followed by Kerala with 3,671 while Punjab reported 622 new cases, it said.

India reported 16,488 new cases in the last 24 hours.

"Maharashtra, Kerala, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Kar-



**Virus check:** A woman waiting to get tested for COVID-19 at the Rajiv Gandhi Super Speciality Hospital in New Delhi. ■R.V. MOORTHY

taka and Haryana are displaying an upward trajectory in daily new cases. In the last two weeks, Kerala has shown the maximum decline in the number of active cases, from 63,847 on February 14 to 51,679, while Maharashtra has shown the highest rise, from 34,449 to 68,810," said the Ministry.

Six States/UTs account for 82.3% of the 113 deaths reported in the last 24 hours. Maharashtra saw the highest number of casualties (48). Punjab reported 15 daily

deaths and Kerala 14 while 17 States and UTs have not reported any deaths.

A presentation was made at the meeting chaired by Mr. Gauba with a focus on districts reporting increasing numbers of cases and trend in positivity. This was followed by a comprehensive review with all the States/UTs.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6  
MORE REPORTS PAGES 6, 8 & 9  
SUPER-SPREADERS AND RISE IN CASES PAGE 11

## Hospitals can charge up to ₹250 per dose

Private hospitals functioning as COVID-19 Vaccination Centres may recover a charge subject to a ceiling of ₹250 per person per dose, the Health Ministry said on Saturday. It released a list of 20 co-morbidities that allow those between 45-59 years to get vaccinated. PAGE 8

## Eight held for cow slaughter in Telangana

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
SIDDIPEET

Tension prevailed in Siddipet district of Telangana on Friday following reports of the slaughter of 16 cows, with members of BJP, ABVP, RSS and other right wing organisations protesting against the incident.

Earlier, acting on information that cows were being slaughtered on the outskirts of the town, a police team rushed to the spot and arrested eight persons.

A case was registered under Sections 429, 153 and 153-A of the IPC against those involved, according to D. Joel Davis, Commissioner of Police, Siddipet.

Police said 68 cows had been brought from villages in Karimnagar district.

The remaining 52 cows were shifted to a goshala.

After post-mortem, carcasses of the slaughtered animals were buried at the same place to avoid any untoward incidents.

The police worked all the night, forming multiple teams to arrest the accused within hours.

The arrested persons were identified as Mohd. Jaber, Mohd. Kahaja, Mohd. Saddam, Mohd. Arafat, Mohd. Rahim, Mohd. Arshad, Mohd. Ashraf and Mohd. Javed.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

## Dreams faded for kids of migrants

Pandemic has led to school drop outs



**Few in school:** Children of migrant labourers at an NGO-run school on the outskirts of Bhubaneswar. ■BISWARANJAN ROUT

SATYASUNDAR BARIK  
BHUBANESWAR

Unlike his three siblings, Arjun Naik, 11, had never stayed in a dingy room near a brick kiln along with his parents. All these years, he was a student at a residential school run by the Odisha government. His classmate, Somu Naik, was put up in such accommodation for months. It was not a pleasant experience.

Almost a year after the onset of COVID-19, school-going children of migrating parents, including Arjun and Somu, are either on the verge of discontinuing their studies or preparing to labour as adolescent workers.

"My elder daughter, who is 14 years old, has already started helping me in brick making. As we keep moving from one place to another,

my eldest son's studies have been hampered. We wanted Arjun to be devoted to his studies but COVID-19 shattered our hopes. The hostel has remained closed for a year. We cannot leave our son anywhere else," said Basila Naik, Arjun's father, who works at a brick kiln in Bhangarpur on the outskirts of Bhubaneswar.

SPECIAL

In a nearby brick kiln, little Nandita, 11, is happy that she can join a residential school at Kukudakhandi in Ganjam district from the next academic session. However, as uncertainty prevails over the opening of residential schools, her stay at the kiln has been prolonged.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

## Cong. rift widens with 'G-23' Jammu meet

Party leadership reacts cautiously ahead of polls

SOBHANA K NAIR  
PEERZADA ASHIQ  
NEW DELHI/JAMMU

The internal differences in the Congress spilled out into the open on Saturday, with the dissenting group, or the 'G-23', in a show of strength holding a rally in Jammu ostensibly to felicitate Ghulam Nabi Azad on his retirement from the Rajya Sabha but clearly challenging the party leadership.

The party leadership



**Show of strength:** Leaders from the dissenting group of the Congress at a rally in Jammu on Saturday. ■PTI

reacted cautiously and did not comment about the possibility of disciplinary action against the participants.

The meeting was attended

by senior Congress leaders, such as Haryana Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda, Anand Sharma, Kapil Sibal, Manish Tewari, Raj

Babbar and Vivek Tankha, in addition to Mr. Azad.

This is the first collective, public appearance of the group that, in August last year, had written to interim president Sonia Gandhi urging her to ensure "full time" and "visible" leadership.

The Congress leadership has remained mum about re-nominating Mr. Azad and the G-23 members find themselves sidelined within the party. Mr. Azad, speaking at the rally, said that he may have retired from the Rajya Sabha but not from politics.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

## Five municipal wards go to polls today

STAFF REPORTER  
NEW DELHI

The stage is set for bypolls in five municipal wards in Delhi on Sunday with all three contenders - the Aam Aadmi Party, BJP and the Congress - exuding confidence about emerging victorious. The bypolls are being seen as the semi-final ahead of the civic body elections for 272 wards of three municipal corporations in early 2022.

DETAILS ON PAGE 3

## Three held in Hapur gang-rape case

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
GHAZIABAD

Investigating the alleged gang rape of a 30-year-old woman in Hapur, the Uttar Pradesh police arrested three persons on Saturday morning after a brief encounter.

The accused have been identified as Ankit alias

Chhotu, Aqil, and Akash of Galand village of Pilakhwa town in Hapur. The woman was raped on Wednesday night when she was returning from work in Ghaziabad.

Hapur SP Neeraj Jadaun said they received information that some suspects had gathered in an autorickshaw

near Hindalpur village in the district. "When the police reached the spot, the accused fired at the team. The police returned fire and arrested the three men." He said the three accused suffered bullet injuries in the lower limbs. Two policemen were also injured.

## Rajasthan bypolls: Gehlot, Pilot put up united front

Both leaders address farmers' rallies

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
JAIPUR

The ruling Congress in Rajasthan on Saturday launched its campaign for bypolls to four Assembly seats with farmers' rallies in two districts, where the party leadership tried to put up a united face. Both Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot and Tonk MLA Sachin Pilot, who was sacked as the Deputy CM last year, addressed the large gatherings of farmers.



Photo of Ashok Gehlot and Sachin Pilot shared by Ajay Maken on social media. ■SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**Shared helicopter ride**

Mr. Gehlot and his former deputy shared a helicopter ride from Jaipur to the two villages in Bikaner and Chittorgarh districts for the first time in more than a year. Mr. Pilot, who had staged a rebellion in July last year, has been addressing huge 'kisan mahapanchayats' along with the MLAs of his camp in the eastern Rajasthan region.

The two leaders came together apparently at the instance of the party's top leadership, besides the political necessity in which Mr. Pilot could not be sidelined any more in the run-

up to the bypolls. AICC general secretary in-charge of Rajasthan, Ajay Maken, who flew along with Mr. Gehlot and Mr. Pilot, shared their picture on social media platforms.

The by-elections are to be held in Sujangarh (Churu), Sahara (Bhilwara), Vallabh-nagar (Udaipur) and Rajasmand, where the sitting MLAs died in the last four months. Three of these seats were with the Congress, while the Rajasmand constituency was represented by BJP leader Kiran Maheshwari. The dates for the bypolls are yet to be announced.

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3 <sup>rd</sup> Batch: 22 <sup>nd</sup> Mar'21 (9:30 AM - 12:30 PM)	4 <sup>th</sup> Batch: 22 <sup>nd</sup> Mar'21 (1:30 PM - 4:30 PM)

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Noida	215	Greater Noida	254
Good 0-50   Satisfactory 51-100   Moderate 101-200 Poor 201-300   Very Poor 301-400   Severe >400			

Air Quality Index at 4 p.m. yesterday (Average of past 24 hours) | Source: CPCB

### AQI to worsen, says SAFAR

**STAFF REPORTER**  
NEW DELHI  
The air quality of Delhi improved slightly but stayed in the lower end of the 'poor' category on Saturday, as per the Central Pollution Control Board data. "Increased surface wind speed, higher temperature, and higher boundary layer heights are influencing AQI positively," said monitoring agency SAFAR. "AQI is forecast to fall to the 'poor' category in the next two days," it said, adding that dust from dry desert regions of Rajasthan may start influencing Delhi's AQI soon.

# Labourer dies in warehouse fire

'Workers were staying in rooms where plastic and nail polish material were kept'

**STAFF REPORTER**  
NEW DELHI  
A 35-year-old labourer was killed and another suffered injuries when a fire broke out at a warehouse in north Delhi's Gulabi Bagh in the early hours of Saturday. A case has been registered in the matter. A Delhi Fire Services (DFS) official said a call regarding a fire near Pratap Nagar metro station was received at 3.47 a.m., and 15 fire tenders were rushed to the site. Subsequently, 10 more fire tenders were sent. The fire was brought under control around 8.30 a.m. and doused by 11.00 a.m. "The fire broke out at a warehouse where plastic and nail polish material is kept. It started from the upper ground floor and the first floor," the official said. A charred body was found inside the building and an injured person was also res-



Firefighters dousing flames at a warehouse in north Delhi on Saturday. ■ SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

cued. The deceased was identified as Upchand Kumar, from Bihar. The injured was identified as Sunil, 22, a resident of Kishan Ganj. Police said that workers used to stay in rooms in the warehouse and that Upchand was likely sleeping when the fire broke out. A case under Sections 435 (Mischief by fire or explosive substance with intent to cause damage), 436 (Mischief by fire or explosive substance with intent to destroy house), 304 (Punishment for culpable homicide not amounting to murder), and 308 (Attempt to commit culpable homicide) of the Indian Penal Code has been registered and further investigation is underway.

# A first, DU awards 'digital degrees'

Parents, friends of students view 97th convocation online

**STAFF REPORTER**  
NEW DELHI  
Delhi University (DU) on Saturday awarded over 1.76 lakh 'digital degrees' – a first in the country, according to acting Vice-Chancellor P.C. Joshi. The 97th convocation also saw 670 PhD degrees being conferred, the highest in the last five years, according to officials. Apart from the degrees awarded to bachelors and masters graduates, 156 medals and 36 prizes were also awarded to students across disciplines. Due to the pandemic, the convocation was held with social distancing norms in place. Arrangements were made for parents and kin to view the event online. On the endeavours in the last few months, Mr. Joshi said, "The university has initiated the innovative 'Vidya Vistar Scheme' to establish academic links between partner colleges and depart-



Breaking a five-year record, 670 PhD degrees were conferred during the event on Saturday. ■ SHINJINI GHOSH

Union Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank' was the chief guest, and UPSC Chairman P.K. Joshi was the Guest of Honour.

**Education policy**  
The Minister said DU was expected to be a frontrunner in implementing the National Education Policy (NEP). "We will reform, perform, transform and show results. We will go vocal for local and then make local, global. You [students] have to be the ones generating employment instead of seeking employment." He said the university has been witness to a time when the "country was burning" with the Vice-Regal Lodge being a place where several freedom fighters had been confined at a point. Urging students to ensure that "dreams are fulfilled," he said, "We have a dream in front of us... we have to make India a 'Vishwaguru' yet again."

### INTERVIEW | ANU SINGH LATHER

# 'AUD used lockdown to prepare for online shift, focus now on research'

**JAIDEEP DEO BHANJ**  
Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD) Vice-Chancellor Anu Singh Lather talks about how the institution adapted during the lockdown, implementation of the National Education Policy, introduction of the Happiness Curriculum and focus on research and entrepreneurship. Excerpts from the interview:

It has been a very tough year for education and learning. How did AUD switch from physical classes to online? ■ As soon as the lockdown was announced, we went in for a long vacation that was initially planned for June-July. This gave us time to plan and prepare, including facul-

ty training, for a shift to online classes. While many universities had short-term plans, expecting educational institutions to open by May, we realised that COVID-19 was not going away. Hence, we made a plan till December that included the new admission process. We also followed a continuous assessment system so we did not face problems regarding conduct of exams.

How did you deal with the digital divide and access to high-speed Internet as AUD attracts students from across the country? ■ We went in for a synchronous as well as an asynchronous mode of teaching. Books, study material, pre-

sentations and case studies were all put together and emailed to students. We also recorded the lectures so that students from the Northeast and Kashmir, who were facing problems with Internet connectivity, could watch recordings and access material. We had students approaching us for laptops, smartphones and other relief. We provided EWS students with reimbursements for their Internet connection. We also purchased and gave tablets to those who were in need.

When can students expect to attend classes like pre-pandemic times? ■ We waited for the State government to notify us when



Ambedkar University Delhi Vice-Chancellor Anu Singh Lather. ■ JAIDEEP DEO BHANJ

we could open the university for students. PhD students who are interested are already on campus. We are working on a definite schedule for UG and PG students as well. We want final-year MA and

UG students to attend classes on campus before opening it up for other students.

How does AUD fare now when compared with other universities in the Capital that have been around for much longer? Do you feel it has become the first choice for students? ■ We have started organising campus placements and appointed a full-time assistant registrar for placement and training. The assistant registrar ensures that "skilling" is a part of education here. While we are approaching the industry for placement of our students, we saw an interesting trend – students who are graduating from courses like history and

global affairs are being placed for unique profiles that show that there is an integration of social sciences and acceptability for employability. It is encouraging that we have found profiles for our students from the social sciences, and we hope to take further steps in this aspect.

With the National Education Policy (NEP) coming in, what changes will we see at AUD? ■ The university is taking a few steps on the quality parameters when it comes to research. We have created our own ordinance for the PhD programme. Also, regulations for that have been created to meet the international demands of research work. This kind of direction is required as there is a perception that Indian research is often plagiarised and viewed to be fake or not up to international standards. These ordinances will help researchers be professional and move towards better integration of what is expected of them internationally. The NEP also has a lot of focus on early childhood care. We are one of the universities in the country that thought about it far ahead and have established ourselves in the field of early childhood care. We also want at least three-four programmes at the UG level to be of the four-year duration. We might make the switch in the next session after discus-

sions with all the Deans. AUD is regularly adding new courses. Any more new courses that AUD is planning to start? ■ We are going in for a major revision of our syllabus in the near future to incorporate aspects of the NEP and keep it updated. We are also planning to launch a Happiness Curriculum. This will be done at two levels. At the university-level, it will be introduced as an essential course. On a wider note, a training programme will be launched for the judiciary, government officials and others. In the three-six months of training, the course will teach those enrolled to look at life differently.

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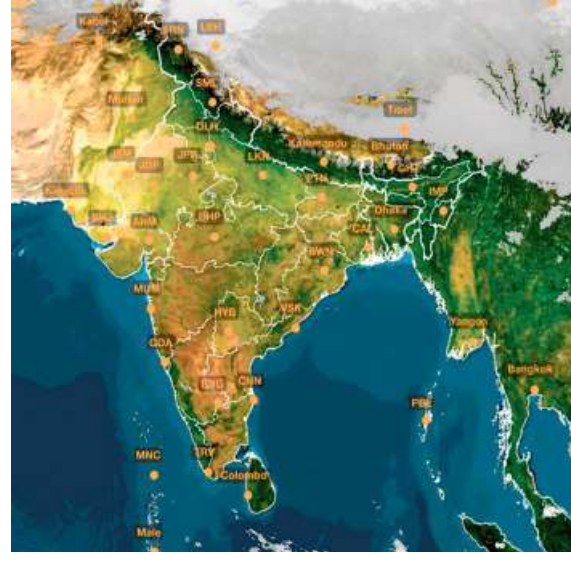






WEATHER WATCH

RAINFALL, TEMPERATURE & AIR QUALITY IN SELECT METROS YESTERDAY



TEMPERATURE DATA: IMD, POLLUTION DATA: CPCB, MAP: INSAT/IMD (TAKEN AT 18.00 HRS)

Forecast for Sunday: Thunderstorm with lightning likely at isolated places over Arunachal Pradesh, Kerala and Mahe

Table with columns for CITY, RAIN MAX, RAIN MIN, TEMPERATURE MAX, TEMPERATURE MIN. Lists cities like Agartala, Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, etc.

Table with columns for CITIES, SO2, NO2, CO, PM2.5, PM10. Lists cities like Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Chennai, etc.

Air Quality Code: Poor Moderate Good (Readings indicate average AQI) SO2: Sulphur Dioxide. Short-term exposure can harm the respiratory system...

'Modi is the PM of capitalists'

RLD chief Ajit Singh cites FCI woes, sugarcane dues to target Centre, U.P. govt.

ANUJ KUMAR GHAZIABAD "Narendra Modi is not the Prime Minister of the poor and the farmers," charged Rashtriya Lok Dal President Ajit Singh while addressing a massive gathering of farmers in Bannauli village of Baghat on Saturday...

He said it was true that MSP had not been touched in the farm laws but in the last four years the debt on Food Corporation of India had increased by four times. Mr. Singh said it seemed the government made these laws to help corporates that are making huge godowns instead of the FCI...

RJD set to join grand alliance, contest election in Assam

Tejashwi Yadav says they are targeting Hindi speakers in 11 constituencies

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT GUWAHATI The Rashtriya Janata Dal is likely to contest the upcoming Assembly election in Assam as a constituent of the Congress-led grand alliance.

"Hindi speakers are a significant number in 11 constituencies. We will contest seats where the chances are high," he said. "Our effort in Assam will be to prevent the communal forces from forming the government..."

BPF joins Congress-led grand alliance in Assam

Party had fought 2016 polls as BJP ally

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT GUWAHATI The Bodoland People's Front (BPF) has severed its ties with the ruling BJP in Assam and joined the Congress-led grand alliance to contest the upcoming State polls.



RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav with AIUDF chief Maulana Badruddin Ajmal in Guwahati on Saturday.

for taking the tea plantation workers for a ride. He also said BJP has robbed the country's constitutional bodies of their independence.

Odisha issues stricter COVID protocol

STAFF REPORTER BHUBANESWAR The Odisha government has made home isolation for seven days mandatory for people coming from five States and set up a strict screening mechanism at airports and railway stations.

All Collectors and civic body heads have been asked to keep a close tab on people coming from Maharashtra, Punjab, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh where there has been a surge in COVID-19 cases.

Even as the government is returning to stricter surveillance, 25 students of Veer Surendra Sai University of Technology, Burla, have tested positive for COVID-19 during the past 48 hours.

GENERAL

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Naveen govt. presents Puri heritage corridor project plan in House

STAFF REPORTER BHUBANESWAR The Naveen Patnaik government aggressively pushed the ₹3,200-crore heritage corridor project for Puri Jagannath Temple by presenting its plan in the Assembly on Saturday.

FRONTLINE EVERY FORTNIGHT READ... For enquiries on announcements in this section, please contact our office at the following number between 10a.m. and 8p.m. New Delhi : 011- 43579797

SEARCH FOR MISSING PERSON General public is hereby informed that this person namely Niloy Kumar Nayak S/o G.C. Nayak R/o D-201, UNESCO Apartment, I.P. Extn., Delhi, Age: 45 years, Height : 5'10", Complexion : Wheatish, Face : Oval, Build : Medium, Identification: Abnormal Mind, has been missing from the area of P.S. Madhu Vihar, Delhi.

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WESTERN RAILWAY NOTICE INVITING E-TENDER No. C45/1/AVM/2021 dated 25/02/2021 Divisional Railway Manager (Commercial), Divisional Railway Manager's Office, Commercial Department, Ground Floor, Mumbai Central, Mumbai - 400 008, invites e-Tender on single stage two packet system, from food and catering service providers for "Provision of Catering Services at Major Static Unit - Automatic Vending Machine (AVM)" in the form of Standalone Self Dispensing Units at following Stations for a period of five years.

Table with columns: Sr. No., Tender Notice No., Station, Category of Station, Location, Reserve Price Per Annum (in ₹), EMD (in ₹). Lists tender details for various stations like MMCT, BDTS, VAPI, etc.





# India-Pak. ceasefire had high-level nod: experts

It may not be the result of a 'package deal to stabilise relations with China', they say

SUHASINI HAIDAR  
NEW DELHI

The decision of the Directors-General of Military Operations (DGMOs) of India and Pakistan was unlikely to have been purely local, say experts, pointing to the language of the joint statement while declaring an observance of the 2003 ceasefire from the midnight of February 24/25, which had a high-level "imprimatur" on it, though there is little clarity on the nature of the back-channel operating between the two countries two days after the announcement.

"I would imagine a decision like this in both countries would have involved considerable amount of inter-agency discussion and consensus. So, whether [Indian officials] were speaking both to the Pakistani military chief or to the Prime Minister's [office], the two certainly would have been in touch on this," said T.C.A. Raghavan, former High Commissioner to Pakistan and the Director-General of the MEA-run think tank Indian

Council of World Affairs. He added that the rising violence at the Line of Control was the most obvious reason for the "tactical" decision to stop firing.

The DGMOs had announced a similar decision to observe the ceasefire line in December 2013 and May 2018 after similar hotline conversations. Ceasefire violations (CFVs) have been increasing year-on-year for the past decade, with a sudden spike after 2018, according to data from the Army, which is matched by the Pakistani side. From just four CFVs in 2004, the number reported in 2014 was 583, which grew nearly tenfold by 2020 to 5,133.

"I don't think this kind of a joint statement, specifying a date for the ceasefire could be a result purely of the DGMO conversations, this had to have some high-level imprimatur," said Happyman Jacob, JNU Professor and author of books on the Line of Control. He added that given the "vitiated bilateral situation" it was unlikely



On alert: A BSF personnel keeping vigil along the international border in Jammu. ■PTI

that one side could propose a ceasefire without some "back-channel conversations and parleys".

While Pakistan Prime Minister's Special Assistant on National Security Affairs denied a specific report that he was conducting the talks with the National Security Adviser that are believed to have led to the LoC announcement, neither New Delhi nor Islamabad has denied a series of reports that suggested that there have been secret talks for the past few months. On Thursday, the MEA spokesperson declined to answer a specific question from *The Hindu* on the reports as well.

Speculation over the timing of the announcement has

also grown, as it came amid the India-China disengagement talks, and just hours before a conversation between External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, where they agreed to establish a hotline between them. However, Mr. Jacob said he doubted that the DGMO talks were the result of a "package deal" to stabilise relations with China on the eastern front and with Pakistan on the northern and western front.

"The government of India perhaps decided to make sure that at least one front is defused, that is, Pakistan. And then negotiations with China happened," he said, as a more likely scenario.

Mr. Raghavan dismissed criticism of the DGMO agreement as a "climbdown" from the government's earlier policy of not talking to Pakistan until terrorism ends, while the Imran Khan government had said there would be no talks until India restores Jammu and Kashmir's autonomous status.

Asked what was likely to be the next step, if in fact the DGMO agreement indicates a deeper dialogue, Mr. Raghavan felt that the first step could be the restoration of High Commissioners to the missions in Delhi and Islamabad, who were pulled in the aftermath of the government's decision to amend Article 370 in J&K in August 2019.

He also felt that cooperation on COVID-19 and healthcare was another area the two sides could make immediate progress.

*(The entire conversation can be accessed at The Hindu In Focus Podcast https://www.thehindu.com/podcast/what-does-the-ceasefire-agreement-mean-for-the-future-of-india-pakistan-relations-the-hindu-in-focus-podcast/article33943563.ece)*

# Onus on India for progress in relations, says Pak. PM

New Delhi must create enabling environment: Imran Khan

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
ISLAMABAD

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan on Saturday welcomed the ceasefire agreement with India, but said the onus of creating an "enabling environment" for further progress in bilateral relations rests with New Delhi.

In his first comments since the militaries of India and Pakistan jointly announced on Thursday that they had agreed to strictly observe all agreements on the ceasefire along the Line of Control (LoC) and other sectors, Mr. Khan said Pakistan was ready to move forward to resolve "all outstanding issues" with India through dialogue.

"I welcome restoration of the ceasefire along the LoC. The onus of creating an enabling environment for further progress rests with India. India must take necessary steps to meet the long-standing demand & right of the Kashmiri people to self-determination according to

I welcome restoration of the ceasefire along the LoC. The onus of creating an enabling environment for further progress rests with India. India must take necessary steps to meet the long-standing demand & right of the Kashmiri people to self-determination according to UNSC resolutions

IMRAN KHAN, Pakistani Prime Minister



UNSC resolutions," Mr. Khan tweeted.

"We have always stood for peace & remain ready to move forward to resolve all outstanding issues through dialogue," he added in a series of tweets.

**'Stop terror attacks'**  
India has told Pakistan that "talks and terror" cannot go together and asked Islamabad to take demonstrable steps against terror groups responsible for launching various attacks on India.

On Thursday, India said it desired normal neighbourly relations with Pakistan and

was committed to resolving all issues bilaterally in a peaceful manner.

"On relations with Pakistan, as we have said earlier, India desires normal neighbourly relations with Pakistan. We have always maintained that we are committed to addressing issues, if any, in a peaceful and bilateral manner," Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson Anurag Srivastava said in New Delhi.

India and Pakistan signed a ceasefire agreement in 2003, but it has hardly been followed in letter and spirit over the past several years.

# Anti-terror operations will continue: Army

'We will be alert, despite ceasefire'

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
UDHAMPUR

The Army's Northern Commander Lt. Gen. Y.K. Joshi on Saturday said the agreement between India and Pakistan to strictly adhere to the ceasefire pact along the Line of Control would have no bearing on the counter-terrorism operations in Jammu and Kashmir.

He said the Northern Command, which looks after the security of the Union Territories of Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh, remained on the highest alert and made possible what was believed impossible by the bravery, grit and determination of its personnel in the face of challenging situations along the border.

"Recently, the Directors-General of Military Operations of India and Pakistan announced an agreement to uphold ceasefire along the LoC. I want to assure that this ceasefire will have no bearing on the counter-terrorist operations and we will maintain our alertness," Lt. Gen. Joshi said at the

Northern Command investiture ceremony here.

**'Like a shield'**

"The Northern Command has always stood like a shield against the attempts by our neighbouring countries to spread disturbance and it will continue to remain so in the future. Whenever anyone raises an evil eye on our country, Indian Army has replied strongly," Lt. Gen. Joshi said. Without naming China and Pakistan, he said the Indian Army had maintained its domination on its borders with the neighbouring countries and helped in maintaining peace in the hinterland.

Referring to the Ladakh stand-off with the Chinese Army, he said the Indian Army stood up to the challenge on the snow-capped mountains of the Line of Actual Control during the challenging situation in 2020 and maintained the highest alert. "The success of the operation (in Ladakh) is the glaring example of the bravery of Indian Army," he said.

# Roll back 'Modi tax' on fuel quickly: Congress

Centre trying to shift blame on State governments: Singhvi

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

Terming the additional excise burden on fuel the "Modi Tax", the Congress on Saturday renewed its campaign against the government, demanding an immediate rollback of additional taxes that would bring down the price of petrol to ₹67 per litre and of diesel to ₹53 per litre, as per the party's estimate.

At a press conference, party spokesperson Abhishhek Singhvi lambasted the Centre for confusing customers by attempting to shift the blame on the State governments.

"We demand the immediate withdrawal of 'Modi Tax' of ₹23.87 and ₹28.37 per litre on petrol and diesel, which was increased by the Modi government since May 2014. I will like to emphasise that this has got nothing to do with VAT or State taxes, with which the BJP tries to confuse the people. I repeat, this is not a favour, the people deserve relief in these hard pandemic times," Mr. Singhvi said.



Burning issue: Youth Congress activists protesting outside Union Minister Smriti Irani's house in Delhi on Saturday. ■AFP

Mr. Singhvi said the Modi government has been the most "mehengi sarkaar" (expensive government), which has heavily taxed the public.

**Crude oil prices**

Mr. Singhvi said in May 2014, when the international crude oil price was \$108 per barrel, petrol was sold at ₹71.51 per litre in Delhi and diesel at ₹57.28 per litre.

However, on February 25, 2021, when the international crude oil price was \$65.70 per barrel, the price of petrol had increased to ₹91.17 per litre in Delhi and diesel

to ₹81.47 per litre. The price of domestic gas cylinder had also increased by ₹200 in the past three months.

"Over the past six years, the additional excise burden on the common consumer has been increased by a whopping ₹23.78 per litre on petrol and by ₹28.37 per litre on diesel, which is 820% on diesel and 258% on petrol. This government earned over ₹21.5 lakh crore by imposing additional excise duties on petrol and diesel, but it has done away all the subsidies or under recoveries on petrol, diesel and LPG," he said.

# RSS-affiliate BMS plans protest against disinvestment of PSUs

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

The Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), which is affiliated to the RSS, has announced a six-phase agitation from March to November against the proposed disinvestment programme of public sector undertakings (PSUs) by the Centre.

The decision was taken at a two-day meeting of the PSUs Coordination Committee of the BMS in Hyderabad that ended on Friday. The meeting came 10 days after

the deliberations of the BMS National Executive in Chennai on Budget 2021 "in the context of the onslaught of the government" against the central PSUs.

In the meeting in Hyderabad, attended by BMS president H.J. Pandya, general secretary Binoy Kumar Sinha and organising secretary B. Surendran, a consensus emerged that the BMS should strongly oppose the policies of the Centre on disinvestment, privatisation and monetisation. The Swadeshi Jagaran Manch has al-

so criticised the disinvestment programme.

The agitation programmes in the first phase will include industry-wise seminars from March 15 to April 14 followed by unit-level workshops in May and a mass awareness campaign in June. The fourth phase will see unit-level mass demonstrations on July 15 followed by State-level conventions in September. The sixth phase will be on November 23, when the BMS will hold demonstrations at the corporate offices of all the PSUs.

# A-G refuses consent for contempt proceedings against former CJI Gogoi

'Statements don't scandalise court'

LEGAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

Attorney-General K.K. Venugopal has refused to give consent to an activist to initiate criminal contempt proceedings against former Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi for his comments about the Supreme Court.

Activist Saket Gokhale said Justice Gogoi's remarks, during a widely publicised interview given during the India Today conclave in February, had scandalised the court and lowered its dignity in the eyes of the public.

It was reported that Justice Gogoi, now a Rajya Sabha member, had used terms such as "ramshackled" judiciary and so on.

Mr. Venugopal, in a letter to Mr. Gokhale, agreed that Justice Gogoi's statements were indeed "very strong", but it was said for the "good of the institution" and would not "in any manner scandalise the court or lower its authority in the eyes of the public".

"The statements apparently reflect his deep frustration with the ills that undoubtedly beset the justice delivery system," Mr. Venugopal explained to Mr. Gok-

# Law Minister flags 'disturbing new trend'

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA  
PATNA

Union Law Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad on Saturday expressed strong disapproval of legal activists making objectionable comments about judges who do not pass favourable orders on their petitions, calling it a "disturbing new trend". "We can surely criticise the reasoning of a judgement. But, I foresee a new trend which I need to flag today," Mr. Prasad said referring to "grossly unfair" comments on social media against judges.

hale. "I accordingly decline consent to initiate proceedings for criminal contempt under Section 15 of the Contempt of Courts Act, 1971..." Mr. Venugopal concluded in his letter dated February 26.

The consent of the Attorney-General is necessary to initiate contempt proceedings in the Supreme Court.

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**6. The last date for the application to be submitted physically** at the address given below is 31/03/2021 till 05:00 PM. Applications that are incomplete in any respect such as those not accompanied by the documents will liable to be rejected. Applications received after the deadline will not be considered.

Arun Kumar, Under Secretary (Paper),  
Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India,  
Udyog Bhawan (Room No. 367), New Delhi-110011.

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3.	Display of list of eligible candidates on SPA, New Delhi website	Friday, 9 April 2021
4.	Display of Selection List on SPA, New Delhi website	Tuesday 20 April 2021
5.	Registration in respective Departments	Friday, 6 August 2021
6.	Orientation Programme	Friday, 6 August 2021
7.	Start of Academic Session	Monday, 9 August 2021
8.	Closure of Admission	Sunday, 15 August 2021

For details, please visit our website [www.spa.ac.in](http://www.spa.ac.in)  
Ragging is completely banned in all the campuses of the School

## IN BRIEF



## Hrithik gives statement in fake emails case

MUMBAI Actor Hrithik Roshan on Saturday recorded his statement with the Crime Intelligence Unit (CIU) of the Mumbai Crime Branch in connection with his 2016 complaint about fake emails in his name to actor Kangana Ranaut, an official said. Mr. Roshan's statement was recorded by a team of CIU officials headed by an Assistant Police Inspector, the official said.

## Death toll in Chamoli disaster touches 72

NEW DELHI The death toll in the disaster in Uttarakhand's Chamoli district has increased to 72. The identities of 40 bodies have been established so far. In all, 30 human body parts have been found at different places. The DNA samples of 110 family members of the missing persons and 86 bodies/body parts have been sent to the forensic science laboratory in Dehradun for matching.

## Ex-PMO official takes charge of Revenue dept.

AHMEDABAD The Centre has preferred not to extend the tenure of Finance Secretary Ajay Bhushan Pandey, who is superannuating on February 28. It has handed over the charge of the Department of Revenue to Tarun Bajaj, Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs. Mr. Bajaj was previously in the Prime Minister's Office as Additional Secretary. The 1988 batch IAS officer had served the Ministry of Finance.

## Priyanka visits Sant Ravidas' birthplace

LUCKNOW Congress general Priyanka Gandhi Vadra on Saturday paid her respects at the birthplace of Sant Ravidas in Varanasi on the poet-saint's birth anniversary. Ms. Vadra tweeted that she had the good fortune to bow at the feet of Guru Ravidas, who inspired people to build an ideal society through the "gurumantra" of equality, service and goodwill.

## Footfall in the flurry: tracking the elusive snow leopard in Himachal

Study by wildlife officials and Nature Conservation Foundation reports that the hilly terrain is home to as many as 73 big cats of the species

VIKAS VASUDEVA  
CHANDIGARH

Himachal Pradesh's high-altitude hilly terrain could be harbouring as many as 73 snow leopards (*Panthera uncia*), says a recent study based on a scientific enumeration of the elusive animal. Snow leopards are one of the most endangered wildlife species. The study observed that local communities are the strongest allies in conservation.

The first-ever study on snow leopards, a top predator of the Indian Himalaya, was completed in January by the Himachal Pradesh Wildlife Department and the Mysore-based Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF). "We are the pioneers in getting snow leopards count done in a scientific manner

in the country. Till now, it was only a guess work surrounding the population of snow leopards. But now we have numbers which are reliable. We detected 44 individual snow leopards on 187 occasions in this study. From this dataset of 44 individuals, we estimated that the snow leopard population

## SPECIAL

size is likely to be 51 individuals and this population can be reliably estimated to be up to 73 individuals, excluding cubs. This is an encouraging count," Archana Sharma, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife), told *The Hindu*.

In Himachal Pradesh, the snow leopard's habitat covers a greater part of the dis-

tricts of Lahaul-Spiti and Kinnaur. Its potential habitat also extends into the upper regions of the districts of Shimla, Kullu, Chamba and Kangra.

The wildlife wing of the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department commenced the snow leopard enumeration project in 2018, with techniques aligned to the protocols prescribed by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change under the Snow Leopard Population Assessment in India (SPAI).

"This project is the first systematic effort at a large regional scale that utilised a stratified sampling design to estimate the snow leopard population over an area of 26,112 sq. km. The entire snow leopard habitat of the



Cat count: Snow leopards are one of the most vulnerable wildlife species. ■ WILDLIFE CONSERVATION SOCIETY/AF

State [of Himachal Pradesh] was first stratified into three categories — high, low or unknown snow leopard occurrence, based on questionnaire surveys of local communities residing in these areas. Camera trap surveys were then carried out in areas under each of

the categories," Ajay Bijoor, assistant programme director of NCF's high altitude programme told *The Hindu*. The population of the primary wild ungulate prey of snow leopards — blue sheep and ibex — for the entire snow leopard habitat was assessed by using the

double observer survey technique. "We found that the snow leopard density was positively correlated with the wild prey density, indicating that higher wild prey densities corresponded to higher snow leopard densities. Spiti and Tabo recorded the highest densities of both snow leopards and their prey, while Chandra and Bharmour recorded the lowest densities of both snow leopards and their prey," he said.

## Local support

The entire camera trapping exercise was led by a team of eight local youth of Kibber village in Spiti, who have been working on such surveys across the upper Spiti landscape since 2010.

45-year-old Tanzin Thin-

ley, who hails from Kibber village and has been associated with the NCF, firmly believes that conservation of the snow leopard would be easy with the participation of local communities.

"Snow leopards at times attack the livestock of villagers. Over the past few years, NCF has tried to convince villagers to get their livestock insured. This has helped in a way that in case anyone has lost livestock to snow leopards, the sense of anguish against the animal is not there, eventually helping in its conservation," Mr. Thinley said.

The results reiterate, the study said, that local communities are the strongest allies in conservation, if their concerns can be factored into conservation planning.

## Cost of vaccine dose capped at ₹250 in private hospitals

Facilities will be mapped with the nearest cold chain points, says Health Ministry

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

Private hospitals functioning as COVID Vaccination Centres (CVCs) may recover a charge subject to a ceiling of ₹250 per person per dose, the Health Ministry said on Saturday.

The Ministry released a list of 20 co-morbidities that enhance the risk of mortality from COVID-19, and now allow beneficiaries in the 45-59 years age bracket to avail of the vaccine.

India is all set to start the second phase of COVID-19 vaccination on March 1, which will cover those above 60 years and people who are 45+ years with specified co-morbid conditions. Government CVCs will offer free vaccination for all and the Central government will bear the full cost of vaccination conducted by them. "To ramp up the COVID



More coverage: The COVID-19 vaccine will continue to be given free of cost in government centres. ■ B. JOTHI RAMALINGAM

vaccination capacity, around 10,000 private hospitals can be used under Ayushman Bharat PM-JAY and more than 600 hospitals under Central Government Health Scheme. Other private hospitals empanelled under State Health Insurance Schemes can also participate as COVID Vaccination Centres (CVCs)," said

the Health Ministry on Saturday.

It added that the Health Departments of State governments had already initiated a dialogue with these private hospitals so that they can be encouraged to participate in the drive as CVCs.

A list of all these private hospitals has been uploaded on the website of the Minis-

try of Health and Family Welfare and the National Health Authority. All the private health facilities that will serve as government CVCs are required to follow strict norms of due process, quality and safety, including integration with the national Co-Win platform.

The Ministry has specified that all private health facilities must have adequate space, adequate cold chain arrangements, adequate number of vaccinators and support staff, and adequate arrangements for addressing Adverse Event Following Immunisation. "User names and passwords will be provided to the private facilities to facilitate effective use of CoWIN 2.0. The government will also do mapping of private facilities with the nearest cold chain points to ensure seamless flow of vaccines," the Ministry release said.

## Banner hub



Busy time: A worker in Ahmedabad arranging campaign banner material printed with the symbol of the Trinamool Congress, ahead of the West Bengal election. The city has several small-scale units that are receiving orders from all over India for such banners. ■ VIJAY SONEJI

## EC shunts out top police official in West Bengal

More paramilitary forces arrive as campaigning picks up

SHIV SAHAY SINGH  
KOLKATA

In the first administrative shuffle after the model code of conduct for the Assembly polls came into force in West Bengal, the Election Commission transferred Jawed Shamim, Additional Director General (Law and Order) of West Bengal Police.

Jag Mohan, who was serving as Director General of West Bengal Fire and Emergency Services, will be the new ADG (Law and Order) and Mr. Shamim will take over as DG, Fire and Emergency Services. Mr. Shamim was appointed ADG (Law and Order) only a few weeks ago by the State government.

About 10 companies of Central Armed Police Forces (CAPF) have arrived in the State from Patna.

The forces have been deployed in Basirhat, Bongaon and Barasat areas of North 24 Parganas and parts of Kolkata.

Eight additional companies of CAPF are likely to arrive from Assam for north Bengal. More than 20 companies of CAPF have already been deployed.

A day after the Assembly election schedule for West Bengal was announced, campaigning in the State gathered momentum.

Trinamool Congress leaders organised a road show at

Ghatal at Paschim Medinipur.

BJP leader Suwendu Adhikari also held a number of public meetings in neighbouring Purba Medinipur, including participating in a *kirtan* programme at an Iskon Temple in Mecheda. Mr Adhikari urged the people to defeat the Trinamool Congress.

Meanwhile, several leaders of Left parties, including Left Front chairperson Biman Bose and Communist Party of India (Marxist) leader Sujan Chakraborty went to Brigade Parade Grounds to oversee the preparations for the mega rally on Sunday.

## 'Provision to block content under IT rules not new'

I&B Ministry says it has existed for 11 years

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

The Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting on Saturday clarified that no "new provision" had been added to the existing law, after the uproar over a provision of the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media

Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, under which the Secretary of the Ministry can block public access to any information in case of emergency.

"Certain misgivings are being raised regarding Rule 16 under Part III of the rules, which mention that in a case of emergency nature, interim blocking directions may be issued by the Secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. It is to inform that this provision is exactly the same as being exercised by the Secretary, Ministry of

Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), since the past 11 years under the Information Technology (Procedure and Safeguards for Blocking for Access of Information by Public) Rules, 2009," the I&B Ministry said in a statement here.

The Secretary, MeitY, has been replaced by the Secretary, I&B Ministry, as the rules have been amended to suitably bring over-the-top (OTT) platforms and the digital media within the ambit of the I&B Ministry.

The government has drawn severe criticism for bringing in rules to govern the digital media without any consultations with the news portals.

## Flak from forum

Digipub News India Foundation, the largest collection of digital news publishers in India, has called the new rules unfair, the process of their formulation undemocratic and the method of their implementation an infringement upon the freedom of

expression. In a letter, jointly addressed to IT Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad and I&B Minister Prakash Javadekar, Digipub said, "These Rules in some places appear to go against the fundamental principle of news and its role in a democracy. While rules and laws already exist to hold news media accountable, the aforesaid rules enable the executive government to even remove content published as current affairs or news (Rule 14) among other things."

## Police search for journalist in rape case

STAFF REPORTER  
NEW DELHI

A team of Delhi Police has reached Mumbai to arrest a TV anchor who is accused in a rape case reported in New Delhi last week, a police officer said on Sunday.

On February 23, a 22-year-old woman alleged she was raped by the man in a hotel room in Chanakyapuri area. The victim is known to the accused for the past three years. He is alleged to have taken her to his hotel room.

The woman managed to come out of the room, and reported the incident at the Chanakyapuri station. A police officer said a case had been registered.

The accused has been identified as Varun Hiremath, 28, in the FIR. The team has been in Mumbai for the past three days but unable to trace the accused, a television journalist. His phones have been switched off.

## India, Bangladesh agree to speed up border fencing

19th Home Secretary-level talks conducted in virtual mode

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT  
NEW DELHI

The Home Secretaries of India and Bangladesh met virtually on Saturday and discussed early completion of pending fencing along the Indo-Bangladesh border as agreed to by the Prime Ministers of the two countries, a statement by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) said.

The 19th Home Secretary level talks between India and Bangladesh was held in the backdrop of 'Mujib Barsho' and 50 years since the Bangladesh Liberation War.

The Indian delegation was led by Union Home Secretary Ajay Kumar Bhalla and Bangladesh was led by Mostafa Kamal Uddin, Senior Secretary, Public Security Division.

"India and Bangladesh attach highest importance to their bilateral relations. Both Secretaries reiterated

Both sides agreed to enhance the level of cooperation to prevent smuggling of fake Indian currency notes and contraband

MINISTRY OF HOME AFFAIRS

their commitment to further expand and strengthen mutual cooperation in the security and border related issues. Both sides reaffirmed not to allow the territory of either country to be used for any activity inimical to each other's interests," the statement said.

## Fight against terror

It added that both sides appreciated the cooperation between the two countries and the action taken to address the menace of terrorism and extremism.

On February 10, Union

Minister of State for Home Nityanand Rai had informed the Rajya Sabha that the total length of the Bangladesh border was 2,126 kilometre of which 319 km cannot be fenced due to topographical constraints.

"The effective functioning of the Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP) to control the illegal cross border activities was appreciated by both sides. The holding of the inaugural Police Chiefs' Dialogue in January, 2021, implementing the decision taken at the Home Minister Level Talks (HMLT) held in August, 2019, was noted with appreciation by both sides. Both sides agreed to further enhance the level of cooperation to prevent the smuggling of Fake Indian Currency Notes (FICN) and contraband," the statement said.

## 17-year-old stabbed for speaking up for sister

The accused had passed lewd remarks

STAFF REPORTER  
NEW DELHI

A 17-year-old boy was stabbed by a group of boys after he objected to the passing of lewd remarks against his sister on Friday, the police said on Saturday. A case has been registered.

A senior police officer said that they received a call around 1 p.m. regarding the stabbing of a boy near Sarvodaya Vidyalaya in Kalkaji and that he was being taken to AIIMS.

The police said that the eyewitness, his 18-year-old sister and a Class 12 student, told them that they were walking back home after school. A police officer, stated, "She said that three boys followed her and passed lewd remarks. When the brother objected to it, they all started beating him and one of them stabbed him on the left side of the abdomen and fled the spot."

Deputy Commissioner of

Police (South-East) R.P. Meena said that a case under Section 307 (attempt to murder), 354D (assault or criminal force to woman with intent to outrage her modesty), 509 (intent to insult modesty of a woman), and 34 (common intention) has been registered at Kalkaji police station.

The police said that the complainant told them that the boys had been troubling her for the last two days.

## Panel seeks report

Taking suo motu cognisance of the incident, the Delhi Commission for Women on Saturday issued notice to the Delhi Police seeking a detailed action report on the matter.

The women's panel also sought a copy of the complaint made by the woman pertaining to stalking and eve-teasing. The Delhi Police was asked to respond to the queries by March 3.

## SUDOKU

	9			3	2
		4			6 7
2	6		3		
9	2	1			
		5	7		
			9 8		4
			5	4	3
1	5			7	
4	8				1

DIFFICULTY RATING: ★★★★★

## Solution to yesterday's Sudoku

8	4	5	2	6	9	3	1	7
9	1	2	7	8	3	4	5	6
7	6	3	5	4	1	8	9	2
1	5	6	4	3	7	9	2	8
3	2	8	9	1	6	5	7	4
4	7	9	8	5	2	1	6	3
5	3	1	6	7	8	2	4	9
6	9	4	3	2	5	7	8	1
2	8	7	1	9	4	6	3	5

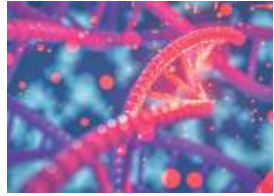


## SNAPSHOTS



## Plastic toys

Lists of 'chemicals of concern' in toys focus on a few such as phthalates. A study published in *Environment International* finds that out of 419 chemicals found in plastic toys, the study found 126 to be potentially harmful. The chemicals list included butyrate TXIB and citrate ATBC which are used as phthalate substitutes.



## Genetic Lego

Like Lego blocks can be rearranged, genetic elements can be shuffled to form new genes, a study published in *Science* finds. Researchers found that the so-called jumping genes or transposons were added to the genetic mix during evolution to rustle up new genes through a process called exon shuffling which generates new genes.



## Quantum limits

The existence of a speed limit to quantum processes was shown theoretically 60 years ago. Namely, for a 'two-level' quantum system, this limit depends on the uncertainty in energy. Experimentalists at University of Bonn show that a lower speed limit applies in the case of 'multi-level' systems, depending on the energy uncertainty as well as number of levels.



## Brainless but smart

Storing and retrieving memories allows organisms with a central nervous system to function smartly. New research published in *PNAS* shows how the slime mould *Physarum polycephalum* stores and retrieves memories even though it has no brain. This organism's body consists of a single cell that may stretch to even metres. It weaves its memories into its network like body.

## Is India witnessing the beginning of the second wave?

While there were no large surges even during the festival season, ICMR's third serosurvey found only 21.5% of India has been exposed to the virus

R. PRASAD

Six months after India witnessed a peak, a spike in daily fresh COVID-19 cases is seen in a handful of States, particularly in Maharashtra. From 10.9 million cases across India as on February 17, the cases shot up to 11 million on February 26, with daily cases staying above 13,000 from February 18 onwards and even almost touching 17,000 on February 24.

From below 5%, the test positivity rate has suddenly shot up in Maharashtra - the seven-day average test positivity rate in the State as on February 26 was 9.5%; the national figure stands at 1.9%. Does the sharp rise in numbers suggest the beginning of a second wave in India?

"No, the increase in daily cases is only a spike. It cannot be called as the beginning of a second wave, not even in Maharashtra," says Dr. Giridhara Babu, Epidemiologist at the Public Health Foundation of India, Bengaluru and a member of the Karnataka COVID-19 Technical Advisory Committee. "There's no strict defini-

tion for what a wave is; usually, epidemiologists refer to the second wave as a resurgence of infection in an area where the transmission had decreased to below the outbreak potential but is now continually increasing over a certain period."

Dr. Babu adds that the prerequisites for defining the second wave are that the first wave should have been contained - the reproduction number or  $R_0$  is below 1.5 and low rate of infection has been sustained for at least one month.

## Sharp criterion

The cumulative test positivity rate below 5% is generally used as a criterion to decide the end of a wave. Any increase in the cumulative test positivity rate beyond 5% and cases show a steadily increasing trend for over two-three continuous weeks are used to define the beginning of a wave.

The Karnataka COVID-19 task force also considered other criteria to define the beginning of a new wave - the seven-day average growth rate should be in excess of normal expectancy and where the test positivity



**Matter of concern:** A spike in daily fresh COVID-19 cases is seen in a handful of States, particularly in Maharashtra, where the test positivity rate has suddenly shot up to 9.5%.  
• GETTY IMAGES

rate doubles in a week despite there being no changes in the testing pattern, and hospitalisations double in the corresponding seven consecutive days. Also, the cases should be increasing steadily after crossing the basic reproduction rate ( $R_0$ ) more than 1.5. "Any of the above conditions that shows a steadily increasing trend

for over two-three weeks is to be used to define the beginning of a new wave," he says.

## Too early

Referring to sudden spurt in daily cases in Maharashtra, he says it is a bit too early to call it as a second wave. "Yes, the number of cases starting to recede around mid-January, but there has been a spike in new cases in the last one week. We need to wait and see if it is sustained over the next one week at least. If there is sustained increase in cases along with either a doubling in hospitalisation or test positivity rate in a week then we can call it a second wave, at least in Maharashtra," Dr. Babu explains.

Since millions have been infected by the first wave in India, and there have been no large surges in cases even during the festival season, winter and large gatherings, will India ever witness a second wave? "With the currently prevailing strains, I do not think that India, as a nation, will have a second wave bigger than the first wave. If anything, we will have second waves regionally in States, which may occur over a period, depending on compliance to COVID-19 appropriate behaviour, testing levels and population movement. For instance, Delhi witnessed not one but three waves. But we may not see a sudden spurt in cases in the entire country all at once," he adds.

## Third serosurvey

The third serosurvey of ICMR found that only 21.5% of India (around 225 million people) has been exposed to the virus - and hence, a large population is still vulnerable to infection. Dr. Babu is not entirely convinced with the results of the third serosurvey. "There is a lot of uncertainty looming around how long the IgG antibodies can

be detected. The evidence suggests that IgG estimation underestimates the overall level of protection in the community. This is corroborated by the higher level of antibodies seen in the serosurveys done in many metros, such as Mumbai and Delhi," he says.

"My own personal assessment is that we have had a greater number of infections in urban areas in the first wave. The threshold for population immunity might have been achieved in the densest settings, responsible for the greater number of cases in the first wave," Dr. Babu adds.

## New variant

But all these assumptions would prove wrong if a new variant that shows greater transmissibility either arises in India or those circulating in other countries spreads here. Dr. Babu says: "Newer variants, especially those capable of immune escape, can change everything we know, and this is the only way to have a second wave more devastating than the first wave. As of now, we have not seen such trends affecting India."

## Covid-19 can be transmitted via lung transplant

The surgeon wore only a surgical mask when preparing the lungs

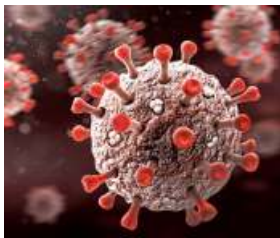
REUTERS

The coronavirus can linger in the lungs even when swab tests of the back of the nose and throat are negative, doctors reported after unknowingly transplanting infected lungs into a patient who later died of COVID-19.

University of Michigan surgeons obtained the lungs from a deceased donor who had tested negative for the virus and had reportedly never been exposed to it. Soon afterward, the transplant recipient and one of the surgeons developed COVID-19.

## Comparative study

The team collected a fluid sample from the patient's new lungs and compared it to a sample taken from the lungs immediately after removal from the donor, as well as to swab samples from the infected surgeon. Genetic analyses showed the patient and surgeon had both acquired virus from the donor lungs, the doctors



**Stealthy presence:** The coronavirus can linger in the lungs even when swab tests are negative, doctors reported.  
• GETTY IMAGES

reported in the *American Journal of Transplantation*.

The surgeon had worn only a surgical mask when preparing the lungs for transplant, rather than full personal protective equipment, because both donor and recipient had tested negative.

Potential lung transplant donors should all have specimens collected from deep within the lungs to be tested for the coronavirus, the report's co-author Dr. Daniel Kaul said. The virus is less likely to be transmitted by other donated organs, such as liver or kidneys, he said.

## IISER Kolkata scientists simulate Mars on the computer, suggest how it lost its atmosphere

The researchers model a Mars-like planet interacting with plasma wind from a Sun-like star

SHUBASHREE DESIKAN

A new and exciting field in astronomy to study exoplanets and gauge whether they possess conditions that will favour the presence and sustainability of life. In this quest, an important part is looking at our own celestial backyard to gain insights - hence the many missions to Mars and Venus probing for signs of past life. One thing that astronomers search for in exoplanets, in the so-called Goldilocks zone of habitability, is the existence of liquid water and an atmosphere like that on Earth. In this context it is believed by many that Mars once had such an atmosphere. The mechanism as to why it lost its atmosphere has remained in doubt. Scientists from Indian Institution for Science Education and Research (IISER) Kolkata suggest that it was the planet's intrinsic magnetic dynamo which, by shielding its atmosphere from the sun's solar wind, protected its atmosphere.



**Protective shroud:** The magnetosphere enveloped Mars, shielding its atmosphere from erosion by solar wind.  
• GETTY IMAGES

When the magnetic dynamo switched off, the atmosphere slowly was eroded by the solar wind and eventually vanished, leaving the thin remnant we see today. These results have been published in the journal *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society*.

## Two scenarios

In the simulation, the researchers build a computer model of a Mars-like planet interacting with the plasma wind from a Sun-like star. They study two scenarios. In

the first one, the planet has a magnetic dynamo and an intrinsic magnetosphere surrounding it. The physics is described by Maxwell's equations - which describe electro-magnetic fields and their interactions with matter - in the presence of plasma. In a simulation, they mimic the Mars model with an intrinsic magnetosphere and allow a solar-wind like plasma to fall on the dayside of the planet. They run the model to simulate the interactions between the magnetized solar wind and Mars.

In the second scenario, they modelled the same system but with no intrinsic magnetic field.

## The right track

To ascertain that they are indeed on the right track, the researchers modelled the present day Mars, with no intrinsic magnetosphere. "We perform a simulation for present day Mars based on which we generate the magnetic environment around the planet. We find that this has good correspondence with observations from NASA Mars Global Surveyor and NASA Maven missions," says Dibyendu Nandi from Center of Excellence in Space Sciences India (CESSI), in IISER Kolkata, in an email to *The Hindu*.

From the study, the scientists infer that when Mars had an intrinsic magnetosphere, it enveloped the planet like a shroud and shielded its atmosphere from the stripping effect of the solar wind. When the planet lost its intrinsic magnetosphere, only

the imposed one due to the pileup of the solar wind remained. "This imposed magnetosphere was made of the Sun's magnetic fields which slips past Mars when the solar wind flows past it after impacting the day side," explains Prof. Nandi. "So, there is a continuous slippage of magnetised plasma from the day-side to the night-side of Mars which also strips away the atmosphere of Mars slowly."

The computational models being developed in CESSI, in IISER Kolkata can be used to simulate and predict the space environment around planets, according to Prof. Nandi.

"Thus these are particularly important to complement and aid in the interpretation of data from planetary space missions," he says. "These simulations can also help in understanding how astrophysical space environments determine atmospheric evolution and thus habitability of planets and exoplanets," he adds.

## New light on rise of mammals

The ancestor of all primates likely lived alongside large dinosaurs

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

Scientists have documented the earliest-known fossil evidence of primates, an advance which sheds light on how life on land recovered after the extinction event 66 million years ago that wiped out the dinosaurs and led to the rise of mammals.

The researchers, including those from the University of Washington in the US, analysed several fossils of *Purgatorius* - the oldest genus in a group of the earliest-known primates called plesiadapiforms.

## Ancient mammals

According to the study, published in the journal *Royal Society Open Science*, these ancient mammals were small-bodied and ate specialised diets of insects and fruits that varied by species.

"This discovery is exciting because it represents the oldest dated occurrence of archaic primates in the fossil record," said Stephen Chester, co-leader of the study from Brooklyn College in the U.S.

"It adds to our understanding of how the earliest primates separated themselves from their competi-

tors following the demise of the dinosaurs," Chester said.

The scientists analysed fossilised teeth found in the Hell Creek area of northeastern Montana in the U.S. which are now part of the collections at the University of California Museum of Paleontology.

## Mass extinction event

They are estimated to be 65.9 million years old, about 1,05,000 to 1,39,000 years after the mass extinction event.

Based on the age of the fossils, the scientists said the ancestor of all primates, including the plesiadapiforms and modern day primates such as lemurs, monkeys and apes, likely lived alongside large dinosaurs.

"It's mind blowing to think of our earliest archaic primate ancestors," said study co-author Wilson Mantilla, a University of Washington (UW) professor of biology.

## First to diversify

"They were some of the first mammals to diversify in this new post-mass extinction world, taking advantage of the fruits and insects up in the forest canopy," Mantilla said.

## Nanosheets help in the detection of uric acid in urine, alcohol in breath

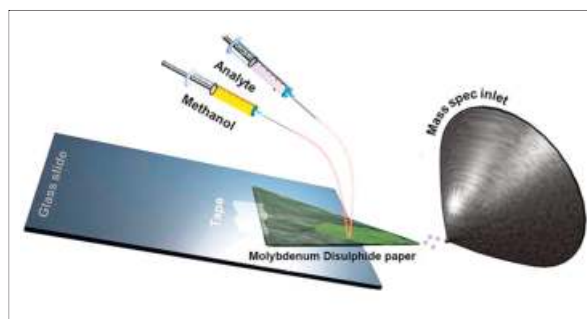
The device could detect alcohol concentrations of even less than 3% in breath

ASWATHI PACHA

Mass spectrometry is an important tool and has helped win several Nobel Prizes. It provides valuable information about the composition and structure of molecules and has found applications from drug testing to carbon dating. Using this, researchers can ionise or break down the compound into simple ions and then identify the molecules based on their masses. The current process of ionisation requires electrical potential of a few kilo volts, heat or high energy ultraviolet lasers (UV-lasers). But now, researchers have developed a new method of soft ionisation using nanosheets which eliminates the need for external energy sources completely.

## Sheet-like structures

The team used a simple filter paper as a support material and coated this with 2D molybdenum disulphide (MoS<sub>2</sub>). "The 2D materials are sheet-like structures and graphene is a perfect example. You pull out sheets of carbon and create gra-



**Simple but effective:** Flowing urine over the nanostructured surface and measuring the current, the team detected uric acid in the urine of a healthy individual.

phene. Similarly, this molybdenum disulphide was created as a thin sheet and spread on a paper. This modified paper produces an electric current when liquids flow over it," explains Thalappil Pradeep from the Department of Chemistry at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Madras. He is the corresponding author of the work published last week in *ACS Nano*.

The team observed that a flow of pure methanol over the nanosheet generates a record-high current of 1.3 microampere. The sample to be tested can be mixed with this methanol, and the

induced current helps make ions of the compound to be tested.

The team then tested the device to measure uric acid. By simply flowing raw urine (about 5 microlitre) over the nanostructured surface and measuring the corresponding current (with no other stimulus), the team detected the uric acid in the urine of a healthy individual.

They also demonstrated that the device can be used as a self-energised disposable sensor for breath alcohol detection. The device was modified in such a way that the breath of a drunken person can interact directly

with the flowing liquid on the MoS<sub>2</sub>-coated surface. A volunteer who had consumed 650 mL of beer containing 9% (v/v) alcohol blew over the paper, and the corresponding current was measured. While standard breath analysers detect breath alcohol concentration above 5%, this device could detect even less than 3%.

## Many applications

"The device can find many more applications: check glucose in blood, toxic chemicals in any liquid, pesticide or any contaminants in drinking water. The main plus point is that it can even detect very low levels. The current wet chemical or reagent-based methods are lengthy and require skilled labour. The new method is cost-effective, and all you need is simple paper coated with nanostructures. By just flowing the liquid and studying the spectrum, molecular detection has now been made simple and easy," adds the first author of the paper Pallab Basuri, a PhD scholar at the institute.



## Question Corner

## Man's old friend

## Did dogs migrate with humans to the Americas?

A bone fragment discovered from southeast Alaska has now answered a few questions on dog migration into the Americas. Researchers found that the thigh bone belonged to a dog that lived in the region about 10,150 years ago. Scientists say the remains represent the oldest confirmed remains of a domestic dog in the Americas.

Analysis of the mitochondrial genome revealed that the dog belonged to a lineage of dogs that diverged from Siberian dogs. Researchers (*Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*) say in a release that this study provides not only the timing but also a location for the entry of dogs and people

into the Americas. The study also supports the theory that this migration occurred just as coastal glaciers retreated during the last Ice Age.

The researchers from University of Buffalo, New York, who studied the bone say that canines did not arrive in the Americas all at once.

The researchers did not set out to study dogs. They came across the femur fragment while sequencing DNA from a collection of hundreds of bones excavated years before in southeast Alaska by other researchers. The bone fragment, originally thought to come from a bear, was quite small, but when the DNA was studied, the team realised it was from a dog.

"Our early dog from southeast Alaska supports the hypothesis that the first dog and human migration occurred through the northwest Pacific coastal route instead of the central continental corridor," Flavio Augusto da Silva Coelho notes in the release.

Readers may send their questions / answers to [questioncorner@thehindu.co.in](mailto:questioncorner@thehindu.co.in)



The damaged engine of the United Airlines flight, in Denver on February 22. •REUTERS

## Engine trouble

What are the concerns around the 'engine failure' of a Boeing 777 and why is the maker under scrutiny?

MURALI N. KRISHNASWAMY

**The story so far:** Regulatory moves have come into effect following an "uncontained engine failure" on a United Airlines Boeing 777 during a scheduled domestic flight in the United States. Dozens of Boeing 777 aircraft with a Pratt and Whitney engine variant have been grounded and subjected to further checks.

### What happened to the United Airlines flight?

On February 20, 2021, Flight UA 328, from Denver to Honolulu, with over 200 passengers and 10 crew had just departed and was in the initial climb phase, when the inlet on the right turbofan engine, a Pratt and Whitney PW4077 build, separated in what is technically known as an engine failure event. The crew stopped the climb, levelled off the aircraft, and declared an emergency. The plane touched down safely within 25 minutes of take-off.

The engine failure was a dramatic event with many eyewitnesses on the ground, as debris rained down on some neighbourhoods under its flight path. There were police reports of the debris field extending to over one nautical mile. This is being investigated by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). Some of the passengers also filmed the remains of the engine wobbling on the engine pylon in a fiery blaze. The FAA and the NTSB have determined that there was damage to the engine and the fuselage of the plane (a machine a little over 26 years old) as well as an inflight engine fire. The initial examination has shown up two stressed and fractured blades.

Air India, which is the only Boeing 777 operator in India, uses General Electric-manufactured engines. The two new Boeing 777 aircraft for the transportation of India's VVIPs also use GE engines

### How common is engine failure?

Given the technological advances made by engine manufacturers, the modern jet engine seldom fails, says a senior Boeing 777 pilot. Nevertheless, there have been events. In recent examples, on February 26, a Rossiya cargo Boeing 777 flight on the Hong Kong-Moscow-Madrid sector had an engine electronic

control issue in one of its General Electric (GE) engines while it was about to land. The plane touched down in Moscow without any further eventuality.

In 2018, a United Airlines Boeing 777 flight had a fan blade fracture. Some of the blade debris impacted the fuselage, but the aircraft was safe.

In 2017, an Air France Airbus A380 had an extreme engine failure that left behind only a metal stub. Experts determined this to be an "uncontained failure".

However, the most dramatic incident occurred in November 2010, when a Qantas Airbus A380 with 459 passengers and crew on a scheduled flight from London to Sydney via Singapore experienced engine failure in one of its four Rolls-Royce Trent 900 engines just after leaving Singapore. At that time, it was the first-of-its-kind incident involving the Airbus A380. After the aircraft returned to Singapore safely, inspections showed that a turbine disc in the number two engine had disintegrated, in turn damaging a part of the wing, fuel system, landing gear and destroying some of the flight and engine controls. It was eventually traced to a manufacturing defect in an oil pipe.

### What are the kinds of engine failure?

Engines are designed to handle issues such as damaged blades and bird hits. Engine failure, in general, is classified as contained or uncontained. In the first, even if engine components disintegrate or separate, they remain within the engine, or as designed by the engine manufacturer, exit the engine case.

In the second, there is a "random, violent event, and one that is usually beyond the design parameters". Damaged components can pose a danger to the aircraft, its fuselage, and in some cases, as in a four-engine aircraft, threaten the adjacent engine. They can affect crucial flight and engine control systems and, in turn, passengers and crew and also people on the ground.

### After the United Airlines incident, what are the regulatory measures now?

On February 21, Boeing, the aircraft manufacturer, said it has recommended "suspending operations of the 69 in-service and 59 in-storage 777s powered by Pratt & Whitney 4000-112 engines until the FAA identifies the appropriate inspection protocol".

In an initial statement, FAA administrator Steve Dickson said the FAA had issued an Emergency Airworthiness Directive that would need immediate or enhanced inspections of Boeing 777s with certain Pratt & Whitney PW4000 engine variants. In an Emergency Airworthiness Directive issued on February 24, the FAA now requires U.S. operators to conduct immediate thermal acoustic image (TAI) inspection of the engine blades for the PW4074/D, 4077/D, 4084/D and 4090/-3 engines. It says TAI technology can detect cracks on the interior surfaces of hollow fan blades, or in areas that cannot be seen during a visual inspection. The hollow fan blades are unique to this engine model. Cracks in the blades can be a problem and airlines use technologies such as ultrasound to detect such fissures.

So far, Japan, New Zealand and the United Kingdom have stopped operators using the Boeing 777 with this engine variant from entering their airspace.

### Will the directive affect India?

Flag carrier Air India, which is the only Boeing 777 operator in India, uses GE-manufactured engines (GE90). The two new Boeing 777 aircraft for the transportation of India's VVIPs are also unaffected as they, too, have GE engines.

# Super-spreaders and rise in COVID-19 cases

Is the recent spike in infections indicative of a 'second wave' and will it be as severe as the first one?

RAMYA KANNAN

**The story so far:** Experts remain divided on the question of whether the slow yet steady rise in the number of COVID-19 cases in the country over the last week of February is indicative of the onset of a 'second wave'. But the Centre and some State governments are on the alert against the rising numbers and are reinforcing aggressive testing and proper social and hygiene protocols. In several States, some restrictions have come back into play, though in a watered-down form.

### What is happening around the globe?

Globally, nations in Europe that witnessed a spike in May 2020 have slowly started emerging out of the grip of COVID-19. As the number of cases dropped, countries also let their guard down, opened up the economy, and resumed travel and near-normal activity. In the summer of 2020, people started travelling across Europe, eager to be released from the confinement and stress of the lockdown.

In November, the second wave struck. Experts said every country in Europe that had managed to get away lightly with the first wave was nearly crippled by the second one. Even nations that had suffered badly initially, including Italy, were hit hard again. Hospitals started filling up, beds went scarce again, and the death rate started climbing. Stricter lockdowns were introduced, with curfews and restrictions on gatherings in public places; schools were shut down again, as governments struggled to cope with this new wave. In late 2020, the emergence of newer, mutated strains of the virus in Britain and South Africa meant a faster-spreading variant had established dominance in some countries. However, scientists said there was no evidence to show that the new British strain caused a more severe disease.

### Are cases growing in India?

After infections peaked in September last year, cases across the country had been steadily declining, with the exception of Kerala, an outlier State that continued to see high numbers after having seen initial success in flattening the curve. However, in the last week of February this year, the trend reversed, with some States beginning to report higher numbers. While the overall rise was rather gradual, the average was skewed by high spikes in some districts in the States – particularly in Maharashtra and Punjab. The average increase was around 14,000 new infections per day and the upward trajectory began around the last week of February. Two States, Maharashtra and Punjab, led the increase in the number of cases, even as their testing numbers had dipped over the past few months.

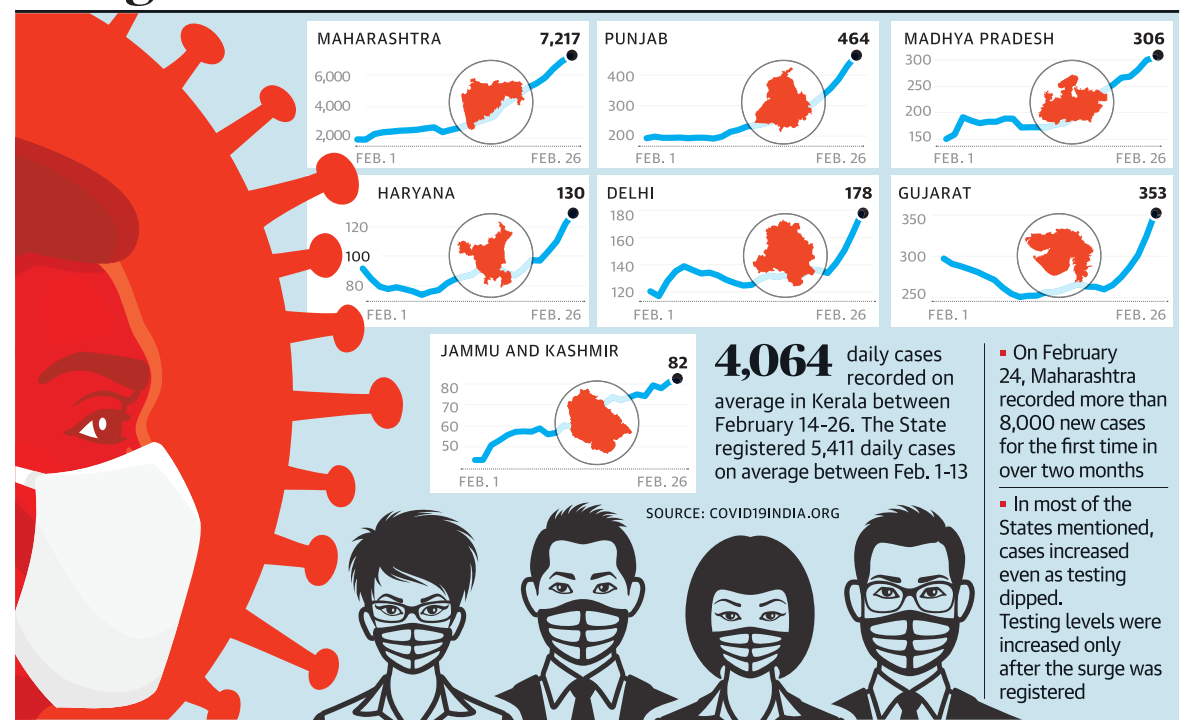
The Union Health Ministry said on Saturday nearly 86% of the over 16,400 cases recorded in the previous 24 hours were from six States and one Union Territory. The Cabinet Secretary chaired a review meeting with eight States and UTs that have shown a surge in infections recently, namely Telangana, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Punjab, West Bengal and the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir.

### What is causing the spike?

"The spikes in Maharashtra were caused by a series of super-spreader events, or clusters," said V. Ravi, nodal officer for Genomic Confirmation of SARS-CoV-2, government of Karnataka. He was speaking at a seminar organised recently by Neuberger Diagnostics on

## Second surge

In several States, COVID-19 cases saw a rise in the second half of February. Both Maharashtra and Punjab recorded significant spikes. In Maharashtra, the average daily cases increased by more than twice in the second half of the month compared to the first half. The charts show the seven-day average of new cases



There are only two ways of getting immunity from the virus, one is getting infected, and the other is via a vaccine, say experts. Fast-tracking the vaccine programme and increasing the rate of testing are equally important

"Coronavirus – Variants and Vaccines". The rise in the number of cases was not due to a variant of the virus with a tendency to transmit faster, but because of select super-spreader events, he said.

V. Ramasubramanian, infectious diseases specialist at Apollo Hospitals and part of the Tamil Nadu task force on COVID-19, says, "With common sense, and looking at a little bit of history globally, a second wave could be down the line for India. I don't see any reason why India shouldn't have a second wave. However, the severity this time round may be milder."

In general, there seems to be an impression among people that the country is over the worst phase of the pandemic, and hence, many are letting their guard and masks down. During the previous surge, strict regulations imposed by States along with fines and penalties for violating protocols helped ensure compliance. However, with the seeming let-up in virus activity in terms of the number of positive cases being reported daily, safety measures were overlooked, possibly leading to the



clusters that have pushed the numbers up again.

There are others who believe that a 'second wave' is not really a wave, but more of a blip. In an interview to *The Hindu*, Manindra Agrawal, deputy director at IIT Kanpur and a leading mathematician involved with the National 'Super Model' initiative, said India is unlikely to see a second wave. He said based on the model, the cases would "at most rise to 11.3 million or 11.5 million infections by April 2021 – or about 300,000-500,000 new confirmed infections over the next 10 weeks (approximately)".

One reason for this, he said, could be the fact that 60% of India's population had already been exposed to the virus and the country may have approached herd immunity. But the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), according to the third national serological survey conducted from December 17, 2020 to January 8, 2021, had reported that around 21% of Indians were estimated to have been exposed to COVID-19.

Earlier, T. Jacob John, former Professor of Clinical Virology at the Christian Medical College, Vellore, had cited the consistently low number of cases in Tamil Nadu despite poor compliance and said that fewer people may be susceptible or vulnerable to catching the infection.

### What is the way ahead?

"There are only two ways of getting immunity from the virus, one is getting infected, and the other is via a vaccine," says Dr. Ravi. It is important to fast track the vaccine programme across the country, but testing is equally important. "Testing is the most powerful tool in our hands," he says, and adds that contact tracing is key for disrupting the chain of transmission. The number of tests must go up again and contact tracing, ideally 20 persons for every case, should be taken up intently, he recommends. Experts call for a renewed emphasis on following safety protocols, such as wearing masks, washing hands and maintaining physical distance to fend off a possible 'second wave' or a sustained hike in the numbers. Draconian total lockdowns are no longer necessary, they add.

# New rules for social media, OTT platforms

Why has the government announced new guidelines to regulate digital content and what are the dos and don'ts?

SRIRAM SRINIVASAN

**The story so far:** On Thursday, in a long-anticipated move, the government notified guidelines that seek to provide a grievance redressal mechanism for users of digital platforms of all kinds – social media sites, messaging apps, over-the-top (OTT) streaming services, and digital news publishers. The Information Technology (Guidelines for Intermediaries and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 also mandate that social media and messaging platforms will have to adhere to new requirements in assisting investigative agencies of the government. Launching the guidelines, Electronics and Information Technology Minister Ravi Shankar Prasad said they were a "soft-touch oversight" mechanism to deal with issues such as the persistent spread of fake news and other misinformation.

### Broadly, what do the new rules require digital platforms to do?

Although there is no single set of rules that uniformly applies to the different kinds of digital platforms, the broad themes of the guidelines revolve around grievance redressal, compliance with the law, and adherence to the media code. Social media platforms like Google or Facebook, or intermediaries, for instance, will now have to appoint a grievance officer to deal with users' complaints. There are additional requirements on 'significant' social media intermediaries – meaning the platforms whose registered users in India are above the threshold notified by the government. Such intermediaries have to appoint a 'Chief Compliance Officer', who will have to ensure that the rules are followed; the officer "shall be liable in any proceedings relating to any relevant third-party information, data or communication link made available or hosted by that intermediary". The intermediaries will also have to appoint a nodal contact person for "24x7 coordination with law enforcement agencies".

The other key requirement is that such a social media intermediary would have to "enable the identification of the first originator of the information on its computer resource" as may be required by a judicial order. In other words, a problematic message, that is considered "an offence related to the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the State, friendly relations with foreign states, or public order, or of incitement to an offence relating to the above or in relation with rape, sexually explicit material or child sexual abuse material", will have to be traced to its initiator on messaging applications like WhatsApp and Signal.

For digital publishers of news and current affairs as well as video streaming services, an identical three-tier structure for grievance redressal has been mandated.



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This structure will look into grievances in relation to a Code of Ethics, which is listed in the appendix to the rules. Among other things, the Code of Ethics includes the 'Norms of Journalistic Conduct' as prescribed by the Press Council of India, as also content that shall not be published – "content which is prohibited under any law for the time being in force shall not be published or transmitted", and the

Programme Code under the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995. The guidelines also require streaming services to classify content based on its nature and type. So, for instance, content "for persons aged 16 years and above, and can be viewed by a person under the age of 16 years with parental guidance shall be classified as U/A 16+".

### What is the context in which these rules have been framed?

The question of stricter regulation of digital media has come up unceasingly in different forms and forums over the last few years. The issue came up last year when the Supreme Court was hearing a case involving *Sudarshan TV*. In the course of the case, it asked the government for suggestions to improve the self-regulatory mechanism for electronic media. The government, in its affidavit, highlighted the need to regulate web-based media.

There has also been a face-off between the government and Twitter in recent weeks over the social media platform's non-compliance with its order to block several hashtags and handles of journalists, activists and politicians in the backdrop of the ongoing farmers' protests. Twitter eventually complied, though not fully.

Questions about how social media platforms can be

made accountable for the spread of fake news and pornographic content have been raised in Parliament and by the Supreme Court in recent years, something that has been highlighted by the government in its release as well. Taking all this into account, it was no surprise that such rules were being envisaged, but critics have said some of these guidelines will lead to restriction of free speech. There have been many controversies involving content on over-the-top platforms. In one such recent incident, two BJP leaders filed a case against the makers of *Tandav* for hurting religious sentiments. There have been calls to censor content that appears on digital platforms.

### What has changed from earlier?

The scope of regulation of the digital space has been expanded. The new guidelines not only replace the Information Technology (Intermediaries Guidelines) Rules, 2011, but go a step further. They also regulate digital news publishers and streaming services, which was not the case earlier. The 2011 rules were a narrower set of guidelines for intermediaries.

Under Section 79 of the Information Technology Act, the intermediaries are not liable for user-generated content, provided they adhere to the rules – "an intermediary shall not be liable for any third-party information, data, or communication link made available or hosted by him," it states. These rules have been tightened now.

### Why are the rules being criticised?

For digital news media, these guidelines will subject it to governmental regulation in a way. The three-tier structure of regulation will entail oversight by a government committee at the highest level. Any grievance that does not get satisfactorily solved at the self-regulatory levels will get escalated to the government panel. The Internet Freedom Foundation (IFF), a digital liberties organisation, refers to this as "excessive governmental control over digital news and OTT content".

The other rule that has been criticised by the IFF is the requirement of traceability of the originator of a problematic message. The news guidelines do suggest that this will not be required "where other less intrusive means are effective in identifying the originator of the information". They also suggest that in identifying the originator, "no significant social media intermediary shall be required to disclose the contents of any electronic message". But the IFF reckons that the government has powers under the Information Technology (Procedure and Safeguards for Interception, Monitoring and Decryption of Information) Rules, 2009, to make demands for the content of the messages. The rules have also been criticised for increasing the potential for censorship and surveillance.

## IAEA

## The 'imperfect' fight against proliferation

The Biden administration's attempts to revive the Iran deal have turned the spotlight on the United Nations' nuclear watchdog

ILLUSTRATION: R. RAJESH



## In Focus

IAEA was set up as an autonomous organisation on July 29, 1957, at the height of the Cold War

Describing its mission, IAEA claims that it "works with its member states and multiple partners worldwide to promote the safe, secure and peaceful use of nuclear technologies"

Though established independently of the UN through its own international treaty, the Agency reports to both the UN General Assembly and the Security Council

The move by the Joe Biden administration of the U.S. to revive the Iran nuclear deal has once again turned the spotlight on the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which played a key role in enforcing the original nuclear deal from which Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. in 2018.

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or the Iran nuclear deal, proved that the IAEA can emerge beyond its mandate of being a monitoring and inspection agency and, in fact, play a key role in finding solutions to tense international crises. Last week, the IAEA and Iranian diplomats struck a "temporary" deal to continue inspection of Iran's nuclear plants for three more months, which keeps at least the diplomatic path to revive the deal open.

As the preeminent nuclear watchdog under the UN, the IAEA is entrusted with the task of upholding the principles of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1970. Established as an autonomous organisation on July 29, 1957, at the height of the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, the IAEA claims that it "works with its member states and multiple partners worldwide to promote the safe, secure and peaceful use of nuclear technologies". Though established independently of the UN through its own international treaty, the agency reports to both the UN General Assembly and the Security Council.

However, there have al-

ways been questions about the Agency's ability to work independently, without being drawn into big power rivalries.

What the IAEA missed in terms of real authority over sovereign states, it compensated for that by cultivating some tall leadership whose actions kept the issue of non-

**As a nuclear watchdog under the UN family, the IAEA is entrusted with the task of upholding the principles of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty of 1970**

proliferation on the multilateral table. Both Mohamed El Baradei (1997-2009) and Yukiya Amano (2009-19) were vocal at difficult moments. Under pressure from the George W. Bush administration to back the American claim that the Saddam Hussein regime of Iraq was pursuing nuclear weapons, Mr. El Baradei maintained that he would not rush into a judgment on this matter without incontrovertible evidence that could prove that Hussein had committed a gross violation of non-proliferation. History proved that his cautious approach was right as the invasion of Iraq failed to yield the necessary proof of Hussein's pursuit of nuclear weapons.

While the agency played a key role in providing the platform for holding frank discussion about civil nuclear requirement for several

countries, it proved to be ineffective to prevent power politics from influencing nuclear negotiations. This was particularly visible when Pakistan pursued a nuclear weapons programme in the 1980s and despite overwhelming evidence in possession of the American authorities, they did not pursue the case effectively through the IAEA because of the cooperation between the U.S. and Pakistan on the Afghan front.

Defenders of the Agency would say the lack of executive authority has not been a real issue as the IAEA was originally set up as a monitoring organ. Richard Barlow, who was in charge of the CIA's non-proliferation programme that tracked Pakistan's nuclear programme, says that having the IAEA is an "imperfect system but it's better than nothing".

## Civil nuclear solution

Apart from dealing with the sovereign states and their pursuit of civil and military nuclear programmes, the IAEA is also active in championing civil nuclear solution to a number of areas like health, which is one of the main areas of peaceful application of nuclear know-how. That apart, in recent years, the IAEA is also active in dealing with climate change, pandemic containment and in prevention of Zoonotic diseases.

The IAEA's lack of enforcement capability was hinted by El Baradei who had observed that IAEA had "uneven authority" as it does not have any power to override the sovereign rights of any member nation of the UN.

The uneven authority produced results when in the case of Iran when the Agency's efforts were backed by big powers. The same, however cannot be said about North Korea.

The IAEA was the first to announce that the North Korean nuclear programme was not peaceful. North Korea finally expelled IAEA observers and as a result, there are no on-the-ground international inspectors in North Korea. The world is reliant on ground sensors and satellite imageries to observe North Korea's nuclear actions.

In comparison, Yukiya Amano was able to conduct some tough negotiation with Iran and managed to convince Iran to allow inspection of some of the top nuclear sites of the country by scientists and observers. His negotiation coincided with the back channel negotiation

between the Barack Obama administration and Iran, which ultimately led to the JCPOA. As a partner to some of the complex and high stakes diplomacy, the IAEA has an air of secrecy around its functions and is accused of not being transparent about its actions.

The IAEA-certified the nuclear power plant at Rawatbhatta in Rajasthan in 2012, which drew criticism as the power plant had two incidents of leakage of nuclear material earlier that year. The second incident affected at least four workers who worked in the nuclear power plant and had caused concern among the scientific community. One major criticism of the IAEA is that it never challenges the nuclear dominance of the five permanent members of the UNSC, who themselves hold some of the biggest nuclear arsenals of the world. That apart,

there were controversies in the case of inspection of Iranian nuclear installations when Iran's then Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi had accused the IAEA of sending intelligence operatives who engaged in espionage against the interest of the Islamic Republic. The 2010 allegation also hinted that IAEA inspectors and observers had shared information with the U.S. government.

## Iran challenge

The coming weeks will, however, test the 63-year old organisation as Iran remains suspicious of the exact intentions of the U.S. under the Biden administration. The current episode, which involves regional political concerns like Saudi-Iran and Iran-Israel rivalries as well as the American interests in the region, will certainly test the leadership of Rafael Mariano Grossi, the current Director

General of the IAEA. It will also test the ability of the IAEA to deal with powerful states from its position of "uneven authority".

After this week's visit to Tehran, Mr. Grossi had posted on Twitter, "A temporary technical understanding has been reached" with Iran. However, the main negotiation on this front is dependent on Tehran's demand of lifting of American sanctions. Iran has said its compliance will depend on lifting of sanctions.

The issues involved between Iran and the U.S. indicate that they are not part of the mandate of the IAEA. Iran also requires assurance that once activated, the deal will not be abandoned in future by an American President in the way that President Trump had done in 2018. Tying all the loose ends of this difficult negotiation will be the biggest challenge for all parties.

## NODEEP KAUR

## Always at the forefront

Released from jail, labour activist says she will soon join the farmers' protest

ILLUSTRATION: J.A. PREMKUMAR

ASHOK KUMAR

For Nodeep Kaur, a poor Dalit woman from a Punjab village, activism has never been a choice, but a necessity. In fact, a way of life. "We have faced it (the discrimination) since childhood. And the choice always was either to keep mum or speak out," said Ms. Nodeep's elder sister Rajveer Kaur, a PhD student in Delhi University's Punjabi Department, in a recent conversation with *The Hindu*.

And coming from a family of fiercely politically active women, Nodeep, who was granted bail by the Punjab and Haryana High Court on Friday, had been at the forefront of workers and farmers' agitations for months till she was arrested by the Haryana police last month. Her mother has been a Punjab Khet Mazdoor Union activist for more than a decade and Ms. Rajveer heads the Bhagat Singh Chhatra Ekta Manch in Delhi University. The third sister, Harveer Kaur, is part of a student union in Punjab.

Ms. Nodeep, 24, was arrested on January 12 from Sonipat's Kundli Industrial Area - near the site of a farmers' sit-in agitation at the Delhi border against the Centre's farm laws. She was slapped with charges of attempt to murder, rioting, criminal intimidation and extortion under the Indian Penal Code, among others, in two separate cases registered in connection with a



Nodeep had come to Delhi to pursue graduation last year, but the circumstances - her father had to shut down his workshop in Telangana due to the COVID-induced lockdown - forced her to give up her dreams.

She took up a job at a company manufacturing automotive lighting in Sonipat six months back, but was gradually drawn to the workers' struggle. She later joined Mazdoor Adhikar Sangathan (MAS), a local workers rights' group in the Kundli Industrial Area. The group would take up the issue of non-payment of dues to the workers. It led to complaints by the local industrialists to the police, alleging extortion by the group.

After the farmers agitation reached the Delhi borders in November, Ms. Nodeep, along with other MAS activists, gave the slogan for the unity of farmers and the workers. They would distribute pamphlets in the industrial area to tell workers as to how the farm laws would impact them. She also lost her job because of her participation in the farmers' stir.

She may now be out of jail, but the fight continues for her. Stepping out of the Karnal Jail, Ms. Nodeep said she would soon join the farmers' protest at Delhi's Singhu border. Meena Harris was among those who welcomed the release of Ms. Nodeep and Disha Ravi: "Please stay loud - this fight is far from over," Ms. Harris tweeted.

single incident. She earlier faced similar charges in an FIR registered on December 28, 2020.

Ms. Rajveer, helped by a few of her friends and activists, fought for her sister's release. She highlighted the alleged high-handedness of the police and, in a press conference, alleged sexual violence and torture against Ms. Nodeep in the police custody. The matter caught the media's attention in a big way after the U.S.-based lawyer Meena Harris, a relative of U.S. Vice-President Kamala Harris, put out a tweet seeking her release. "#ReleaseNodeepKaur," read Ms. Harris's tweet on February 6.

## Call for release

And soon, everybody seemed interested in the story of this young activist. She was all over the social and mainstream media, with hashtags seeking her release trending on Twitter. The issue gained the centre

stage with the arrest of climate activist Disha Ravi and the media drawing parallels between the two young women activists. Support also poured in from the farmers' unions.

"When I met Nodeep a day after her arrest, she was bleeding from her legs. She told me that the male police personnel tortured her in custody causing injuries on her private parts and the back. She was not molested or raped, as reported in a section of media, but can't a woman complain of sexual violence till the time she is subjected to its highest form?" Ms. Rajveer told *The Hindu*. The Haryana Police have denied the allegations as "arbitrary" and "baseless".

Before the High Court order in the third case paved the way for her release, Ms. Nodeep was granted bail by the Judicial Magistrate First Class in the two other cases. Born in Sir Muktsar Sahib's Gandhar village, Ms.

## NIRAV MODI

## The fugitive merchant

India moves a step ahead to get the trader extradited with a recent U.K. ruling

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

DEVESH K. PANDEY

Riding high on the fame that his exquisite collection of precious gem jewellery had generated in the glamorous world within such a short span, a third-generation diamondaire made it to the elite Indian billionaires' club in 2013. However, Nirav Modi's success story lasted for just about a decade. Wanted by Indian agencies for bank fraud and money laundering, he now awaits his fate currently confined in London's Wandsworth prison.

With the Westminster Magistrates' Court allowing the extradition request against him on Thursday, Mr. Modi's first attempt to escape trial in India has failed. His wife Ami (U.S. citizen); father Deepak Modi; younger brothers, Nehal and Neeshal; sister Purvi and her husband Maiank; and uncle Mehul Choksi are also facing probe by the Central Bureau of Investigation and the Enforcement Directorate.

While Mr. Modi is an Indian citizen, his parents and younger siblings are Belgian nationals. His grandfather was a diamond trader from Gujarat's Surat, from where he shifted to Singapore. His father then migrated to Belgium in the 1960s. At the age of 19, the aspiring diamond merchant dropped out of the Wharton School to learn the tricks of the diamond trade from his uncle, Mr. Choksi, who has fled to Antigua and is now facing extradition proceedings there.



Back in 2017, when the agencies did not have the slightest inkling of the alleged crimes being committed by him, the businessman made it to the list of Indian billionaires for the fifth consecutive year. He often talked about business expansion in other parts of the world, in Hong Kong, Dubai, New York, Macau, Singapore, Beijing and London. The top celebrities engaged by him to endorse his collections played a key role in establishing his brand.

Nothing seemed unusual when Mr. Modi and other members of the family flew abroad in the first week of January 2018. However, all hell broke loose as reports of a scam emerged.

As it turned out, the CBI received a complaint from Punjab National Bank (PNB) on January 29, 2018, days after the family had left the country, alleging that Mr. Modi's companies were involved in the fraudulent use of eight Letters of Undertak-

ing (LoUs), which is a form of bank guarantee to facilitate overseas transactions by getting credit from foreign banks.

The perpetrators, in conspiracy with certain officials of the PNB's Brady House branch in Mumbai, had exploited the flaws in the system of keeping LoU records. About a month later, the bank again wrote to the CBI, this time informing that there were 150 fraudulent LoUs worth ₹6,498.20 crore, issued to companies that were part of Mr. Modi's Firestar Group.

## Money laundering probe

Based on the CBI case, the ED launched a money laundering probe into the financial scam. The agencies found that Mr. Choksi was also part of the racket. Further enquiries revealed that he had already taken Antigua citizenship. The diverted funds were used to acquire prime properties in different countries, for

which Trusts were also set up.

Dummy directors and partners, who were mostly the employees of Mr. Modi, were roped in. The ED discovered that the businessman had floated a number of overseas companies in Hong Kong and Dubai, which received the proceeds of the fraud, noted the U.K. court's order.

These companies were used for the circular trade of diamonds, pearls, gold and jewellery at highly inflated values to give the impression that the firms in receipt of the LoUs issued via the PNB were engaged in legitimate trade.

The agencies alleged that in a bid to escape the law, Mr. Modi also got the dummy directors of Dubai-based firms shifted to Cairo, where they were kept in confinement. Their mobile phones were disposed of and a server in Dubai, in which all the data related to his companies was stored, was also destroyed.

On the strength of two sets of criminal proceedings pursued by the CBI and the ED, India requested for Mr. Modi's extradition from the U.K. in July-August 2018. Another request was made in February last year on the allegation that he had destroyed evidence and threatened witnesses. Mr. Modi was arrested in London on March 19, 2019, and since then, he has been in judicial custody there. His wife and three children are said to be in the U.S.



