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I am a Hindu but not Hindutvawadi;

NOT AFRAID OF ATTACK FROM HINDUTVAWADIS: RAHUL GANDHI

JAIPUR | Agencies

Addressing a mammoth gathering in Jaipur during the national rally organised to protest against the price rise and inflation, veteran Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Sunday fiercely attacked the central government's policies and said that he is a Hindu but not Hindutvawadi.

Elaborating the difference between the two, he said, "Two words cannot mean the same thing. Every word has a different meaning. In our country's politics today, the meaning of Hindu and Hindutva are the same. These are not the same thing, they are two different words and they mean completely different things. I am a Hindu but not a Hindutvawadi. Mahatma Gandhi was a Hindu and Nathuram Godse was a Hindutvawadi, he added.

"No matter whatever happens, Hindu seeks and spends his whole life in search of truth whereas Hindutva spends his whole life in search of power and getting empowered. He will kill anyone for the sake of power. The path of Hindu is 'Satyagraha' while the path of Hindutva is 'Sattagraha'."

Rahul Gandhi, who took on the BJP at the party's Jaipur rally on Sunday and labelled it "power hungry," while seeking to draw a distinction between



his Hinduism and its, said he would not be deterred by attacks on him.

Attacking the Modi government, Rahul Gandhi said that the entire country has been left in the hands of a few industrialists and the country is being run by "Hum Do, Hamare Do."

Rahul Gandhi further said that the government of the country says that no farmer has died during the agitation. "I gave them a list of five hundred people from Punjab and Haryana and asked them that the Punjab government has given compensation, you should also give it. But they didn't."

He also took a jibe at PM Modi for giving concessions to industrialists.

He said that the country belongs to the poor, farmers, small shopkeepers, only these people can give employment to this country. Adani-Ambani has a place but they cannot create jobs on a large scale. Small business people, farmers can generate large scale employment. Meanwhile, Rahul

Gandhi was unaware of the absence of Punjab CM Charanjit Channi from the rally. He kept calling his name but then Sonia Gandhi and Ashok Gehlot signalled him about Channi's absence.

Before Rahul, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra also addressed the gathering and attacked the policies of the central government and the BJP. She termed the central government as the government of lies, greed and loot. I know how roads are being built in Goa just for the sake of transportation of coals to benefit one industrialist, she said and termed Modi as Paryatak PM.

"Modiji travelled throughout the world but did not go to farmers who were protesting on the roads," she said adding that "the state in which I work spends crores of rupees on advertisement but does not spend on fertilisers for farmers." Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot also spoke on the occasion and said that all state governments are facing the challenge of financial crisis as the central government stays mum.

He said that Narendra Modi is one such PM who has not replied to a letter from the CM. "This government is being run with hubris," he added.

Tributes were paid to late CDS Bipin Rawat and other soldiers who died in a chopper crash on December 8.

ICMR develops testing kit to detect Omicron in 2 hrs

New Delhi: The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has developed a testing kit which can detect the new Omicron Covid-19 variant within two hours. The kit has been designed by a team of ICMR scientists from the Regional Medical Research Centre (RMRC) for the Northeast region led by scientist Dr Biswajyoti Borkakoty. "ICMR-RMRC, Dibrugarh, has designed and developed a hydrolysis probe-based real-time RT-PCR assay for detection of the new Omicron variant (B.1.1.529) SARS-CoV-2 that can detect the new variant within two hours. This is important because as of now a minimum of 36 hours is required for targeted sequencing and 4 to 5 days for whole-genome sequencing to detect the variant," said Dr Borkakoty.

Generally, it takes three to four days to detect the Omicron variant in infected people. The kit is now being produced on a bulk basis by the West Bengal-based GCC Biotech on a public-private partnership (PPP) model. ICMR case detected in Delhi on Saturday, overall tally of persons infected by the variant has climbed to 33 in India.

India has won direct wars with Pak, will also win indirect one: Rajnath

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Sunday said that India has won direct wars with Pakistan and will also win indirect one as well.

Singh was speaking after inaugurating 'Swarnim Vijay Parv' celebration at India Gate on 50 years of India's 1971 war.

Singh said, "After the defeat in 1971, Pakistan is continuously fighting a proxy war. Pakistan wants to disrupt peace in India by promoting terrorism and other anti-India activities. The Indian forces foiled their plans in 1971 and work to eliminate terrorism from its root is underway. We have won in a direct war and the victory will be ours in an indirect war as well," he added.

Talking about strong anti-India sentiment of Pakistan, Singh said, "The anti-India feeling in Pakistan can be seen from the fact that they name their missiles after invaders who attacked India - Ghori, Ghaznavi, Abdali, whereas India's missiles are named Akash, Prithvi, Agni. Now one of our missiles has also been named Sant". Singh congratulated Defence Research & Development Organisation (DRDO) for the successful flight test of indigenously designed and developed helicopter-launcher Stand-off Anti-tank (SANT) Missile on December 11.

The Defence Minister termed the 1971 war as among the most decisive after two World Wars. "This war tells us that the partition of India on the basis of religion was a historic mistake. Pakistan was born in the name of one religion but it could not remain one," he added. Singh mentioned that the 1971 war is a classic example of India's morality and democratic traditions. "It will be rarely seen in history that after defeating another country in a



war, a country does not impose its dominance, but hands over power to its political representative. India did this, because it is a part of our culture. India has never invaded any country, nor has it ever captured an inch of land of any other country," he said.

The Defence Minister recalled India's contribution in the establishment of democracy in Bangladesh and appreciated the fact that it has progressed rapidly on the path of development in the last 50 years, which is an inspiration for the world. Singh said that the atrocities on the people of then East Pakistan were a threat to the entire humanity and it was India's responsibility to liberate them of that injustice and exploitation. He paid rich tributes to the brave Indian soldiers, sailors and air warriors and their families who ensured the victory in the 1971 war, and said that the country will always be indebted to their sacrifice. Remembering general Bipin Rawat, India's first Chief of Defence Staff, Singh said that in the untimely death of General Rawat, India has lost a brave soldier, an able advisor and a lively person. The event will also mark the culmination of the year-long journey of the Victory Flame, the Swarnim Vijay Mashal which, having traversed the length and breadth of the country and collected soil samples from the villages of the gallant soldiers of the war, will converge in New Delhi on December 16, 2021 in a grand ceremony.

India is most pro-vaccine nation

Team Absolute | New Delhi

India is the most pro-vaccine country in the world with more than 98 per cent of the country's eligible population showing willingness to get inoculated against the deadly Coronavirus, as per the findings of the IANS-CVoter Covid Vaccine Tracker.

Mirroring the high acceptance levels of vaccination shown in CVoter Covid Vaccine Tracker, more than 89 lakh vaccines were administered in past 24 hours, as per the data released by Health Ministry. India's cumulative Covid-19 vaccination coverage (Dose 1+ Dose 2) has now exceeded 133 crore. Of the 90 crore adult population of the country, more than 81 crore people have got their Dose 1 of the Covid-19 vaccine. According to the findings of the IANS-CVoter Covid Vaccine Tracker, of the remaining 9



crore unvaccinated, 7.5 crore want to their job to get protection against the lethal virus. Only 1.5 crore people have shown either unwillingness or hesitancy to get their job. The tracker also found that even those who had shown unwillingness or hesitancy to get vaccinated were not rigid against taking the jab. They had their reasons for not getting vaccine and a session or two of counselling by the health personnel may easily convince them to get vaccinated. As per the vac-

ination data released by Health Ministry, India is administering around 60-70 lakh Covid-19 vaccine doses every day. With this speed of vaccination, India will be able to vaccinate whole of its adult population with first dose by the end of this month.

In the vaccination drive, the entire population may not be counted, as the eligible population is only above 18 years. Compared to India, vaccine hesitancy is much higher in European countries and US.

VARUN GANDHI TO BRING PRIVATE MEMBER BILL SEEKING LAW ON MSP

▶ **BJP LOK SABHA MEMBER VARUN GANDHI WILL BRING A PRIVATE MEMBER BILL SEEKING LEGAL GUARANTEE FOR MINIMUM SUPPORT PRICE (MSP).**

▶ **VARUN GANDHI, LOK SABHA MEMBER FROM PILIBHIT, ON SUNDAY SAID THAT THE TIME HAS COME FOR A LAW ON MSP.**

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Sharing the details of his private member bill on Twitter, Gandhi said, "India's farmers and her governments have long debated the agricultural crisis, in and out of commissions. The time has come for an MSP law. I've created and submitted to parliament what I believe to be an actionable piece of legislation. I welcome any critique of it."

Varun Gandhi's private member bill envisages guaranteed realisation of MSP for 22 agricultural commodities grown extensively in India with an annual financial outlay of Rs one lakh crore and the list of agricultural commodities shall remain open for inclusions as needed.

The bill said that the MSP is set at a profit margin of 50 per cent over the comprehensive cost of production, which includes actual paid expenses on inputs, value of unpaid family labour, and foregone rentals on farmland and fixed agricultural assets, as



recommended by the Swaminathan Committee (2006). "Any farmer realising a price less than the above declared MSP price shall be entitled to compensation equal to the difference in value between price realised and the guaranteed MSP," it said.

It provides for codification of various crops based on quality parameters, thereby ensuring that the farmers do not have to resort to distress sales if crops do not meet pre-defined quality criterion.

In addition, provision of agricultural credit in lieu of crop storage shall provide additional working capital for next harvesting season, further minimising distress sales. "Farmers will be guaranteed of realising MSP for their crops with timely payments. Payments shall be made directly to the bank account in two days from the transaction date (by the purchasing party). In case, MSP price is not realised, Govt to pay the difference in value between sale price and MSP within a week from matter is being reported," it said.

The bill encourages crop diversification and recommends the most suited crop to be cultivated for each sub-district, thereby reducing environmental cost for agriculture (particularly with respect to groundwater) and promoting cropping patterns suitable for long-term ecological sustainability.

"Price announcements to be made two months before the start of the harvest season to help farmers plan their sowing in advance," the bill said.

The bill suggests that a separate Department under the Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare shall be created for implementation of the said law. The Department is headed by a separate decision making body consisting of farmer representatives, public officials, and experts in agricultural policy.

Terrorist killed in Kashmir encounter after refusing to surrender



Srinagar: A terrorist was shot dead in Jammu and Kashmir's Pulwama district on Sunday after he refused to surrender and fired upon the security forces, triggering the encounter, police said.

Police said based on a specific input generated by police regarding presence of a terrorist in village Bargam in Awantipora area of the district, a joint cordon and search operation was launched by the police, army's 42 RR and the CRPF's 130 Bn. During the search operation, the presence of the trapped terrorist was ascertained, and he was given ample opportunities to surrender. However, he denied the surrender opportunities and fired indiscriminately upon the joint search party which was retaliated, leading to an encounter," police said. The trapped terrorist was killed and his body was retrieved from the site of encounter. He has been identified as Sameer Ahmad Tantray, resident of Bargam Awantipora. As per police records, the killed terrorist was a categorised terrorist linked with proscribed terror outfit JeM and was part of groups involved in several terror crime cases.

NH 334B set to be completed by January 2022: Nitin Gadkari

Union Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari on Sunday said the National Highway 334B, which starts at Baghat near the UP-Haryana border and ends at Haryana's Rohna is set to be completed by next month (January 2022).

Team Absolute | New Delhi

NH-334B is nearing completion with 93% progress and is targeted for an early completion by 3 months in January 2022," he wrote on Twitter.

NH-334B, which is a spur road of National Highway 34 and traverses Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, is expected to provide seamless connectivity from UP to Rajasthan via Haryana, ensuring users can bypass Delhi traffic.

Noting that the national highways are growing at unprecedented pace under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, he said that the NH-334B also crosses NH-44 providing direct access to commuters between Chandigarh and Delhi.

The distance between Chandigarh and Delhi is approximately 245 Km and the road journey takes around 5-6 hours, but the new highway is also expected to shorten this time.

As the rigorous development of highways also lead to the deforestation in the specified area, Gadakri, recently in a written reply in Rajya Sabha, informed that the government is compensating the loss by planting trees.

Development of National Highways involves cutting of trees in the Right of Way acquired by the Ministry. It is, however, ensured that bare minimum tree felling is carried out for widening of existing National Highways," he said, adding, "to compensate the ecological loss, median and road side plantation is being carried out either by the contractor as a scope of



agreement or through Forest Department as deposit work". A total of 55.10 lakh plants have been planted in 94 projects, completed by March 2021. In addition, plantation jobs are also being carried out by private agencies and NGOs through competitive bidding, apart from the compensatory afforestation carried out by the Forest Department for statutory compliance under FCA 1980 and local laws.

Allahabad HC notice to UP Dy CM Keshav Prasad Maurya in land grab case

Prayagraj: The Allahabad High Court has issued a notice to Keshav Prasad Maurya, Deputy Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, asking him to file a reply in response to the allegations levelled against him in a dispute regarding alleged efforts to grab a house.

In the writ petition filed by one Vishnu Murti Tripathi of Prayagraj, serious allegations of malafide have been made against Maurya, who has been made a respondent (opposite party) number six. While posting the matter for January 10, 2022 for the next hearing, a division bench comprising Justice Manoj Kumar Gupta and Justice Om Prakash Tripathi have also directed the state government to file its reply in response to the averments made in the writ petition. According to the case file, there is a dispute regarding possession of a house in Kalindipuram Awasth Vojna at Prayagraj between the petitioner and a private respondent.

In the writ petition, Vishnu Murti Tripathi of Prayagraj has alleged that with Maurya's support the private respondent was trying to grab the house of the petitioner.

Earlier on October 6, 2021, the court after hearing both sides had observed, "The grievance urged in the instant petition is that the petitioner, who owns House No. G1 456 EWS, Basera Kalindipuram Awasth Vojna, Prayagraj, was dispossessed there from on June 6, 2018 by the intervention of the state machinery. In support of the said contention, reliance has been placed on a communication sent by respondent Keshav Prasad Maurya, the deputy chief minister of UP, to senior superintendent of police (SSP), Prayagraj dated March 14, 2018 wherein it is mentioned that private respondent had requested for possession of the house being delivered on basis of certain enquiry report and the senior superintendent of police was directed to take necessary steps and inform him accordingly." The court added, "It has further been alleged that with oblique motives, the petitioner was thereafter implicated in a false case by lodging a first information report (FIR) against him. The petitioner is alleged to have made complaints in this respect to various authorities but no heed was paid to the same and hence, the instant petition has been filed."



GOVT TO LAUNCH NATIONAL HELPLINE AGAINST ATROCITIES ON SCS/STS

Team Absolute | New Delhi

With an objective to build informed awareness about the provisions of the law that are aimed at ending discrimination and provide protection to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), the government will launch a National Helpline Against Atrocities (NHAA) on Monday. The helpline will be launched by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment with an aim to ensure proper implementation of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) (PoA) Act, 1989 which was enacted with a view to, inter-alia, preventing atrocities on members of SCs and STs.

The ministry said that the NHAA will be available round the clock on toll-free number 14566 across the country. It can be accessed by making a voice call /VOIP either from a mobile or landline number of any



telecom operator across the country. This service will be available in Hindi, English and regional language of the State/UTs. Its mobile

application will also be available. The system will ensure that every complaint is registered as an FIR, relief is provided, all registered complaints are investigated and all chargesheets filed and prosecuted in the Courts for decision all within the given timelines in the Act. Available as a web based self-service portal also, the NHAA will generate awareness about the Protection of Civil Right (PCR) Act, 1955 and its rules as well. "A docket number shall be given for each complaint received from Victim/Complainant/NGOs regarding non-compliance of the POA Act, 1989 and the PCR Act, 1955. The status of the grievance can be tracked by complainant/NGOs online.

"Any inquiry shall be replied by IVR or operators in Hindi, English and regional languages. This helpline will adopt the concept of single point of contact and have a proper feedback system," the ministry added.

Don't trust CBI 'selectively,' Union Minister urges states

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Union Minister of State for Personnel, Dr Jitendra Singh, on Sunday said that the Narendra Modi government is committed to uphold, preserve and strengthen the independence and autonomy of the CBI and all other investigating institutions.

Presiding over the Investiture Ceremony for recipients of the police medal for meritorious services at the CBI headquarters, he said that zero tolerance for corruption, transparency, and citizen-centricity are the "three main mantras" that determine the government's administrative outlook. Years, he said, citing the setting up of a Special Investigation Team to unearth black money and necessary amendments being made in the



Prevention of Corruption Act. Noting that a few states are giving selective cases to the CBI, he said: "These state governments have to come clear and state whether they trust the CBI or not, or whether they trust CBI selectively as they continue to give selective consent in cases which suit them," said Dr Singh. He called on these State governments to rethink on the decision of withdrawal of general consent to CBI to investigate cases. Felicitating the awardees, he said that he hopes that the officials will discharge their duties for the

service of the nation. In his remarks on the occasion, CBI Director Subodh Kumar Jaiswal, congratulating all the CBI awardees, reiterated the agency's unflinching commitment to work towards the national goal of zero tolerance of corruption. He said that the CBI has over the years evolved into a multidisciplinary premier investigating agency of the country inducting professionals from different fields, and is trusted by courts, governments and people at large. "For every serious crime, there is always a clamour for CBI investigation. The success of the CBI is exemplified by the fact that the CBI has, over the years, been able to achieve nearly 70 per cent conviction rate despite of the fact that the accused are able to get best of legal support," he said.

JOIN HANDS TO DETHRONE BJP, BAGHEL URGES OPPOSITION

Jaipur: Amid debate on opposition unity with Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress charting its own course and not willing to accept a prime position for the Congress, Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel on Sunday urged the opposition parties to join hands to dethrone the BJP government. Addressing the Congress rally in Jaipur, he said that in a democracy, no one is more powerful than the people and opposition should join hands to overthrow the BJP. "People voted against inflation in the by-elections, and on the very next day the Modi government reduced the prices of petrol and diesel." He said that in the five states where elections are being held, if the people defeat the BJP, then the price of diesel and petrol will come down to the level of the time of the UPA government. "If inflation has to be brought down, then BJP will have to be defeated," he said. He also made a veiled attack on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Union Minister Amit Shah and top businessmen. Baghel said that Congress leader Rahul Gandhi had repeatedly warned the government regarding demonetisation, GST, and coronavirus and also stressed that the government will be forced to take back the three farm laws. "The law had to be withdrawn after 14 months. This is the power of farmers and of Rahul Gandhi," he said.



RAHUL GANDHI TO KICK-START UP CAMPAIGN FROM AMETHI

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Former Congress president Rahul Gandhi will kick-start campaign for UP assembly polls from his former Lok Sabha seat, Amethi. The date has not been finalized yet but it is said that Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra will be in Amethi and Rai Bareilly on December 17 and 18. The Congress, which is weak at its own turf after lone Congress MLA Aditi Singh left to join BJP, has no legislative assembly member in both Lok Sabha seats as both the MLAs elected on Congress ticket in Rai Bareilly have shifted to the BJP.

The party is thinking of a good show in the assembly polls to retain the seats and increase its number in the next elections. Union Minister Smriti Irani, who



had defeated Rahul Gandhi in Amethi in 2019, has also been working in Rae Bareilly to widen the party base. Of the total ten Assembly seats in two Lok Sabha constituencies - Amethi and Rae Bareilly, six are already with the BJP.

Two Congress legislators from Rae Bareilly - Aditi Singh and Rakesh Singh - have switched over to the BJP, and so has Congress MLC Dinesh Pratap Singh from Rae

Bareilly. Aditi Singh had revolted against the Congress last year when she defied the party's whip and attended a special one-day session of the UP Assembly. Ever since, she has been critical of the Congress leadership and has been praising the BJP. Her joining the BJP was expected since the past several months. The BJP has also won the control of Zila Panchayats in the two dis-

tricts. In Rae Bareilly, Irani replaced Sonia Gandhi as chairperson of District Development Coordination and Monitoring Committee, in July. Sonia Gandhi's prolonged absence from her constituency, mainly due to her health issues, has dampened the morale of Congress workers there. The desertion of some senior leaders, including two sitting MLAs, has damaged the party in the region that was once a Congress bastion. Priyanka Gandhi, who oversees Rae Bareilly and Amethi, has also not been able to devote much time to the two constituencies due to her preoccupation with state level issues. The BJP, on the other hand, has deployed a well-oiled machinery to widen its reach. The Congress does not have a single MLA in Rae Bareilly and Amethi.

Compulsory Covid vaccination comes into effect in Puducherry

Puducherry | Agencies

Compulsory vaccination against Covid-19 has become mandatory in Puducherry from Sunday. Lt Governor Tamilsai Soundararajan said. Addressing reporters, he said that she was keen that Puducherry emerge as a fully vaccinated Union Territory. She called upon the people to carry the vaccination certificate with them at all times as there would be surprise check. Visiting the Viliannoor Primary Health Centre for a direct check on the vaccination drive, Soundararajan was full of praise for the health staff who were implanting vaccination even on Sundays. The Puducherry administration had issued a statement that vaccina-

tion was mandatory in the Union Territory and those who evade it would be penalised under the public health act. Soundararajan, who is also a medical doctor, said that people must never shy away from vaccination as it was intended to protect them from contracting the Covid-19 virus and now a new variant of the virus - Omicron - has emerged. She said that vaccination was the only known prevention from the pandemic and requested the people to make use of the facilities for vaccination. Senior Health Department officials including its Secretary, Udhayakumar, and Director of Health G. Sriramalu were also present.

Ambedkar statue vandalised at Salem, highway blocked by protesters

Chennai | Agencies

People, under the banner of several Dalit organisations, blocked at the Salem-Bengaluru national highway on Sunday after a statue of Dr B.R. Ambedkar was found vandalised in Omalur town of Tamil Nadu's Salem district.

The statue was found with the right hand missing on Sunday morning and the police suspect the incident to have taken place on Saturday night.

Several Dalit outfits, including the VCK, blocked the road in protest to vandalism of the statue of the Father of the Constitution.

A strong police contingent reached the spot and held discussions with the leaders and registered a case. After that, the protesters dispersed. Police are on high alert in the area as recently in Myladuthurai, there was stone pelting when VCK activists erected a



three feet tall portrait of Ambedkar on his 65th death anniversary at Pattavarthi village which is predominantly having presence of Thevar community.

There was a spate of beheadings in south Tamil Nadu during September in a span of two days, with both Thevars and Dalits targeting each other over minor disputes.

Police are on high alert whenever minor incidents occur affecting Thevars and Dalits and here also a huge police deployed to prevent any untoward incident.

Boost for SP as eastern UP's Tiwari clan joins party

Lucknow | Agencies

The Samajwadi Party got a major boost on Sunday when three BSP leaders - Vinay Shankar Tiwari, Kushal Tiwari and Ganesh Shankar Pandey joined the party in presence of party president Akhilesh Yadav.

Vinay Shankar Tiwari, MLA, and Kushal Tiwari, former MP, are sons of former minister Hari Shankar Tiwari who is an erstwhile mafia don and one of the tallest Brahmin leaders of eastern Uttar Pradesh. Ganesh Shankar Pandey is the nephew of Hari Shankar Tiwari and also the former chairperson of the UP Legislative Council.

With their joining the Samajwadi Party, Akhilesh Yadav is bound to benefit



from Brahmin support - more so, since the Thakur-Brahmin hostilities are more pronounced in the region.

Meanwhile, BJP MLA from Sant Kabir Nagar, Digvijay Narain Chaubey also joined the SP on Sunday.

Welcoming the leaders into his party, Akhilesh said

that there was no stopping the Samajwadis from forming government now.

"People have seen through the lies being spoken by the ruling party and they stand completely exposed. The joining of these leaders will further strengthen the party and also prove that people have faith in us," he said.

India reports 7,774 fresh Covid cases, 306 deaths in a day

Team Absolute | New Delhi

India on Saturday reported 7,774 fresh Covid cases in the last 24 hours. In the same time span, a total of 306 deaths have also been reported across the country, said the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare on Sunday. With 306 new deaths, the total death toll has climbed to 4,75,434 so far. The recovery of 8,464 patients in the last 24 hours has increased the cumulative tally of recoveries to 3,41,22,795. Consequently, India's recovery rate stands at 98.36 per cent, the highest since March 2020. India's active caseload presently stands at 92,281, which is the lowest in 560 days. Active cases constitute 0.27 per cent of the country's total positive cases, which is the lowest since March 2020.



Also in the same period, a total of 11,89,459 tests were conducted across the country. India has so far conducted over 65.58 crore Covid tests. Meanwhile, the weekly positivity rate at 0.70 per cent has remained less than 1 per cent for the last 28 days now. The daily positivity rate stands at 0.65 per cent, which has also remained below 2 per cent for the last 69 days and less than 3 per cent for 104 consecutive days

now. With the administration of 89,56,784 vaccine doses in a day, India's Covid inoculation coverage has reached 132.93 crore as of Sunday morning. This has been achieved through 1,38,52,959 sessions. More than 17.93 crore balance and unutilized Covid vaccine doses are still available with the states and UTs to be administered, according to the health ministry as of Sunday morning.

MODI TO INAUGURATE KASHI VISHWANATH DHAM ON MONDAY

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday will inaugurate the first phase of 'Kashi Vishwanath Dham' corridor constructed at a cost of around Rs 339 crore on Monday. Appealing to people to join the programme, Modi on Sunday tweeted: "Tomorrow, 13th December is a landmark day. At a special programme in Kashi, the Shri Kashi Vishwanath Dham project will be inaugurated. This will add to Kashi's spiritual vibrancy. I would urge you all to join tomorrow's programme." Modi will reach Varanasi on a two-day visit on December 13. He will visit Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple to offer prayers and after which he will inaugurate phase 1 of Shri Kashi Vishwanath Dham. In a statement, the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) said it was the vision of the Prime Minister for a long time, to facilitate the pilgrims and devotees of Baba Vishwanath, who had to encounter congested streets and surroundings with poor upkeep, when they practiced the

age-old custom of taking dip in the holy river, collecting Gangajal and offering it at the temple. "To realise this vision, Shri Kashi Vishwanath Dham was conceptualised as a project to create an easily accessible pathway to connect Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple to the banks of the River Ganga. To kickstart the work for this pious endeavour, the foundation stone of the project was laid by the Prime Minister on March 8, 2019," the PMO said. The PMO pointed out that the Prime Minister took a keen and active interest at all stages of the project. Regular briefings, reviews and monitoring was done by the Prime Minister himself, and he constantly gave inputs and insights to improve the project and make it more accessible for pilgrims, including for the disabled. The project was designed to provide easy access for the disabled and old age people with provision of ramps, escalators, and other modern facilities. As per the PMO, a total of 23 buildings will be inaugurated in the phase 1 of the project. They will provide a variety of facilities to the pilgrims

visiting Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple, including Yatri Suvaidha Kendras, Tourist Facilitation Centre, Vedic Kendra, Mumukshu Bhavan, Bhogshala, City Museum, Viewing Gallery, Food Court, among others. "The project involved purchase and acquisitions of more than 300 properties around Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple. The Prime Minister's vision to take everyone along was the principle based on which mutual negotiations were done for these acquisitions. In this endeavour, the rehabilitation of around 1,400 shopkeepers, tenants and homeowners were done amicably," the PMO said. It claimed that the testimony of the success is the fact that there is no litigation pending in any court of the country regarding acquisitions or rehabilitation related to the development of the project. "Prime Minister's vision was also to ensure that all heritage structures be preserved during the course of development of the project. This foresight came handy when, during the process of

destruction of the old properties, more than 40 ancient temples were rediscovered. These temples have been restored and beautified, while ensuring that there is no change in the original structure," the statement said. The scale of the project was such that the project is now spread over a massive area of about 5 lakh square feet, whereas earlier premises were limited to just around 3,000 square feet. Despite the Covid pandemic, the work on the project has been completed as per the planned schedule. During the visit to Varanasi, the Prime Minister will also visit Kaal Bhairav Temple on Monday afternoon and witness Ganga Aarti while on board a Ro-Ro Vessel in the evening. On December 14 at around 3.30 p.m., the Prime Minister will attend the 98th anniversary celebrations of Sadguru Sadafaldeo Vihangam Yog Mahamandir in Varanasi. The conclave will provide an opportunity to share governance related best practices and is in line with the Prime Minister's vision of furthering team India spirit.



CDS CHOPPER CRASH: NAIK JITENDER KUMAR CREMATED IN MP

Team Absolute | Bhopal

The last rites of Naik Jitender Kumar, who was killed in the tragic December 8 Indian Air Force (IAF) Mi-17 helicopter crash in Tamil Nadu along with India's first Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), Gen Bipin Rawat and 11 others, were performed on Sunday at his village in Madhya Pradesh's Sehore district.

A large number of people had gathered to pay homage to the fallen soldier, who was one of the security personnel of Gen Rawat.

The ill-fated helicopter crashed near Coonoor in Tamil Nadu, killing the CDS, his wife Madhulika Rawat and 11 others including Naik Jitender Kumar.

Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan who arrived in Dhamanda village to pay homage to the martyr announced an assistance of Rs 1 crore to his family.

The Chief Minister also said that Kumar's wife Sunita Verma would be given a government job, adding the state government would provide education to his children -- one daughter and a son, free of cost.

"Naik Jitender Kumar's wife Sunita Verma will be given a government job and a school will be named after the martyr's name and also a memorial of the martyr will be built," Chouhan said after paying homage to Kumar on Sunday. Earlier on Sunday, wrapped in a Tri-colour, Kumar's mortal remains were received at Raja Bhoj airport in Madhya Pradesh capital Bhopal with



full military honours. A Guard of Honour was also given before his body was taken to Dhamanda village.

Earlier in the morning, the mortal remains of Naik Jitender Kumar, who was among those killed in CDS chopper crash in Tamil Nadu, were received at Bhopal's Raja Bhoj airport at 11.30 a.m. on Sunday. Kumar was with CDS General Bipin Rawat, his wife and 11 others in the chopper that crashed near Coonoor on December 8.

Wrapped in tri-colour, Kumar's mortal remains were received at Raja Bhoj airport in the state capital Bhopal in full military honours. A guard of honour was also presented to him.

The body was then carried in a special vehicle to Sehore district, around 60 km away. The funeral will take place later in the evening on Sunday. Chief

Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan along with other senior ministers will visit Kumar's family and pay homage to the departed soul.

Family members of Naik Kumar and people of his village - Dhamanda have been waiting to receive the mortal remains for the last 5 days after the Mi-17 V5 chopper crashed that led to the demise of India's first CDS Gen Bipin Rawat, his wife Madhulika Rawat, Brig L.S. Lidder and others on December 8 in Tamil Nadu's Coonoor area.

Naik Jitender Kumar was one of the security staff of General Rawat.

Lance Naik Jitender Kumar served in the Desert Sector along the Indo-Pak border, on the India-China border near Pithoragarh, and in J&K. He was expert in sniper and specialist in communications.

CM Shivraj Singh Chouhan paid tributes by reaching Late Verma's home town

- ▶ SAMMAN NIDHI OF ONE CRORE TO THE FAMILY OF MARTYR JITENDRA KUMAR VERMA
- ▶ GOVERNMENT JOB TO A FAMILY MEMBER
- ▶ A MEMORIAL WILL BE BUILT TO KEEP THE MARTYR'S MEMORIES INTACT
- ▶ VILLAGE SCHOOL WILL BE NAMED AFTER MARTYR JITENDRA VERMA

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Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan reached Dhamanda, the home village of late hero Jitendra Kumar Verma of Sehore district and expressed condolences and shouldered the body of martyr Verma. Chouhan also saluted in honour of the martyr by laying a wreath on the mortal remains. People's representatives and villagers, including Chief Minister paid homage to martyr Jitendra with moist eyes.

Chouhan said that martyr Jitendra Verma was a brave son of Mother India, who was the best sniper who could exterminate the enemy by aiming even in the dark. Entire Madhya Pradesh including Sehore district is proud that



such a great hero lived with General Bipin Rawat, a symbol of bravery of the army.

Chouhan said that I bow to the parents and family of martyr Jitendra Verma. This family is our family. On behalf of eight and a half crore people of Madhya Pradesh, I bow at the feet of Amar Shaheed Shri Jitendra Kumar Verma.

Chouhan said that in the helicopter crash that took place on December 8 in Tamil Nadu, Shri Jitendra Kumar Verma of Sehore district, along with

CDS Bipin Rawat ji, also died untimely among 13 persons. An honour fund of one crore rupees will be given to the family of martyr Jitendra ji. The name of the village school will be after the martyr. Government service will be given to the wife of the martyr. A memorial will be built to keep the memory of the martyr intact. Arrangements will also be made for the education of the children of martyr Jitendra. Chouhan met the parents and the wife of late Jitendra Verma and expressed his condolences.

Nomination process for panchayat polls begins on Monday

Team Absolute | Bhopal

The process of filling nomination papers for the first and the second phase of Madhya Pradesh's three-tier, three-stage Panchayat elections 2021-2022 will start on Monday, the State Election Commission said.

It said that all preparations have been completed in the districts for receiving nominations. The nomination process for the third phase of the local body elections will start from December 30.

"The last date for receipt of nomination papers is December 20 for phases 1 and 2 and for phase 3, the nominations will close on

January 6. Scrutiny of nomination papers will be held on December 21 for phases 1 and 2 and on January 7 for phase 3. The last date for withdrawal of candidature and allotment of election symbols is December 23 for the first and second phases and January 10 for the third phase," the State Election Commission said in a statement. Voting for the panchayat elections will be held January 6 for the first phase, on January 28 for the second phase, and February 16 for the third phase from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. The counting of votes for the posts of Panch and Sarpanch will be done immediately at the polling stations after the voting is over.

The election results for the posts of Panch and Sarpanch will be announced on January 11 for the first phase, on February 2 for the second phase, and February 21 for the third phase.

The counting of votes of Janpad Panchayat and Zila Panchayat members from EVMS will be held at the block development headquarters - on January 10 for the first phase, February 1 for the second phase, and February 20 for the third phase.

The results for Janpad Panchayat members will be announced on February 22 (all phases) and for Zilla Panchayat members on February 23.

Over 6 religious conversions in one-and-a-half month in MP

Madhya Pradesh has witnessed over six instances of religious conversions of Hindu persons in a span of one-and-a-half month, triggering a controversy in different parts of the state. In all cases, Christian missionaries have been accused of the conversion.

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Following a fresh episode, the Madhya Pradesh police claimed to have arrested a couple in Barwani district for allegedly trying to lure tribal women to convert to Christianity. Those arrested for their alleged

involvement in religious conversion, have been identified as Anar Singh Jamre, 35, and his wife Laxmi Jamre, 32, residents of Nawalpur village, the police said.

The police told IANS that the couple has been booked under the provisions of Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act (MP-FRA). The police action was initiated following a written complaint filed by a resident of Barwani district on Friday. "As per the complaint, the couple had been luring the tribal women for conversion to Christianity by offering money, free education, free medicines, employment and other facilities after inviting them to their residence," a senior police official in Barwani district said, claiming that they have also seized some related literature, pen drives and other material from the couple's house. The amended

Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act penalises religious conversions through fraudulent means including those for the sake of marriage. In cases involving religious conversion of members of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and minors, a provision has been made for imprisonment of two to 10 years and Rs 50,000 fine.

Recently, a school run by a Bhopal-based Christian missionary was vandalised in Vidisha district by a right-wing group accusing the school management of being involved in alleged conversion of Hindu children.

However, the police had arrested five persons involved in vandalising and creating violence at school premises. The National Confederation for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCHR) had also directed the district administration

to investigate the matter. A similar case was reported on December 10 in Sagar district, in which a father of two children had alleged that Christian missionary school (St. Francis Sevadharm) forced his children to "eat cow meat and read Bible". The NCPCHR has directed district Superintendent of Police (SP), Sagar to investigate the issue, and take appropriate action.

On November 10, the NCPCHR had inspected a Christian missionary-run women hostel in Raisen district in Madhya Pradesh and had claimed that it had uncovered an alleged conversion racket wherein Hindu girls were being converted to Christianity. Last month, the police in Madhya Pradesh had arrested 11 people including seven from Rajasthan and Gujarat, in two cases of religious conversion in Khargone and Jhabua districts.

Ken-Betwa project will prove to be a boon for people of Bundelkhand

Team Absolute | Chhatrapur

The Ken-Betwa river linking project in Bundelkhand is expected to bring about a major change and prove to be a boon for half the population as the lives of people of a large part of this area are affected by the scarcity of water.

Bundelkhand comprises of 14 districts of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. One can easily find wells, water sources etc in all the rural areas here with a large number of women and girls seen on the roads carrying a pot of water on their heads. This is because the responsibility of arranging water in every household lies solely with the women. In the past, Bundelkhand used to be known for its abundance of water with a large number of wells, ponds, stepwells etc but with time the situation changed and this area gradually became known for droughts, migration, unemployment and backwardness. In the present times, several people have been exploiting these ills plaguing the Bundelkhand region. In the past, several government schemes were



approved, NGOs spent a lot of money on the issue of water conservation but the situation seems far from improving. Only empty slogans to make this area drought-free were raised.

After struggling for the last several years, the Central government approved the Ken-Betwa project costing Rs 45,000 crore facilitating cooperation between the Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh governments to link the two rivers. With this development project, a 10.5 lakh hectare area will be irrigated and provide clean drinking water to nearly 62 lakh people. KS Tiwari, a Bundelkhand expert, says that it is true that women are responsible for arranging water in rural areas but this project is expected to bring about a change in the lives of women. It

is a long-term project, which will be completed in the next eight years but it is too early to predict if it will be completed within this time period.

Therefore, it is necessary that parallel efforts continue along with this project so that the people living here get immediate benefits. For this, emphasis is needed on watershed, water harvesting etc. Central schemes like Atal Bhujal Yojana should be given the much needed push. Social activist Mamata Jain says that the availability of water will lead to prosperity of the Bundelkhand region and will bring about a major transformation in the lives of the people, adding that women are actively involved in gardening work in this area. If water is made available, agriculture will get the much-needed push which will lead to increase in incomes. With this, prosperity will return to the region.

Several surveys have revealed that girls in rural areas are unable to attend school because they have to help in getting water for their families. With the Ken-Betwa project the water woes affecting Bundelkhand will be resolved.

MINISTER MADE A SURPRISE INSPECTION OF CIVIL HOSPITAL



Bhopal: Energy minister saw the dirt in the civil hospital during the inspection then he himself cleaned it by offering shramdaan

Energy Minister Pradyuman Singh Tomar made a surprise inspection of Hajira Civil Hospital, Gwalior. During the inspection, the places where the dirt was seen, there he offered shramdaan and cleaned them himself. Energy Minister Tomar prima facie found cleanliness in the hospital premises to be better. Seeing this, he honoured the sanitation worker brothers by garlanding them and also encouraged them. Tomar himself cleaned the Kanch Mill Naveen Park on Saturday and Hajira Civil Hospital on Sunday by offering Shramdaan himself. Appealed to the general public to be aware of cleanliness by honouring the sanitation workers.

CM plants Gulmohar and Cassia saplings in Smart Garden

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan along with Dhanush M and Hemant YB of Mission Possible Save Environment planted Gulmohar and Cassia saplings in Smart Garden. Atul Tare, Group Editor of Swadesh Gwalior, also planted saplings. Dhanush M from Kadugodi, Karnataka and Hemant from Yadaganandahalli, have set out on a cycle tour with an aim to create awareness about global warming and the importance of literacy. Their goal is to get a place in the Guinness Book of World Records by cycling 24 thousand kilometers in 200 days covering 29 states and 3 union territories. The yatra started from Bengaluru Soudha on July 11, 2021. The Yatra is being supported by three other organisations in Bengaluru including Rotary Bangalore White Field Central.

Gulmohar is considered one of the most beautiful trees in the world. Flowers blooming in large clusters among the leaves of Gulmohar give a



distinct attraction to the tree. In summer, instead of leaves, Gulmohar trees are laden with flowers. It is also rich in medicinal properties. Cassia is important because of its environment and beautiful flowers.

CANDIDATES WILL HAVE TO PRODUCE NO-DUES CERTIFICATE OF ELECTRICITY DISTRIBUTION COMPANIES

Bhopal: Under Panchayat Election 2021-22, for the three-tier Panchayat election, the candidates of Sarpanch, Janpad Panchayat and Zila Panchayat members will have to present the no-dues certificate of all the liabilities (dues) payable to the concerned Madhya Pradesh Electricity Distribution Company along with their nomination papers. The nomination paper will be rejected for non-production of no-dues certificate. Secretary State Election Commission BS Jamod has informed that no-dues certificates can be given by the stipulated date and time to the Returning Officer concerned for scrutiny of nomination papers. No-dues certificate will have to be submitted in respect of the amount due 6 months ago. Instructions have also been given to set up facility counters at each power distribution centre so that the candidates do not face any inconvenience in getting the no-dues certificates. If there is no electricity connection in the name of any candidate, then such letter will be issued to them by the electricity distribution company "As per the records of the distribution centre, the applicant is not found to have any electricity connection."

Panchayat Election

Nomination papers will be filed from December 13 for the first and second

Team Absolute | Bhopal

State Election Commissioner Basant Pratap Singh has informed that the process of filing of nomination papers for the first and second phase of the general election year 2021-22 of three-tier panchayat will start on December 13. He said that all the preparations have been completed in the districts for receiving nomination papers from the candidates.

The work of receiving nomination papers for the first and second phase of Panchayat elections will start on December 13 and for the third phase on December 30. The last date for receipt of nomination papers is

December 20 for Phase I and II and January 6 for Phase III. Scrutiny of nomination papers will be held on December 21 for Phase I and II and January 7 for Phase III. The last date for withdrawal of candidature and allotment of election symbols is December 23 for the first and second phase and 10 January for the third phase till 3 pm. Voting (if required) will be held on January 6 for the first phase, January 28 for the second phase and February 16, 2022 for the third phase from 7 am to 3 pm. The counting of votes for the post of Panch and Sarpanch at the polling stations will be done immediately after the voting is over. Counting of votes of

Janpad Panchayat member and Zila Panchayat member from EVM at development block headquarters will be done on January 10 for the first phase, February 10 for the second phase and February 20, 2022 at 8 am for the third phase. The election results for the post of Panch and Sarpanch will be announced on January 11 for the first phase, 2 February for the second phase and 21 February 2022 for the third phase from 10:30 am. The election results for Janpad Panchayat members will be announced on February 22 for the first, second and third phases and for Zilla Panchayat members on February 23, 2022 from 10:30 am.

DATIA IS BECOMING AN EDUCATION HUB: MISHRA

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Datia is continuously progressing in the field of education. Now Datia is being recognised as "Education Hub."



Police Training Centre is also starting in Datia along with Medical College, Nursing College, Polytechnic, Veterinary and Fisheries College. Home Minister Narotam Mishra said while addressing the programme of Smart City Park to be developed at a cost of 1 crore 50 lakh near Lala kay Tal on Sunday. Mishra inaugurated the highway road and paver block from the pond of Khedapati Hanuman Mandir Lala constructed at a cost of 80 lakhs under the Mini Smart City Scheme. He said that the building of Law College would be built in Datia at a cost of seven crores. Its construction work will start soon. He said that boating would also be started soon in the Boat Club situated on the lake of Lala, so that Datia residents would be

able to enjoy boating. Mishra solved the problems of the people by discussing with the people in a public dialogue programme organised near Ganji ke Hanuman in Datia. He gave instructions for construction of two separate cement concrete roads at a cost of one crore 20 lakhs. He said that with the construction of both the roads, the residents of the area would get the facility of transportation. Home Minister Dr. Mishra instructed the Municipal Officer Datia to complete the construction of both the roads before Holi. Mishra also participated in the "Ek Diya, Shaheedon Ke Naam" programme organised at the local level. He honoured the father of martyr Ranjit Singh Tomar, Pratap Singh Tomar and his mother Draupadi Tomar by presenting shawl, shirfal and bouquet.



EDITOR'S SPECS

Farmers victory is not government's defeat, but a learning

There is relief all around after the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) announced the end of its 15-month-long agitation at the Delhi borders against the three central laws. Parliament had annulled these laws at the beginning of the Winter Session but the protestors had insisted that the government commit to their various demands in writing if they were to call off the protest. The government has done that. It has assured the SKM that a committee will study the demand on minimum support price, withdraw police cases against protesters, compensate the kin of those who died during the agitation and suspend the penal action against stubble burning. The farmer mobilisations, particularly in Punjab, Haryana and Western UP, had lingered on for too long. For, the government had decided that its majority in the House and its well-meaning intentions were enough, that those who had questions about the laws were either brainwashed by sinister forces or didn't know better. The protestors ultimately prevailed and forced the prime minister to publicly announce the repeal of the laws. The government should not see this as a defeat but as learning. That in a constitutional democracy, reforms, especially in agriculture where land is a key factor, need negotiation and accommodation, humility and generosity. The fact is that the structural problems that in the first place influenced the government to introduce the farm laws remain. But a dialogue on reforms in agriculture hinges on rebuilding trust between the farming community and the government. The conversation should continue and common ground has to be found on issues such as minimum support price, access to credit, a sustainable paying model for electricity and, of course, the high environmental cost of stubble fires.

NAEEM KAUSAR: MASTER STORYTELLER WHOSE WORKS HAVE WOWED GENERATIONS OF READERS

The famed Urdu author had written his first short story in early 1950s and has been consistently writing since then.

Shams Ur Rehman Alavi

Naeem Kausar, the veteran Urdu author, has been known across the country for his short stories. The Bhopal-based author has written plays, stories for children, afsanas and has nearly half-a-dozen collections of short stories to his name. Besides, he had brought out the unique literary fortnightly newspaper. However, it is the genre of short stories where he rules the roost. The Madhya Pradesh government has announced Shikhar Samman to him as recognition of his literary works. The octogenarian had written his first 'afsana' when he was barely 14 and there was no looking back. His father Kausar Chandpuri, a legendary writer, was an established name in Urdu literature but apart from him, Naeem Kausar got inspired by Prem Chand and other major writers. In fact, he had written his first story for children in 1948, and it was published in Naunihal from Delhi. Later on, he wrote a short novel too. But serious literary career began since early 1950s and he wrote hundreds of short stories. Naeem Kausar had also started publishing a children's magazine from Bhopal. But in the year 2001, he started the unique fortnightly Sada-e-Urdu that soon made its name across the country and outside. It not just focused



on literature but also fine arts and it became popular due to the content, standard and for taking a clear stand on contention literary issues. He was born in Begamganj town in erstwhile princely state of Bhopal. He has spent almost his entire life in Bhopal and after retirement, he completely got immersed into literature and wrote extensively. Many of his short stories including the one that mentions the post-mortem scene or the afsana focusing on the life of a musician are remembered by readers. His collections, Khwabon ka Maseeha, Kaal Kothri, Iqar Nama and Agni Pareeksha have got critical acclaim. In Central India, he is unquestionably the leading writer. The recent announcement of Shikhar Award is another addition to his list of literary achievements. For him, the reader's love is the ultimate litmus test for the writers' accomplishments. Actually, he summed it up well in an interview with Rais Siddiqui for Akashvani, when he said that 'naqqad nahi, balki qaari ko jauhari samajhta hoon' i.e. he doesn't consider critic but reader the key person to test or pass judgment, as critics often see the writer in light of their own literary stream, school of thought ranging [for example progressive or modernist] and also because other factors too play a role in whether distinguished critic would write about an author or ignore him.

Call Zoom session if the House has to be run one-sided: Suspended Cong MP

Congress' Rajya Sabha member, Syed Naseer Hussain who has been suspended along with 11 other parliamentarians, has criticised the Central government, saying it does not want to give any opportunity to the Opposition to take part in discussions in the House. Underlining that the House cannot function one-sided in a democratic set-up, Hussain, during an interaction with IANS, said "if that's what the government had to do, it could have called a group meeting on the Zoom app". Here are some of the excerpts of the interview. **Q: Why did the Congress members stage a walkout during discussion on all bills and issues in the both Houses?** A: We had raised several issues including that of the three agriculture laws but got suspended in turn.

The Central government has suspended 12 parliamentarians of the Opposition camp. The government will have to withdraw the suspension if it wishes to conduct the Winter Session... and allow the Opposition MPs to present their views during discussion on the bills in the House. **Q: The Parliament has, however, said that the MPs were suspended as per the rules. Also, the Central government has repealed the farm laws. The agitation has also ended and the farmers have decided to leave the protest sites. Considering all, what's the stand-off from your side?** A: Well, if they are talking about the laws, then why no action was taken by the House against the way women MPs were misbehaved with, besides the ruckus that took place in the House over the farm laws? As far as the question of the current session



is concerned, no action should be taken. This is against the rules. The House cannot function by bringing marshals into the picture. There was attempt to privatise the insurance sector. A discussion should have been held on this. Instead of that, the marshals were called in, and the question is why? Why did they misbehave with the women parliamentarians? We want to raise all these questions, and in fact, are raising them. The entire Opposition is on the same page over the issue of the sus-

pension of 12 MPs. Interestingly, every single suspended MP was issuing notice to the House to raise some issues. India follows democracy. And bills are passed through the debate and discussion route... the Opposition should also be allowed to put forward its views. The ruling dispensation cannot run the House one-sided. What role the Opposition is left with today? It is only to raise up hands, and if the government is not keen to make it a part of the debates and discussions in the House, a Zoom call could have been arranged... was there any need for the in-House proceedings? Why so much of expenditure is being done on the travelling and accommodation of the MPs? This is a loss to the general

public. The Opposition has been raising a lot of issues pertaining to the country. It includes civilian killings in Nagaland, inflation, compensation to the Covid-hit families, employment, compensation to the farmers, among others. **Q: You have maintained that the Opposition should be allowed to take part in the debates but the Congress MPs, in fact, walked out of both the Houses...** A: We want cancellation of the suspension of 12 MPs. A fresh start should be made towards discussion on all bills, and the Opposition should also be allowed to part in the deliberations. It is the responsibility of the ruling side to ensure the Parliament functions.

international

B'desh capable of protecting its independence & sovereignty: Hasina

Dhaka | Agencies

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Sunday said that her country has attained all capabilities to protect its independence and sovereignty if it is attacked by any external aggressor or an enemy. The Prime Minister made the remarks while virtually addressing the President Parade 2021 of the 81st BMA Long Course at Bangladesh Military Academy at Bhatiari, Chittagong. "But if we're ever attacked by a foreign foe, we have the capacity to protect our independence." The Armed Forces, as the children of Bangladesh's soil, should be equal partners in sharing the joys and sorrows of its people, she said. "Their only professional goal should be to stay vigilant, be ready to perform their duties, and pay the ultimate sacrifice for the nation, if necessary. "We believe in peace, the Father of the Nation has given us the foreign policy 'Friendship to all, malice to none', we believe in that foreign policy, but if we're attacked by enemies from outside, we've attained our



capabilities to protect our independence and sovereignty," Hasina added. Through their oaths, the new cadets are now responsible for maintaining the independence of Bangladesh and upholding its sovereignty, she noted. Extending her best wishes and greetings to all the new officers, the Prime Minister said that they were now entrusted with the "sacred duty of defending the great independence and sovereignty of the motherland". "You've to remain alert and ready

always to fulfil this responsibility. You'll have to remain beside the people of the country; you'll have to perform your duties to meet all the necessities of people and share happiness and sorrows equally," she said. The Prime Minister asked them to uphold the spirit of the independence and put it above everything. Mentioning that the 'Bangabandhu Complex' has been constructed at the BMA with all kinds of sophisticated facilities for internal training of cadets, she said: "I hope that this

modern training system will play a pivotal role in building a trained and modern army." Hasina also noted that the BMA is a successful embodiment of the military academy that Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had dreamt of providing advanced training and developing capable leadership. Describing various development programmes for Bangladesh Army, she said the government has established new infantry divisions, brigades, units and training institutes. Hasina said the physical infrastructures required for the new weapons and equipment have been installed and built, while work is underway to incorporate and expand a variety of weapons and equipment. At the function, Battalion Senior Under Officer of the 81st BMA Long Course Abdullah Al Islam received the "Sword of Honour" as the best all-around cadet and Company junior under officer Imrul Kayes got the "Army Chief Gold Medal" for his best performance in military subjects. On behalf of the Prime Minister, Chief of Army Staff General SM Shafiquddin Ahmed handed over the two awards.

S Korean trade official to discuss supply chain, steel tariffs in US

Seoul | Agencies

South Korean Deputy Trade Minister Jeong Dae-jin will visit the US this week for talks on supply chains of key materials and steel tariff issues, the Trade Ministry said on Sunday. During the three-day visit starting on Monday, Jeong will have a series of meetings with officials of the White House, the Commerce Department, the US Trade Representative office, Congress and major think tanks to boost cooperation on a range of bilateral trade and industry issues, according to the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy. The meetings will be focused on follow-up measures on the establishment of a new dialogue channels, as the two sides agreed last month to create a channel to jointly address supply chain challenges and issues of new technologies, reports Yonhap News Agency. Also on the table will be tariffs on South Korea's steel



and aluminium exports. The Seoul government has also sought negotiations with the US to revise the Section 232 tariff rules, after Washington decided in October to lift tariffs on European steel and aluminium imports imposed by former President Donald Trump. In 2018, the US waived the tariffs on South Korean products, but it was in return for a yearly import quota of 2.63 million tonnes of steel, or 70 per cent of Seoul's average steel products export volume over the past three years. Jeong will also have discussions on the US' plan to launch a new economic framework in the Indo-Pacific region and steel tariffs, according to the Ministry. Washington has said that it is looking to form a fresh economic framework in the region, rather than joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

LANDMINE BLAST KILLS 3 IN YEMEN: OFFICIAL

Sanaa: Three Yemeni civilians were killed in a blast caused by a landmine in the country's northeastern province of al-Jawf, a government official said. "A large landmine explosion struck a civilian vehicle carrying local citizens in the turbulent province of al-Jawf, killing three people at the scene," the official told Xinhua news agency. He confirmed that the explosion destroyed the vehicle and critically injured five people who had been transferred to a nearby hospital for treatment. The explosion was caused by a mine laid by the Houthi rebels engaging in sporadic fighting with the Yemeni government forces in the province, according to the official. A total of 44 Yemeni people were killed by explosions caused by landmines and explosive devices in the first half of 2021. During the January-June period this year, 44 people were killed, including 11 children, and 57 others were injured, according to official data. Majority of the casualties and losses were recorded in the coastal areas located in the southern parts of the country's Red Sea port city of Hodeidah. Previous reports of humanitarian organisations suggested that Yemen has become one of the largest landmine battlefields in the world since the World War II. The Houthi militias have placed many of these landmines, often in busy areas containing hospitals and schools.

Palestinians vote in local polls despite Hamas opposition

Gaza | Agencies

Palestinians voted in the municipal elections in the West Bank despite the opposition of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), which has been ruling the coastal enclave since 2007. The local vote came after President Mahmoud Abbas cancelled the parliamentary and presidential elections in the Palestinian territories earlier this year, reports Xinhua news agency. Hana Nasser, chairman of the Palestinian Central Elections Commission (PCEC), told a news briefing that more than 405,000 Palestinians have the right to cast ballots for representatives in 154 village councils in the West Bank. The polling stations were opened to voters in the 154 West Bank villages on Saturday morning, and closed at 7 p.m. Municipal votes in the major West Bank cities had been postponed. Nasser called on the Palestinians, who



will do the counting right after the ballots are closed in the evening," Nasser told reporters. "The results of the votes counting will be immediately declared." In September, the Palestinian government of Prime Minister Mohammed Ishtayeh decided to divide the municipal elections into two phases, with the first on December 11 and the second in March 2022. The first phase of the municipal vote was held in the West Bank only, excluding the Hamas-ruled Gaza. The elections won't be held in East Jerusalem either because of Israel's rejection. Hamas and the less-influential Palestinian Islamic Jihad said in two separate statements that they reject the exclusion of the Gaza Strip from the Palestinian municipal elections. The two Islamic groups called on President Abbas to abide by the previous understandings to hold the general elections in all the Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem.

4 AFRICAN NATIONS JOIN HANDS TO FIGHT PLASTIC POLLUTION

Dar es Salaam: Four east African countries of Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda have joined hands to fight plastic pollution in the region, an official said. Ana Le Rocha, the executive director of Nipe Fagio, said the four countries have decided to start a Single-Use Plastic Free East African Community (EAC) campaign to advocate against the use of single-use plastics in the region, reports xinhua news agency. Nipe Fagio is a Kiswahili slogan translated in English as 'Give me the Broom'. It is a public advocacy organization that focuses on increasing awareness by facilitating and promoting sustainable development in Tanzania. Le Rocha told a press conference in the Tanzanian capital of Dodoma that the campaign has been started by a coalition of four organizations of the Center for Environment Justice and Development (CEJAD), Global Initiative for Environment and Reconciliation (GER), Bio Vision Africa (BiVA) and Nipe Fagio. She said the campaign pushes for a phase-out on the production of single-use plastics and ending plastic pollution in the region. East African countries have banned the use of single-use plastics with Rwanda being a significant success case and Kenya having the highest penalty for non-compliance. "The EAC can become a global example and the



Despite Rise in Omicron Cases, Maharashtra Not in Favour of Imposing Restrictions

The number of Omicron cases in Maharashtra expected to rise as at least 1,349 people have travelled from foreign countries to Maharashtra's Raigad in the last eight days

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Despite the rise in new cases of the Omicron coronavirus variant, the Uddhav Thackeray-led Maharashtra government has clearly ruled out any kind of restrictions/lockdown in the state. Notably, Maharashtra's tally of Omicron cases rose to 17 after Mumbai detected three fresh cases of the strain, prompting authorities to impose section 144 (ban on large gatherings) for 48 hours. An official informed that the restrictions were imposed within the commissionerate limits of Mumbai, prohibiting rallies and protest marches involving people and vehicles. Speaking to reporters, state health



minister Rajesh Tope asked people to not panic as the 'severity of the coronavirus variant is low'. "We are not thinking about any lockdown in the state as of now. The state task force has given no such directions. We shall closely keep a tab on the situation and take a call on any curbs following the guidance of the Centre, state task force and the chief minister", Tope told Times of India, a couple of days ago. On being asked about the state's strategy to combat the spread, Tope asserted that the government is working with the 3T

Principle - tracking, tracing, and testing. "For genome sequence, we have currently three labs. We will expand the facility further in Nagpur and Aurangabad", he added. If reports are to be believed, industry bodies and traders have asked to not take any strict step as it 'may hamper the slowly recovering economy. Besides, Opposition parties have reportedly also warned the state against any move that would hit the livelihood of common people. The Centre, on the other hand, has asked states/UTs to impose restrictions,

night curfew in the districts where the infection rate is more than 5 per cent. "Regular meetings are being organized to keep a watch on global scenario and Covid scene in India with a focus on Omicron. We need help to not spread panic. District level restrictions to be implemented where positivity over 5%", Balam Bhargava, DG, ICMR said. The number of Omicron cases in Maharashtra expected to rise as at least 1,349 people have travelled from foreign countries to Maharashtra's Raigad in the last eight days. Of the 1,349 travellers, 594 arrived in Panvel, 150 in Mangaon, 116 in Panvel rural, 105 in Mahad, 83 in Shrivardhan, 170 in Mhasala, 28 in Alibaug, among other parts of the district. While the COVID-19 test reports of these travellers have come out negative, they have been advised to remain under home quarantine, district health officer Dr Sudhakar More said. The airport authority has been regularly sharing the details of passengers with the local administration for monitoring purposes, official added.

Maha's Nagpur logs first Omicron case, state tally rises to 18

Nagpur | Agencies

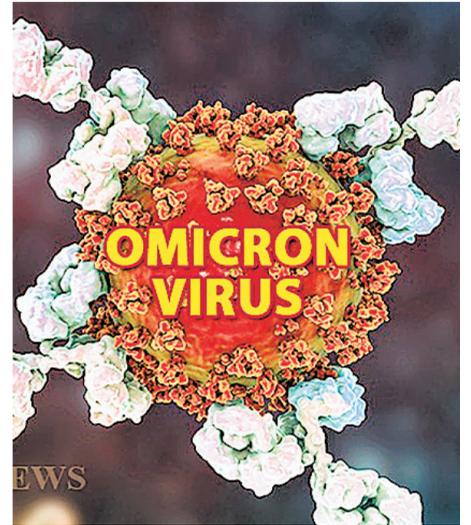
A 40-year-old man from Maharashtra's Nagpur, who recently travelled to west Africa, has tested positive for the Covid-19 variant Omicron, taking the state's tally to 18, officials said here on Sunday.

Nagpur Municipal Corporation Commissioner B. Radhkrishnan said that the condition of the patient - who arrived here on December 4 from a West African nation - is stable and he is undergoing treatment at a city hospital.

None of his family members have been tested positive but as a precaution, they have been kept under isolation, while the NMC health authorities are tracing all his contacts.

The patient is also reported to be suffering from heart problems and the genomic sequencing of his samples confirmed he was afflicted by Omicron, said the NMC chief.

With this, the eastern part



of the state has got its first Omicron case, with the remaining being in Mumbai and Pune, with the state tally going up to 18 in the past 8 days. All three cities have inter-

national airports and the state health authorities are monitoring all incoming passengers from the "high risk" countries besides random arrivals from other countries.

India greets veteran leader Sharad Pawar on his 81st birthday

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Maharashtra Governor Bhagat Singh Koshyari, Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray and other prominent personalities cutting across party lines from all over India greeted veteran leader and Nationalist Congress Party President Sharad Pawar on his 81st birthday on Sunday.

In a message, Modi said: "Birthdays Sharad Pawarji. I pray for his good health and long life." Penning a letter, Koshyari said: "Heartiest greetings to Hon' Sharad Pawarji on his birthday. Wishing a long life and best of health to continue to serve the people." Thackeray sent a bouquet of flowers with his heartiest greetings and wishing for a long and



healthy life. Several prominent Sena leaders including Ministers Aditya Thackeray, Anil Parab, Kishore Tiwari and Dr. Raghunath Kuchik - both accorded MoS status; Sena MPs Sanjay Raut, Arvind Sawant, Priyanka Chaturvedi, actress Urmila Matondkar and others greeted the NCP leader.

State Congress President Nana Patole, Ministers Balasaheb Thorat, Ashok Chavan, Vijay Wadetiwar, Yashomati Thakur, Satej D. Patil and senior party leaders wished Pawar. Others including the Bharatiya Janata Party's Leader of

Opposition Pravin Darekar, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, and many more from around the country extended warm greetings to Pawar on the 81st red-letter day in his life.

The NCP celebrated Pawar's birthday with a virtual rally addressed by him at the Nehru Centre with top leaders like Deputy Chief Minister Ajit Pawar, Supriya Sule, Praful Patel, Ministers Jayant Patil, Dilip Walse-Patil, Nawab Malik, Chhagan Bhujbal, Dr. Jitendra Awhad and others paying glowing tributes to his rich and momentous political career of more than 55 years. The NCP also felicitated Pawar, released a party App, youth festival for students, and will start 'Swabhiman Saptah' from December 14 with various social activities concerning the common citizens.

MALIK CLAIMS BJP LEADER WILL BE ARRESTED NEXT WEEK

Last month, Maharashtra Minister had claimed that some people are trying to frame him in a false case just like they did with former Maharashtra Home Minister Anil Deshmukh.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Maharashtra Minister and Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leader Nawab Malik on Saturday claimed that an FIR will be registered against a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader next week and he will be arrested.

His remarks come after former MP Kirit Somaiya levelled fraud allegations against him in the Pune Waqf land matter.

"Defamation of Maharashtra government by Enforcement Directorate (ED) needs to be stopped. Kirit Somaiya has levelled allegations of fraud against me in Waqf Board land matter. I want to apprise him that an FIR will be lodged against a BJP leader next week and he will be arrested," said Mr Malik.

Stating that defamation of the Maharashtra government by the ED needs to stop, the NCP leader said agency officers keep telling the media that they will raid his



house. "ED officers have been telling the media that they will raid my house. Today Kirit Somaiya said ED will visit my house in Waqf board land matter. Instead of this whispering campaign, they can directly ask me to appear, I will do so," he added.

On Friday, Malik said some "government guests" were soon going to pay him a visit. "Friends, I have heard that government guests will come to my home today or tomorrow, I welcome them," the NCP leader tweeted in Hindi.

Last month, Maharashtra Minister had claimed that some people are trying to frame him in a false case just like they did with former Maharashtra Home Minister Anil Deshmukh.

Anil Deshmukh was arrested earlier this month by the ED for his alleged role in a money laundering case and is currently in jail under judicial custody.

Reconsider excise duty reduction on imported products: Domestic liquor makers

In November, the Maharashtra government had announced to reduce the excise duty on imported liquors by half, which is from 300 per cent to 150 per cent on imported liquor.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Domestic liquor makers have requested the Maharashtra government to reconsider its decision to reduce excise duty on imported products. The Confederation of Indian Alcoholic Beverage Companies (CIABC) in a letter to the Maharashtra government has said reduction on excise duty on imported products has created an "unequal and unfair playing field" against Indian-made foreign liquor. The state government should

encourage products made in India, which historically has been the main contributor to its revenues and economic prosperity, said a letter addressed to Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister and Finance Minister Ajit Pawar. "Excise duty reduction of such scale on imported products is disastrous for the Indian industry. It so distorts the level-playing field against the Indian industry, that consequences may be far-reaching leading to disinvestment, job losses and farmer discomfort," it said. In November, the Maharashtra government had announced to reduce the excise duty on imported liquors by half, which is from 300 per cent to 150 per cent on imported liquor. The move was done to bring its price at par with that in other states. According to CIABC, this reduction will make premium Indian malt whiskies such as Amrut and Paul John and other niche products

unsale-able in Mumbai. The prices of these Indian made super-premium products used to be 80-90 per cent of comparable imported products earlier thus allowing them some competitive space. "After this change, the prices of Indian made products will become 30-40 per cent higher than similar imported products," said the letter, written by CIABC Director-General Vinod Giri, adding it is evident that with that kind of price difference, Indian super-premium products will find it difficult to sell. Moreover, it also added the decision would also discourage investment in Maharashtra and lead to job losses. "As the price difference with fully Indian made product narrows down significantly, most Indian products are likely to lose competitive ground to imported products. The result may be a widespread loss for the Indian industry. Moreover, the premise that such a duty reduction

will prevent the smuggling of imported liquors from other states is "misplaced" as the prices of Maharashtra is actually lower than in Karnataka, the most prominent neighbouring state. "With this excise duty reduction, the fear is that stock will be smuggled out of Maharashtra to other states, which may force those states also to reduce duty, thus creating a domino effect which will be disastrous for the Indian industry," CIABC said. The Indian alcoholic beverage industry contributes nearly ₹2.40 lakh crore in taxes to the exchequers of the state governments and an overwhelming 99 per cent of this is contributed by products produced in India. "Considering that we believe that the governments should take proactive measures to support domestic production instead of offering preferential treatment to imported products which do no such service to the society," it said.

Man sentenced to life imprisonment for stabbing son to death

The court was informed by the additional public prosecutor Yogendra Patil that both the accused and the duo often landed up in an argument.



Thane | Agencies

A 50-year-old man was sentenced to life imprisonment by a sessions court on Maharashtra's Kalyan on charges of stabbing his 29-year-old son to death. Reportedly, the man took this drastic step over a domestic dispute. AAA Shaikh, an additional session judge found the

Kalyan. Patil, while commenting further on the case, stated that in order to prove the crime, a total of 8 witnesses were examined. This comes after a couple in Maharashtra's Thane tried to sell their newborn baby girl for Rs 1.50 lakh with the help of four other aides. As soon as the incident came to light, the 6 accused were arrested.

i (37) and his wife Mumtaz (29), again got a girl child, they decided to get rid of the baby girl by selling her. The baby girl was born on December 4 and the couple decided to sell her to ease their financial condition. "We took the baby safely in our custody and nabbed all six accused in the case. The child is safe in a children's home in Dombivli," said police.

FIR against Parbhani officer for vaccine 'lag'

Pune | Agencies

Parbhani collector Aanchal Goyal has filed an FIR against a health officer managing a primary health centre on the charge of not actively participating in the Covid vaccination programme. The FIR was filed based on a report by the zilla parishad CEO on the poor performance of the officer, who was not conducting the necessary number of drives nor was he taking steps to complete the first dose of vaccination, Goyal said. The percentage of first dose completion in the district is 73 and the second dose 38. Pimpalghari, where the health centre is situated, has registered less than 70% first dose vaccination as

reported by the zilla parishad CEO. Goyal said the FIR, filed through the tehsildar, has been registered under sections 2, 3 and 4 of the Epidemic Act, 1893, and section 56 of the Disaster Management Act, 2005. "These sections mainly deal with dereliction of duty," said the collector. Besides, a departmental inquiry would be initiated against the health officer. Currently has 85% partial or first-dose beneficiaries and 50% full-dose beneficiaries. Parbhani district occupies 30th position in terms of vaccination in Maharashtra. According to the complaint, even after following up with the official and urging him to encourage citizens to participate in the drive, no effort to push

the immunisation drive was taken by the concerned officer. State government officials have been directing local authorities to speed up vaccination in all districts in the wake of omicron variant and experts stressing on completion of double-dose vaccination. Nearly 22 districts in Maharashtra have continued to be below the state average in both the doses. Districts such as Parbhani, Gadchiroli, Hingoli, Beed, Nanded and Nandurbar have been directed to boost first dose of the covid vaccination. Nanded and Nandurbar, till now, have not even completed 70% first-dose vaccination, according to the chart issued on December 10.

RTI: PANDEMIC HURT BANKS TOO, WITH NPAS' WRITE-OFFS ZOOMING

Pune | Agencies

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic since March 2020 has not only hurt the people, but has also hit the banking industry hard -- with NPAs write-offs shooting up significantly, as per an RTI reply. The malady affected almost with equal force all public sector banks, private, foreign, NBFCs and urban cooperative banks, as per the recent figures provided under RTI to Pune businessman Prafulla Sardar. The calculations for only 15 months - from April 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021 - are an eye-opener on the dismal scenario faced by the banking industry with huge write-offs of NPAs. During the 15-month pandemic period, the PSBs wrote off a mountain of NPAs to the tune of Rs 1,56,681 crore, the private sector players had a write-off of a pile of NPAs worth Rs 80,883 crore, while the foreign banks, NBFCs and Scheduled Commercial Banks notched NPAs' write-off of around Rs 3,826 crore, Rs 1,216 crore and Rs 2,859 crore respectively. This comes to a staggering total of Rs 2,45,465 crore NPAs written off in the first 15 months of the pandemic - which still continues. Among the major banks which have revealed the highest NPAs write-off during the pandemic period are the State Bank of India, Bank



Of Baroda, Punjab National Bank and Union Bank of India. Some of the major private sector banks that have declared huge NPA write-offs in the pandemic period include Axis Bank, ICICI Bank, HDFC Bank and Yes Bank. At least two foreign banks also stand out with respect to NPAs write-off -- Standard Chartered Bank and Citibank -- among around the five dozen which figure in the list, though some have shown zero NPAs written off. The major NBFCs that figure in the NPAs write-off list are: Jana Small Finance Bank Ltd, Ujjivan Small Finance Bank Ltd, and Equitas, besides large amounts written-off by Scheduled Commercial Banks during the pandemic. The amounts of NPAs written-off from April 1, 2015 - March 31, 2020 were: Rs 875,770 crore consisting of PSBs Rs 675,593 crore, Private Banks Rs 172,161 crore,

Foreign Banks Rs 20,056 crore, NBFCs Rs 1,526 crore and Urban Co-operative Banks Rs 6,434 crore. In comparison, from April 1, 2015 - March 31, 2021, the loan write-offs to reduce the NPAs were: Rs 11,19,482 crore, comprising PSBs Rs 832,274 crore, Private Banks Rs 253,044 crore, Foreign Banks Rs 23,882 crore, NBFCs Rs 2,742 crore and Urban Co-operative Banks Rs 7,540 crore. Accordingly, Sardar said that from April 1, 2015 till June 30, 2021, the figure of NPAs write-offs during the NDA rule went up by more than 500 percent compared with the write-offs allowed during the 10 years of the previous UPA regime, as per the government's own RTI replies earlier. On this, Sardar said that despite claims by the Bharatiya Janata Party-led NDA government, the economic situation is not all that rosy considering the RTI revelations of loan write-offs to reduce NPAs during the 15 months of the pandemic. "The Government had announced a huge pandemic relief package worth Rs 20 lakh crore to boost the economy. By its own admissions vide RTIs in the past, the Centre has admitted that it has barely given out around Rs 3 lakh crore from those packages. Is that the reason for the banks now suffering massive NPAs? Who's responsible for this mess," demanded Sardar.



'WEST SIDE STORY' HEADS FOR WORRISOME OPENING

Steven Spielberg directed the musical, which hopes to overcome a subdued start with a long run through the holidays and Oscar season.

Steven Spielberg's critically acclaimed West Side Story posted a subdued opening day gross of \$4.1 million from 2,820 theaters at the Friday box office for a disappointing domestic opening in the \$10 million to \$11 million range.

The good news: if those projections hold, the 20th Century and Disney film will claim the No. 1 spot on the chart ahead of Disney Animation holdover Encanto. West Side Story had hoped to clear at least \$13 million in its start.



Musicals face a huge challenge in the pandemic era since they rely on older adults, and particularly older females. So far, moviegoers over the age of 35 are the leaviest in terms of returning to theaters. The movie earned an A

CinemaScore from audiences, while the largest quadrant were ticket buyers over the age of 55 (26 percent). More than half of the audience was over the age of 35. The overall marketing campaign has positioned the film as an event

pic and love story instead of a musical, in hopes of attracting younger consumers who are so far fueling the box office recovery.

Directed from a script by Tony Kushner and based on the iconic 1957 Broadway show, West Side Story was originally set to open in 2020. The film stars Ansel Elgort and newcomer Rachel Zegler as star-crossed lovers Tony and Maria and opens 60 years after the first movie hit the big screen on its way to scoring numerous Oscars, including best picture. Spielberg's West Side Story is likewise expected to be a major Oscar contender. At the box office, it hopes to remain a player throughout the year-end holidays.

The weekend's other new nationwide release, the football drama National Champions, is getting sacked in its debut. The film, directed by Ric Roman Waugh, grossed \$120,000 from 1,197 theaters on Friday for an estimated weekend opening of \$320,000. STX, which is handling the films, is counting on a robust premium VOD run in January tied to the real-life national championship game.



'Black Widow' Post-Credit Scene Was Kept Secret

Head writer Jonathan Igla recalls having to stay quiet about a moment involving Florence Pugh's Yelena and Jeremy Renner's Clint Barton.

Los Angeles | Agencies

The final moments of Black Widow featured a surprise for audiences - and as it turns out, even the writing staff of Hawkeye didn't know about it at first. In Black Widow's mid-credits scene, Yelena, the breakout character played by Florence Pugh, was put on the trail of Jeremy Renner's Clint Barton/Hawkeye, teeing up an appearance in the Renner's Disney+ show that began with this week's episode.

When Marvel added that scene, the Hawkeye team was already writing Yelena into their show after head writer Jonathan Igla lobbied to include her in the series. One day, Igla got word from Marvel Studios boss Kevin Feige that Black Widow would include a post-credit scene leading into Hawkeye, but he had to keep that to himself to preserve the secret as long as possible.

"There was a length of time where I wasn't supposed to share it with the rest of the writing staff. There were a handful of things like that, which was challenging," Igla tells The Hollywood Reporter. "I did my best. I like to think that I'm an honest broker and if somebody tells me not to share something, even if I think, 'Well the writing staff really needs to know this,' then I'm just going to trust their process.... I kept it under my hat

for awhile." It turns out that secrecy was a two-way street. The ramifications of the scene were also kept from Black Widow screenwriter Eric Pearson. He told to write a scene in which Valentina Allegra de Fontaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) puts Yelena on the hunt for Clint Barton, but was not told why. "They told me, 'and then at the end, this is the target.' And I was like, 'What does that mean?' They were like, 'Don't worry about it. You don't have to know that,'" Pearson told THR in July. "I was like, 'Who am I screwing over? Something is going on! I don't have an answer for this.' They were like, 'You don't need to. We are going to figure that out.'"

Pearson even had some guilt, telling THR: "I remember writing it and feeling super guilty. I hope whatever writer is working on this next chapter is going to be OK with what I've done to them."

Igla, however, assures that Pearson has nothing to feel guilty about. "I had made the case to Kevin and Lou [D'Esposito] and Victoria [Alonso] that Yelena had a place in our story and this was the right place for her next chapter. So I think the scene was created to support that," says Igla. "Obviously, the rest of the writing staff knew we were building pitches around her as soon as I got the thumbs up."

GUY BURNET JOINS MELISSA BARRERA IN STX THRILLER 'BED REST'

The Project X film is from writer-director Lori Evans Taylor.

Los Angeles | Agencies

Ray Donovan and The Affair alum Guy Burnet is set to star in STX films and Project X thriller Bed Rest, joining In the Heights star Melissa Barrera.

Lori Evans Taylor wrote and is directing the film, which is currently in production in Winnipeg. The story centers on Julie (Barrera), who, according to the project's synopsis, "after years of struggling to start a family, is pregnant again and moving into a new home with her husband as they embrace a fresh start. Upon being ordered to mandatory bed rest, she begins to slowly unravel as she suffers through the monotony and anxiety of her new constraints."

William Sherak, James Vanderbilt and Paul Weinstein will produce under their Project X Entertainment banner along with Evans Taylor and Barrera. David Gendron, Matthew



Helderman, Ali Jazayeri and Luke Taylor will executive produce.

Burnet, who is repped by ICM, Lasher Group and the U.K.'s United Agents, can be seen in Amazon series The Feed and recently wrapped production on Western Dead yet, and it's unclear whether the potential series would be

'Six Feet Under' Follow-Up in the Works at HBO

The premium cabler is in the early stages of developing a new series based on the 2001-05 drama.

Los Angeles | Agencies

HBO is eyeing a return visit to Fisher & Sons Funeral Home. The premium cable outlet is in the earliest stages of developing a follow-up show to its 2001-05 series Six Feet Under. No writer is attached yet, and it's unclear whether the potential series would be



a direct sequel, a remake or something else. Sources say the project is not on any kind of fast track and might not move forward. Series creator Alan Ball and executive producers Bob Greenblatt and David Janollari are attached as EPs.

HBO declined comment. Six Feet Under premiered in June 2001 and ran for five seasons. The darkly comedic drama followed a family that ran a Los Angeles funeral home, with Peter Krause,

Michael C. Hall, Frances Conroy, Lauren Ambrose and Freddy Rodriguez heading the cast.

The series won nine Emmys over the course of its run and was nominated for outstanding drama series three times. It also had one of the most widely praised - and definitive - series finales of this century, with flash-forward scenes showing snapshots of each surviving character's life up until their death.

'Cowboy Bebop' Team Reacts to Netflix Cancellation

Los Angeles | Agencies

"I truly loved working on this," tweeted co-executive producer Javier Grillo-Marxuach about the anime adaptation that starred John Cho.

Members of the Cowboy Bebop team are offering their thoughts as the show rides off into the sunset.

On Thursday, The Hollywood Reporter learned exclusively that Netflix canceled its highly anticipated anime adaptation starring John Cho, Mustafa Shakir and Daniella Pineda as a trio of bounty hunters. The space Western series launched Nov. 19.

This led Bebop co-executive producer Javier Grillo-Marxuach to retweet THR's story, adding his personal disappointment that the cast and crew won't be back in the saddle with a hoped-for second season.

"I truly loved working on this," Grillo-Marxuach wrote. "It came from a real and pure place of respect and affection. I wish we could make what we planned for a second season, but you know what they say, men plan, god laughs. see you space cowboy... #CowboyBebop #whateverhappens."

Castmember Mason Alexander Park replied, "A joy to work on this with you," adding a heart emoji. Grillo-Marxuach wrote back, in part, "Right back at ya! Had so much cool shit planned for s2."

An individual not involved with the show responded to Grillo-Marxuach's post by asking if he wrote a line from the first season that involved wordplay surrounding the homophones "black-mail" and "Black male." The line had previously been criticized on social



media.

The producer responded, "I didn't write it and while I understand why you are displeased with it, how about not showing up on my mentions to admonish me when I just lost my job?"

Grillo-Marxuach later tweeted, "The one nice thing about tweeting about the cancellation of bebop is that it's one more bite at the 'block toxic fans with extreme prejudice' apple!"

While he did not directly mention the cancellation, Cho took to Twitter shortly after the news broke to post a GIF from Friends of Richard, as played by Tom Selleck, saying glumly, "I'm OK."

Park responded to Cho's post by tweeting, "Love you, friend."

Additionally, while she also did not directly reference the cancellation,

Pineda posted a meme to Instagram shortly after THR's story ran that featured two people holding shattered beer glasses amid an apparent toast gone wrong. The actress later shared other images of various mishaps to her Instagram Stories.

"Also this," she wrote about one video showing a man falling off a trampoline and being accosted by a dog. "Today has been fun!"

Cowboy Bebop was based on a 1998 Japanese anime TV series and 2001 anime film. The Netflix live-action remake's 10-episode first season currently holds a 46 percent approval rating from critics on Rotten Tomatoes.

In her review, THR critic Angie Han wrote that the series was "faithful to a fault" and "seems to have no point at all."

'LAW & ORDER' REVIVAL ADDS CAMRYN MANHEIM

Los Angeles | Agencies

The Emmy winner joins Anthony Anderson, Jeffrey Donovan and Hugh Dancy in the NBC series.

The Law & Order revival at NBC has completed the police half of its core cast.

Camryn Manheim has joined the series, which premieres Feb. 24 and which NBC is referring to as its 21st season - which will come almost 12 years after the original's run ended in 2010. The Emmy winner will play NYPD Lt. Kate Dixon, head of the homicide detective squad that typically anchors the first half of an L&O episode.

Anthony Anderson - who will reprise his role as Detective Kevin Bernard from seasons 18-20 of the series - and Jeffrey Donovan will play the two lead detectives in the revival, which premieres Feb. 24. Hugh Dancy will play an assistant district attorney. Manheim will fill the lieutenant's role that was played by S. Epatha Merkerson for most of the original series' run. Merkerson is now a regular on Chicago Med, which like the Law & Order franchise is produced by Dick Wolf. The role won't be Manheim's first time in the Law & Order-verse. She guest starred in three episodes of the mothership in the early 1990s.

Manheim won an Emmy in 1998 for her work on ABC's The Practice and has been nominated two other times. Her recent TV credits include Big Shot on Disney+, ABC's Stumptown and Syfy's The Magicians. She's repped by Framework Entertainment, UTA and Goodman Genow.



ABSOLUTE PIC OF THE DAY



Camila Cabello



SPLIT CAPTAINCY IN INDIAN CRICKET: HOPE THE CHANGING ROOM DOESN'T GET DIVIDED, SAYS BRAD HOGG

Sydney | Agencies

Former Australian left-arm spinner Brad Hogg feels split captaincy in the Indian cricket team setup is a good move and hoped that when the team tours South Africa for a Test and ODI series, the changing room doesn't get divided because of the division of roles between Virat Kohli and Rohit Sharma.

The Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) gave the complete white-ball captaincy to Rohit Sharma, who successfully led India to a 3-0 win over New Zealand in the T20I series at home recently, while Kohli will remain captain of the Test side. Days before the start of the ICC T20 World Cup in the UAE, Kohli had announced that he would step down as India's T20 captain after the showpiece tournament, but said he would like to continue as the ODI and Test skipper.

But ahead of the Test and ODI series against South Africa beginning on December 26, the BCCI announced that Sharma will also lead the ODI side, with experts saying the move will not go down well with Kohli.



However, Hogg, who played seven Tests and 123 ODIs for Australia, said on his YouTube channel on Saturday that the two skippers should take it as a "blessing in disguise." "I just think this is a good move; Kohli should embrace it and relax about the whole situation because it will help him to concentrate on leading the Test team. And you have a white-ball captain... so Rohit Sharma would be concentrating on the team he wants in

white-ball and Kohli can relax about the whole situation and concentrate on Test cricket," said Hogg. "I just hope that when they go on their next tour (South Africa) then the change room is not separated by this little slight division between these particular two players in the leadership role. Both of them are going to embrace it, get into the change room and jell and move forward and take Indian cricket forward," opined the former spinner.

The former Australian cricketer said that it will take a lot of pressure off Kohli's shoulders and help him relax. "It takes a lot of pressure off, the media hype off the field all of a sudden that relaxes Kohli; he's only got to be worried about the Test environment and Rohit just got to concentrate on white-ball environment. Plus all the sponsorship commitments and all the other commitments off the field. I think it's going to be better for Kohli; it's gonna improve his performances which have slightly dropped off in the last couple of years when he has been under pressure captaining all three teams. So, I think it's a blessing in disguise." Hogg also said that with the kind of depth India has in batting and bowling, it won't be surprising if they dominate world cricket for at least five years.

"Indian cricket, with the depth they've got in their batting and bowling, should dominate world cricket over the next five years at least. It's only going to be a little bit of disruption (split captaincy) between a couple of players that unsettles the network between the group, (but) that will turn things around," felt Hogg.

Pressure will always be there when you play for India: Rohit Sharma

Team Absolute | New Delhi

India's new white-ball captain Rohit Sharma on Sunday said that pressure will always be there on any cricketer who plays for the 'Men in Blue', adding that individuals should focus on their own performances rather than outside noise.

Rohit was handed the T20I captaincy following Virat Kohli's decision to step down from the role post the culmination of the T20 World Cup. Later, the Mumbai batsman was also appointed India's ODI captain as selectors did not want to have two different leaders for the T20I and ODI teams.

The star opener said that there will be pressure but he will try to focus on his job.

"When you are playing cricket for India, the pressure is always going to be high. The pressure is always going to be there. There will be a lot of people talking about it; be it positively or negatively," said Rohit in a video shared by BCCI on Twitter.

"For me, personally, as a cricketer, it is important to focus on my job and not to focus on what people are talking about because you can't control that. I have said it a million times and I will keep repeating it," he added.

The 34-year-old also mentioned that he wants the players to share a strong bond when they play for India and focus only on what they have in their hands rather than pay attention to the outside noise.

"This is also the same message to the team and the team understands that when we are



playing a high-profile tournament, there will be a lot of talk. It's just important for us to focus on what we have in hand; which is to go and win games and play the way you are known for. So, those talks outside are immaterial," the batsman said.

"What we think of each other is more important. You want to share a strong bond between players and that is what will help us achieve the goal we want to," he concluded.

Rohit's stint as the Test vice-captain will start in South Africa where they will play 3 Tests from December 26. He will then lead India in the subsequent 3-match ODI series from January 19.

Vijay Hazare:

Venkatesh Iyer hits 2nd ton in four days, set to be picked for SA ODIs

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Continuing his rich vein of form, Madhya Pradesh's Venkatesh Iyer on Sunday smashed his second hundred century in four days in the ongoing Vijay Hazare Trophy 2021-22 tournament, strengthening his chances for the spot in India's squad for three-match ODI series in South Africa.

The 26-year-old played a blistering knock of 151 off 113 balls, with eight fours and 10 sixes against Chandigarh in Rajkot, taking his tournament tally to 348 runs in four innings.

In the previous match against Uttarakhand, he scored a brisk 49-ball 71 and bagged a couple of crucial wickets with his medium pace. Before that encounter, Iyer smashed 112 off 84 balls against Kerala and also produced an excellent bowling figure of 3/55.

The talented all-rounder has been batting in the middle order for Madhya Pradesh, which clearly shows the role in which the team India management is looking for him to fill in. He is being seen as a replacement for Hardik Pandya, who is still struggling with his injury issues. Earlier, Iyer had a great outing in the second leg of IPL 2021 for KKR, scoring a total



of 370 runs in top-order. His batting and medium pace impressed selectors and the youngster was rewarded with a maiden call-up for the T20I home series against New Zealand, in which he played all three T20I matches. Apart from Iyer, Maharashtra's Ruturaj Gaikwad, who won the Orange Cap in the IPL 2021 after amassing 635 runs, has also smashed three hundred in the ongoing Vijay Hazare Trophy tournament. While BCCI has announced Rohit Sharma as the next captain of the ODI side, the squad for the series against Proteas is yet to be finalised. And after their impactful performances, both Iyer and Gaikwad are all set to board that flight to South Africa.

Pune | Agencies

Raushan Kumar struck five goals as Hockey Bengal overwhelmed Goans Hockey 8-0 on the second day of the 11th Hockey India Senior Men National Championship, Pimpri Chinchwad near here on Sunday.

In Pool F's second game of the day, Hockey Bengal thrashed Goans Hockey 8-0, with Raushan Kumar scoring an incredible five goals (2', 4', 53', 54', 59') in the encounter. Abhishek Pratap Singh (10', 22') and Santosh Baxla (19') were also among the goals as Bengal wrapped up a comfortable three points.

Hockey Odisha, Uttar Pradesh Hockey, Hockey Jharkhand, Telangana Hockey, Hockey Bihar, and Hockey Maharashtra were the other teams that registered victories on Day 2 of the competition here.

In the day's opener, Odisha took on Hockey Gujarat in a Pool F encounter. After a feisty and goalless first quarter, Odisha took control of the game, notching up a comfortable 8-0 victory. Goals for Odisha were scored by Sushil Dhanwar (17', 26', 36'), Prakash Barla (34', 57'), Patras Turkey (39', 52') and Mangra Bhengra (48').

Uttar Pradesh Hockey beat Kerala Hockey 9-0 in the Pool G opener courtesy of a brace each from Mohammad Amir Khan (6', 24'), Ajay Yadav (37',



46'), and Faraz Mohd (48', 52'). Goals for Uttar Pradesh were also scored by Mohd Saif Khan (10'), Deepak Patel (22'), and Mohd Sadiq (50'). Among the big winners of the day were Hockey Jharkhand, who beat Assam Hockey 11-0 in Pool G. Hat tricks by Noyel Topno (14', 25', 31') and Jen Soreng (24', 40', 49') and goals Rajendra Oram (10', 43'), Amardeep Samrat Kujur (44', 59') and Sandeep Minj (5') ensured Jharkhand rode out a comfortable victory. Pool A's first game of the day saw Telangana Hockey beat Hockey Himachal 13-1. Surya Prakash Potluri (24', 26', 31', 51') started with four goals, while Feroz Bin Farhaji (8', 23', 52') and Sandeep Subedar (19, 35', 48') each bagged a hat-trick. Ranjit Chand Bhavani (30'), Mahesh Reddy Rela (33'), and

Rekham Vivek (59') also chipped in with a goal each for Telangana Hockey. Whereas, Hockey Himachal's goal was scored by Divyam Grover in the 43rd minute.

In a hugely entertaining, back and forth encounter in Pool H, Hockey Bihar beat Chhattisgarh Hockey 4-2. Bihar established an early two-goal cushion courtesy of goals from Subash Sanga (4') and Samuel Topno (7'). In the 11th minute though Chhattisgarh halted what threatened to turn into a rout with a goal of their own via Nirmalkar Shukdev. From thereon though Bihar shifted gears, captain Mukesh Lakra slotting home a penalty stroke in the 12th minute before Sanga scored his second of the game in the 25th minute to extend their lead. Ali Arbaz scored Chhattisgarh's second goal in the 60th minute but it proved too little too late as Bihar took home the points. In the final game of the day, Hockey Maharashtra trounced Hockey Mizoram 18-0 in their Pool H encounter. Goals for Captain Taleb Shah lead the charge for Maharashtra scoring an incredible eight goals (20', 29', 34', 37', 42', 47', 51', 59') in the game. Prapat Kishanrao Shinde (53', 59', 60', 60'), Venkatesh Kenche (23', 23'), Mohd Mizamuddin (28', 36'), Darshan Vibhav Gawkar (2') and Ajit Bharat Shinde (14') were the other goalscorers for Maharashtra.

OLYMPIAN ARVIND SINGH WINS GOLD IN ASIAN ROWING C'SHIP

Ban Chang (Thailand) | Agencies

India's Arvind Singh won the gold in the Lightweight Men's Single Sculls at the Asian Rowing Championship on Sunday, beating his opponents with a time of 7:55.942.

India ended the championship on a strong note, winning three more silver medals as the rowers continued their medal spree on the final day on Sunday.

India bagged silver medals in Men's Lightweight Double Sculls, Men's Quadruple Sculls and in Men's Coxless Four. Thus, India ended the competition with two gold and four silver medals.

Arvind Singh, who finished 11th at the Tokyo Olympics along with Arjun Lal Jat in the Men's Lightweight Double Sculls -- which is India's best performance ever at the Olympics -- finished first in the field that included competitors from Uzbekistan, China, Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand.



It was an excellent race by Arvind as he got the better of Uzbek and Chinese scullers for the gold medal. In Lightweight Men's Double

Sculls, India's Ashish Phugat and Sukhjinder Singh won the silver with a time of 7:12.568. In the next race in Men's

Quadruple Sculls, India's Bittu Singh, Jakar Khan, Manjeet Kumar and Sukhmeet Singh won silver in a photo-finish, losing the gold by 0.523 seconds. They clocked a time of 6:33.083.

In Men's Coxless Fours final, India's Jasveer Singh, Punit Kumar, Gurmeet Singh and Charanjeet Singh won the silver by clocking 6:51.661.

The Indian women rowers, who figured in the Quadruple Sculls and Light Weight Double Sculls finals, finished fifth in their respective races.

"Overall, another good performance by India. Congratulations and best wishes to all the rowers, coaches, support staff and backend administrators, who managed the team all these months. A special mention to Ismail Baig, who consistently, year on year, turns out sterling results for India," said MV Sriram, secretary general of Rowing Federation of India in a release in Sunday.

SAFF U-19 Women's C'ship: Want to give players equal opportunities, says coach Ambrose

Dhaka | Agencies

Ahead of the Indian women team's opening match against Sri Lanka in the SAFF U-19 Women's Championship, head coach Alex Ambrose on Sunday said that he wants to give his players equal opportunities in this tournament, set to be played here.

"We will be giving all players the opportunity to play and experience the importance of development through tournaments like these. All teams are equally competitive and we need to work hard to make a good mark in the tournament," said coach Ambrose on the eve of the match. "There is absolutely no pressure on the players. We



just want them to perform well, enjoy their football and have a good championship," he added. Looking forward to a competitive tournament, the coach said, "We have a very young squad and there are eleven players in this squad who were in the U-15 team that won the SAFF U-15 Championship". Ambrose also expressed his views on developing the youth structure in the game of football and how important it is for the players

and said, "Developing the players is more important in youth tournaments than winning the match." With the AFC Asian Cup 2022 knocking at the door, the coach wants football to grow. "India is hosting the AFC Asian Cup in 2022 and the FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup and we want football to grow in this part of the region so that matches are competitive and more spectators come to the stadium," he concluded.

National car racing C'ships: Two wins for Chirag; Arjun, Charen

Chennai | Agencies

Chennai, Dec 12 (IANS) Coimbatore veteran Arjun Balu (Race Concepts) and Chirag Ghorpade, the schoolboy from Bengaluru, won their second races respectively in the second round of the MMSRC fmsci Indian National Car Racing Championship 2021 with dominating performances in their respective categories on a rain-marred Sunday at the Madras Motor Race Track (MMRT) here.

Chirag, who had won the first race in the MRF F1600 category on Saturday, topped the third on Sunday of the triple-header after local teenager Dillon Zachariaiah took the honours in the second outing for his maiden win in this class.

Balu, the 47-year old ace from Coimbatore, brought into play all his vast experience to complete a double in the premier Indian Touring Cars class after starting from P3 (reverse grid) i a "wet ace" following a bout of heavy showers in the afternoon. Having won the first race on Saturday, Balu, started behind two Rayo Racing polos of Anandith Reddy and Jeet Jhabakah and, played a waiting game before getting a jump on the two Hyderabad drivers for another brilliant win.

Earlier, Dillon, 18, drove a fine race starting from the second position on the reverse grid, to notch his maiden win in



this class from a fast-finishing Suriyavarathan (Coimbatore) and Viswas Vijayaraj (Nellore).

Late in the evening, with light fast fading, Ghorpade

scored a lights-to-flag win to complete a double, in a race that was reduced to six laps from the scheduled eight. Agra's Shahan Ali Mohsin, who finished second, was later docked a

10-second penalty for speeding in the pitlane which pushed him to sixth. The penalty moved Nellore's Viswas Vijayaraj to second place and Ashwin Datta (Chennai) to third.

Also achieving a double was 'oimbatore's private entrant Charen Chandran who won both the races in the Super Stock category while Rithvik Thomas (Race Concepts) from Bengaluru ended Deepak Ravikumar's (Performance Racing) winning streak in the Indian Junior Touring Cars class by winning Race-2 today.

Salem's Sai Sanjay and Ritesh Rai (Chennai) won a race apiece in the Volkswagen Polo category double-header after surviving tight finishes. The seasoned Chennai driver Raghul Rangasamy (Quest Motorsport) took the honours in the Formula LGB 1300 race from P5 start ahead of Bengaluru's Tjijl Rao (Momentum Motorsport) and Viswas Vijayaraj (DTS Racing) from Nellore.

Mumbai's Fahad Kutty completed a profitable weekend as he won two of the three races and finished on the podium in the other in the MRF Saloon Cars category.

The day's programme was delayed due to bursts of rains overnight and this morning, but the track dried up quickly later in bright sunshine. The post-lunch session too was affected by sudden showers leading to some races being declared as "wet race."



Elli AvrRam joins cast of 'Ganapath' with Tiger Shroff

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The Tiger Shroff-starrer 'Ganapath' has made another addition to its cast in the form of Elli AvrRam.

The actress is into martial arts, which makes her entry into the cast even more interesting given that Tiger is known for acrobatics and martial arts skills.

The actress, who earlier finished shooting the half schedule of her film 'Goodbye' co-starring Amitabh Bachchan, Neena Gupta and Rashmika Mandanna, said, "This year has been really grateful for me. After the success of my song 'Har Funn Maula' and now 'Goodbye',

I'm very excited to begin my journey for 'Ganapath'. I'm currently in London shooting for it. It's a really cool script and I'm very excited to be a part of the film."

The film directed by Vikas Bahl ('Queen'), also stars Kriti Sanon and Rashin Rahman, and is produced by Jacky Bhagnani, Vashu Bhagnani and Deepshikha Deshmukh under the banners of Good Co. Production and Pooja Entertainment. Earlier, Elli also bagged the Best Actress honour at the Stockholm City Film Festival for her Swedish short film 'With You', which touched upon the topic of mental health awareness and childhood trauma.



AMAR UPADHYAY ON MOULDING HIS CAREER AS AN ACTOR ON TV

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actor Amar Upadhyay, who made his stint as Mihir Virani in 'Kyunkii Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi' and is currently seen as Virendra Pratap Singh in 'Molki', spoke about how he has shaped his career so far in these 28 years.

Amar said: "Not only since 'Kyunkii Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi' but even before that, the love of my audiences has been intact since 'Dekh Bhai Dekh' days! And I am fortunate that I got to do the number one show of that era and that was my first performance and I used to be scared of going on the set, there were all huge names like Farida Jalal, Sushma Seth etc even the director was one of the most prestigious directors of the industry."

He also recalled how scared he was on the first day of his shoot. "I remember my first day at the shoot, and I was sweating in an AC hall. I remember we were shooting in a huge set up and I was wearing a suit but all of them made me really comfortable. My first episode went on air, my mother was travelling in the train and there she overheard two people talking about Sahil Chachu (His character in 'Dekh Bhai Dekh')

and the show."

"She was very ecstatic to hear that. I was very young and that was the first time I had tasted success at a very young age. And after that as an actor you always want your work to be appreciated and to be seen and my aim was to gain recognition from my audiences as that is how you get more work," he added.

However, Mihir Virani has been the most prominent role of his career.

He says: "After Mihir there was no looking back! After that also today after so many years I am playing the lead character in 'Molki'. Although the pairing was odd and I was cast alongside a girl who is half my age. But deep down I was convinced about the character." "And also, because it is challenging in a way. Hindi is spoken by everyone and I have also spoken Hindi all my life but here I had to speak in the Haryanvi accent. In my previous show also, I had a Gujarati accent but because I am a Gujarati so that was comparatively easier for me. And I am really thankful to my audience who accepted me in 'Molki'," he concluded.

Amar will be soon seen playing a pivotal role in 'Bhool Bhulaiyaa 2.'



PIYA VALECHA RECOUNTS HER JOURNEY IN SHOWBIZ

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Actress Piya Valecha, who is currently seen essaying the role of a Bollywood actress Pooja Oberoi in the TV show 'Imlie', reveals how she started a career in acting even while holding an MBA degree.

She says: "I'm into acting now but many do not know I hold my MBA degree. My journey to acting was an unplanned one. I gave it a thought after I was frequently asked if I'm into modelling. I shifted to Mumbai for my internship in a bank here. I remember being a fitness freak when I joined a gym here, many people used to suggest that I try acting. And I was offered a project from which I earned a handsome amount. And that's how I gave thought to acting and started going for auditions on the weekends. I got to feature in many popular shows and I got into a full time acting career." "She previously acted in shows like, 'Chhoti Sardarni' and 'Maddam Sir - Kuch Baat Hai Kyunki Jazbaat Hai' and now she wants to continue acting.

"I faced rejection in my life after some time of my bright acting debut. That's when I was confused about my decision to quit my job as an MBA and start an acting career. I didn't have any source here in showbiz. And all my hardwork was going to waste. I was depressed with

my struggle here. But now I'm back in action. I'm getting to work with popular producers and in shows which are trending now. I wish to impress my audience with my skills and stay here for long," she added.

Piya is known for featuring in shows like 'Bahu Hamari Rajni Kant', 'Dilli Wali Thakur Gurls' and 'Baal Veer'.

'Bigg Boss 15': Salman schools male contestants



The 'Weekend ka Vaar' episode on 'Bigg Boss 15' hosted by Salman Khan will see Ayushmann Khurrana and Vaani Kapoor appearing as special guests.

Farah Khan gives a quirky task to guess the name of songs from the emojis shown to them. Ayushmann sings the popular 'Dream Girl' number in the girl's voice. The trio dances on 'Baby Ko Base Pasand Hai'.

Furthermore, Ayushmann and Vaani also witness contestants target each other in a new task under Farah's supervision.

The housemates had to point out the other contestants' problems in the house. Rajiv calls Devoleena the most adamant person and accuses her of showing favouritism towards Pratik. Devoleena calls Umar an untrustworthy person. In retaliation, Umar says: "My trust is with my friends and not with people like this." Tejaswi, on the other hand, taunts Shamita for always being dependent on others. Shamita blames Tejaswi for always using Karan for her gain. Shamita, however, blames Ritesh for not giving back Rakhi the respect that she shows him, whereas Karan accuses Nishant of playing with others' emotions. Salman schools some of the male contestants on how to treat the ladies. Karan has been constantly questioning Tejaswi's loyalty, making her feel miserable. Salman also lashes out at Umar for behaving arrogantly: "You are a doctor still you don't know how to behave properly. Do you think by behaving in this way, you will increase your numbers. Earn respect here."

SARA SMASHES SODA BOTTLES WITH BARE HANDS ON 'SA RE GA MA PA'!



Mumbai: Bollywood actress Sara Ali Khan smashed soda bottles with her bare hands on the sets of singing reality show 'Sa Re Ga Ma Pa'. Sara is appearing as a special guest along with director Aanand L. Rai. While Sara and Aanand enjoyed all the performances by the contestants in Girls vs Boys special episode, Laj and Sharad gave brilliant performances to the songs 'Jugni' and 'Mere Rashke Qamar'.

After their performances, Sara Ali Khan in a unique way promoted her movie 'Atrangi Re' that stunned everyone. She challenges Sharad to drink 20 soda bottles. Somehow, Sharad completes drinking 8 bottles and she asks Sharad to smash the bottle against his hand. She then left everyone stunned by smashing two bottles against her own hand.

Bert and Bertie talk about the importance of human qualities in superhero stories



Team Absolute | Mumbai

Marvel Studios' mini series 'Hawkeye' released last month and has been getting audience appreciation for the portrayal of its characters, the approach to storytelling and taking the narrative forward in the post-blip New York.

The show tells the story of its eponymous character 'Hawkeye' played by Jeremy Renner, who teams up with a 22-year-old skilled archer, Kate Bishop played by actor Hailee Steinfeld, to embark on a journey to unravel a criminal conspiracy.

Series director duo, Bert and Bertie, who have worked in tandem with the showrunner, Rhys Thomas, recently spoke with IANS about their experience of working with Marvel Studios, the production design of the series and the importance of keeping the human alive in superhero films. Talking about what the past year has been like for her from the show's filming, its release to the subsequent response, Bert says, "It has been an incredible adventure working with Marvel Studios, who are beyond belief when it comes to supporting a filmmaker. It was also a pleasure to work with such amazing actors all the way to seeing the final edit, now seeing it live and experiencing how much the fans love getting to know Barton and introducing Kate. It's been a great learning curve."

Explaining the idea behind the show's production design, Bertie says, "We wanted to show New York with not just the skyscrapers of Manhattan or the business district but we also wanted to show the gritty underbelly of New York, the streets of Brooklyn and the strange little apartments. Also Christmas was going to be a character in the show."

HIP-HOP STAR'S NEW SINGLE 'GET IT IN' OUT NOW

Mumbai:

After much-celebrated numbers including 'City Slums', 'US' and 'Firestarter', rapper Raja Kumari has come up with her new single 'Get It In', for those who shine their light in the dark. Penned by Sanjoy, Elvis Brown, and Grammy Award-winning songwriter Sirah, the new single high-lights living each day like it's the last.

Talking about the single, Raja Kumari said, "This song is about a battle between good and evil in your own mind and being fearless in the face of any obstacle but having fun and living in joy. I've admired people who have overcome hurdles and held their own when it seemed impossible. Here's a single that salutes their spirit."

INSTAGRAM PIC OF THE DAY



Sunny Leone