For Generation Ace

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SC seeks documents of 'thinking' on vaccination policy, data on numbers covered, says

'ARBITRARY, IRRATIONAL'

The Supreme Court has asked Centre to furnish data on the percentage of population vaccinated so far (with one dose and both doses), both in rural and urban areas, along with documents reflecting its thinking in connection with the vaccination policy. Top Court also made scathing remarks on Centre's vaccination policy against Covid-19, the replacement of free vaccination in the first two phases with paid vaccination for persons between 18-44 years.

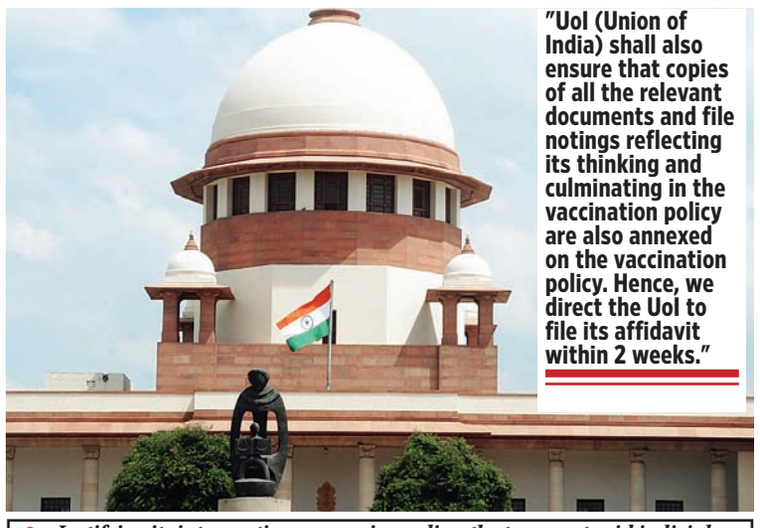
Explain the Vax policy

New Delhi: A bench of Justices D.Y. Chandrachud, L. Nageswara Rao and S Ravindra Bhat stressed on Centre bringing on record an outline for how and when it seeks to vaccinate the remaining population in Phases 1, 2 and 3.

The top court also sought data on percentage of population, which has been vaccinated (with one dose and both doses), as against eligible persons in the first three phases of the vaccination drive. The bench emphasised the data should include the percentage of rural population as well as the percentage of urban population vaccinated so far.

As the Centre, in its May 9 affidavit, had said that every state/UT government will provide vaccination free of cost to its population, the court noted: "It is important that individual state/UT governments confirm/deny this position before this court.

"Further, if they have decided to vaccinate their population for free, then, as a matter of principle, it is important that this policy is annexed to their affidavit, so that the population within their territories can be assured of their right to be vaccinated for free at a state vaccination centre." The top court also asked the Centre to submit update on steps taken to ensure drug availability for mucormycosis.



"UoI (Union of India) shall also ensure that copies of all the relevant documents and file notings reflecting its thinking and culminating in the vaccination policy are also annexed on the vaccination policy. Hence, we direct the UoI to file its affidavit within 2 weeks."

- *Justifying its intervention on vaccine policy, the top court said judicial review and soliciting constitutional justification for policies formulated by the executive is an essential function, which the courts are entrusted to perform. "Our Constitution does not envisage courts to be silent spectators when constitutional rights of citizens are infringed by executive policies," it said.*
- *"The justification for this policy has been adduced in a bid to spur competition which would attract more private manufacturers that could eventually drive down prices. Prima facie, the only room for negotiation with the two vaccine manufacturers (Bharat Biotech and Serum Insititute of India) was on price and quantity, both of which have been pre-fixed by the Central government. This casts serious doubts on UoI's justification for enabling higher prices as a competitive measure," it said.*
- *The bench contended that if the Centre's unique monopolistic buyer position is the only reason for it receiving vaccines at a much lower rate from manufacturers, it is important for the court to examine the rationality of the existing liberalised vaccination policy against Article 14 of the Constitution, since it could place severe burdens, particularly on states/UTs suffering from financial distress.*

Policy for 18-44 yrs

New Delhi: The Centre said the Union Budget for financial year 2021-2022 had earmarked Rs 3,5000 crore for procuring vaccines. However, the top court said in light of the liberalised vaccination policy, the Centre is directed to clarify how these funds have been spent so far and why they cannot be utilised for vaccinating persons aged 18-44 years.In a 32-page ruling, a bench said: "Due to the importance of vaccinating individuals in the 18-44 age group, the policy of the Central government for conducting free vaccination themselves for groups under the first 2 phases, and replacing it with paid vaccination by the state/UT governments and private hospitals for the persons between 18-44 years is, prima facie, arbitrary and irrational." The court noted that persons between 18-44 years of age have not only been infected by Covid-19 but have also suffered from severe effects of the infection, including prolonged hospitalisation and, in unfortunate cases, death.

Healthcare workers (HCWs), frontline workers (FLWs) and persons above the age of 45 years, were prioritised in Phases 1 and 2 for obtaining Covid-19 vaccines. The vaccination policy was substantially changed for persons between 18-44 years of age.

- The top court noted vaccination of the nation's entire eligible population is the singular most important task in effectively combating the pandemic in the long run.
- "The complete data on the Central Government's purchase history of all the Covid-19 vaccines till date (Covaxin, Covishield and Sputnik V). The data should clarify: (a) the dates of all procurement orders placed by the Central Government for all 3 vaccines; (b) the quantity of vaccines ordered as on each date; and (c) the projected date of supply," bench said.
- The top court directed each of the state/UT governments to also file an affidavit within 2 weeks, clarifying their position and put on record their individual policies.

ABSOLUTE COMMENT

Nagendra Sharma

Eligibility is useless

In the view of Covid, Government of India has cancelled the board exams of class 12th. Following the Government of India, now MP government and some other governments have also announced to cancel the 12th class board exams. The reason given for this is step is that these governments keep the health, safety and future issues of students on priority. As far this reason is concern, the decision is excellent. But let's elaborate the things. Really, it is a student friendly decision? It will shape the students future as claimed? The boards will setup the criteria and declare the results in time bound manner. Whatever the criteria it will be, that will be useless. For over a one and a half year, students are far from school. They were attending online classes. If they can study digitally, why can't they appear in digital exams? Exams are meant to make students eligible for their future challenges but Government of India and other state governments have changed the definition of eligibility.

> *Really, it is a student friendly decision? It will shape the students future as claimed? The boards will setup the criteria and declare the results in time bound manner. Whatever the criteria it will be, that will be useless. For over a one and a half year, students are far from school.*

Actually this is not student's friendly decision. It is a popular decision. One thing should and must be mentioned that not only government but opposition (all the political parties) are in the dock. All of them got opportunity in Crisis to increase their vote bank. These teenagers will be voters within one or two years, especially, for 2024 general elections. All the political parties preparing voters not educated citizens. NSUI is terming it as their victory. Is it a victory? Current politics has changed or established so many new precedents. Class 9th to 12th, these four years are to shape the adolescent's future, especially class twelfth. Whatever marks the student will get, will it be as per his or her competency? Will he or she be fairly eligible for what they will achieve in future? If they opt to face the exam won't they be missing the opportunities in their higher education due to time duration? Will the colleges wait for them or accept them if they score better or under marks. Nobody bothers these questions. Firstly, all the government failed to curb the pandemic then to manage the health services and now ready to en-cash the situation for their benefits, without even thinking of the consequences. Climbers go up and get the shape as per the sustenance provided to them. As they get strength it becomes impossible to reshape them. If done forcefully, they break. Students are also like climbers and there is strength is eligibility but today it seems, eligibility is useless.

Govt's target to vax 1B people in 2021 'not possible': ICMR

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Experts from the ICMR-National Institute of Malaria Research and the Indian Council of Medical Research, on Wednesday, slammed the government for poor planning of the home-grown vaccine production and deployment, as a result of which "India doesn't have enough vaccines to go around".

While there are plans to significantly ramp up production of the Covaxin and Covishield vaccines, the target to vaccinate around one billion people may still not be reached this year, the experts said in a commentary published in the online journal BMJ Global Health. Only around 3 per cent of the population has been inoculated till now. The experts urged the government to expedite the approval of foreign vaccines already deployed elsewhere around the globe.

Further, to expand coverage, the government has allowed private hospitals to vaccinate, which charge anything from $3 to $15 (roughly Rs 220 to Rs 1,098), meaning very few people can afford it. They urged the government to make vaccines against Coronavirus free for everyone in India, which will not only boost uptake but also curb the death toll from the infection.

> "As any protection conferred by Covid-19 vaccine is expected to take at least two weeks after both doses, and with large demands, India will require many more sources of vaccines in the coming days and weeks to stem the current uptick in infections. India may need to reset its vaccine strategies, enhance the competence level of pandemic management and spur the bureaucratic machinery so that vaccine equity can be achieved in a very short span of time."

Some reports on vaccination numbers 'incorrect': Health Ministry

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Union Health Ministry on Wednesday termed certain media reports regarding the number of vaccine doses acquired and administered in the country as "factually incorrect and without any basis".

"There have been several unfounded media reports that have peddled misinformation among the masses regarding this exercise of national importance," a ministry statement said, adding that the total number of Covid vaccine doses administered in the country so far stand at 21,85,46,667.

"There have been media reports alleging the Union Government promising 120 million doses of vaccines during June 2021 while administering only around 58 million doses from the total of 79 million doses available in the month of May. This report is factually incorrect and without any basis," it said, adding that as per the data at 7 am, on June 1, between May 1-31, a total of 61.06 million doses have been administered by states/UTs.

24 HELD FOR ASSAULTING DOCTOR IN ASSAM

Guwahati: At least 24 people, including a woman were arrested by the police after a doctor at a government hospital in Assam's Hojai district, was brutally beaten up.Seuj Kumar Senapati, posted in Udali Covid Care Centre in Hojai, around 140 km from Guwahati, was kicked and pounded with metal trash and bricks by relatives of a Covid patient who had died, allegedly due to oxygen shortage, police said on Wednesday. Police and health officials said that the young injured doctor was being treated at another hospital in Nagaon and his condition is stated to be stable after the Tuesday evening incident.

Army Chief reviews security situation in Kashmir

SRINAGAR | Agencies

The Chief of Army Staff (COAS), General M.M. Naravane, reached Kashmir on Wednesday on a two-day visit to review the prevailing security situation in the Union Territory (UT), the army said in a statement.

Naravane was also briefed about the measures being taken to identify and target the network of the over ground workers' (OGWs) involved in radicalisation and recruitment of youth into terrorist ranks. Efforts to prevent local recruitment and facilitate surrender of local terrorists were also discussed.

"While interacting with the troops, the COAS expressed his appreciation to the jawans and commanders who are relentlessly battling the dual challenges of Pakistan abetted terror and the global pandemic. He further reinforced the need to be prepared to meet the emerging security challenges effectively.

IB, CBI, Income Tax, CRPF officers debarred from publishing material without consent

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Government servants having worked in any intelligence or security related organisation have been directed through a notification not to make any publication without prior clearance from the competent authority.

These rules are part of the Central Civil Services (Pension) Amendment Rules 2020, notified on May 31, 2021.

The material that cannot be published by former government servants includes domain of the organisation including any reference or information about any personnel and his designation and expertise or knowledge gained by virtue of having worked in that organisation.

In addition, it includes sensitive information, the disclosure of which would prejudicially affect the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security, strategic, scientific or economic interests of the state or relation with a foreign State or which would lead to incitement of an offence.

1.32L cases, 3,207 Covid deaths in 24 hrs

Team Absolute | New Delhi

A day after reporting lowest cases since April 8, India witnessed a slight increase in Covid numbers with 1,32,788 new infections reported in 24 hours and 3,207 more people succumbed to the pandemic, the Union Health and Family Welfare Ministry said on Wednesday.

On June 1, India reported 1,27,510 cases lowest since April 8. On April 8, India had recorded 1,31,968 cases while on April 7, India witnessed 1,26,789 fresh cases.

Most Metro cities are still fighting huge waves, though Mumbai and Delhi have arrested the surge.

Andhra Pradesh on Sunday breached the 15-lakh mark in recoveries. India's overall tally of Covid-19 cases now stands at 2,83,07,832 with 17,93,645 active cases and 3,35,102 deaths so far.

DELHI HC SEEKS CENTRE'S RESPONSE OVER GOOGLE'S PLEA AGAINST NEW IT RULES

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Google LLC moved a plea on Wednesday in the Delhi High Court seeking interim protection against its declaration as a "Social Media Intermediary" (SMI) under the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Ethics Code) Rules 2021 (IT Rules 2021) and contended these rules are not applicable to its search engine. Google challenged a single judge bench order of the court which directed it to remove content globally, which was flagged as "objectionable" by a female petitioner, for being "offensive". The petitioner claimed that the content was taken from her social media accounts on Facebook and Instagram, and circulated without her consent. Despite court orders the content was not removed in entirety from the World Wide Web.

The plea urged the High Court to set aside the single judge order.

A bench of Chief Justice D.N. Patel and Justice Jyoti Singh issued notices to the Centre, the Delhi government, Facebook, Internet Service Providers Association of India, the pornographic site and the woman. The High Court sought their responses in the matter by July 25.

Citing the April 20 judgment, Google contended it has "mischaracterised" its search engine as a 'social media intermediary' or 'significant social media intermediary', which has been provided under the new rules for digital media.

Google said it was aggrieved by the blanket, "template directions" issued by single judge. It further argued that the judge mixed various sections of the IT Act and separate rules prescribed thereunder and passed template directions combining all such offences and provisions, which it emphasized was bad in law. However, the High Court said it would not pass any interim order at this stage.A Google spokesperson told reporter that search engines are a reflection of the content and information that is available on the internet."While we maintain a consistent policy over removal of objectionable content from search results, the Delhi High Court order has cast certain obligations that would wrongly classify Google search as a social media intermediary," a Google spokesperson told reporter.

"We've filed an appeal against this part of the order and look forward to explaining the steps we take to remove objectionable content from Google search results," the company spokesperson added.

BJP MLC questions Nitish's CM candidature, JDU hits back

Team Absolute | Patna

The political differences between the JDU and the BJP in Bihar once again came to the fore on Wednesday after a BJP MLC put a question mark over Nitish Kumar for holding the post of Chief Minister.

In a public statement, BJP MLC Tunna Ji Pandey said that Nitish Kumar is a 'circumstantial' Chief Minister, as the people of Bihar had elected Tejashwi Yadav as the CM of Bihar.

"He (Nitish Kumar) became the Chief Minister of Bihar using government machinery," Pandey alleged.

Following his statement, Upendra Kushwaha, the president of JDU's parliamentary board, hit back at the BJP.

"Had any JDU leader made such a statement against the top leadership of the BJP, either in the state or at the Centre, they (BJP) would have made an issue out of it," Kushwaha said.

Kushwaha also hinted that such statements are being made by the saffron party leaders on the direction of the top BJP leadership sitting in Delhi.

Kushwaha's remarks also came after BJP state president Sanjay Jaiswal raised questions over Nitish Kuma's night curfew decision.

Sources said that Nitish Kumar generally takes important decisions all by himself after formally informing two Deputy CMs and the concerned ministers of the BJP. However, the decisions of the BJP, in the context of Bihar, are generally taken by its central leadership, sources said.

MUNICIPAL COUNCILLOR SHOT DEAD BY TERRORISTS IN J&K

Srinagar | Agencies

A municipal councillor was shot dead by terrorists at Tral in Jammu and Kashmir's Pulwama district late on Wednesday evening, police said.

Police sources said three unidentified terrorists fired upon Tral municipal councillor, Rakesh Pandita when he was visiting his friend at Tral Payeen. Pandita succumbed to his injuries whereas the daughter of his friend is seriously wounded. Police said Pandita was residing in a secure accommodation at Srinagar and was provided two Personal Security Officers (PSOs) but did not take them on his Tral visit. Police and security forces have cordoned the area and massive search operation has been launched to nab the assailants.

Eight deaths in 20 days: A family in shock and grief in UP

Lucknow | Agencies

Imalia village situated on the outskirts of Lucknow is embedded in silent shock and grief. Seven members of a family died within a span of 20 days between April 25 and May 15. The eighth member was unable to bear the shock of successive deaths and died following cardiac arrest.

The deceased include four brothers of the family.

According to Omkar Yadav, who is now the surviving head of the family, "My four brothers, two sisters and mother died of Covid within days of each other. My aunt could not bear the shock and she died of heart attack."

He further said, "I have performed the last rites of my mother in the morning and then cremated three brothers, the same afternoon. My younger brother and two sisters died in the following days."

Yadav said that his family members were taken to a hospital but they were not provided oxygen beds and proper treatment.

On Monday, he performed the 'Tehravi' ritual of five members of the family. Rituals for the remaining three members will be performed later.

Mewaram, the head of the village, said that not a single representative from the government had even visited the village.He said that despite the spate of deaths, sanitization in the village had not taken place.

"We have been left to fend for ourselves and die without treatment," he added.

The children in the family are yet unable to fathom why so many elders have suddenly disappeared.

"We sent them to a neighbour's house when the bodies came in. They still think that the missing members will return soon," said a family member.

He also voiced his concern about the future of these children who have lost their parents.

"We are not even sure if there will be any government assistance for us because no one has even contacted us till now," the family member said.

MEHUL CHOKSI FEARED FOR HIS LIFE, WAS TERRIFIED, SAYS WIFE

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Even as a court in Dominica is all set to hear the habeas corpus plea filed by the lawyers of fugitive Indian businessman Mehul Choksi later in the day, his wife Priti Choksi in an interview with Business Standard has alleged that the 'mysterious girl, Barbara Jabarika, had come to Antigua and Barbuda in August 2020 and she had walked in to their other house on the island.She also claimed that after his capture, Choksi had thought he was going to be killed. The fugitive diamantaire, who has been staying in Antigua and Barbuda since 2018 after taking citizenship in 2017 under the Citizenship by Investment programme, had gone missing on May 23, sparking a massive manhunt in the island nation.

He was captured in Dominica on May 27. A Dominican court has restrained the extradition of Choksi until further orders while hearing a habeas corpus plea filed by his lawyers.

Time to act is now, says Harsh Vardhan at virtual WHO meeting

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Addressing the 149th session of the World Health Organization (WHO) executive board meeting on Wednesday, Union Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said that all must rise to the occasion to save the powerless and the voiceless, to see hope in these darkest of hours.

Harsh Vardhan, who successfully completed his tenure as the chairperson of the executive board of WHO, said in his address, "I believe that we at WHO must all rise to the occasion, to save the powerless and the voiceless, to see hope in these darkest of hours. This is one chance, one moment to forge open collaborations and reaffirm the fundamental truth that the world is one.

"I draw from the Indian philosophy of Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam -- 'the world is one family'. We must, therefore, commit to work with the Member States, the organisation and the global community of partners for the efficient, effective and responsive discharge of our public health obligations.

Talking about the pandemic, Harsh Vardhan said, "The time to act is now. This is a time when we all understand that there are going to be many urgent health challenges in the next two decades. All these challenges demand a shared response, because these are shared threats requiring shared responsibility to act. And, of course, this is also the core philosophy of WHO."

He emphasised that the biggest need of the hour is a greater degree of shared idealism of nations.

Top Maoists infected with Covid, reveals arrested ultra

The Maoist leaders who are infected with Covid includes two Central Committee members -- Katakam Sudharshan alias Aanand, and Tippari Thirupathi alias Devuj.

Hyderabad | Agencies

About a dozen top leaders of the banned CPI-Maoist are suffering from Covid-19, revealed a top Maoist arrested in Telangana's Warangal Urban district.

This has been revealed to police by Dandakaranya Special Zone Divisional Committee (DKSZCM) Secretary, Gaddam Madhukar alias Mohan alias Shobroy, who was arrested on Tuesday in Warangal when he was coming to Hanamkonda town for Covid treatment.Some of the Maoist leaders hiding in the forests in Chhattisgarh near the Telangana border are believed to have succumbed to the virus. This has confirmed the suspicion of the police that Covid is ravaging the Maoist cadre.

Warangal's Commissioner of Police, Tarun Joshi told reporters that Gaddam Madhukar and a courier were arrested during a vehicle-check near Mulugu crossroads on Tuesday. Madhukar, who was suffering from Covid, had come to Warangal for the treatment with the help of the courier, a minor.Madhukar, who hails from Kumuram Bheem Asifabad district, had joined the Sirpur dalam of the then People's War Group (PGW) in 1999. The outfit later shifted him to Dandakaranya Special Zone Committee and since then, he was involved in several offences including killing of police personnel and snatching away their weapons.

The police officer said the courier went to Venkatapuram forest area in a car and was bringing Madhukar to Hanamkonda for admission in a hospital. When police searched the vehicle at the checkpost, Madhukar was found hiding in the car's boot.Police arrested both of them and seized Rs 88,000 cash. Madhukar was later admitted to a hospital for treatment.

MAHARASHTRA TO CARE FOR KIDS ORPHANED BY COVID

Team Absolute | Mumbai

In a significant development, the Maharashtra government on Wednesday decided to provide financial assistance to the tune of Rs 500,000 in the name of children who have lost one or both parents due to Covid-19, an official said here. The state Cabinet presided over by Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray resolved to deposit the amount which will take care of the children's expenses till they attain the age of 21.

This financial assistance scheme would be applicable to all children, from newborn infants to up to 18 years of age, who lost one or both parents after March 1, 2020, or any one parent before March 1, 2020 due to Covid-19 or related causes.

The accumulated amount in the bank deposit of the child would be given with interest to him/her after he/she attains adulthood and completes 21 years of age.

A similar scheme has been recently announced through the PM-CARE scheme and the state government initiative will be in addition to the Central initiative.

If there is nobody willing to take over the responsibility for such orphaned kids, the state government will admit them to a children's home along with the amount deposited in their name jointly with the concerned District Women & Children Development officer.

However, if any relatives step forward to care for the orphaned children, then they would also be entitled to a grant from the state government's Child Care Scheme, said Women & Child Development Minister Yashomati Thakur.

She added that a district level task force chaired by the respective collector has been constituted to gather full information about all such kids who have been orphaned due to the Covid contagion in the past 15 months or so.

The government will ensure that a family-type of environment is provided to such orphans to ensure their holistic development and prevent them from being pushed into child labour, human trafficking or other crimes, said Thakur.

No hostage situation inside Tral SOG camp: Police

Srinagar | Agencies

A policeman was injured on Wednesday inside a camp of the special operations group (SOG) in J&K's Tral town when a suspected militant snatched his rifle and fired at him, police said, denying reports of a hostage situation there.

Inspector General of Police, Kashmir, Vijay Kumar, told reporters that there is no hostage situation inside the Tral SOG camp but a senior police officer has reached the camp and is trying to make the suspect surrender.

The injured policeman, identified as Amjid Ahmad, has been shifted to hospital for treatment.

Reports also said that a militant, identified as Mohammad Amin Malik, had surrendered before the police on May 29.

"He was shifted to Tral SOG camp where he snatched the cop's rifle and fired at him during questioning," a source said. Police, however, is yet to disclose the identity of the suspect.

MP 12TH BOARD EXAM 2021 CANCELLED: CM

- Chief Minister said that a group of ministers has been constituted to decide how the 12th board results will be evaluated. The decision regarding the process of result on the basis of internal evaluation or other grounds will be taken after discussing with the experts.

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has said that there will be no 12th board examination in the state this year. Children's lives are precious to us. We can take care of career later. At this time, when the entire country, state and children are facing the crisis of Corona, it is not appropriate to put the mental burden of examinations on them.

Chouhan said this in a message given to the media from Mantralaya on Wednesday. Chief Minister said that a group of ministers has been constituted to decide how the 12th board results will be evaluated. The decision regarding the process of result on the basis of internal evaluation or other grounds will be taken after discussing with the experts. Chouhan said that the option will be open for the students who want to appear in the examination for better results or to improve the results. After the end of the Corona crisis, interested students will be able to take the 12th examination.

Chouhan said that a decision has already been taken not to conduct the 10th board examinations. The result of class X students will be declared on the basis of internal assessment.Notably, earlier, the government was in favour of conducting classroom exams. Speaking to Times Now, Education Minister Inder Singh Parmar had said that most of the students and parents want Class 12 board exams to be conducted in the state. Final decision, he said, would be announced soon.The Government, however, after deliberating has decided to cancel the Class 12 examinations and follow CBSE's decision. Speaking on the same.Parman said that 'Centre has to take a decision for CBSE as it is conducted across many states and hence situation of all stated have to be considered."

Madhya Pradesh Board of School Education, MPBSE had earlier postponed its examination for Class 12th which was scheduled to begin in June. In an earlier interview he had also said that the final decision is likely to be announced by June 5.

32 die of black fungus at Indore hospital in 20 days

- The Maharaja Yeshwantrao Hospital (MYH) in the state's industrial hub Indore has been treating a number of black fungus patients not only from here, but also from various other districts.

Team Absolute | Indore

As many as 32 patients have died of mucormycosis in the last 20 days at a government-run hospital in Madhya Pradesh's Indore city, an official said on Wednesday.

Of late, several cases of mucormycosis, also known as the black fungus, a serious infection, have been found in people who have recovered from COVID-19.

The Maharaja Yeshwantrao Hospital (MYH) in the state's industrial hub Indore has been treating a number of black fungus patients not only from here, but also from various other districts.

"The first patient of black fungus was admitted in the MYH on May 13 and since then, a total of 439 patients have been admitted till now in the hospital. Out of them, 84 people were discharged after treatment, while 32 patients have died so far," MYH superintendent Pramendra Thakur said.

The present black fungus mortality rate in the hospital is 7.29 per cent, he said, claiming that the fatality rate was lower than other hospitals in the state.

"We have carried out more than 200 surgeries in the last 20 days to save the lives of patients suffering from the black fungus," he said. At present, 323 patients are undergoing treatment for the fungal infection in the hospital, the official said.

Out of them, 14 contracted the fungal infection along with COVID-19, while 301 people got mucormycosis after recovering from the coronavirus infection, he said.

The eight other patients suffering from the black fungus have no record of contracting COVID-19, he informed.

The statistics show that 93 per cent of the patients contracted the black fungus after recovering from COVID-19.

Indore, having a population of nearly 35 lakh, has been the worst affected by COVID-19 in Madhya Pradesh.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 here on March 24, 2020, the district has till now reported 1,50,516 cases and 1,347 deaths due to the disease.

Two tigresses rescued a year back released into wild

- After being kept at the Baheraha ward for about a year, they have now been shifted to the Sanjay Tiger Reserve (in Sidhi district) and the Satpura Tiger Reserve (Hoshangabad).

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Two tigresses, rescued from Sanjay Tiger Reserve about a year ago and kept at an animal ward, have now been released into the wild, a senior forest official said.

The two felines are over 3 years' old now. They were rescued as cubs from the buffer area of the Sanjay Tiger Reserve in Sidhi and brought to Baheraha ward of the Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve in Umaria, an official release quoting Principal Chief Conservator of Forest, Wildlife, Alok Kumar said on Tuesday evening.

After being kept at the Baheraha ward for about a year, they have now been shifted to the Sanjay Tiger Reserve in Sidhi district and the Satpura Tiger Reserve in Hoshangabad, he said.

Based on the recommendation of wildlife experts, the tigresses have been released into the wild for their free and natural movement, he said. Meanwhile, all tiger reserves in the state have been opened for public with effect from June 1, another official said.Visitors are allowed to enter the tiger reserves subject to adherence to COVID-appropriate behaviour, he added. Madhya Pradesh has a number of tiger reserves, including Kanha, andhavgarh, Pench, Satpura and Panna.

Construction of Atal Progress Way and Narmada Expressway will give new dimensions to the progress of the state: CM

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has said that the work of Narmada Expressway originating from about 17 districts of the state and Atal Progress Way to be developed in Gwalior-Chambal division should be completed on a war footing. Both these projects are far-reaching investments for the industrial development of the state and for creating new employment opportunities and for the development of new urban areas. These projects will give new dimensions to the progress of the state. Chief Minister was addressing the review meeting of Narmada Expressway and Atal Progressway at Mantralaya. Public Works MinisterGopal Bhargava virtually attended the meeting.

Chouhan said that the land acquisition process in both the projects should be completed expeditiously. Efforts should be made that maximum government land is used in project construction. In private land acquisition, work on the option of giving land in lieu of land on priority. Chief Minister Shri Chouhan said that the Gharial Sanctuary should be kept safe in the construction of Atal Progress Way. Chief Minister Shri Chouhan said that he will interact with the concerned ministers at the level of Government of India to complete both the projects soon.

Atal Progress Way will pass through Bhind, Morena and Sheopur districts. This area is located between Delhi-Mumbai Expressway, East-West Corridor, Agra-Kanpur Highway. Given its geographical location, this area can be developed as an excellent industrial area. The industrial potential of this area is increasing as a result of the conditions being created in Delhi and adjoining states. There are plans to set up a logistics hub at Bhind, a multi-product industrial area at Morena and to encourage agro-based activities in Sheopur.

The estimated cost of Atal Progress Way is Rs 6,742 crore. A total length of 312 km, this route will pass through 153 villages of Sheopur, Bhind and Morena. For this project 3 thousand 55 hectare land is required. Under the project 7 bridges and two ROBs. construction is proposed.

The Narmada Expressway will connect the state on the NH-45E Bilaspur-Raipur-Visakhapatnam route in the eastern border and Gujarat in the west. An estimated cost of Rs 2 thousand 696 crores is estimated for the construction of this route of about one thousand kilometer length. Narmada Expressway will create new opportunities for industrialization by connecting eastern Madhya Pradesh with industrially advanced western Madhya Pradesh. This will prove to be the horizontal industrial backbone of the state. About 70 percent of the present industrial ecosystem of the state is located in this belt. Narmada Expressway is being developed by integrating district routes, state routes and national highways of different districts of the state. Itarsi and Kiratpur are planned to be developed as logistics and warehouse hubs in the Narmada Expressway area. Work is underway to develop a world-class park focused on pharma and multi-products at Mohasa-Babai.

Second wave of Corona spread has been controlled: CM

Team Absolute | Bhopal

The spread of infection in the second wave of corona has been rapidly controlled by the Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan by implementing the strategy of public participation. Chouhan extended all possible help to children, poor, families suffering from corona, small traders, rural street vendors etc. in this critical phase of corona infection. All necessary arrangements were made for proper treatment of corona infected persons. Meanwhile, injections, availability of medicines and other medical arrangements were made swiftly for the patients of mucormycosis. On the instructions of Chief Minister an awareness mass movement is being conducted to adopt corona friendly behavior.

Chouhan took the recommendations of the Groups of Ministers to control and eliminate corona infection and to bring back the common people from Corona curfew to unlock in a safe manner. Extensive cooperation of Crisis Management Committees of all levels was taken at each stage to prevent the spread of corona infection. He was given responsibilities. As a result, the positivity rate of the state has come down continuously from the first week of May to 1.24 percent on June 2, 2021. On June 1, 79 thousand 794 tests were conducted in the state, out of which 991 people came corona positive. At present, the number of active patients in the state is 17 thousand 136. According to the number of active cases, on April 21, Madhya Pradesh was at number seven in the country. Which is at number 17 as of June 2, 2021. Recovery is being done more in comparison to new positive cases every day in the state. The recovery rate in the state has increased continuously to 96.77 percent on June 2. In all the districts of the state except Burhanpur and Panna, the recovery has been more than the new cases of corona. On June 1, not a single positive case was received in Alirajpur district.The fourth phase of the campaign has started. The team is going door-to-door identifying persons with symptoms of corona. Treatment is being given to the victims. Members of the local Crisis Management Committee are supporting them. The team is also getting full support from the villagers.

On the instructions of Chouhan, more than 1.25 lakh Corona Volunteers have been made from different sections in the entire state. They are providing all possible help to the corona infected in every district. Creating awareness among people to adopt corona friendly behavior. Collaborating with vaccination. They are playing an important role in preventing corona infection.

Chouhan has implemented a scheme to provide free education, medical, ration along with five thousand rupees monthly pension to the children dependent on the death of parents/guardian from Corona. The scheme is also being implemented to provide compassionate appointment to a member of the family and ex-gratia of Rs. An ex-gratia amount of one lakh rupees is being given to the family of every victim on death due to corona. Many other relief schemes have also been ensured.

Under the Chief Minister's Covid Treatment Scheme, any citizen of the state can get admitted and get free treatment in the government hospitals and Covid Care Center of the state. Under this component, as on June 2, 3 thousand 184 patients are getting treatment.

Any citizen of the state can get admitted and get free treatment on contract beds in private medical college hospitals of four districts of Indore, Bhopal, Dewas and Ujjain. Under this component, 914 patients are getting treatment as on 2nd June.

CM TO INTERACT WITH CORONA VOLUNTEERS

Bhopal: Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan will have a virtual dialogue with the Corona Volunteers of the state on June 3 at 3 pm. Chouhan will also share with the Corona Volunteers the work being done by them and their experiences. Besides, he will address the volunteers and Jan Abhiyan Parishad on the future strategy on corona control. As per the instructions of Chief Minister, 'I Corona Volunteer" campaign was started from April 4. In this, the district coordinator of the Jan Abhiyan Parishad is working as the nodal officer of the district. In this campaign, so far more than one lakh 19 thousand 940 people have been registered in 15 sub-categories of five categories. Out of this, 61 thousand 210 volunteers are actively doing social service and public awareness work totally free of cost.

Statue of Kailash Sarang to be installed in Smart City Park

Chief MinisterShivraj Singh Chouhan pays tribute to Kailash Sarang on his birth anniversary

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has said that today is the birth anniversary of our guide Kailash Narayan Sarangji, who established the roots of Jana Sangh and BJP in the state, who worked hard to expand the organization and carry forward the work of ideology throughout his life. He was rich in versatility. To preserve the memory of Shri Kailash Sarang, his statue will be installed in Smart City Park. Chouhan garlanded the portrait of former Rajya Sabha MP Kailash Sarang on his birth anniversary. Recalling him, Chouhan said that Late Sarang was a skilled organizer, able administrator, writer, thinker, journalist, poet. On his birth anniversary, many memories are flashing in the mind. I bow with reverence at his feet.

Kailash Sarang was born on 2nd June 1934 in Dumar village of Raisen district. He was a Rajya Sabha MP from 1990-1996. Shri Sarang also wrote a book on Prime Minister Shri Modi titled 'Narendra Se Narendra'. He was always dedicated for the upliftment of the suffering section of the society.

Bhopal Gas Tragedy Survivors Account for 23% of Covid-19 Casualties in the City

Survivors' organisations are claiming that 1984 victims account for more than half of the Covid-19 casualties in Bhopal.

Team Absolute | Bhopal

As Madhya Pradesh has moved towards unlocking in a phased manner seeing the second wave of Covid-19 ebbing, the hapless survivors of the 1984 Union Carbide tragedy continue to suffer.

Since last year the survivors' organisations are claiming that 1984 victims account for more than half of the Covid-19 casualties in Bhopal and it seems the situation remains the same.

Dr Ravi Shankar Verma, the Chief Medical Officer of Gas Relief recently told the media that out of 933 Covid-19 related deaths, 218 were 1984 victims which account for 23% of the Covid-19 deaths.

However, survivors' organisations are flagging the issue for a long and also wrote to various authorities for urgent measures since last year. These organisations are also accusing the administration of under-reporting the figures among the 1984 victims.

By December 3 last year when the victims observe the 1984 anniversary, the State had reported deaths of 102 gas tragedy victims among 518 deaths due to the Covid-19. However, the volunteers working for the victims had alleged that the figure by then would be at least 254. "We have compiled the data by visiting homes of the victims," they had claimed.

The Bhopal Group for Information and Action (BGIA) volunteers then had claimed that they had visited 450 of the 518 households of the victims.

Before the Covid-19 second wave struck the State, BGIA had kept compiling data. Rachna Dhingra, one of the founders speaking to News18, said they found out that of 650 casualties reported in the city by then, 321 were 1984 victims.

"We could not compile data post-March due to other assignments but it's a known fact that casualties in the second wave were far more than the first wave of the pandemic," said Dhingra, adding the administration continues to under-report mortalities both among 1984 victims and others as well.

As special care was sought by 1984 victims for fighting the virus, many alleged they could not avail the basic ones.

Anwar Ahmed, a 1984 survivor who died at the Hamidia Hospital on May 5, went through an ordeal of making rounds between three hospitals. He was finally taken into the Hamidia Hospital on May 4 night but none was taking care of him and when he demanded food from inside the ward, none was eager to offer him, said Almas, the teenage son of Ahmed who now has left studies and works as a tailor to help his family.

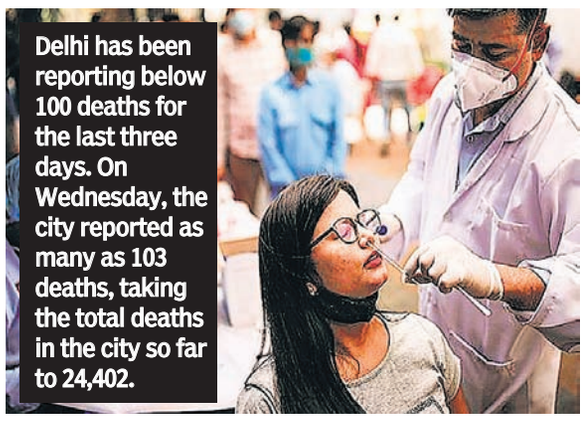
Aman Yadav, whose father too had tested positive for the virus last year, went through a similar ordeal. "My father was coughing and we took him to gas relief hospital in Jehangirabad, which asked us to take him to the Hamidia Hospital," Aman recounted.

He added that his father was taken to Hamidia who tested him asked them to bring him the next day and he died almost half an hour after being allowed admission the next day, said Aman.

Besides a dedicated hospital for victims, the Bhopal Memorial Hospital and Research Centre (BMHRC) are also making things no better for them. The facility which saw a mass exodus of staffers in 2019 is still in bad shape, claim survivors.Last year after a court's intervention, the hospital's status of the Covid-19 dedicated centre was reversed but it remains an ill-equipped unit for lakhs of victims and other commoners in Old city areas.

Ritesh Purohit, the spokesperson of the facility refuted the allegations that the hospital wasn't offering proper treatment to the patients. "We have a 50-bed covid care centre where beds are now gradually empty as cases have diminished."By June 1, Bhopal has lost 934 people due to the Covid as over 1.21 lakh have contracted the virus since March 2020.

576 Covid cases, 103 deaths in Delhi in 24 hrs



Delhi has been reporting below 100 deaths for the last three days. On Wednesday, the city reported as many as 103 deaths, taking the total deaths in the city so far to 24,402.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Delhi reported 576 new Covid-19 cases in the last 24 hours, the lowest since March 17, when the city had reported 536 coronavirus infections and 3 deaths in a day.The city's positivity rate, the proportion of samples tested returning positive remained below 1 per cent (0.78 per cent) for the third consecutive day.

Delhi has been reporting below 100 deaths for the last three days. On Wednesday, the city reported as many as 103 deaths, taking the total deaths in the city so far to 24,402.

Delhi had reported 623 cases and 62 deaths on Tuesday, similarly 648 new cases and 86 deaths were reported on Monday and 946 new infections and 78 deaths on Sunday.

According to Delhi government's health bulletin, the active Covid cases have reduced below 10k (9,364), of which 4,531 Covid infected people are in home isolation.Delhi has been under strict lockdown since April 19 and with continuous decline in daily cases and positivity rate below 5 per cent from the last week, the government has re-opened construction and manufacturing units, while the lockdown restrictions have been extended till June 7.

Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, making an announcement for extension of lockdown in Delhi had stated that the National Capital will be unlocked phase-wise. The state administration will take further decision after reviewing the Covid situation of the city with Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) after this week.

CANCELLING CLASS 12 EXAMS A BIG RELIEF: KEJRIWAL

New Delhi: After Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced on Tuesday that Class 12 board exams will not take place this year for the CBSE and CISCE students, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, who has been pushing for cancelling board exams, termed the decision "a big relief".

After chairing a high-level meeting on Tuesday evening, PM Modi said: "Government of India has decided to cancel the Class XII CBSE Board Exams. After extensive consultations, we have taken a decision that is student-friendly, one that safeguards the health as well as future of our youth." Reacting to the development, Kejriwal wrote on Twitter: "I am glad that Class 12 exams have been cancelled. All of us were very worried about the health of our children. A big relief."Delhi Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia tweeted: "The insistence on conducting the examination was taking a toll on the safety of the children."

As the national capital has been battling the second wave of Covid-19 pandemic since March this year, the Aam Aadmi Party-led Delhi government has been pushing for cancellation of board exams. Recently, after a meeting with Union Education Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank' on this issue, Manish Sisodia, who is also the Education Minister in Kejriwal-led Delhi Cabinet has demanded that exams should not be conducted without vaccination of students. Now, the CBSE and CISCE will be releasing the criteria for assessment. The government said that it will be a well-defined, objective method that will ensure timely results. Recently, CISCE and CBSE schools were asked to submit data of class 12 students' performance in classes 11, 10, and 9.

BJP's corrupt practices landing MCD in deep mess: Manish Sisodia

Sisodia, said, "No government structure or cooperation has ever been asked by the court to sell its property, assets to pay salaries of its employees. It has happened because of rampant corruption by the BJP."

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Days after the Delhi High Court asked the North Delhi Municipal Corporation (North MCD) to disclose its list of assets and bank balance to examine the issue of non-payment of salaries to its employees and pensions to the retired staff, the ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) on Wednesday hit out at the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has been ruling the MCD for the last 15 years.

Addressing a press conference on Wednesday, Senior AAP leader and Deputy Chief Minister of Delhi, Manish Sisodia, said, "No government structure or cooperation has ever been asked by the court to sell its property, assets to pay salaries of its employees. It has happened because of rampant corruption by the BJP."

He said that Delhi's civic bodies are facing one of the biggest challenges in their basic functioning. The situation would not have arisen had the BJP made dedicated efforts in managing the MCD, Sisodia said.

"Health and 'safai' workers or employees who have been in the forefront of the Covid crisis in the MCD would not have had to face this kind of embarrassment and insult of not being paid had the BJP managed its operations well," the Deputy CM said.

"The Delhi government has continuously aided and supported the MCD, more than what is required. Since AAP came to power in Delhi, we have not even adjusted the loan or interest of MCD employees, especially when loans were adjusted earlier," he said.

The Delhi High Court had on Monday directed the North MCD to disclose its list of assets and bank balance, to examine the issue of non-payment of salaries to employees and pensions to the retired staff.

The court also told the civic body that it would attach its properties to recover the money.

"We have already said that the right to receive salaries and pensions constitutes a fundamental right, and we have already directed the corporations to ensure timely payment of salaries and pensions to their employees and pensioners," the bench said, adding that now the court is going to attach its assets.

Gurugram forms panel to check private hospitals charges

This three-member district level committee will hear the complaints of private hospitals for exorbitant collection of bills from the Covid patients and if the complaint is found to be true, it will also help to return the excess amount to the complainant as per the instructions of the government

Gurugram | Agencies

Gurugram Deputy Commissioner Yash Garg has constituted a three-member committee to deal with cases of exorbitant charges by private hospitals from Covid patients. "The District Level Committee will have District Magistrate Siddharth Dahiya as the representative of the Deputy Commissioner. Other members of the committee include Anuj Garg as representative of Civil Surgeon and M.P. Jain as representative of the district's Indian Medical Association (IMA)," Garg said in his order."This three-member district level committee will hear the complaints of private hospitals for exorbitant collection of bills from the Covid patients and if the complaint is found to be true, it will also help to return the excess amount to the complainant as per the instructions of the government," said the district administration spokesperson.Gurugram District Magistrate Siddharth Dahiya said that the aggrieved person can give their complaint in the office of the Civil Surgeon in the Polyclinic located in Sector 31 or the District Magistrate's office located on the first floor of the Mini Secretariat.Besides, the complaints can also be sent to the e-mail address of the district magistrate at ctmgrg@hry.nic.in.

"After receiving the complaint, action would be taken as per the instructions of the government and the rules laid down for the hospitals," Dahiya added.

No licence for home delivery of liquor issued, clarifies Delhi govt

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Delhi government on Tuesday clarified that it has not issued any licence for home delivery of liquor in the national capital through online or any mobile app, but only amended an existing provision in the excise law.

A fresh statement issued by the Chief Minister's Office on Tuesday evening said: "L-13 is an existing licence which has been amended. No licence for L-13 or home delivery licence has been issued."

Delhi government's clarification on this issue came hours after it was reported that under its new excise policy, the Arvind Kejriwal government has allowed home delivery of liquor in Delhi.Contrary to the statement, the official notification issued by Delhi government regarding the new excise policy on May 31 read: "Retail vend of Indian liquor for and home delivery for L-13, retail vend of foreign liquor for home delivery to the holders of Licence in form L-13 (f)."

According to the Delhi Excise (Amendment) Rules, 2021, published in a gazette notification on Monday (May 31), "Holders of L-13 licence will be allowed to deliver liquor at the doorstep of people".

Sources in Delhi government told IANS that the state administration had made provision for online supply of liquor for L-13 category of vendors under its new excise policy 2021, but it has not issued any licence so far.

Earlier on Tuesday when IANS sought clarification on the matter, a Delhi government official said: "It is a slightly wrong interpretation of a rule change, the government will issue a statement in this regard."

On the basis of the official notification, it was widely reported that the Delhi government has permitted home delivery of Indian and foreign liquor as Covid-19 restrictions continue to be in place in the city.

DELHI TO PLANT 33 LAKH SAPLINGS FROM JUNE 5

New Delhi: The Delhi government announced on Wednesday that it will start a tree plantation drive in the national capital from June 5 on the occasion of the World Environment Day.Making the announcement, Delhi Environment Minister Gopal Rai said the government will plant around 33 lakh saplings this year, including both big and small trees, to curb the problem of pollution.

"Last year, the Centre had given us a target to plant 15 lakh saplings in the city. We have planted 32 lakh saplings. This time, the target set by the Centre is to plant 18 lakh saplings, but the Delhi government has decided to plant at least 33 lakh saplings," Rai said during a press conference on Wednesday.Meanwhile, the minister also linked the shortage of oxygen during the second wave of the Covid pandemic to lack of trees."We have seen how Delhi faced oxygen shortage during the pandemic and the government had to make efforts to bridge the gap and it was successful. Though Covid cases are reducing now, there is only one way to reach a permanent solution for this oxygen problem and that is to plant trees on a large scale. We have decided to do that starting June 5."Rai said that nurseries in Delhi will distribute saplings for free, including those with immunity boosting powers."Boosting immunity is important amid the Covid pandemic. Every year we give out plants for free from our nurseries. We have also been planting trees and plants such as giloy, aloe vera, curry leaves, sahjan, tulsi etc. These will be available at the nurseries to take home. Last year, 6.6 lakh plants were distributed like this," he said.

Over 3l screened during Covid survey in Gurugram villages

Gurugram | Agencies

Over 3 lakh people of 165 Gurugram villages have been screened so far by the health department officials under the 'Haryana Village General Health Checkup Scheme' in rural pockets.

As many as 164 teams were constituted in each gram panchayat to detect Covid patients in the rural areas of Gurugram. They have been conducting door-to-door screening and also creating awareness on the Covid preventive measures among the people."Under this screening campaign launched from May 15, so far survey teams have visited 58,569 houses and examined the health of 3,12,027 citizens. During this, symptoms like slight fever were found in 2,217 villagers who were then advised by the survey team to stay in home isolation," Deputy Commissioner Yash Garg.Garg informed that this screening work in its final stage. It is expected to be completed in the next 2-3 days.He said under this campaign, health check-up of the villagers of the district is being done.Members of the field survey team at the village level include Asha Worker, Anganwadi Worker, School Teacher, Village Secretary, among others are conducting Covid tests.District Development and Panchayat Officer (DDPO) Narendra Sarwan, who is looking after the screening work in rural areas, said that during the survey, rapid antigen tests of 2,850 people were done, in which 23 were found positive. Apart from this, 15 people have been found positive in 1,232 RT-PCR test. All these people are being given treatment facilities under the supervision of the doctors of the health department. "In view of the convenience of the villagers, isolation centers have been set up in the village itself for the corona patients, where they will be provided with the necessary health facilities. For this, buildings in 164 gram panchayats of the district have been converted into isolation centres and made operational," Garg added.

Resident doctors protest against Ramdev's remarks on allopathy

The medicos have sought an unconditional public apology from Ramdev or action under the Epidemic Diseases Act.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Resident doctors at several hospitals in Delhi participated in a nationwide protest on Tuesday against the remarks made by yoga guru Ramdev on allopathy practitioners. The medicos have sought an unconditional public apology from Ramdev or action under the Epidemic Diseases Act.The Federation of Resident Doctors Associations (FORDA) had, on May 29, called for the protest and stressed that healthcare services would not be hampered. The doctors wore black armbands and ribbons and held up placards.

"Our protest began on Tuesday morning against the remarks made by Ramdev, who is not qualified to even speak on the discipline of allopathy. His utterances have affected the morale of doctors who are fighting day in and day out during the pandemic. We demand an unconditional public apology from him or action taken against him under the Epidemic Diseases Act," a senior FORDA official said.

The resident doctors' associations which joined the protest include those from AIIMS, Safdarjung Hospital, Lady Hardinge Medical College and Hospital, Hindu Rao Hospital, Sanjay Gandhi Memorial Hospital and B R Ambedkar Hospital.

More doctors will join the protest, the FORDA official said. While some doctors held up placards bearing protest messages, others wore PPE kits with the word 'Black Day Protest' scribbled on the back of the medical gear.The AIIMS RDA has also urged competent authorities to take stringent action against Ramdev for allegedly "trying to create public unrest" against the vaccination drive.

DU ADMISSION PROCESS LIKELY TO BEGIN IN JULY: OFFICIAL

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The University of Delhi (DU) is likely to commence the admission process to various undergraduate (UG) courses for the academic session 2021-22 in July, Rajeev Gupta, Chairman DU Admission said. In view of coronavirus crisis, the entire DU admission process will be online and the candidates will be given sufficient time to complete the formalities.

Announcing the tentative date for DU admission, Gupta further said that there are about 70,000 seats for UG courses in 60 colleges affiliated to DU. The admission process will begin after the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and the state boards announce Class 12 results, Gupta added.

In normal circumstances, DU also conducts entrance tests for admissions to nine UG courses. The tests are administered by the National Testing Agency (NTA). Delhi University, earlier today, also said that it will adjust its admission process to the extraordinary situation without compromising on merit and added that the Central Universities Common Entrance Test (CUCET) can be a good method.

After the CBSE and the CISCE announced cancelling Class 12 board examinations in view of the ongoing Covid pandemic, PC Joshi, Acting Vice Chancellor, said discussions will be held with the admission committee and the academic council of the university to finalise the process of admission to undergraduate courses.

The university last year, as a first, admitted the students to the first year UG programmes through the online admission process. The DU admission process in 2020 was completely online due to the onslaught of the Covid pandemic and the university had also advised students not to visit colleges in person. To accustom the students and the parents with the online application process and the details of documents required, the university also conducted several seminars in virtual mode.

NDMC TO INTRODUCE BLOCKCHAIN FOR BIRTH-DEATH CERTIFICATE AND PROPERTY TAX

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC) is planning to create a blockchain-based infrastructure for its record management system (RMS) and will subsequently to migrate its existing birth-death certificate and property tax database to this infrastructure.The National Capital Territory of Delhi (NCT) comprises three local bodies - Municipa Corporation of Delhi, NDMC and Cantonment Board. While MCD comprises approximately 96 per cent of the area and population of Delhi, the NDMC consists of only 3 per cent of the population.NDMC area comprises of the area that is regarded as the seat of central authority in India. It comprises buildings such as Rashtrapati Bhawan, Parliament House. The Indian government owns about 80% of the buildings in the NDMC area.

"IT Department (of NDMC) is intending to migrate all record-related database in blockchain technology and to implement/develop the blockchain-based database environment RMS for all application related to keeping records for prevention of tampering (sic)," the tender floated iby the NDMC said. The municipal authority said that blockchain was being brought in to prevent tampering of records.

"Blockchain technology would bring in more transparency in the entire process of issuing birth/death certificates. Since blockchain is immutable, it would be easier to detect cases of suspected tampering," AW Ansari, Joint Director, NMDC told MediaNama Once a vendor has been chosen for the project, they have to develop the blockchain infrastructure within two months. Subsequently, within the three-month mark, the company is expected to migrate the birth and death database to this infrastructure. And then within five months, the estate and property tax database will need to be migrated.

MAHARSHTRA CABINET DECIDES TO CANCEL CLASS 12 EXAMS

Maharshtra school education minister Varsha Gaikwad said the government's first priority is to ensure the health and safety of the students.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The Uddhav Thackeray government on Wednesday decided to cancel the Maharashtra board examinations for Class 12 students. The in-principle decision by the Maharashtra cabinet will be placed before the state disaster management authority, also headed by chief minister UddhavThackaray, for the formal orders.

The state school education department on Wednesday moved a proposal to the state disaster management authority headed by chief minister Uddhav Thackeray to take the final decision, officials said. A formal announcement is expected after the nod by the authority.

School education minister Varsha Gaikwad, who had welcomed the Centre's decision to cancel CBSE class 12 exams on Tuesday, said their priority is to ensure the health and safety of the students.

Around 1.5 million students appear for Class 12 exams in Maharashtra every year.

The Maharashtra government had earlier decided to cancel Class 10 board examinations due to the prevailing Covid-19 situation and promote students on the basis of their performance in Class 9 and 10.

Notably, Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Tuesday had announced the Centre's decision not to hold the school-leaving exams conducted by the CBSE this year. Several states such as Haryana, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh also have cancelled Class 12 board examinations.

"We informed the state cabinet about the decisions taken by the central government and a few states pertaining to Class 12 exams. We have moved a proposal to the state disaster management authority to take a decision in this regard as all such decisions have to be approved by it considering the unprecedented situation," Gaikwad said on Wednesday after the state cabinet meeting.

"Our stand on this issue has been clear since the beginning. Health, safety and mental stress of the students needs to be considered before taking such a decision. We had clarified our stand in a meeting of education ministers of all the states chaired by the defence minister Rajnath Singh and have also welcomed the decision of cancellation of Class 12 board exams. The same has been proposed before the disaster management authority," school education minister Varsha Gaikwad said.

A senior official familiar with the matter said all ministers supported Gaikwad's proposal to scrap the Class 12 board exam at the cabinet meeting.

"It was decided that it should be approved by the disaster management authority as Epidemic Diseases Act was invoked in the state," said a senior official, privy to the development.

Class 12 examinations were scheduled on April 23 and were put off till May-end owing to a surge in Covid-19 cases and subsequently lockdown restrictions imposed to arrest the spread.

47 police personnel died across Maharashtra from Covid in May

Of 110 police personnel who died in March and April this year, at least 20 officers died after taking the second dose of Covid-19 vaccine.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

A total of 47 police personnel from Maharashtra Police succumbed to Covid-19 in May this year. The number of cases in the police force is seeing a steady decline after it peaked in the second wave.

As compared to May, a total of 68 police personnel in the state police lost their lives to Covid-19 in April. The number of active cases has come down from 3,811 on May 1 to 1,326 cases on June 1 in the state police.Of 110 police personnel who died in March and April this year, at least 20 officers died after taking the second dose of Covid-19 vaccine. As many as 18 of them had co-morbidities while two had no co-morbidities. Sanjeev Singhal, Additional Director General of Police (Administration), told The Indian Express, "We are almost done with the vaccination process which has increased the immunity in the force. But we keep reminding our men that Covid appropriate behaviour is a must and has to be followed all the time for their own safety and safety of the people around them."

Since the pandemic broke out, May was the fourth worst month in terms of deaths in the police force. The highest number of deaths were recorded in September last year when 87 police officers had died, followed by April when 68 died and August last year when 55 police officers died.Of the 47 deaths that took place in May, 10 are from Mumbai, four each from Ahmednagar and Gadchiroli, three each from Buldhana and Nanded and two each from Nagpur and Mumbai Railway police. One police officer has died in Sindhudurg since the beginning of the outbreak while some of the remaining districts reported one or no deaths.Overall, as many as 469 police personnel have died across Maharashtra of which 119, a quarter of the deaths, are from Mumbai Police. "At present, we have 176 active cases of Covid-19 in Mumbai Police. At least 91 per cent of the Mumbai Police force has taken the first dose of the vaccine and 69 per cent have taken the second dose as well," said Chaitanya S., DCP (operations) and PRO for Mumbai Police.In the state police excluding Mumbai Police, at least 1,38,992 (90 per cent) of the 1,54,039 personnel have received the first dose of the vaccine while 1,38,992 (68 per cent) have received the second dose as well. As the waiting period for vaccination has increased and those infected cannot be vaccinated for a certain period, the completion of the entire process will take another few months.

Heavy rainfall across half of Maharashtra till June 4

A sharp rise in relative humidity and sufficient heating in the day are collectively causing thunderstorm over the city and other districts in the state, said Met officials.l.

Team Absolute | Mumba

Rainfall over many parts of Maharashtra will continue during the first week of June, even before the official onset of the Southwest monsoon this year, said officials at India Meteorological Department (IMD).For the third consecutive day, Pune experienced intense rain accompanied by severe thunder and lightning. Rainfall recorded over Pune till 5.30 pm was 38 mm in Lohegaon, 32 mm in Pashan and 15.1 mm in Shivajinagar.

A sharp rise in relative humidity and sufficient heating in the day are collectively causing thunderstorm over the city and other districts in the state, said Met officials.

"There is a presence of moderately strong westerlies over Konkan-Goa, Madhya Maharashtra and Marathwada. This, when combined with the orography offered by Sahyadri ranges, is creating a convergence leading to intense rain spells during afternoon or evening," said Anupam Kashyapi, head, weather forecasting division, IMD, Pune.With the pre-monsoon season officially ending on Monday, Pune city recorded 55 per cent surplus rainfall against a normal of 55.6 mm between March and May. Pune district recorded 135 per cent and is among the top 10 districts in the state to have recorded excess rainfall during the last three months.

The IMD has issued a 'yellow' alert (keep a watch) over Pune, Ahmednagar, Nashik, Satara, Raigad, Ratnagiri, Sindhudurg, Palghar, Solapur, Kolhapur, Sangli, Aurangabad, Jalna, Dhule and Beed districts, where heavy rain, lightning and thunder has been predicted till June 4. Whereas, heavy rainfall will continue till Wednesday over Osmanabad, Latur, Nanded and Hingoli districts.

NOW, MAHARASHTRA TO HOLD 'COVID-FREE VILLAGE' COMPETITION TO COMBAT VIRUS

Mumbai: After five small villages in the state independently attained Covid-free status in May, the Maharashtra government has now come up with a unique proposal to inspire more such rural settlements to "chase away the virus". Rural Development Minister Hasan Mushrif on Wednesday announced a Covid-Free Village Competition with fat cash prizes to be implemented across the state soon."If the villages become free from the coronavirus, then the talukas, districts, regions, and the entire state will be rid of the scourge as soon as possible, with the participation of the common people," he said.The competition comes close on the heels of Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray last week lavishing praises on villages that had virtually "barred the gates" on the coronavirus by taking strict initiatives at the local level and setting a national example.

Fadnavis Slams Maharashtra Over Crop Insurance PayoutTo Farmers

BJP leader Devendra Fadnavis said the Maharashtra government delayed the tender process and was blaming the Centre to hide its failure.

Team Absolute | Mumba

Aurangabad: BJP leader Devendra Fadnavis on Wednesday claimed that the Maharashtra government was failing to ensure that insurance firms paid adequate compensation to farmers despite heavy premium collection.The Shiv Sena-Nationalist Congress Party-Congress government was blaming the Centre to hide its failure, he said, speaking to reporters at Parbhani in central Maharashtra.

The BJP-led government headed by him had made insurance firms pay out about ? 4,000 crore against premium collection of ? 576 crore, the former chief minister said."The state government delayed the tender process. The government has the right to appoint companies for crop insurance. They have failed. To hide these failures, it is blaming the Centre," Fadnavis alleged.Earlier this week, minister of state for revenue Abdul Sattar had alleged that insurance firms were not paying compensation to farmers.

Against the payment of premium of ? 5,800 crore by the state and Centre last year, only ? 1,000 crore were paid out to farmers, he had said.

Agriculture minister Dada Bhuse had said there would be a probe into this issue.Meanwhile, Fadnavis, who visited COVID-19 centres in Parbhani, said ventilators provided under the PM-CARES Fund were running well in hospitals in the area. There have been allegations that ventilators provided by the Centre were not functioning.

The BJP leader also took a swipe at the state government for declaring standard rates for COVID-19 treatment at private hospitals "after the caseload crossed 50 lakh".Had the rates been declared earlier, people would not have been forced to pay bills running into lakhs of rupees, he said.

FADNAVIS EXPRESSES DOUBT OVER MAHARASHTRA'S COVID DEATH NUMBERS

Mumbai: Former Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Wednesday expressed doubt over the number of deaths caused by Covid-19 in the state. Fadnavis on Twitter said, "In entire Maharashtra, #COVID19 death numbers are not brought out with transparency. To take measures against COVID-19, such transparency is of utmost importance. It must be audited properly and if need be, we will do it at our level."Maharashtra on Tuesday reported 14,123 new cases, lowest since March 10. It had reported 477 deaths, including previously unreported fatalities. Out of the 477 deaths, 340 occurred in the last 48 hours and 137 in the last week. The state's toll now stands at 96,198.

MAHA TO START 82 HOSTELS FOR KIDS OF MIGRANT SUGARCANE WORKERS

Mumbai: The Maharashtra government has decided to provide 82 permanent residential accommodations for the children of the migrant sugarcane workers in the state under the Sant Bhagwan Baba Government Hostel Scheme. The decision was taken at the state cabinet presided over by Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray, said Social Justice Minister Dhananjay Munde.In the first phase, 10 separate hostels each for boys and girls shall be started from the current academic year in Beed, Ahmednagar, Jalna, Nanded, Parbhani, Osmanabad, Latur, Aurangabad, Nashik, and Jalgaon. These shall be launched in rented buildings with a capacity of 100 each, providing free lodging and boarding to the children, since the construction of new hostels will take time, said the minister.The scheme had been approved by the previous Bharatiya Janata Party-led government in September 2019, but languished and Munde had revived it now, terming as "a true tribute to the memory of the late Union Minister Gopinath Munde", who was his uncle.

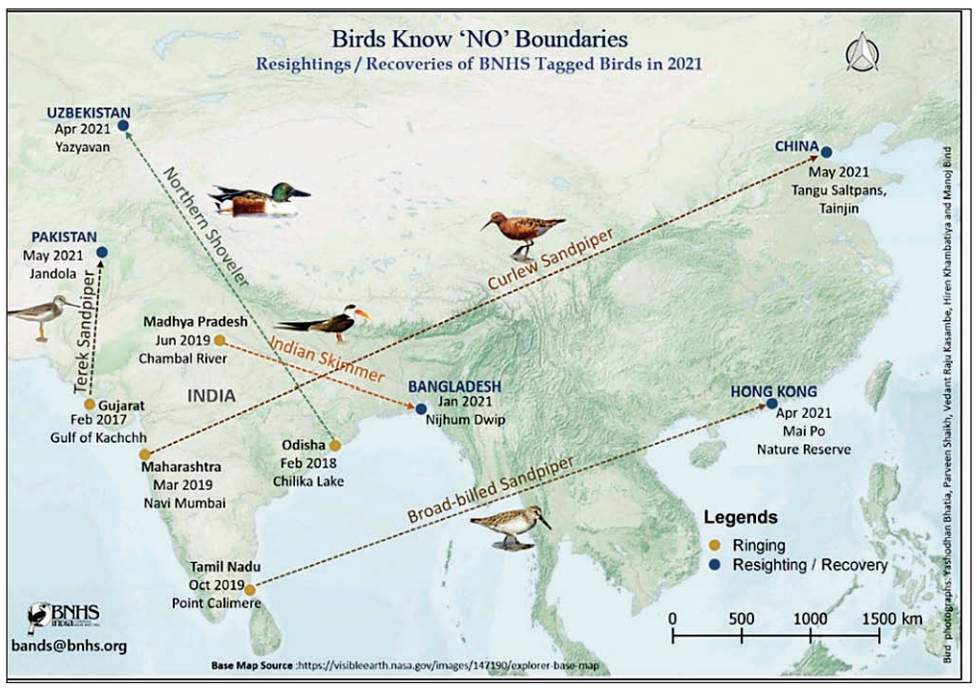
Munde said that there are 232 sugar factories in Maharashtra which employ over 800,000 workers, both men and women as sugarcane cutters.However, a majority of them have an uncertain nomadic life, migrating to different places for a living in sugarcane fields, which drastically affects the education, increases the dropout rate and the future prospects of their young children who are forced to travel along with their parents.

MAHA COVID DEATHS AND CASES DECLINE, TOLL REMAINS BELOW 96K

Mumbai: Maharashtra's Covid-19 daily deaths and new infections touched new lows on Wednesday and the toll remained below the 96,000 mark - the first time since May 13 it has not shot above the next thousand level, health officials said here. Against 854 deaths on Tuesday, the state reported 553 fatalities (285 fresh and 268 previous), taking the toll to 96,751 now. The number of fresh cases increased from 14,123 on Tuesday to 15,169, and the state tally climbed up to 57,76,184. In Mumbai, for the second day running, the new infections remained below the 1,000 level, but increased from 830 on Tuesday to 923, taking the city tally to 707,041. Deaths went up from 23 on Tuesday to 31, with total fatalities in the country's commercial capital rising to 14,880. The state death rate remained stable at 1.67 per cent, while the number of active cases dropped from 230,681 to 216,016.

Migratory bird tagged in Mumbai, sighted 4,500-km away in China

It was first caught and tagged in a wetland near the Palm Beach Road at Nerul in Navi Mumbai on March 18, 2019 with a unique Flag No. 7N5, and later it was captured again on January 13, 2020 at the Bhandup Pumping Station in Mumbai.



Team Absolute | Mumbai

A Curlew Sandpiper tagged in Mumbai by Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) has been spotted in the Tianjin province of China, around 4,500 kms away, marking a significant achievement in studying bird migration, officials said here on Wednesday.

The bird - which breeds in the Tundra of Arctic Siberia is strongly migratory, wintering in Africa and also south and south-east Asia besides Australia and New Zealand - was tagged by the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) scientist Mrugank Prabhu and his team.

It was first caught and tagged in a wetland near the Palm Beach Road at Nerul in Navi Mumbai on March 18, 2019 with a unique Flag No. 7N5, and later it was captured again on January 13, 2020 at the Bhandup Pumping Station in Mumbai.

The same Curlew Sandpiper has now been resighted at Tianjin in China on May 6, 2021 during its northward migration to its breeding sites, said Prabhu.

"The migratory birds wintering at Thane creek use the adjacent wetlands as their high-tide roosts. They show high fidelity to their traditional feeding and roosting sites as evident from their frequent resightings at these wetlands in the same as well as subsequent migratory seasons. This signifies the importance of these habitats and the urgent need for their conservation," BNHS Director BivashPandav said.

The bird tagged by Prabhu and his team was resighted in the Tangu Saltpans in Tianjin, China, near the shoreline. Tianjin province of China is the first record of international resighting of a waterbird tagged on the coasts of Mumbai and adjoining wetlands, he added.

Currently, President of the Convention on Migratory Species, since 1927 the BNHS is an old hand at bird banding and ringing which reveal fascinating insights into the migrations of the birds, the political boundaries they cross and the potential hurdles they conquer en route, said Pandav.

The birds are tagged either with a band of a light-weight metal ring having a unique alpha-numeric code, colour-flags, colour-bands or neck-collars on certain species in accordance with international protocols.

India falls under the Central Asian Flyway (CAF - the paths birds follow in the sky) mainly for the North to South winter migration. The country has recently launched a National Action Plan for the flyway and a network of 29 sites comprising 20 major wetlands and nine wetland-clusters are identified as critical sites for the migratory waterbirds under the CAF-NAP which are being survey by the BNHS.

Annually, around 50-billion birds migrate across the world on their preferred routes with the timing of travel and the ecology of migration shrouded in intrigue and the bird ringing, recapture, resighting method is used to study this process and help scientists discern the migratory 'flyways' of these avians.

In past nearly four years, in Mumbai along around 10,000 birds of 36 species have been ringed or colour-flagged and in the past other studies, various species of gulls, terns, shorebirds, flamingos ringed in Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, eastern Asia and Indian Ocean islands have been recorded on the Maharashtra coast, said Pandav.

MILIND SOMAN: HAVE BEEN RUNNING EVERY DAY SINCE I GOT MY NEGATIVE REPORT

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actor-model-fitness enthusiast MilindSoman has gone back to running five to six kilometres a day after testing negative for Covid-19. Milind posted an Instagram picture running shirtless, clicked by wife Ankita.

"My first 10k post covid! 62 mins, comfortable, max heart rate during the run 142. I have been running 5-6km every day since I got my negative report on 5th April," Milind wrote alongside the image that shows him sporting shorts, sneakers and sunglasses.

He also answered questions posted by fans on running.

Milind wrote: "1. To run i wear either vibram five fingers with toes cut off, or Luna Sandals. I find closed shoes uncomfortable, I can't run with my natural form. 2. To me, soft/hard surface does not matter, technique matters. Run softly. 3. Running correctly and regularly strengthens legs and is good for the knees."

"4. If you are starting/restarting/been sick/been injured/overweight, start with very slow speed and short comfortable distances. Regularity is the key to improvement. 5. I dont need any special diet if I am running 5-6km a day. I might need to eat more if I am running 50-60km a day."

He added: "6. I dont use sunscreen. After running, if the sun has been really hot, I use a little curd on my face, and wash it off with water when it dries. Skin feels good, tan looks amazing."

KEERTHY SURESH ROOTS FOR YOGA THERAPY TO KEEP TENSION AWAY

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Southern star Keerthy Suresh has found a way to keep tension at bay, going by her social media post on Wednesday.

Keerthy posted a picture on Instagram where she is seen doing Vrksasana. Alongside the image, she wrote: "Some yoga in the day keeps the tensions away."

Keerthy, who has featured in Tamil, Telugu and Malayalam films, was feted with the National Film Award for portraying actress Savitri in the 2018 Telugu biopic film "Mahanati".

She will soon be seen in films including "Good Luck Sakhi", "Marakkar: Arabikadalinte Simham" "Vaashi", and "Sarkaru Vaari Paata".

The actress had her first lead role in the 2013 Malayalam film "Geethaanjali". She was then seen in films such as "Ring Master", "Idhu Enna Maayam", "Rajini Murugan", "Remo", "Nenu Sailaja", "Bairavaa", "Thaana Serndha Kootam", "Sandakozhi 2" and "Sarkar".

VIDYUT JAMMWAL: SEXUAL HEALTH SHOULD BE TALKED ABOUT OPENLY TO ERADICATE TABOO

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Bollywood action star and martial artist VidyutJammwal took to Instagram on Tuesday to highlight the necessity to openly talk about sexual health in order to eradicate taboo surrounding the same. The actor also shared a set of workouts on his YouTube channel, which he says will help rejuvenate blood flow and bring sexual energy back in the pelvic region. "It's time we braved into the discussion about sexual health and Erectile Dysfunction. One in ten men can suffer from Erectile Dysfunction. Here's KalariSutra, a set of 19 exercises which if practised daily will help in rejuvenating your blood flow and bring sexual energy back into the pelvic region," Vidyut wrote in his post.

"Sexual health is a salient part of overall well-ness and it should be talked about more openly so as to eradicate the taboo. Cheers to living a well-rounded life," he added. The actor also informed in his post that the complete set of the workout video is available on his YouTube channel.

Recipes to devour this summer

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Food connects the dots of life like nothing else. With the onset of summers, tangy and sweet mangoes and nutty coconuts are great for pickles, chutneys, murabbas and jams of all sorts.

Neha Mathur, a dentist by profession and a founder of WhiskAffair by passion shares the 'HingKaAchar' and slightly pinkish in colour 'Solkadhi' recipes that deeply connects with her childhood memories:

HingkaAchar

Ingredients: Raw Mangoes, Hing, Kashmiri Red Chilli Powder, Salt

Method: Wash the mangos and wipe them with a kitchen cloth. Peel the mangoes and cut them into thin slices. Spread the mango slices on a clean cloth and let them dry for 2-3 hours. Mix all the ingredients in a bowl. Transfer the pickle in clean glass jars and keep in strong sun for 3-4 days. Bring the jars inside and keep them for another 10-12 days. The pickle is ready to serve after 12-15 days of making.

Solkadhi

Ingredients: Dried kokum, grated fresh coconut, piece of ginger, chopped green chili peppers, chopped cilantro

Method:

Rinse 15-20 pieces of dried kokum lightly with water. Soak them in a cup of hot water for 30 minutes. Mash the soaked kokum nicely in the water and squeeze with your palms. Discard the pulp. The color of the solkadhi will depend on the quality of kokum used. It ranges from brownish to dark pinkish.

Add 1 cup grated fresh coconut to a blender along with e inch piece of ginger (chopped) and 1 tsp chopped green chili pepper. Add 1 cup of water and blend to make a smooth paste. Strain the coconut mixture using a fine mesh strainer to get thick coconut milk.Transfer the leftover coconut pulp back to the blender. Add another cup of water and blend again for 8-10 seconds. Strain again to get thin coconut milk.

Add thick and thin coconut milk and kokum water to a large non-reactive mixing bowl or jug. Add salt to taste, 1 tbsp chopped cilantro, and a cup of water, and mix well. Solkadhi is ready. Chill it for a few hours before serving. If you want to serve it right away, add a few ice cubes to the serving glasses.

KARAN JOHAR'S 'STATUS' IS 'FREE'

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Filmmaker Karan Johar shared his status on Wednesday and it is free, going by his post on social media.

Karan posted a picture on Instagram Story that shows the director is seen sitting dressed in a black T-shirt teamed with sunglasses. The T-shirt reads: "Free", while he captioned it as "Status".

Professionally, Karan's latest production "AjeebDaastaans" released digitally. He is all set to don the director's hat with "Takht", a period drama. The film stars Ranveer Singh, Vicky Kaushal, Alia Bhatt, Kareena Kapoor Khan, Anil Kapoor, Bhumi Pednekar and Janhvi Kapoor.

The film marks his return to big screen as director for the first time since his 2016 release "Ae Dil Hai Mushkil".

Juhi Chawla: 4G to 5G a very big leap, radiation will increase exponentially

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actress Juhi Chawla, who has filed a lawsuit in Delhi High Court on the health risks associated with 5G telecom technology, has urged netizens to do a bit of research on the ill effects of radiation.

Juhi took to instagram early on Wednesday to talk about how radiation will increase exponentially with 5G and urged people who are interested, to join her in the first virtual hearing being conducted at the Delhi High Court, on June 2.

Speaking in an Instagram video in Hindi and English early on Wednesday, Juhi said: "People are asking me why I woke up suddenly and filed a suit. I want to tell them that I didn't wake up today. I have been speaking about radiation, safe cell phone use, cell phone tower radiation since the last 10 years and tried to spread awareness on the same as much as possible."

"Our phones work on radio waves, which are increasing in our environment. From 1G to 2G to 3G to 4G. Now 4G to 5G is a very big leap. Radiation will increase exponentially. See, you know it, everything in moderation is fine but when it is more than required then you get to know the ill effects of it," she added.

Citing an example, the actress further said: "I will give you a simple example. A pharmaceutical drug when introduced in the market, research is done for at least 10 to 15 years to check its side effects and then it finally gets the approval to be released in the market. But this radiation is being spread over the last 20 to 25 years, has anyone studied about this?"

Urging netizens to read and research about radiation, she added: "All of us use technology, so I request you to research about this and see what you get to know about it. I hope that you are convinced and join me. The case has just begun and our first hearing is on 2nd June. I will share the link if you want to join me."

The actress also shared a note for memers who have created memes on her and her case. Addressing them in her video, Juhi said: "I want to thank those who have made memes on me. Because of these memes a lot of people got to know about this. So, keep it coming, let's enjoy the ride."

Alongside her video, Juhi wrote on Instagram: "Hum, tum aur 5G. If you do think this concerns you in any way, please feel free to join our first virtual hearing being conducted at the Delhi High Court, on the 2nd of June, 3:00 PM IST onwards! Link in bio. #5g."

BTS' 'BUTTER' DEBUTS AT NO. 1 ON BILLBOARD HOT 100

Seoul | Agencies

K-Pop band BTS's new single "Butter" has made it to the number one spot on the Billboard Hot 100 chart.

"Butter" is their fourth chart-topping single to date. This makes them the first group to have a trio of number one entrances as well as the fastest group to run their first four number one singles since The Jackson 5 in 1970. "We released 'Butter" to bring a fun song that anyone can enjoy. We're happy and honoured that the song reached number one on the Billboard Hot 100 again. We wouldn't have gotten our fourth chart topping song without everyone's love and support. Thank you for enjoying 'Butter' and we will keep working hard to deliver refreshing and passionate music," the group said in a statement. "Butter" became the most streamed song in a single day in the history of Spotify, amassing 20.9 million global streams on the first day. The music video of the song set an all-time record of 108.2 million views in 24 hours, and the biggest music video premiere on YouTube with 3.9 million peak concurrents.

Matthew McConaughey engages in conversation with Sadhguru

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Hollywood star Matthew McConaughey took to Instagram to inform fans that he would engage in a conversation with Sadhguru. The interview goes live on Wednesday, on YouTube.

The Oscar-winning actor's discussion with the spiritual guru pertains to Karma, crafting one's destiny, the connection between yoga and religion, and exploring the unknown.

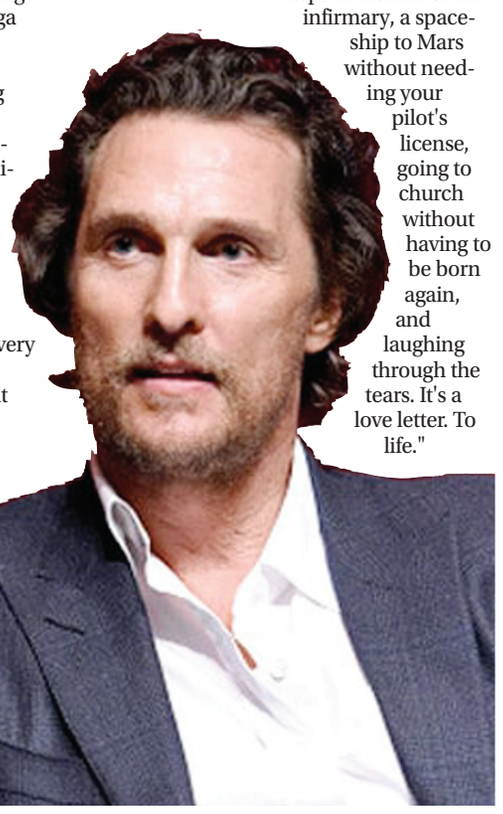
The official description of the video on YouTube reads: "Academy Award-winning actor @Matthew McConaughey asks Sadhguru about Karma, crafting one's destiny, the connection between yoga and religion, and exploring the unknown. Sadhguru offers insights on how we should not confuse our lifestyle -- a consequence of the times we live in -- with life, the real thing!"

The actor's recently-released book "Greenlights", too, speaks about the discovery of life.

"Recently, I worked up the courage to sit down with those diaries. I found stories I experienced, lessons I learned and forgot, poems, prayers, prescriptions, beliefs about what matters, some great photographs, and a whole bunch of bumper stickers," McConaughey said on the official website of his novel.

"I found a reliable theme, an approach to living that gave me more satisfaction, at the time, and still: If you know how, and when, to deal with life's challenges-how to get relative with the inevitable -- you can enjoy a state of success I call catching greenlights," he added.

Describing it as a "love letter to life", he added: "Hopefully, it's medicine that tastes good, a couple of aspirin instead of the infirmary, a spaceship to Mars without needing your pilot's license, going to church without having to be born again, and laughing through the tears. It's a love letter. To life."



Matthew Perry splits from fiancée Molly Hurwitz

Los Angeles | Agencies

Matthew Perry has split from fiancée Molly Hurwtiz - saying their relationship "just didn't work out". The breakup comes just days after the actor "worried fans" who were concerned about his health during the recent Friends reunion.

The Friends star, 51, and literary manager, 29, began dating in 2018 and got engaged in November 2020.

Matthew confirmed the news to PEOPLE, sharing in a statement: "Sometimes things just don't work out and this is one of them.

"I wish Molly the best."

Matthew got engaged to Molly in November after two years of dating. However, last week it was reported that Molly put their wedding on hold after he "flirted with other women" while they were on a break.

Kate Winslet: 'Mare Of Easttown' was a middle-aged actress's dream

London | Agencies

Oscar-winning actress English Kate Winslet has opened up about her experience of reading the script "Mare Of Easttown" for the first time. She says it felt like a middle-aged actress's dream.

"It was a bizarre time, actually. It was September 2018, I was filming in the UK and in the space of a month I was sent the script for 'Ammonite' and episodes one and two of 'Mare (Of Easttown)'. I ended up saying yes to both of these huge, great jobs," she recalls.

"I read the script and it was like a middle-aged actress's dream, quite honestly. I actually hate that term, but I am 45 now. I'm not 20 anymore," she adds.

The actress felt lucky that she was asked to read something that "could have been offered to an American actress".

"When I read 'Mare', I knew how lucky I was to be asked to read something that could have been offered to an American actress. The writing was utterly real and wonderful and I could feel myself saying those words," she recalls.

Winslet tagged it as an indicator for her: "I always sort of read bits out loud when I'm reading a script and play around -- I'll say to my son or daughter, 'just come and quickly read this scene with me', and then I'll get that feeling of, 'ooh, this could be good. This could be good'. With 'Mare' I had that feeling right away. So, I was flattered initially to get the offer but also really taken by the challenges."

Shot in Pennsylvania, the series has been produced by Karen Wacker, written by Brad Ingelsby and directed by Craig Zobel.

"Mare Of Easttown" has an ensemble cast of talented actors that includes Julianne Nicholson, Jean Smart, Angourie Rice, David Denman, Neal Huff, Guy Pearce and CaileeSpaeny. The series streams on Disney+ Hotstar Premium.

Paris Hilton: I send my love to LGBTQ+ community

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Socialite-entrepreneur Paris Hilton is celebrating Pride Month and on Wednesday sent out love for the LGBTQ+ community, thanking them for always being an inspiration.

In an Instagram image Paris posted, she is covered with colourful roses. To complete her look, the socialite sported a short bob and bold red lips.

"To all my babes... Happy #Pride Month!! You are all beautiful. I send my love to the LGBTQ+ community and thank you for always being an inspiration and reminder to live life with all of your colors. Keep shining and #SLIVING and being YOU. #LoveIsLove," she wrote as the caption.

Paris also celebrated Hollywood icon Marilyn Monroe's birthday, which was on June 1. She shared a picture dressed in a light pink dress posing beside Monroe's picture.

"Happy Birthday to my queen, the forever icon #MarilynMonroe 'Imperfection is beauty, madness is genius and it's better to be absolutely ridiculous than absolutely boring.' - Marilyn Monroe #Iconic #HappyBirthdayMarilyn," she wrote.

ABSOLUTE PIC OF THE DAY

Rihanna

TAYLOR SWIFT TO STAR WITH CHRISTIAN BALE, MARGOT ROBBIE, RAMI MALEK IN NEW FILM

Los Angeles | Agencies

Singer Taylor Swift will star in filmmaker David O. Russell's next film, with Christian Bale and Margot Robbie. The film also stars "Tenet" actor John David Washington, Rami Malek and Zoe Saldana. Russell, the filmmaker behind the Oscar-winning films as "American Hustle" and "Silver Linings Playbook", is directing the film from his own script. It's his first feature since the 2015 release "Joy" starring Jennifer Lawrence, reports variety.com. The title of the film, as well as plot details, have been kept under wraps. The film marks Swift's first big screen role since "Cats", the musical adaptation of Andrew Lloyd Webber's long-running stage show. Pop superstar Taylor Swift made her debut as an actress in the 2010 romantic comedy "Valentine's Day" alongside Jessica Alba, Jessica Biel, Bradley Cooper and Taylor Lautner. Swift's other film credits include the dystopian drama "The Giver" and a voice role in the animated Dr. Seuss movie "The Lorax".

EDITOR'S SPECS

Low vaccination is dangerous

Vaccinating the world is the most effective way to boost global output in the near term, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said on Tuesday, warning that low vaccination rates in some countries is "dangerous" for everyone. Georgieva said at a press conference in response to a question from Xinhua. The IMF chief participated in the joint press conference together with the heads of the World Bank Group, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), with a focus on a new joint call on scaling up equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines. Georgieva noted that countries with more fiscal space and rapid vaccinations are coming out of the crisis faster, but those, especially with low vaccination rates are falling further behind, and "that is dangerous for everyone because it would hold the global recovery back." According to IMF estimation, a faster vaccination rollout could inject the equivalent of $9 trillion into the global economy by 2025, due to a faster resumption of economic activity. "And it is important to recognize that 60 per cent of the benefits, this 60 per cent of this 9 trillion would go to emerging markets in developing countries, but 40 per cent will go to advanced economies," said the IMF chief. "So we mobilize everybody to step forward for the benefit of all," she added. Georgieva also noted that building on the work of the WHO, WTO, World Bank and many others, IMF staff have put forward a proposal - a $50 billion-dollar plan - to end the pandemic. The proposal would vaccinate at least 40 per cent of the population in all countries by end of 2021, and at least 60 per cent by the first half of 2022, providing additional upfront grants to COVAX, the WHO-led international campaign for equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines around the world. The plan would also insure against downside risks such as new variants, and manage the interim period where vaccine supply is limited with widespread testing and tracing, therapeutic and public health measures, Georgieva said.

"IT IS NOW INCREASINGLY CLEAR TO LEADERS EVERYWHERE AND TO ORDINARY PEOPLE THAT WE ARE NOT GOING TO SUCCEED IN OVERCOMING THE ECONOMIC CRISIS THIS PANDEMIC TRIGGERED, UNLESS WE BRING THE PANDEMIC TO A DURABLE END,"

UNGA PRESIDENT MIGHT HAVE GOT IT ALL WRONG

Dr Amjad Ayub Mirza

The President of the United Nation General Assembly, Volkan Bozkir, has said that Pakistan needs to 'work harder to raise the issue (of Kashmir) internationally, specifically to bring it to the United Nations platform more forcefully. The statement was issued on his arrival in Islamabad on May 27.Commenting on Bozkir's statement, Pakistani Daily 'Dawn' in its editorial on May 29 had endorsed his comments by calling "the Kashmir issue a major stumbling block to peace in south Asia".Well, Pakistan, and not Kashmir, is the stumbling block to peace in South Asia unless it withdraws its military and all aliens from the occupied territories of Pakistan occupied Jammu Kashmir (PoJK) and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), a demand that was made in the UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 47 passed on April 21, 1948.The UN resolution clearly states that Pakistan must "secure the withdrawal from the state of Jammu and Kashmir of the tribesmen and Pakistani nationals not normally resident therein who have entered the state for the purpose of fighting" (i.e. military forces).Earlier, in January 1948, the UN Resolution 39 had been adopted and the United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan (UNCIP) was established. The above mentioned statement of the UNSC had come only after the UNCIP had held discussions with both India and Pakistan and issued its findings and subsequent recommendations to the UNSC. It had asked for a "complete withdrawal of Pakistan's fighting forces, including the army, tribes and other Pakistani nationals".Did Pakistan abide by the dictates of the UNSC? No. On the contrary, Pakistan has made her military presence a permanent feature of the geographical landscape of PoJK and Gilgit-Baltistan.The UNSC had also asked Pakistan to withdraw "tribes and other Pakistani nationals" from the occupied territory of Jammu Kashmir. Did Pakistan comply? No. Instead, Pakistan brought in more aliens into PoJK and Gilgit-Baltistan, setting up training camps for jihadist to be sent into the Vale of Kashmir to cause violence and unrest.And to hide her evil doings, Pakistan keeps pointing her finger towards the presence of the Indian army in Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Well, the UNSC has permitted India to maintain an army presence in the region that might be "required for maintaining law and order".It was on October 22, 1947 that Pakistan attacked the state of Jammu and Kashmir despite the fact that a Standstill Agreement had already been signed between Maharaja Hari Singh and the Governor General of Pakistan, Muhammed Ali Jinnah.

Bozkir said that "parties to the conflict, i.e. India and Pakistan, must not change the status of the disputed territory till the matter is resolved".Well Sir, with due respect, allow me to bring to your attention the instrument of accession signed on October 26, 1947 between the Maharaja of Jammu Kashmir and the Republic of India. It was signed in accordance with the India Independence Act of 1947, according to which the 565 princely states of British India "would be free to accede to one or the other of the new dominions".By suggesting to the Pakistan government to 'work harder to raise the issue (of Kashmir) internationally, and specifically to bring it to the United Nations platform more forcefully', and suggesting that 'Pakistan could initiate a debate on the Kashmir issue at the UNGA supported by other states', Bozkir has seemingly sided with Pakistan. The UNGA President should be a neutral entity.Pakistan and not India is the one which has been declared as an aggressor by the UNSC. It is Pakistan which has been settling outsiders from Punjab and the neighbouring province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa into PoJK and Gilgit-Baltistan in order to alter the demography of the occupied region, and it is Pakistan that has deprived the people of the so called Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan of their basic human rights by imposing an interim constitution called Act 74 and Schedule Four.To come up with such a statement as given by the President of the UNGA is at best naive and devoid of any factual research. Especially at a time when the Pakistani army is increasing its military presence in PoJK and POGB by the hour.

(Dr Amjad Ayub Mirza is an author and a human rights activist from Mirpur in PoJK. He currently lives in exile in the UK. The views expressed are personal)

Maritime militia give China the edge in South China Sea

Prof. Carl Schuster

According to reports, China recently warned the United States that it will face defeat if the two superpowers go to war. This warning is a testimony to what China thinks about its military might.

The threat to the US has come from China in response to the joint military exercise carried out by the US, Japan, Australia, and France last week amidst tension in the East China Sea. Tension is also mounting in the South China Sea with the Philippines refusing to withdraw vessels from the disputed territory.China's Maritime Militia are very often a party in these disputes due to its bullying tactics along the maritime boundary with Philippines, Vietnam, and Japan. The People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) of China owes its origin to the Communist Party's 1950 consolidation of people's militia groups comprising mainly fishermen and coastal workers of China.

Its initial role was confined to keeping a close eye on People's Republic of China (PRC)'s coastal waters and reporting any suspected activities to the Chinese Army (PLA). These militia were recruited, trained, and equipped by the party's Bureau of Aquatic Products, which authorize former PLA officers [TS1] to train and direct the militias' operations.

These militia groups operated very close to the maritime boundary till the 1960s. However, their activities started expanding in subsequent years. They started bullying South Vietnamese fishermen in Paracel and Spratly islands in the late 1960s. Their first major victory came in January 1974 when they seized South Vietnam's Paracel Islands. They engaged the South Vietnam Naval unit with 400 militia troops and captured the islands. This island remained with China ever since.The PAFMM have been leading the PRC's bullying in the East and South China Sea from the early 1980s. They threaten the Vietnamese and Filipino fishing ships, which are small, slow, and less robust. The militia threatens these fishing boats with small arms and attacks them with high pressure water cannons, very often sinking them. This is particularly true for Vietnamese fishing vehicles. The Chinese Coast Guards are often seen helping these militia groups in their nefarious activities.

In fact, due to the early gains by this militia unit, China built 'fishing shelters' to protect their fishermen in the Spratly islands. Their activities increased further after the US Navy pulled out of the Philippines in 1994. With the help of the PLA, the PAFMM isolated all the neighbouring countries and captured Mischief Reef and Scarborough Shoal. This compelled the US to follow a proactive strategy and support the Philippines in the South China Sea.

Despite all these activities by PAFMM, the Chinese government headed by Chairman Xi Jingping has never accepted any link between PAFMM and China's military. They claim that they are fishermen. This enables the PRC to deny any involvement of the Chinese government in these scuffles.

The PAFMM do not regularly use firearms or other military weapons so their actions cannot be called an 'act of war' which might trigger retaliation. It may also compel Manila to seek US support under the US-Philippine Mutual Defence Treaty. That is why the US calls PRC's actions 'Grey Zone Operations', which means they are acts of aggression, but fall short of military actions that would risk triggering a military response.

The PAFMM still continues with its activities in the East and South China Sea. For occupying an uninhabited island, the PAFMM does the initial seizure posing as fishermen. When other countries confront them with their Coast Guards or other law enforcement agencies, they find themselves confronting an armed militia, which is fully backed by China's Coast Guard or Navy. The situation can escalate into a full-fledged war if the other party insists on vacating the island.Such is the highhandedness of China that when an International Arbitration held the Chinese occupation illegal, it refused to abide by the judgment saying all nations should 'respect' international law.

At the time of the real war PAFMM may shift to supporting roles like defensive mining. They did this during the PLA Navy exercise in 2014. They would act as one of the many eyes of the fleet, land militia troops in remote areas or covertly land troops before the actual war starts.

A unit of the People's Armed Forces, PAFMM operates under direct military command for carrying out state-sponsored activities. Although they are locally supported but report to the head of China's military -- Commander-in-Chief Xi Jinping.

The exact number of fishing vessels possessed by PAFMM is not known, but estimates put the figure at around 350, out of which 225 are deployed in the South China Sea. Their vessel hulls are made up of reinforced steel, which are very strong. On the other hand, most of the other fishing vessels in the South China Sea are made of wood or other light materials. The PAFMM vessels are faster, which puts them at an advantageous position in an encounter.

They can 'bump' the enemy's vessel at will with little risk of damaging their own strong hull. Most of the fishermen from other countries are unarmed, but PAFMM vessels have small arms and, in some cases, Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPG) and machine guns. They are rarely used but are available on the vessels.The PAFMM vessels have water cannons mounted above the pilot house. They aim the spray at the other vessels' pilot house to blind the crew, but sometimes they aim it at the engine exhaust. Cold sea water hitting a hot engine tends to damage the engine, leaving the craft non-functional in the water. The PAFMM vessel can then do what it wants -- bump, ram or just leave.China places greater importance to claims on the South China Sea because of its strategic location. The political and strategic payoff is bigger in the South China Sea compared to the East China Sea and the risks and operational difficulties are less. The South China Sea is easier to dominate. The PAFMM base in Sanya is closer to the disputed territories in the South China Sea than the PAFMM base in Guangzhou to the Senkaku. They must pass through Taiwan to reach Senkaku.The PRC's military bases and airfields are closer to the disputed territory in the South China Sea than they are from the US bases in Japan. The East China Sea is not strategically located. The US and Chinese bases are equidistant from Senkaku. Also, Japan's Coast Guard is stronger than those of Vietnam and the Philippines, China's main target in the South China Sea. The PAFMM gets greater support in the South China Sea from the Chinese military establishments compared to the East China Sea.

China wants to dominate the South China Sea because that would give Beijing strategic advantage against Taiwan and Japan, before risking a conflict over the Senkaku. Xi always goes for an easy target that he believes can be achieved with minimal risk and costs.

Traditional thought in Chinese military believes in isolating the enemy and establishing an advantageous geo-political and military superiority before engaging in a war. Also, the best leader is the one who achieves 'victory' without fighting. China has secured much of the South China Sea and is using the PAFMM to expand its control without firing a shot. It has worked so far. However, doing that around the Senkaku may prove to be difficult and expensive.

(Commissioned out of the NROTC unit at the University of South Carolina in 1974, Captain Schuster served in a variety of US and international posts both at sea and ashore before his retirement in 1999. He was a qualified Joint Staff Officer, Foreign Area Officer and Strategic Planner at retirement. The views expressed are personal).

SACHIN TOP CHOICE TO 'PILOT' GUJARAT CONGRESS AFFAIRS

Saiyed Moziz Imam Zaidi

The Congress high command is mulling to appoint a new in-charge for Gujarat after the untimely demise of Rajeev Satav last month. Congress Rajya Sabha MP Rajeev Satav (46), who was in-charge of Gujarat affairs, passed away on May 16, days after recovering from Covid-19.

In the last elections in 2017, present Rajasthan Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot was the in-charge for Gujarat, while old hands like B.K. Hariprasad and Mohan Prakash were also around.However, according to sources, this time Gehlot's former deputy Sachin Pilot could be the top choice of the party leadership to pacify him and give him a bigger responsibility. The move might give stability to the Congress in Gujarat by involving Pilot in the party affairs of the state.However, it's not clear whether Pilot is willing to accept the offer, as the party leadership has talked to him through an emissary. His close aides say the former Deputy CM of Rajasthan is not willing to leave his home state.

In that case close, Gehlot's close aide and former AICC Secretary Sanjay Bapna could land the coveted assignment.There are talks of a massive reshuffle in the All India Congress Committee (AICC) and sources say many state PCC chiefs from the Northeastern states, West Bengal, Kerala, Gujarat, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh could be replaced, and state in-charges from election bound states like Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Uttarakhand may be sent back to their home states for poll preparations.However, it's not clear whether the 'dissenting' G-23 leaders, who had written a letter to interim Congress chief Sonia Gandhi about sweeping reforms in the party, will be adjusted in the party, though many from the group, including Manish Tewari and Ghulam Nabi Azad, have got assignments within the party.The Congress also has to decide about the Rajya Sabha seat that is vacant following the demise of Satav. It would be interesting to see if any of the G-23 leaders gets nominated for the post.The Congress also has to perform in the state elections ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, especially after the recent debacle in Assam, Kerala and West Bengal. Four states are scheduled to go the polls in 2022 - Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab and Gujarat. Barring in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab, the Congress is in direct contest with the BJP in the other two states. And that is why, sources said, the party is looking for a good election strategist for Gujarat.

The state is vital for the Congress keeping in mind the crucial Assembly elections scheduled next year, especially after coming very close to wresting power from the ruling BJP in the last state polls held in 2017.

RDSO: First SDO institution under "One Nation One Standard" mission

The Research Design and Standards Organisation (RDSO) on Tuesday became the first Institution to be declared Standard Developing Organisation (SDO) under "One Nation One Standard" mission on Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS).

Addressing a press conference here, Railway Board Chairman Suneet Sharma said that the RDSO of Indian Railways has become the first Institution to be declared SDO under one "One Nation One Standard" mission on BIS which is Institution under Department of Consumer Affairs.

He said that this a unique initiative of two organisations under government is going to set a template for all the rest of leading research and standard development organisations in the country to follow and adapt World Class Standards.In a statement, the railway ministry said: "To attain 'One Nation One Standard' vision of the government, BIS has launched a scheme which provides for 'Recognition of SDO' and through this scheme, BIS aims at aggregating and integrating the existing capabilities and dedicated domain specific expertise available with various organisations in the country engaged in standards development in their specific sectors, and enable convergence of all standard development activities in the country resulting in 'One National Standard for One Subject'."It said that RDSO, which is the sole research and design wing of Railways, is one of India's leading Standard formulating Body undertaking standardisation work for railway sector.It further said that the RDSO took the initiative to seek recognition as a SDO under the BIS SDO Recognition Scheme. In the process, RDSO reviewed its Standard Formulation procedures to realign them with the Best Practices of Standardisation, encoded in the WTO-TBT "Code of Good Practice" and also mandated by the BIS as essential criteria for recognition as SDO.It said that the recognition is valid for three years and will require renewal after completion of the validity period.

S KOREA UNVEILS HOMEGROWN SPACE ROCKET FOR FIRST TIME

Seoul | Agencies

South Korea has unveiled a fully assembled model of its homegrown space rocket for the first time since the country started its development in 2010 as it conducts final testing procedures before its launch later this year.

South Korea has earmarked $1.8 billion to develop its first homegrown space launch vehicle, named Nuri, and aims for a launch in October this year. In 2013, South Korea successfully launched its first-ever Naro space rocket, though its first stage rocket was built in Russia.

An assembled qualification model of the Nuri has been transported and erected on its launch pad at the Naro Space Center in Goheung, 473 kilometers south of Seoul, and will undergo testing over one month, according to the Ministry of Science and ICT.

The testing will cover procedures such as the charging of the rocket's fuel tanks and the separation from the launch pad, which was also developed with South Korean technology.

The actual flight model of the three-stage space rocket that will be used for the launch is under construction.

The science ministry said the rocket's third stage has been assembled, while the other two stages are currently being built, reports Yonhap news agency.

The latest testing comes after the country conducted the final combustion test of the main first-stage engines in March.

The Nuri uses four 75-ton liquid engines in its first stage, a 75-ton liquid engine in the second stage and a 7-ton liquid engine in the third stage.

The 200-ton rocket, which will be able to transport a 1.5-ton satellite, will carry a mock payload for its launch in October ahead of its mission to fly with a 200-kilogram satellite in May next year.

The Nuri has suffered setbacks in development over the years, such as changes in the first stage's assembly process and delays in acquiring parts, prompting South Korea last year to push back its launch originally set for February this year.

South Korea, a relative latecomer to the global space development race, has recently ramped up efforts in its space program, with plans to launch its first lunar orbiter next year.

US starts clinical trial to evaluate safety of Covid booster shots

Washington | Agencies

The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) has started a Phase 1/2 clinical trial in which adult volunteers who have been fully vaccinated against Covid-19 will receive booster doses of different Covid-19 vaccines to determine the safety and immunogenicity of mixed boosted regimens.

"Although the vaccines currently authorised by the US Food and Drug Administration offer strong protection against Covid-19, we need to prepare for the possibility of needing booster shots to counter waning immunity and to keep pace with an evolving virus," National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Anthony S. Fauci said.

"The results of this trial are intended to inform public health policy decisions on the potential use of mixed vaccine schedules should booster doses be indicated," Fauci, who is also a top adviser to President Joe Biden on the coronavirus pandemic.

The trial, to be led by Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, and the University of Maryland, College Park, will include approximately 150 individuals who already have received one of the three FDA authorised Covid-19 vaccines of -- Johnson & Johnson, Moderna or the Pfizer-BioNTech.

Each vaccine group will enroll about 25 people ages 18 to 55 years and approximately 25 people age 56 years and older. Initially, these volunteers will receive the two-dose

Moderna Covid-19 vaccine regimen and will be assigned to receive a booster dose of a vaccine about 12 to 20 weeks later. People who have not yet received a vaccine are also eligible to enroll in the trial in a separate cohort.

All trial participants will be followed for one year after receiving their last vaccination as part of the study. Participants also will be asked to provide blood samples periodically so that trial investigators can evaluate immune responses against current circulating strains of SARS-CoV-2, as well as emerging variants.

If trial participants develop laboratory-confirmed symptomatic Covid-19, investigators will perform genetic sequence analyses on the participant samples to see if a variant strain of SARS-CoV-2 caused the infection. Initial trial results are expected in late summer 2021.

Nepal receives more China-donated vaccines

Kathmandu | Agencies

In a major boost to its faltering vaccination drive against Covid-19, Nepal on Tuesday received more vaccines granted by China.

A Nepal Airlines plane carrying a batch of Chinese vaccine arrived in Kathmandu on Tuesday afternoon from Beijing, said Dim Prasad Poudel, Managing Director of the airline.

Meanwhile, the Himalaya Airlines, a Nepal-China joint venture based in Kathmandu, announced on the same day that it is bringing another batch of shots donated by China's Tibet Autonomous Region, the Xinhua news agency reported."The government of Nepal sincerely appreciates and thanks the government of the People's Republic of China and the Tibet Autonomous Region of China for providing the life-saving vaccines at this trying time," the Foreign Ministry of Nepal said in a press release.

It is the second time that Nepal has got Chinese Covid-19 vaccine in grant. The Himalayan country received a batch of Chinese vaccine in late March.

"Our priority is to give vaccine shots to people aged between 60-65 who were left out from the past vaccination drive," said Tara Nath Pokharel, Director at the Family Welfare Division of Nepal's Ministry of Health and Population."Our aim is to start the vaccination in most districts with the newly arrived Chinese vaccine," said Pokharel.

Nepal has so far had only 2 per cent of its some 30 million citizens administered two shots, due to a lack of vaccines. The pandemic has revisited the country since early April and sickened some 8,000-9,000 people in most days in May. As of Tuesday, Nepal has reported a total of 566,587 coronavirus cases and 7,454 deaths, with 5,285 new infections and 68 fatalities logged in the past 24 hours.

HERZOG ELECTED AS ISRAEL'S NEXT PRESIDENT

Jerusalem: Israel's former Labor chairman and opposition leader Isaac Herzog was chosen by the Parliament on Wednesday as the next Israeli President, a largely ceremonial position.Speaker of the Knesset (Parliament) Yariv Levin announced in a broadcast statement that Herzog was elected after winning votes of 87 lawmakers, while his rival Miriam Peretz, a conservative educator and a settler, won the votes of 26 lawmakers, the Xinhua news agency reported.Herzog, 60, is the chairman of the Jewish Agency, a major Jewish nonprofit organisation, and the son of Israel's sixth President Chaim Herzog.

Biden announces measures to narrow racial wealth gap

Washington | Agencies

US President Joe Biden on Tuesday announced a series of measures aimed at narrowing the wealth gap among racial groups in a speech commemorating the 100th anniversary of Tulsa massacre, one of the most atrocious racial violence in US history.

In less than 24 hours between May 31 and June 1, 1921, a mob of white attackers killed over 300 Black Americans in the Greenwood neighbourhood of Tulsa, Oklahoma, and burned down 35 square blocks of that business district built by Black Americans -- so prosperous at the time that it was then referred to as Black Wall Street. Roughly 10,000 Greenwood residents were displaced and the community has never come close to recovering, the Xinhua news agency reported.

Yet, Tulsa officials, in efforts to cover up the massacre, framed the atrocity as "riot," and the mass killings received scant mentions in media reports, school curriculum and civil and governmental conversations in the decades that followed. It wasn't until recent years that the horrendous events were eventually included in American history textbooks.

"My fellow Americans, this was not a riot. This was a massacre. Among the worst in our history," Biden said in his speech as the audience rose to their feet. "Some injustices are so heinous, so horrific, so grievous they can't be buried no matter how hard people try," the president said earlier during the speech.

Biden detailed a raft of policies intended to bolster homeownership and help minority-owned small businesses and entrepreneurs. The measures include using federal purchasing power to invest more money into minority-owned businesses and allocate $10 billion in infrastructure funds to rebuild disadvantaged neighbourhoods across the country.

The first President to come to Tulsa and commemorate the massacre, Biden also plans to enhance the Fair Housing Act in ways that the Department of Housing and Urban Development will "more vigorously enforce" the law, according to a senior administration official, who added that the goal is to increase Black homeownership.

Missing in the Biden initiative, however, was a plan to cancel student debt, which disproportionately affects Black students. The rollout also failed to address the issue of reparations for relatives of massacre victims, who said the federal payments could restore what was erased during the attacks.Biden in his speech also announced that Vice President Kamala Harris will lead the administration's efforts on protecting Americans' voting rights.

Canadians fear more tragedies in indigenous kids' tale

Toronto | Agencies

Canadians fear there could be more graves of indigenous children after the discovery of the remains of 215 kids from the grounds of a former native school.

The discovery of the remains at the former Indian residential school in Kamloops in British Columbia led to calls on Tuesday for officially designating it as 'genocide.'

Indian-origin Opposition leader Jagmeet Singh of the New Democratic Party said these schools were started with the aim of a `genocide' of indigenous people.

"These residential schools were not schools; they were institutions designed to eradicate and eliminate Indigenous people. They were institutions that were designed to perpetuate a genocide," Jagmeet Singh said.

Angry indigenous leaders wanted the Pope to apologize as Catholic missionaries ran these schools with government support.

Canada's first Prime Minister Sir John Macdonald too came under attack as he started these schools in 1883 and ordered Indigenous kids forcibly removed from their "savage" parents and placed in these schools.

Macdonald's statue was removed from the city centre in Charlottetown in Prince Edward Island.Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, speaking in a House of Commons debate on the tragedy, expressed fears that there could be more unknown graves of indigenous kids at other Indian residential schools.

"We know that the discovery in Kamloops is part of a larger tragedy and that from coast to coast to coast, many children forced into the residential school system disappeared without a trace."Today, some of the children who were found in Kamloops - and who have yet to be found in other places across the country - would have been grandparents or great-grandparents. They would have been elders, knowledge keepers and community leaders. They are not. And that is the fault of Canada."

Former senator Murray Sinclair too feared more unknown graves of indigenous kids who disappeared from the residential schools.

"We know there are lots of sites similar to Kamloops that are going to come to light in the future. We need to begin to prepare ourselves for that," he said.

In all, 139 indigenous residential schools ran across Canada where over 150,000 indigenous kids were placed till the last was closed in 1996.

1 KILLED, 16 INJURED AS TORNADO, HAIL HIT NE CHINA

Harbin: One person was killed and 16 others were injured as tornado and hail lashed northeast China's Heilongjiang Province on Tuesday, local authorities said Wednesday.The extreme weather has thrashed the city of Shangzhi for about 30 minutes starting from 5:30 p.m., with four local townships being affected, according to the municipal authorities, the Xinhua news agency reported.As of 6 a.m. Wednesday, it was reported that the tornado had damaged or toppled 148 houses and ravaged through farmlands.More than 240 villagers have been evacuated and the economic loss was primarily estimated at 5.12 million yuan (about $795,400).One seriously injured is under treatment, while the others only suffered minor injuries, local authorities said.

Car bomb blast hits military convoy, 2 civilians killed

"The blast occurred at around 10:10 a.m. local time along a busy road in Police District 4 when a convoy belongs to national intelligence agency's Special Operations Forces was passing by the area," spokesman Attahullah Khogiani told reporters via a text message.

Jalalabad (Afghanistan) | Agencies

Two Afghan civilians were killed and 10 others including one security personnel were wounded in a car bomb blast targeting a military convoy in Jalalabad city, capital of eastern province of Nangarhar on Wednesday, a local government spokesman confirmed.

"The blast occurred at around 10:10 a.m. local time along a busy road in Police District 4 when a convoy belongs to national intelligence agency's Special Operations Forces was passing by the area," spokesman Attahullah Khogiani told reporters via a text message.

The wounded were transported to a regional hospital in Jalalabad, he said, adding that the killed were passing by people including a rickshaw driver, the Xinhua news agency reported.No group has claimed responsibility for the attack yet.

While the United States and NATO troops have been leaving the country, violence in the country is on the rise.On Tuesday night, eight civilians were killed and 14 others wounded after sticky bombs attached to two public transport buses were detonated in the western part of national capital Kabul.

UNGA chief 'saddened' by India's reactions to his Kashmir statements

United Nations | Agencies

General Assembly President Volkan Bozkir is "saddeneda¿ by India's reaction to his statements on Kashmir, according to his Deputy Spokesperson Amy Quantrill, who has asserted that they were taken out of context.

She said at a news briefing on Tuesday, "The President was saddened to see a press statement from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, which portrays his remarks on Jammu and Kashmir from a selective perspective, while they are consistent with the longstanding UN position regarding this issue."

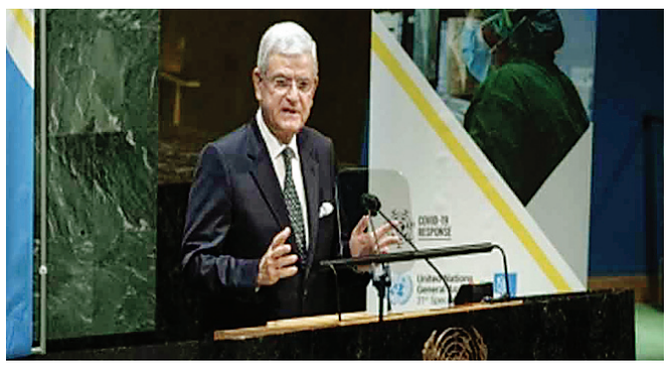
She added, "It is regrettable that the President's remarks were taken out of context."

Referring to Kashmir at a news conference in Islamabad last week, Bozkir said, "I think it is the duty, especially Pakistan's, to bring this to the United Nation platform more strongly."

Speaking with Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi at his side, Bozkir also endorsed Islamabad's attempts -- so far unsuccessful -- to link the Kashmir issue to the Palestine problem.

"As the minister mentioned, and also compared to two important things, I think the two problems are of the same age, Palestine and Jammu and Kashmir, and I fully agree that this is the case," he said.

He also said that the Kashmir issue does not have the "same enlarged



political wind behind it" like the Palestine cause.Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is one of only two leaders -- other than Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan -- to have raised the Kashmir issue in recent years in the 193-member UN General Assembly where Islamabad's attempts to bring it up have been rebuffed.

Bozkir, who is a former European Affairs Minister of Turkey, is by tradition expected to act independent of his country while the General Assembly president.

Reacting to Bozkir's statements, External Affairs Ministry Spokesperson Arindam Bagchi had said in a strongly worded statement, "When an incumbent President of the UN General Assembly makes misleading and prejudiced remarks, he does great disservice to the office he occupies. The President of the UN General Assembly's behaviour is truly regrettable and surely diminishes his standing on the global platform."

"We express our strong opposition to the unwarranted references made with respect to the Indian union territory of Jammu and Kashmir by the President of the United Nations General Assembly Volkan Bozkir during his recent visit to Pakistan," he said.Explaining Bozkir's position, Quantrill said, "During his joint press engagement with the Foreign Minister of Pakistan, the President also replied to questions from the press members regarding the procedural aspects of a possible consideration of this (Kashmir) issue in the UN General Assembly, while reiterating the UN position, which is governed by the UN Charter and applicable Security Council resolutions."One of the Security Council Resolution, No. 47 adopted on April 21, 1948, called for Pakistan's complete withdrawal from Kashmir.

Quantrill added, "President also recalled India and Pakistan's Simla Agreement of 1972, which states that the final status of Jammu and Kashmir is to be settled by peaceful means, in accordance with the UN Charter."

IRANIAN NAVY VESSEL CATCHES FIRE, SINKS IN GULF OF OMAN

Tehran: Iran's large navy ship Kharg caught fire and later sank Wednesday in the Gulf of Oman, the Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA) reported.Following the spread of the fire on the vessel, the crew safely disembarked, the report said, adding that efforts to save the ship failed, the Xinhua news agency reported.The support ship Kharg sank on Wednesday morning near the southern Iranian port of Jask on the Gulf of Oman near the Strait of Hormuz.The vessel has been used in training missions for more than four decades, said the report. It did not give details on the cause of the blaze.

T20 WORLD CUP: ICC GIVES INDIA A MONTH, EYES OPTIONS IN WEST ASIA

Dubai | Agencies

The International Cricket Council (ICC) Board has given India a month's time to show its readiness to host T20 World Cup in the country later this year. The governing body of cricket, however, confirmed that Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) will remain host of the tournament, to be held in October-November, even it is shifted outside India.

The ICC Board has also asked its management to begin planning the tournament in UAE and look for another venue in west Asia.

"The ICC Board has requested management [to] focus its planning efforts for the ICC Men's T20 World Cup 2021 on the event being staged in the UAE with the possibility of including another venue in the Middle East," the ICC said in a statement following a meeting of its Board on Tuesday.

"A final decision on the host country will be taken later this month. The Board also confirmed that the BCCI will remain hosts of the event regardless of where the event is played," the statement added.

The T20 World Cup is scheduled to take place immediately after the remainder of Indian Premier League (IPL) is completed in UAE in September-October. India is going through Covid-19 pandemic which had forced the suspension of IPL last month.

There is concern about the state of pitches for the T20 World Cup in UAE following 31 IPL matches. This is probably why ICC is eyeing another venue in the Gulf region.

The BCCI think-tank had earlier, on May 29, called a Special General Meeting and apprised its members that it will ask ICC for a month to decide if it can host the T20 World Cup in India.

Kohli, Shastri back different teams for different tours

Team Absolute | Mumbai

India captain Virat Kohli and coach Ravi Shastri on Wednesday backed sending different teams on different tours to reduce cricketers' physical and mental fatigue as well as expand the sport.

"With the kind of structure we are competing in, it is very difficult for the players to stay motivated and find the right kind of mental space for a long period. Being confined in one area, doing the [same] stuff day in and day out and dealing with high pressure situations," Kohli said at press conference on the eve of the team's departure to England. "This will definitely become a norm for the future where apart from the workload, mental health side will also come into the picture big time because you don't have an outlet at all in today's day and age." Kohli, 32, said these days there is hardly any time to relax. Coach Shastri too backed the idea of separate teams. "At the moment, it is happening because of the current situation -- restriction in travel and things of that sort. But you never know. In the future if you want to expand the game, especially in the shorter formats, then it could be the way to go," he said. "When you have to play five Tests in six weeks, it is no joke. Even the fittest will need a break. More than the physical part, it is the mental part. You can be destroyed mentally being asked to do the same thing day in and day out and then asked to perform. It is not easy to recover especially if you had a bad day," Shastri said. India will play five Test matches in 42 days against England in August-September.

Hockey rankings: Indian men placed 4th, women 9th

Lausanne (Switzerland) | Agencies

Indian men and women's hockey teams maintained their fourth and ninth position, respectively, in the latest International Hockey Federation (FIH) world rankings released on Wednesday.

Despite missing the European leg of the FIH Hockey Pro League series in Great Britain, Spain and Germany in April and May, the Indian men's team maintained its fourth spot. India have 2223.458 points in their kitty, better than the 2063.78 points collected in the 2020 season.

Belgium, the reigning world and European champions, with 2533.830 points lead the table, followed by the 2019 FIH Hockey Pro League winners, Australia, with 2496.978.

The Netherlands are placed third with 2301.044 points.

Germany with 2112.568 points have jumped to fifth place due to their recent performances in the FIH Pro League while Great Britain have also moved up a spot to the sixth position with 1976.092 points.

Argentina, the reigning Olympic champions, are seventh with 1923.420 points. New Zealand on 1672.689 points are eighth while Spain ninth on 1636.865 points. Canada with 1509.191 points are 10th.

In the women's category, India are ranked ninth with 1643.00 points. In the 2020 FIH World rankings, the Indian team had 1543.00 points. The Netherlands women's team is leading with 2772.084 points. Argentina, whose points tally is 2235.598 points, are second. Australia with 2117.490 points climbed to third position while Germany slipped to fourth position with 2115.185 points. Great Britain are ranked fifth with 2111.857 points.

In the bottom half of the table, New Zealand are placed sixth with 1916.268 points while Spain are seventh on 1902.126 points.

Ireland with 1683.086 points are at the eighth spot followed by India (1643.00 points) and China at the bottom with 1621.00 points.

1ST TEST VS ENGLAND: NEW ZEALAND 144/3 AT TEA

London: New Zealand were144 for three wickets at tea interval on the first day of the first Test against England at Lord's here on Wednesday. At the break, Devon Conway was batting on 71 off 131 balls and Henry Nicholls was on 10. Ollie Robinson dismissed opener Tom Latham (23, 57 balls) in the first session and experienced Ross Taylor (14). At lunch, New Zealand were 85 for one wicket. Earlier, New Zealand won the toss and elected to bat. New Zealand have won only one out of the 17 Tests they have played at Lord's in their 90-year history in England. Their lone victory came in 1999 under Stephen Fleming's captaincy. They have lost eight and drawn eight matches.

FRENCH OPEN

Zverev stretched on way to third round

Paris | Agencies

Sixth seed Alexander Zverev of Germany used all his energy to overcome Russian qualifier Roman Safiullin 7-6(4), 6-3, 7-6(1) to secure a spot in the French Open third round on Wednesday.

World No.6 Zverev, who recovered from two sets down against qualifier Oscar Otte of Germany on Sunday, took 60 minutes to win the nerve-wracking opening set against Safiullin. Zverev will next play Serbian Laslo Djere, who defeated compatriot Miomir Kecmanovic 4-6, 4-6, 6-3, 6-2, 6-3. Zverev was broken when serving for the set at 6-5, but got off to a strong start in the tie-break to win 7-6(4). This is the fifth time Zverev has progressed to the French Open third round, with his best showing coming in 2018 and 2019 when he reached the quarter-finals.

Djokovic will next face a Top-100 player from Uruguay, Pablo Cuevas, who advanced after a 6-3, 6-1, 6-3 victory against Frenchman Lucas Pouille. Djokovic, beaten by world No. 3 Rafael Nadal of Spain at the Roland Garros final last year, has now won his previous 16 first-round matches in Paris.

Ashleigh survives a scare; Venus ousted

Australian world No. 1 Ashleigh Barty survived a scare before overcoming 70th ranked Bernarda Pera of the USA 6-4, 3-6, 6-2 in the first round and extending her personal winning streak at French Open to eight.

Czech Republic's former world No. 2, Petra Kvitova, gave a walkover to Russia's Elena Vesnina before the second-round match due to an ankle injury, while Ekaterina Alexandrova, the world No. 32 from Russia, got the better of seven-time Grand Slam champion and former finalist Venus Williams 6-3, 6-1 in the opening round. Venus, the 2002 finalist, was competing in her 24th French Open.

ROOT EYES 5-0 SWEEP AGAINST INDIA TO BUILD CONFIDENCE FOR ASHES

London | Agencies

England captain Joe Root has said that 5-0 Test series sweep against India in August-September will be ideal preparation for Ashes that begins on December 8.

Root, who leads England in first Test against New Zealand at Lord's from Wednesday, said he is looking to win all seven Tests that England play this summer.

"There is going to be constant conversations about Australia throughout this summer," Root told British media ahead of first Test.

"There is no getting away from that. We have said for a long time now we are planning towards that series. As an English fan, as an English player it is such an iconic series and one that holds so much weight," he added.

England play two Tests against New Zealand before the five-Test series against India.

"You talk about readying a side -- winning seven Test matches before going to Australia is the best way of doing that, filling the side with confidence. Playing against the two best sides currently is a great opportunity for these players."

The 30-year-old No. 3 batsman, who started the 2021 calendar with Test scores of 228, 186 and 218 also spoke on the 'moment of silence' gesture ahead of first Test.

No pre-determined plan for India women batters

Team Absolute | Mumbai

India women cricket team's travel to England for their first Test in seven years will pit them in challenging conditions but the team is not going with a pre-determined plan.

Though this will be India women's first Test in seven years, many of the current squad members featured in India's last Test in 2014, also against England, at Wormsley.

Smriti Mandhana, Mithali Raj, Jhulan Goswami, Shikha Pandey, Punam Raut and Harmanpreet Kaur were in the Indian playing eleven in the 2014 Test and are also part of the current squad.

While the Test in 2014 was played in August, the latter part of English summer, when pitches tend to break after use during the season, the one-off Test in Bristol this time will be played from June 16, which is the early part of summer.

"I think there will be ball seaming around for batters and bowlers also. I think it is better when you land there [and decide]. Conditions in every part of England will be different," Powar had said while speaking to media ahead of departure.

"We will try and adjust to that. There are a lot things we will go there and assess. We will build on it (assessment). We can't go in with a fixed mindset that we might get sun out and get flat tracks or otherwise. You never know," he had added. There is one thing though that India women team batters are expected to do -- play close to the body.

Southampton pitch in WTC final will help spinners: Panesar

London: Pitch at Southampton will help spinners giving India edge over New Zealand in World Test Championship (WTC) final, said former England left-arm spinner Monty Panesar.

The WTC final will be played in Southampton between June 18 and 22.

"I think the Southampton wicket will help the spinners and also the fact that New Zealand players don't play spin very well [giving India edge]," Panesar told reporter.

Panesar, who had left everyone surprised by predicting a 5-0 win for India in five-Test series against England in August-September, now said that 5-0 won't happen.

Panesar had tweeted recently that pitches in England in August-September will help spin bowlers giving India advantage over England, who struggled to play spin in the recent 1-3 Test series defeat in India.

Asian Cup football qualifiers: India face champions Qatar

Doha | Agencies

Despite a far-from-ideal preparation, the Sunil Chhetri-led Indian football team begins its bid to qualify for the 2023 Asian Cup with a match against Asian champions Qatar on Thursday. Although it is a combined qualification tournament, combining the 2022 World Cup, India are out of contention for the game's biggest tournament.

India's other qualification matches are against Bangladesh on June 7 and Afghanistan on June 15.

There is a huge different in both the quality and rankings of the two teams. While Qatar are ranked 58th, India are 105th.

However, Indian players will draw inspiration from the last time they clashed with Qatar, in a World Cup qualifying match in 2019, at the same venue in Doha. It was a goalless draw, but the Indian team, minus an ailing Chhetri, put up a brave fight and won many hearts. It is considered one of the best results in India's recent football history.

Goalkeeper Gurpreet Singh Sandhu, who had captained India in Chhetri's absence in that match, says the two situations are not similar.

"The situation was different then. The situation is different now. We had headed into Doha after a longish camp [in 2019]. The tempo was exceptionally high despite the defeat against Oman in the previous match," he recalled.

"In the past few days in Doha, we have picked ourselves up besides getting ready for not just Qatar, but the two other matches which are to follow."

The Indian team landed in Doha on May 19 and began training two days later. A preparatory camp was to be held in Kolkata from May 2, but owing to the Corona pandemic, it was cancelled. The pandemic even robbed India of friendly matches in Dubai as well.

So, the fact that the Indian players haven't been able to train much outdoors due to the pandemic, could make things tough for India.

Defender Sandesh Jhingan has stressed the importance of preparatory sessions.

"Anyone who understands football knows the importance of a proper preparatory camp, and how important a friendly match is in preparation for a major tournament. Owing to the pandemic, we lost out on friendly matches in Dubai which isn't ideal," he had earlier rued.

Sandhu, however, tried to put up a brave front on Wednesday. "In the past few days in Doha we have picked ourselves up besides getting ready for not just Qatar, but the two other matches which are to follow," he underlined. There is a minor setback for India as midfielder Rowllin Borges suffered a hamstring injury during training and he remains doubtful for Thursday's match. There is no other injury concern for the other 23 players, who will be up for selection.

Chhetri said the team would draw inspiration from the drawn match in 2019.

Cabinet approves Model Tenancy Act for circulation to states/UTs

The Model Tenancy Act aims at creating a vibrant, sustainable and inclusive rental housing market in the country, and to enable creation of adequate rental housing stock for all the income groups, thereby addressing the issue of homelessness.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on Wednesday approved the 'Model Tenancy Act' for circulation to all states and Union Territories for adoption, by enacting fresh legislation or amending existing rental laws suitably. "It (the model act) will help overhaul the legal framework with respect to rental housing across the country, which would help spur its overall growth," an official statement said.The Model Tenancy Act aims at creating a vibrant, sustainable and inclusive rental housing market in the country, and to enable creation of adequate rental housing stock for all the income groups, thereby addressing the issue of homelessness.It is intended to enable institutionalisation of rental housing by gradually shifting it towards the formal market."The Model Tenancy Act will facilitate unlocking of vacant houses for rental housing purposes. It is expected to give a fillip to private participation in rental housing as a business model for addressing the huge housing shortage," the statement said.

GST WAS NOTIFIED WITH HORRENDOUS RATES OF TAX: CHIDAMBARAM

Congress leader P Chidambaram has slammed the union government for converting the GST to a bad law, saying it was notified with horrendous rates of tax. In a statement on Wednesday, Chidambaram said, "GST started as a good idea, BJP converted it into a bad law. It was notified with horrendous rates of tax."

Team Absolute | New Delhi

He said the law was applied as though tax-collecting officers were hounds hunting foxes and every businessperson was suspected to be a tax evader, the GST Council was reduced to a talking shop.

He also added that the GST Implementation Committee (consisting of officers) became the tail that wagged the dog and the FM treats the GoM as an extension of the NDA and its supporting parties. All FMs who express a contrary view are treated as errant schoolboys."

"And the idea of GST: RIP", he added.

Congress Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot and Bhupesh Baghel have slammed the Centre for not including members from Congress ruled states in the GoM.

Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel on Tuesday termed the non-inclusion of members of Congress-ruled states in the panel "against the spirit of cooperative federalism".

"The Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council has constituted an eight-member panel of ministers, which does not include any member from Congress-ruled states, for exemption from tax on essential goods related to Corona," he said, demanding ministers from Congress-ruled states, who are part of the GST Council, be included in the GoM constituted to discuss the GST rates on COVID relief material. "It is unfortunate not to include any members of Congress-ruled states and is against the spirit of cooperative federalism," Baghel said.

India's diamond exports are expected to shimmer past the $20 billion watermark this fiscal, with demand rebounding after the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.

For diamantaires, 20% growth past the $20 bn revenue watermark this fiscal

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Revenue from exports reached $16.4 billion last fiscal, marking a decline of 12 per cent -- well below the plunge expected when the world went into unprecedented lockdowns. But as nations recovered well in the second half, the tumble in exports was halted, an analysis of 70 diamantaires rated by CRISIL - accounting for a third of industry's total revenue - shows.

Towards the second half of the last fiscal, pent-up demand and stimuli had buoyed consumption of diamonds and jewellery in the US and China, which account for 75 per cent of India's polished diamond exports.

With the pandemic said to be contained in China, and the US inoculating 40 per cent of its population, consumer confidence has improved in both countries. Demand will also be bolstered by improving economic growth and declining unemployment. Additionally, restrictions on overseas travel and lower spending on hospitality mean celebrations are largely restricted to spending on gifting, including diamond jewellery. That augurs well for India's diamond exports. Says Rahul Guha, Director, CRISIL Ratings Ltd, "Exports have been rising, and averaging $2 billion per month since October 2020. To be sure, there will be some moderation in the second quarter of this fiscal, which is a lean period typically. But the festival season that begins in the export destinations from the third quarter will boost revenue to pre-pandemic levels. That will tantamount to a 20 per cent growth in diamond exports by revenue this fiscal."

The onset of the second wave saw smaller, labour-intensive polishing units facing 20-30 per cent labour migration. The larger ones restricted this to 10 per cent by following physical-distancing norms and providing safe transport to staff. The industry's current operating rate is over 80 per cent, with sufficient inventory to tide over any production loss in the first quarter of this fiscal. The pandemic has also improved the management of rough diamond inventory. Earlier, prices of roughs moved sharply versus polished diamonds, leading to stocking-up of the former. The pandemic then led to a correction in the inventory of roughs last fiscal, and this trend continues. Diamantaires now tend to purchase roughs when there is visibility in polished-diamond sales. The receivables-collection cycle has also been regularised from the second half of the last fiscal, leading to overall net current asset days declining to 150 from historical levels of 175. As a result, the debt of the CRISIL-rated diamantaires has declined 15 per cent.

Says Jumana Badshah, Associate Director, CRISIL Ratings Ltd, "The prices of both rough and polished diamonds are expected to be firm and move in tandem this fiscal, which would steady operating profitability at 5-6 per cent. Net profit margin will expand by 50 basis points to 2.5 per cent, supported by lower interest outgo. That, and stable capital structures, will support the credit profiles of CRISIL-rated diamantaires."

Medical stores witnessed a 32% transaction growth this year

Team Absolute | New Delhi

In a new report that shows the pulse of small and micro business across India, OkCredit has revealed that the latest surge in infections has not been as catastrophic for SMBs as last year. The primary reason for this moderate impact has been absence of a national lockdown this year as compared to a harsh lockdown in March 2020 which forced several businesses to shut down. This year however, states have taken a more relaxed approach towards lockdowns keeping the economy in mind. According to the study, medical stores witnessed a sharp 32 per cent transaction growth this year in comparison to an 18 per cent decline in the corresponding period of last year due to a sudden increase in demand for medical supplies and rapid adoption of digital bookkeeping applications by pharmacy stores. The data has been taken for last week of March 2021 up till May 2021.

Electronics, Fruits, vegetables and dairy were other categories to register a 5 per cent uptick each in transactions. The number of customers per merchant has actually increased indicating that more and more merchants are resorting to digital bookkeeping and enrolling customers when compared to the previous wave. At a lot of locations, state government gave prior notice before implementing the lockdown. This gave merchants time to prepare in advance by adding customers digitally. Kirana stores have seen 7 per cent increase in customers and so have fruit/vegetable dairy shops, mobile recharge stores and electronics stores. The increment in the number of customers per merchant in essential services, implies that a lot of customers might have stocked up goods prior to the lockdown announcement. Within the number of customers, the active customers has seen a drop of only 16 per cent vis-a-vis 40 per cent in 2020. Active customers in the case of groceries have increased by 6 per cent when compared to pre-covid period last year.

However, there is still a drop of 6 per cent when compared to February. There could be two reasons for this decline- for one, this might be because of many customers moving to online retail and second many grocery stores are finding it difficult to procure stocks.

"While the impact has not been as disastrous as last year, the fact remains that small and micro businesses are struggling. For some of them cashflows have been severely affected and for others customers have moved online. Besides, the scare of the virus has ensured that a lot of them remain shut", said Harsh Pokharna, Co-founder and CEO, OkCredit. During the 2020 lockdown, there was a 32 per cent decline in the number of transacting merchants, compared to just 9 per cent this year. Categories where this decline has been minimal are medical stores, kirana, hardware, electronics, repair services and Fruit/vegetable/ dairy.

SALE OF LARGE-SIZED HOMES IN JAN-MAR RISE IN INDIA: PROPEQUITY

New Delhi: Sale of large sized housing units (3 BHK and above) rose by 19 per cent across top seven cities in India in the first quarter of 2021 to 30,169 units, according to data from PropEquity.

During the same period last year a total of 25,307 large sized units were sold. The PropEquity report noted that many of the working population in India are now looking to get larger homes as 'work from home' (WFH) is still a recommended suggestion by the central and state governments to follow for corporates. The new supply or launches of housing units decreased by 30 per cent in the same period to 20,848 in Q1 2021 units from Q1 2020 at 29,836 units as developers were clearing earlier stock and resizing home offerings. Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad, Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR), National Capital Region (NCR) and Pune are the cities where home sales witnessed a growth in Q1 2021 versus Q1 2020 at 10 per cent, 43 per cent, 14 per cent, 54 per cent, 13 per cent and 34 per cent respectively. Only Kolkata witnessed a downfall of 12 per cent in home sales during the same period.

"This trend of looking to buy larger homes will continue in India as complete vaccination of the eligible Indian population is still some time away. There is also expectation of the third COVID wave, which effectively means that WFH is here to stay. We believe the the worst in terms of the latest COVID wave is behind us and normal real estate transaction will bounce back in a gradual manner," Samir Jasuja, founder and managing director at PropEquity said. Ankush Kaul, President (Sales & Marketing), Ambience Group: "Work from home culture is a new normal and also, it has added demand for larger homes. Post Covid and the first lockdown last year, people wanted larger homes as even schooling for their children from home needed a dedicated space along with working space for the parents. Many of the queries that received for several months now are for larger sized units, or to setup one room as home office, Kaul said, adding that this trend is likely to continue in 2021 as well.

Mumbai's data centre capacity to grow more than 2-fold by 2023

Mumbai's data centre capacity is likely to grow by more than two times its current capacity by 2023, according to a JLL report.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Mumbai with 199 MW IT load is the leading data centre hub of the country with nine internet cable landing and assured power supply, said the report titled '2020 India Data Center Market Update'. According to JLL, the capacity is likely to reach 529 MW by 2023.

"Mumbai is the most preferred destination for cloud players with a 60 per cent share of the occupied space due to its excellent infrastructure support. The state has provided various incentives for setting integrated data centre parks," said Karan Singh Sodi, Regional Managing Director - Mumbai, JLL India.

"The new supply additions in the city are backed by pre-commitment from cloud players. The city's strong demand is driven by BFSI, media and IT/ITes companies, leading to high occupancy levels of 95 per cent," he said.

According to Rachit Mohan, Head, Data Center Advisory (India), JLL, India's colocation data centre industry witnessed unprecedented absorption of 102 MW during 2020, notching higher absorption than most key markets of Europe and America.

"Fuelled by longer-term trends of rising cloud adoption, increasing digitalisation and progressive legislation, we anticipate increased demand for colocation space nationwide," Mohan said.

As the data centre landscape continues to evolve, the industry is expected to grow exponentially to reach 1,007 MW by 2023 from its existing capacity of 447 MW.

Mumbai and Chennai are expected to drive 73 per cent of the sector's total capacity addition during 2021-23, while other cities like Hyderabad and Delhi-NCR emerging as new hotspots.

Samantak Das, Chief Economist and Head of Research & REIS (India), JLL noted that India's data centre industry is expected to add 560 MW during 2021-23 leading to a real estate requirement of 6 million square feet.

The supply addition will be complemented by densification of racks and servers, sustainable energy sourcing and use of indigenous resources, he said, adding that rising demand is leading operators to pursue ambitious expansion plans, while some are adopting the acquisition route to enter Indian markets.

COVID, FUEL COST SEQUENTIALLY SLOWS AUTO SALES

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Covid's second wave, along with high fuel prices, dented the sequential growth of major automobile manufacturers in May.

Sales growth momentum slowed down from April to May but was faster on the year-on-year basis due to base effect. Last year, the pandemic-triggered national lockdown from late March 2020 had a massive impact on the sector. It was only on June 1, 2020, that the partial unlock measures were implemented.

Auto major Maruti Suzuki reported total sales of 46,555 units in May 2021. The auto major's total sales in the month included domestic sales of 33,771 units, sales to other OEMs 1,522 units and exports of 11,262 units. It had sold 159,691 vehicles during April 2021 and 18,539 units in 2019. "In May 2021, the Company shut production from 1 to 16 so as to divert oxygen from industrial use for medical purposes," Maruti Suzuki said. "In May 2020, the company witnessed production disruption owing to lockdowns. Since neither of the two months had normal production, the sales volume of May 2021 are not comparable with May 2020."

Hyundai Motor India also reported an exponential increase in its May cumulative sales. The company cumulatively sold 30,703 units in May 2021. It had reported an off-take of 12,583 units in May 2020. Last month, its cumulative sales stood at 59,203 units. Geography-wise, the domestic sales rose to 25,001 units from 6,883 units reported for the corresponding period of last year.

However, exports remained flat.The company shipped out 5,702 units in May, a marginal rise from 5,700 units sold abroad in the like month of 2020. Another auto giant, Mahindra & Mahindra's May overall auto sales rose to 17,447 units.

The total sales including passenger and commercial vehicles along with exports had stood at 9,560 units in May 2020. It sold a total of 40,403 units of its vehicles last month, both in the domestic and the international markets. In the utility vehicles segment, Mahindra sold 7,748 vehicles in May 2021, and in the passenger vehicles segment, it sold 8,004 vehicles. M&M's Automotive Division CEO Veejay Nakra said: "We are seeing a strong growth momentum for our entire product portfolio. The Thar is clocking robust bookings, despite extended waiting periods. XUV300 has been a tremendous success and continues to see strong demand. Our power brands (Scorpio and Bolero) continue to do well." "With the cases coming down and gradual opening up of markets, we foresee strong demand rebound. We are working closely with our supplier partners to manage supply chain issues and meet the market demand." Another auto giant, Tata Motors' domestic total sales for May rose to 24,552 vehicles sold, compared to an off-take of 4,418 units during the corresponding month of 2020. In April, the company's total domestic sales stood at 39,530 units.

"Tata Motors Limited sales in the domestic and international market for May 2021 stood at 26,661 vehicles," the company said in a statement. Furthermore, two- and three-wheeler manufacturer TVS Motor Company closed last month selling 166,889 units up from 58,906 units sold in May 2020. In a statement, the company said it sold 166,889 units (two-wheelers 154,416 units, three-wheelers 12,473 units) as against 58,906 units (two-wheelers 56,218 units, three-wheelers 2,688 units) sold in May 2020. Last month, the company shipped 114,674 units as against 17,707 units in May 2020. In terms of the two-wheeler segment, Hero MotoCorp reported total sales of 1,83,044 units from 1,12,68 units sold during the corresponding period of last year.The motorcycles and scooters manufacturer had sold 372,285 units in April 2021.In addition, Honda Motorcycle & Scooter India closed May 2021 with 58,168 unit sales. This includes 38,763 domestic dispatches and 19,405 two-wheeler exports. In April, Honda's total sales closed at 283,045 units, with 240,100 two-wheeler sales in domestic market. "May'21 witnessed further slowdown in sales momentum with close to 80 per cent of the network being non-operational due to local lockdowns. The situation on ground is very dynamic with weekly announcement of lockdown extensions," Honda Motorcycle & Scooter India's Director, Sales & Marketing, Yadvinder Singh Guleria said.

"We are closely monitoring the situation and with some relaxations in economic activities visible across towns as per new guidelines, we are optimistic on gradual resumption in our dealership operations caring safety and convenience of the customers. Moving forward, we shall be aligning our production to meet the market demand accordingly," he added. Acuite Ratings & Research's Chief Analytical Officer Suman Chowdhury said: "The sequential trajectory in auto sector sales is on a substantial decline in the face of the second Covid wave. Since a large number of states in India had imposed fairly strict lockdowns to contain the threatening rise in infections and mortalities, auto dealerships were either closed or partially operated during the month."

"Consequently, OEMs were not in a position to send fresh stocks to their dealers, leading to a severe drop in domestic despatches of both PVs and 2Ws."

Arjun Kapoor: Dibakar Banerjee has a 'mind that's unlike anyone else's'

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Arjun Kapoor on Wednesday thanked filmmaker Dibakar Banerjee for "all those torturous, tiring, exhausting, mentally consuming days" while filming their recent release "Sandeep AurPinkyFaraar". He says the film gave him "a chance to work with a mind that is unlike anyone else's".

The actor, who played a cop named PinkyDahiya in the film, posted a long note about his experience of working in the film.

"Pinky gave me a chance to challenge myself. Pinky gave me a chance to question my understanding of the beliefs prevalent in our country. Pinky gave me a chance to work with a mind that is unlike anyone else's.... Thank you #DibakarBanerjee for all those torturous, tiring, exhausting, mentally consuming days, without which there would be no Pinky and no redemption for an actor like me seeking to find new pastures so that I could take my craft to unchartered territories. Thank you for not trusting me too much and building this man from scratch. You have built Pinky with me, from within me, from all the hidden parts of me. That is what has made it all so much pure and so, so, so gratifying. Thank you," wrote Arjun, with folded hand emoji.

The film dropped digitally recently, after a theatrical release before pandemic shut down theatres all over India.

Sanjay Kapoor on Madhuri Dixit: Never felt I was working with a superstar

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The Madhuri Dixit-Sanjay Kapoor starrer "Raja" released 26 years ago on this day. Recalling memories of his first day at shoot with Madhuri, Sanjay said he never felt like he was working with a superstar.

The songs of the film became popular on release, and Sanjay recalled the shoot of the title song, "Kisi din banungi main raja ki rani, zaraphir se kehna" in Ooty. The song was filmed on Madhuri and him.

Sharing a video of the song on Instagram, the actor wrote: "26 years of Raja #timeflies, We started shooting for Raja with this song in Ooty, Zara phir se kehna was the first shot I gave, I cannot thank Madhuri enough for making me so comfortable on set never felt I was working with a super super-super STAR, Wat a super team we had @madhuridixitnene #pareshrawal #induirani #ashokthakeria #babaazmi #nadeemshravan #sameer #unforgettablememories."

The Indra Kumar directorial also featured PareshRawal, Mukesh Khanna, DalipTahil and Rita Bhaduri in key roles.

Sanjay is all set to reunite with Madhuri in the upcoming thriller series "Finding Anamika". The series also features ManavKaul. They were also seen together in the 1997 romantic drama "Mohabbat", co-starring Akshaye Khanna.

Shreya Ghoshal shares first photo of son Devyaan

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Playback singer Shreya Ghoshal took to Instagram on Wednesday to introduce her newborn son to the world. Shreya, who has named her son DevyaanMukhopadhyaya, also shared his first photograph.

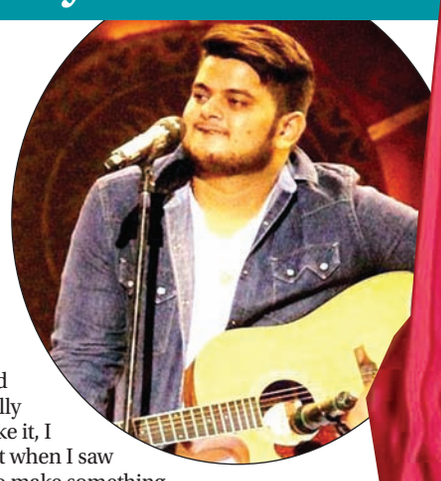
The singer shared the image on Instagram where she can be seen holding her son in her arms and staring at him while husband Shiladitya keeps his left hand below the child's head and smiles at him.

Alongside the photo, Shreya wrote: "Introducing -- 'DevyaanMukhopadhyaya'

"He arrived on 22nd May and changed our lives forever. In that first glimpse as he was born he filled our hearts with a kind of love only a mother & a father can feel for their child. Pure uncontrollable overwhelming love. It is still feeling like a dream. @shiladitya and me are so grateful for this beautiful gift of life."

On May 22, Shreya had shared the news of her son's birth via an Instagram post. The singer wrote: "God has blessed us with a precious baby boy this afternoon. It's an emotion never felt before. @shiladitya and I along with our families are absolutely overjoyed. Thank you for your countless blessings for our little bundle of joy."

Vishal Mishra: 'Teri hogaiyaan 2' is the quickest melody I have made



Team Absolute | Mumbai

Singer-composer Vishal Mishra says the track "Teri hogaiyaan 2", which he made for the ongoing web series "Broken But Beautiful 3", is the quickest song he has made. He says the visuals of the version of the track, which was originally used in the second season of the series, inspired him to make the track even better and faster. "This version of 'Teri hogaiyaan' is very special. When the older version came out, it had received much love and people were emotionally invested in it. When we wanted to make it, I was not sure what should be done, but when I saw visuals from the show it inspired me to make something that sounds like a different song -- where people are trying to express anxiety. This is the quickest melody I have made. We completed the entire song in two and a half hours. It's one of the most inspiring journeys I have had in a long time because I could feel the vulnerability of love. The song is close to my heart," says Vishal. Composed and sung by Vishal Mishra, and penned by Mishra and Kaushal Kishore, the song showcases the confession of love that Rumi (played by Sonia Rathee) makes for Agastya (Sidharth Shukla). The makers released the romantic track after launching three songs, "Terenaal", "Mere liye" and "Kya kiyahai tune". Produced by Ekta Kapoor, the third season of the show streams on ALT Balaji.

VIDYABALAN : IN 'SHERNI' I PLAY A WOMAN OF FEW WORDS BUT MANY DIMENSIONS

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The trailer of the VidyaBalan-starrer "Sherni" was unveiled on Wednesday. The actress says the film, which is slated to release on June 18, deals with a sensitive topic that touches upon respect, mutual understanding, and co-existence, not just between man-animal, but between humans as well. "Ever since I first heard the story of Sherni, I found the world fascinating and so far removed from my own. Also the character I play, Vidya, is a woman of few words but many dimensions," Vidya said. The film will see Vidya as an upright forest officer who battles social barrier set by the patriarchal society and lackadaisical attitudes within her department.

"The film deals with a sensitive topic that touches upon respect, mutual understanding, and co-existence, not just between man-animal, but between humans as well," the actress said.

"Sherni" is directed by Amit Masurkar, who earlier helmed "Newton" and "SulemaniKeeda". Speaking about working on this unconventional entertainer, Masurkar said: "'Sherni' is an intricately-layered story, exploring the complex issues of conflict between humankind and animals. VidyaBalan plays a mid-level forest officer who despite obstacles and pressures, works with her team and local allies to preserve a balance in the environment. "The film also features NeerajKabi, zVijay Raaz, SharatSaxena, MukulChadda, Brijendra Kala and IlaArun in supporting roles. The film is scheduled for a digital release on Amazon Prime Video.

INSTAGRAM PIC OF THE DAY

Hiba Nawab

Indian Idol: ZeenatAman calls PawandeepRajan 'Pahadi boy with the Guitar'

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Television show Indian Idol celebrated 50 years of evergreen Bollywood icon ZeenatAman. Honoring the veteran actress, all the contestants of the show made her feel special by singing songs from her movies.

Contestant PawandeepRajan dedicated two songs, Hum TumheChahate Hain Aise and EkAjnabeeHasina Se, to her.

Zeenat said, "I am aware that you play a lot of instruments. You're such a genius because I tried learning the piano once but got of the habit and now, because of you, I feel encouraged to start learning again."

She further added, "After my song ChuraLiya Hai Tumne came out, I was known as, 'The Girl with the Guitar' and soon, people will know you as, 'The Pahadi boy with the Guitar.' All my blessings are with you."

Talking about the compliments received, PawandeepRajan shares, "Being appreciated and acknowledged by such a huge icon is beyond words. I am so honored that Zeenat Ji loved my performance and gave me the title 'Pahadi boy with the guitar'. Her kind words have further motivated me to do better with every performance. It was a great feeling being in the same room and Zeenat Ji. Am eternally grateful for this occurrence."

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