

absolute india

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K'taka govt order says no to hijab in minority institutions

HIJAB CONTROVERSY DEEPENS



Bengaluru | Agencies

In further hardening of the stand, the Karnataka government on Thursday issued a circular which says that wearing of hijab is not permitted in minority institutions run under the state government.

Secretary for Minority Welfare, Haj and Wakf Department Major P. Manivannan stated that, the interim order of the full bench of the High Court also applies to residential schools run under the Minority Welfare Department and Moulana Azad Model Schools (English medium).

All educational institutions run by the Minority Welfare Department have been ordered not to allow hijab, scarves, saffron shawls and other religious symbols in the classrooms.

The circular quoted the order, "we request the state government and all their stake-

holders to reopen the educational institutions and allow the students to return to the classes at the earliest. Pending consideration of all these petitions, we restrain all the stu-

dents regardless of their religion or faith from wearing saffron shawls (Bhagwa), scarves, hijab, religious flags or the like within the classroom, until further orders." "We

make it very clear that this order is confined to such institutions wherein the college Development Committees have prescribed the student dress/uniform." The circular mentions that it is issued after it has come to the notice that women students are attending classes in hijab. Students wearing hijab have already started questioning the authorities and staging protests as well as submitting memorandums to the concerned Deputy Commissioners across the state.

SITUATION STILL TENSE

Meanwhile, the six girls from Udipi who started the hijab protest have chosen to remain absent from the college until the final order. Meanwhile, police had a tough time as about 340 students resorted to block the road holding placards in support of wearing hijab in Hassan. A police officer warned them of action and dispersed them. A tense situation is prevailing at Saraladevi College in Bellary as hijab wearing students joined by parents refusing to go back even after several requests from college and police authorities.

Allow Muslim students to wear hijab on Fridays, K'taka HC urged

Bengaluru: Counsel appearing for students seeking to attend schools with hijab, on Thursday urged the Karnataka High Court that these students be allowed to wear hijab and attend classes on Fridays at least.

Senior advocate Vinod Kulakarni, appearing for the students, submitted that the hijab issue has created mass hysteria and mental disturbances throughout the country, and that sending poor Muslim girls out of class is against the preamble of the Constitution. At least on Fridays, and ensuing holy month of Ramzan, beginning in March, let the students be allowed to come wearing hijab, he said, quoting a Lata Mangeshkar song, "... Kuch paake khona hai, kuch khoke paana hai" (to get something you

lose, you lose something to get something) and sought court directions in this regard. "I beg with my folded hands to allow hijab on Fridays and it will avoid unnecessary controversy," he said, adding that the Quran can't be ignored and hijab is not against public order. Outside authorities have no standing and have no authority to pass orders in religious matters and beliefs, he said.

Advocate General Prabhuling Navadagi, appearing for the state government, opposed the demand, saying that if the request is considered, it is as good as considering the petitioner's application. The three judge bench, which heard the matter for the fifth consecutive day, subsequently adjourned the matter to Friday, when Navadagi will present his arguments.

Ex-NSE CEO's residence searched by I-T sleuths

RECENTLY, SEBI HAD IMPOSED A FINE OF RS 3 CRORE ON RAMAKRISHNA. SHE HAD SAID A SAGE, WHO LIVES IN HIMALAYAS, WAS GIVING HER DIRECTION AND HAD ALSO SENT HER MAILS REGARDING THE NSE. SHE QUIT THE SEBI IN DECEMBER 2016.



Team Absolute | Mumbai

emails were sent.

The Income Tax department on Thursday conducted a search operation at the residence of Chitra Ramakrishna, the former Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of National Stock Exchange (NSE).

She is alleged to have shared important information with the Yogi. "Information regarding organisational structure, dividend scenario, financial results, human resource policies and related issues, response to regulator, etc., were shared by her with Yogi," said the source.

Between 2014 and 2016 she sent emails at rigvijur-sama@outlook.com. It was

learnt that this Yogi was Subramanian, who was brought to NSE by Ramakrishna. He had access to the email ID on which the

Subramanian had been the Chief Strategic Advisor of NSE. He served there at this post between 2013 and 2015. He was given a post of Group Operating official and advisor to MD. He discharged his duty on this post between 2015 and 2016. Subramanian, who had previously been working as a mid-level manager in Balmer and Lawrie, had no exposure to the capital market. His salary was increased from Rs 15 lakh per annum to Rs 1.68 crore yearly. Later in 2017 his salary was increased to Rs 4.21 crore yearly. It was a massive salary hike which he was given at the NSE.

Now, the I-T department is scanning various transactions and digital records. They have also recorded the statements of a few of her employees.

IED found in rented Delhi home after bomb threats, hunt on for suspects

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Panic ensued after calls regarding unattended bags and bomb threats at two different places in east Delhi on Thursday, and a suspected IED was found in a house in New Seemapuri area and taken away by the NSG to be disposed off, police said.

According to a source, the incident is suspected to be linked to the Ghazipur incident, where an IED was found last month.

The house from where the device was recovered belongs to a man named Kasim and he had given it to some people who are now missing. A manhunt has been launched for them.

The first case was reported



from Shahdara area, police said. A police official said that an unidentified bag was found in Shahdara district after Delhi Police and Fire Department received a bomb threat call at 2.15 p.m.

Meanwhile, another call, about an IED, was received at New Seemapuri and people, "taking it seriously" summoned National Security Guard personnel to the spot.

A Special Cell team, which reached the spot, found a bag in the house and some suspicious articles.

The Special Cell has questioned a few persons in this connection including Kasim.

Meanwhile, the NSG put the IED into bomb defusing machine and took it to Dilshad Garden area where it was put in a hole to be destroyed.

'WILL DEMOLISH TOWER LIKE SUPERTECH': SC WARNS MUMBAI BUILDER

New Delhi: The Supreme Court on Thursday warned a Mumbai-based real estate developer that its project will meet the same fate as Noida-based Supertech's twin towers, if residents of the housing society are deprived of parking space.

A bench of Justices D.Y. Chandrachud, Surya Kant, and Vikram Nath said: "We will demolish the tower like Supertech." "It is a big fraud, the building will come down," noted the bench during the hearing. The Supreme Court in a judgment, delivered on August 31, issued directions for the demolition of Supertech twin towers in Noida. Advocates Sumedha Rao and Sudhanshu S Choudhary represented the residents of Videocon Tower "A" Co-operative Housing Society. Residents of Tower "B" also moved to the top court.

Stalin to coordinate with non-BJP CMs for national platform against BJP

Chennai | Agencies

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister and DMK leader M.K. Stalin will coordinate with non-BJP Chief Ministers and other opposition leaders, including from the Congress and the CPM, to form a national platform against the saffron party.

Stalin has already floated the All-India Federation of Social Justice, in which he invited even his political rival and AIADMK leader, O. Panneerselvam.

It may be recalled that West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had requested Stalin to take the charge in coordinating with non-BJP CMs in the country as well as non-BJP political parties, including the Congress and the CPM.



Senior DMK leader and state Water Works Minister S. Duraimurugan told reporter, "Our Chief Minister is an icon of Dravidian struggle and he has excellent rapport with almost all the national leaders. He has already commenced speaking to these leaders for a national platform against the BJP and after the urban local body polls are over on February 19, the momentum of

this coordination will increase and a national platform against the BJP will soon emerge."

Subramanian Ramaswamy, former professor of political science at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, who is also a political observer, told reporter, "Stalin is the apt choice for such coordination as he has good rapport with the Congress, CPM, CPI, and other political parties.

The Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, according to sources close to him, has already telephoned all the senior leaders, including the Chief Ministers of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Maharashtra. Sources also said that Stalin has spoken to senior leaders, including Sharad Pawar, Farooq Abdullah, Mehbooba Mufti and others.

Loan fraud: CBI grills ABG Shipyards Chairman Rishi Kamlesh Aggarwal

Team Absolute | New Delhi

In the latest development in the Rs 22,842 crore bank loan fraud, allegedly committed by ABG Shipyards, the CBI has interrogated its Chairman and main promoter Rishi Kamlesh Aggarwal at length, sources said.

Sources privy to the investigation said that Aggarwal was asked to join the investigation and record his statement.

"He responded to our summons and questioned the probe. Our team joined him for hours in connection with the case," a source told reporter. In coming days, Aggarwal will be called again as he has to be confronted with others and a few documents. The CBI, which had recently issued look out circular (LOC) against him and eight others connected to the case, had recently revealed that there were around 100

high value bank fraud cases that could not be registered due to non-accordance of specific consent by state governments where the general consent has been withdrawn.

The agency has seized incriminating documents, i.e account books of ABG Shipyards, its sale-purchase details, minutes of Board meetings, share registers, and contract files. Bank account details of ABG Shipyards and related parties have been obtained.

In the case, there are 28 banks involved in the consortium with huge amount of disbursement to the company in the way of CC loans, term loans, letters of credit, bank guarantee etc. that were given as advance by the banks. In between April 2019 to March 2020, various Banks of the consortium declared the account of ABG Shipyards as fraud.

Indian digital-first brands have \$250 bn opportunity by 2030: Report

Digital-first brands are finding it increasingly rewarding to engage with consumers in these channels and offer them a seamless, omni-channel experience.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Online shoppers in India are seeking new experiences in the age of social and video commerce and this has given digital-first brands a massive \$250 billion market opportunity by 2030, a new report has shown.

India's e-tailing gross merchandise value (GMV) reached \$53 billion in 2021, demonstrating post-Covid acceleration.

"Additionally, Indian e-tailing showed impressive growth (on-quarter) in 2021 while other global players struggled to maintain the momentum," according to the report by Bengaluru-based market research firm

RedSeer. "The success of such brands will depend on how effectively they leverage these new retail channels and how they innovate on the digital front to offer a superior omnichannel experience," Gutgutia added.

The findings suggest that consumers opt for these new-age brands for their quality (and not only price) with significantly high repurchase willingness. Multiple \$100 million revenue technology-first brands have been created already across the categories in just the past few years, with each having a unique winning playbook and first-of-their-kind business model.

"Over the 2021-30 period, we expect many more digital-first brands to scale

exponentially, supported and incubated by roll-up platforms that are building the next wave of digital-first brands for India," the report noted.

"The current B2C retail landscape is evolving rapidly with the emergence of new consumer behaviours and expectations. The rise of new retail channels, particularly video and social commerce, is further changing the way consumers shop and what they expect from brands."

Mrigank Gutgutia, Associate Partner, RedSeer

MEA OBJECTS TO SINGAPORE PM'S COMMENT ABOUT INDIAN MPS

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) has raised strong objections to Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's adverse comment about Indian Parliamentarians, taking up the matter with the Singapore High Commissioner in Delhi.

The MEA said that Loong's remarks were 'uncalled for'.

Participating in a debate in the Singapore Parliament two days ago, Loong had said that the politics around the globe is changing and people's trust in the political class is dwindling.

The electorate has started accepting it and believe that this is the new norm and nothing better can be expected. As a result, standards are lowered, confidence is destroyed, and the country suffers more, the Singapore

PM said. During a debate on the Committee of Privileges' report on complaints about untruths told by former Workers' Party lawmaker Raeesah Khan, Loong had invoked Jawaharlal Nehru to argue how a democracy should function.

But while doing so, he also stated that many parliamentarians in India face criminal cases now.

"Nehru's India has become one in which, according to media sources, over half of the Lok Sabha MPs face criminal accusations, including rape and murder. Though many of these claims are claimed to be politically motivated," Loong had said.

The 70-year-old politician said that everyone should maintain and expand the system that Singapore has inherited.



DHANKHAR INVITES MAMATA FOR TALKS AT RAJ BHAVAN

KOLKATA | Agencies

Amid the ongoing tussle between the West Bengal secretariat and the Raj Bhavan, Governor Jagdeep Dhankhar -- in an apparent effort to end the constitutional stalemate -- has invited Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee for talks at the Raj Bhavan any time next week.

However, no reaction has come from the Chief Minister's side so far. "Hon'ble CM Mamata Banerjee has been urged to make it convenient for an interaction at Raj Bhavan any time during the week ahead as lack of response to issues flagged has potential to lead to constitutional stalemate which we both are ordained by our oath to avert," Dhankhar tweeted.

Interestingly, the Chief Minister had said recently that she has blocked the Governor on Twitter. Dhankhar also uploaded a letter he had written to Banerjee in which



he wrote, "Dialogue, discussion and deliberation, particularly among constitutional functionaries, like the Chief Minister and the Governor, are quintessential to democracy and an inseparable part of constitutional governance."

"All my earnest efforts in this direction have unfortunately not fructified in view of the stance at your end. Such a scenario has potential to lead to constitutional stalemate which we both are ordained by our oath to avert." There has been no response, now for long, to issues legitimately flagged and in respect of which there is constitutional duty at your end under Article 167 of the Constitution to impart information. There are other worrisome aspects also which call for urgent consultations."

"I would, thus, urge you to respond to all issues flagged thus far at the earliest and make it convenient for an interaction at Raj Bhavan anytime during the week ahead," Dhankhar added.

Called 'Maun Mohan' by BJP but now country remembers my work: Manmohan

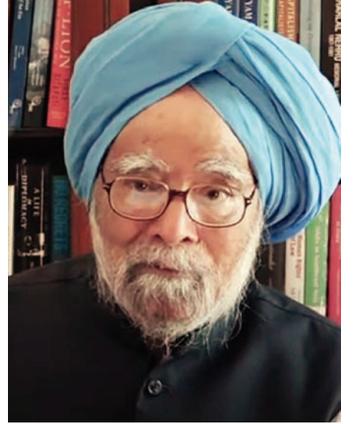
Team Absolute | New Delhi

Ahead of the assembly polls in Punjab and the remaining phase of Uttar Pradesh polls, former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has issued a video statement in which he said that he was called 'Maun Mohan' then but now the country remembers the good work done by him. He appealed to the voters of Punjab, UP and Manipur to vote for the Congress.

Manmohan Singh said, "I am satisfied that I was called 'Maun Mohan', and false allegation of corruption was levelled against the government but the nation remembers my good work and the BJP has been exposed."

He alleged that due to the wrong policy of the government, people are suffering from inflation, unemployment and in the past 7.5 years, the government is not accepting its failures but blaming the first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

The former Prime Minister is recovering from post Covid complications and could not address any rally or press conference in Punjab. He said that there is a gracefulness of the Prime Ministerial post and blaming history will not lessen the crimes of the present government. He said the Congress never politicized anything for political gains and in



adverse situation never let down the country at international level.

The former Prime Minister defended Punjab Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi and said that the BJP is trying to defame him in the name of security. Similarly, the farmers were also demonised.

Mulayam Singh Yadav campaigns for Akhilesh Yadav in Mainpuri

MAINPURI (UP) | Agencies

Samajwadi patriarch Mulayam Singh Yadav, on Thursday, campaigned for Akhilesh Yadav in Karhal in Mainpuri and asked people to ensure a big margin of victory for Akhilesh.

Addressing his first election rally, Mulayam said, "If the Samajwadi Party forms government, it will ensure jobs for the youth. If the youth does not have means of livelihood, how will they look after their families?"

He said that the Samajwadi Party always does what it says and never betrays the people.



Welcoming his father to Karhal, Akhilesh said that Mulayam's presence had given him blessings.

He asked the voters to beware of BJP which is the

'biggest liar'. Mainpuri is the parliamentary constituency of Mulayam Singh Yadav and Akhilesh is contesting his first assembly elections from Karhal in the district.

REET paper leak case: Students should not be charged for retest, says Pilot

JAIPUR | Agencies

Congress leader Sachin Pilot has demanded that the students taking the retest of the Rajasthan Eligibility Examination for Teachers (REET) exam should not be charged again.

The exam was cancelled due to paper leak. In such a situation, the fee should not be charged again from the youth who have taken the examination earlier, the former deputy chief minister said during his Jodhpur visit on Wednesday night to attend a wedding. Speaking to media here, he said: "The candidates who have appeared for the exam before should not be charged again. Also, the matter should be investigated with transparency. Everyone seems worried about the REET exam. BJP is trying to do politics on the



issue. But the state government seems very serious about it. Further, necessary strict steps are being taken so that such incidents do not happen in future. The entire system related to the employment of

youth should be transparent so that they have faith in the government," he said. On elections being held in five states, he said: "The fear of defeat is clearly visible among the BJP leaders. It is clear that the Yogi government shall be given a farewell." Pilot further said that Pilot said that the Congress will perform brilliantly in the proposed elections in five states. "We will form a government in Punjab, Uttarakhand and Goa whereas in UP, it cannot be said how many seats we will get, but it is certain that the Congress will see a great performance there. "Our vote share will increase significantly. Priyanka Gandhi has continuously worked among the people living in UP whereas SP-BSP remained inactive for a long time. Congress will definitely get the benefit out of this," he added. Pilot was given a rousing welcome in Jodhpur, which is the home town of Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot.

Centre resumes biometric system for attendance for its employees, work from home stopped

Team Absolute | New Delhi

The Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) has resumed the biometric system for office attendance and stopped the system of 'work from home' for every employee of the Central government's ministries and departments.

In an office memorandum issued on February 16, 2022, the DoPT said while referring to the earlier office memorandum on January 31, 2022, "Since the period of suspension of biometric attendance is over on 15.02.2022, all the officers, officials working in this Department are required to mark their attendance in the Aadhaar Enabled Biometric Attendance Control System (AEBAS) with effect from the February 16, 2022. The latest order also said that while marking their attendance in AEBAS, all officers, officials will follow the preventive measures to contain the spread of Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19). Soon after the spread of Covid-19 during the third phase this year, the Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and



Pension had issued a direction to all the Central Ministries and Departments to reduce the office attendance by 50 per cent. The officers and staff to ensure strict compliance of Covid-appropriate behaviour like frequent washing of hands, sanitisation, wearing face mask, face cover and observing social distancing all the time. Earlier, the pregnant women employees and Divyang employees were

exempted from attending offices while the physical attendance of the government servants below the level of Under Secretary was restricted to 50 per cent of the actual strength and the remaining 50 per cent was working from home with the instruction that those working from home would remain available on telephone and other electronic means of communications at all times.

'HIGH QUALITY' FAKE CURRENCY SEIZED IN UP, 2 HELD

Saharanpur: The Uttar Pradesh Police has seized fake Indian currency notes (FICN) of Rs 500 and Rs 2,000 denomination with face value of Rs 28,000 from the Nakud region of Saharanpur.

Two people have been arrested in the matter. The currency notes are said to be of high quality.

Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) Saharanpur, Akash Tomar, said, "These are not normal printouts but high-quality notes which can be easily passed off as real ones. There are reports of similar seizures in other districts as well. I am in touch with my counterpart in Rae Bareilly district where fake currencies were also seized. Preliminary investigation has revealed that the currency may have links to Pakistan and Bangladesh."

According to him, a youth was picked up by police after he was found carrying 20 such currency notes of Rs 500 each in Rae Bareilly on Sunday.

Four people were arrested in the matter and booked under the NSA.

Violent clashes in UP district after molestation incident

MORADABAD (UP) | Agencies

Violent clashes erupted in Moondapande village of the district after some boys allegedly molested girls of another community. One person was injured in the clashes that took place on Wednesday evening. He was rushed to the district hospital.

Superintendent of police (city) of Moradabad, Akhilesh Bhaduria, said that a case has been registered against seven of the accused.

Additional forces have been deployed in the area to ensure peace.

According to reports, some teenage girls had gone to the fields when nearly eight to nine boys stood in their way, passing comments.

The matter took a turn for the worse when the girls' relatives reached the spot. One of the accused was caught and beaten up. Since the boys and the girls belonged to two different villages and separate communities, people



from both sides came face-to-face, which led to a clash.

The matter was settled once police reached the spot. A probe revealed that the accused had started misbehaving when the girls protested. The younger brother of one of the girls was also beaten up by the accused, police said. Tension prevailed after the incident. SP Babloo Kumar reached the spot along with the police force. Station House Officer (SHO) of Moondapande, Sanjay Panchal, told reporters: "The police reached the spot in time and arrested two of the accused."

'On your responsibility': Calcutta HC allows abortion for 34 week pregnant woman

In an unprecedented decision, the Calcutta High Court, considering the post-delivery complications of the mother and the child, on Thursday allowed a 34 weeks pregnant woman to undergo abortion.

KOLKATA | Agencies

So far, the Supreme Court allowed abortion only upto 24 weeks.

However, the High Court made it clear that neither it nor the doctors will take the responsibility for the woman during abortion.

The incident came to the fore when a couple of north Kolkata applied to the state government for abortion. The middle-aged woman, who had a late pregnancy, not only had some physical complications but medical reports showed that the foetus had some problems on the spinal cord which might lead to further medical complications after the birth. The woman was 34 weeks pregnant and



prayed for abortion, else it would lead to medical complications both for the mother and the child. As abortion after 24 weeks was virtually

impossible so she was denied permission by the state Medical Department and the couple was forced to move the Calcutta High Court.

ACB arrests executive magistrate for demanding bribe in J&K



SRINAGAR | Agencies

The Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) on Thursday arrested an executive magistrate of Chuker area in Jammu and Kashmir's Baramulla district, for demanding bribe.

According to the ACB, the accused, Habibullah Mir, had demanded a bribe of Rs 30,000 from the complainant.

"ACB received a complaint, wherein the complainant had alleged that Habibullah Mir who is the Naib Tehsildar of Chuker in Baramulla's Kunzer tensil, had demanded a bribe of Rs. 30,000 for allowing him to cut down a walnut tree.

"The complainant approached Habibullah Mir for the removal of a walnut tree with an application which was moved through Tehsildar Kunzer. The tree, as per the complainant, was very old. It was about to fall anytime. There were apprehensions of the tree causing damage to the house or family members of the complainant.

"He, therefore, approached authorities for seeking permission to cut down the tree. The concerned Naib Tehsildar, Habibullah Mir, after visiting the spot, asked for a bribe of Rs. 30,000.

"The amount was later settled at Rs. 20,000. The complainant had even deposited Rs. 10,000 in Habibullah's account as per his direction," the ACB statement said.

In Jammu and Kashmir, walnut trees are protected under the law of the land and its felling in the union territory is illegal unless lawfully authorised by the competent authority.

Several women injured in police crackdown on illegal sand mining in Bihar's Gaya



PATNA | Agencies

Several villagers including women were injured when police attacked them for illegally mining sand from a river bank in Bihar's Gaya district.

A chilling video of the incident which took place on Tuesday went viral on social media in which women are seen sitting at the bank of Morhar river in Ahatpur village with their hands tied. They were reportedly mining sand from the river bank.

The police said, the villagers started pelting stones at the mining department

officials and police team who went their to stop the illegal sand mining. The police then resorted to lathicharge and fired tear gas shells to overpower the villagers.

Local police claimed that nine cops and around two dozen villagers sustained injuries in the clash.

However, according to sources, it is only the villagers who received injuries after a brutal assault launched by the police. They tied the hands of villagers and attacked them with sticks. Meanwhile, when

contacted by reporter, the Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP), Gaya, refused to comment on the incident.

CHANGE OF NAME

I No. 4579365P L/NK PAITHANE RAVI RAJU presently residing at ta chikhali Katoda Buldhana, Gangaalgaon, Maharashtra, Pin-443201 have changed my son's name from PRATIK to PRATIK RAVI PAITHANE vide affidavit No. 74AA313892 and date 16 Feb 2022.

CHANGE OF NAME

I PATEL KAMINIBEN KAMLESHBHAI is legally wife of No. 4572776L/Hav PATEL KAMLESH presently residing at Bolundra, Arvalli, state: Gujarat Pin : 383250 have changed my name from PATEL KAMINIBEN to PATEL KAMINIBEN KAMLESHBHAI and my DOB from 23/02/1982 to 01/01/1984 vide affidavit No. 74AA313875 and date 12 Feb 2022.



MADHYA PRADESH HC STAYS 27% OBC RESERVATION IN MPPSC 2019 EXAMS

The principal bench of Madhya Pradesh High Court has ordered to restrain the state Public Service Commission (PSC) from giving a 27 per cent reservation quota to the Other Backward Class (OBC) in the civil services exams.

Team Absolute | Bhopal

The principal bench of Madhya Pradesh High Court has ordered to restrain the state Public Service Commission (PSC) from giving a 27 per cent reservation quota to the Other Backward Class (OBC) in the civil services exams.

The court has also issued notices to the commission and general administration department (GAD) in response to a petition challenging MPPSC's decision to give 27 per cent reservation to OBCs while deciding the results of the civil services main examination 2019.

Petitioner Niharika Tiwari, a resident of Betul district in the state, is a candidate in the same exam, whose results were declared on December 31, 2021. In declaring the list of candidates eligible for interview, MPPSC had given 27 per cent reservation to OBCs as per a notification



issued by the GAD on August 14, 2021. The petitioner contended that, if 27 per cent OBC quota is given, it raises the total reservation in MP (SCs and STs included) to 63 per cent,

which is in violation of the law. Advocate Aditya Sanghi appearing for the petitioner said that a Constitution bench of the Supreme Court in its landmark judgment in

the Indra Sawhney case had capped caste-based reservation at a maximum 50 per cent, which is breached if OBC quota is hiked to 27 per cent. On the basis of the Constitution bench order, the SC recently struck down reservation given to the Maratha community, he said.

Sanghi also pointed out that there are several petitions pending in court against the 27 per cent OBC quota enacted in MP and the court has stayed the Act, but MPPSC has declared the 2019 main exam results with 27 per cent OBC reservation. Following preliminary hearing in the case, the bench of Chief Justice RV Malimath and Justice MS Bhatti in its interim order restrained MPPSC from giving 27 per cent reservation and issued notices to MPPSC and general administration department, the respondents in the case. The next hearing is on February 21.

Congress to kickstart digital membership drive in MP soon

► THE MADHYA PRADESH UNIT OF CONGRESS IS SET TO RUN MEMBERSHIP CAMPAIGNS THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIUM SOON WITH AN AIM OF CONNECTING WITH MORE PEOPLE.

Team Absolute | Bhopal

The Congress' Madhya Pradesh unit is set to run membership campaigns through digital medium soon with an aim of connecting with more people.

For this, the party will appoint a Chief Enroller and an Enroller at district, block and booth levels to ensure 100 per cent authenticity of the members.

A senior party leader in the state claimed that the Congress' "digital membership" will be quite different from the BJP's "missed call" membership. The All India Congress Committee (AICC) membership in-charge K Raju is scheduled to visit Bhopal on Thursday to chalk



out a detailed plan for this digital membership drive.

"A complete plan for digital membership drive will be prepared in the direction of a meeting today. After authentication of the new members joining the party, they will be given a certificate from the AICC," a senior Congress leader said. Along with digital membership drive, the Congress in Madhya Pradesh is set to start election processes for districts and block level posts. Though the Assembly polls in the state are likely in October-

November 2023, the Congress has started its preparations. Under party's ongoing 'ghar chalo ghar chalo', state Congress chief Kamal Nath has started targeting the Shivraj Singh Chohan government on various issues.

Under this month-long campaign, the party leader and workers are tasked to reach maximum possible homes across the state to create direct contact.

Under the campaign, Kamal Nath is scheduled to visit Rewa next week.

Corres worth Water supply Schemes Approved

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Public Health Engineering Department has issued approval for 1339 rural tap water supply schemes (retrofitting) costing Rs 1050 crore 77 lakh 4 thousand under Jal Jeevan Mission. In this, work of 1327 water supply schemes will be done by Public Health Engineering Department and work of 12 water supply schemes will be done by Jal Nigam.

Under the Jal Jeevan Mission, work is being done to provide water to the rural population of the entire state through tap connections. So far, more than 46 lakh 56 thousand families have been given the benefit of the mission in the state. Among the proposals for which approval has been issued for water supply schemes

include 76 of Bhopal, Raisen 49, Vidisha 97, Hoshangabad 262, Betul 53, Harda 67, Shajapur 27, Ujjain 131, Dhar 27, Dewas 49, Jabua 231, Ashoknagar one, Bhind 12, Sagar 8, Chhatrapur 5, Guna 22, Gwalior 119, Sheopur 13, Morena 13, Dindori 25, Chhindwara 17 and 4 retrofitting schemes of Seoni district are included. In Jal Jeevan Mission, approval has also been given for 79 schemes of inter-village (retrofitting) in Damehdi and Mohankhed group water supply schemes of Anuppur and Chhindwara respectively. Approval of Rs 25 crore 84 lakh 75 thousand has been issued for 12 group tap water schemes (retrofitting) of 9 districts Balaghat, Neemuch, Ujjain, Barwani, Dewas, Morena, Datia, Niwari and Khargone implemented by Madhya Pradesh Jal Nigam Maryadit.

CM PAYS TRIBUTE TO VASUDEV BALWANT PHADKE

Bhopal: Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan paid homage to Adi revolutionary Vasudev Balwant Phadke on his death anniversary. Chouhan paid floral tributes by garlanding his picture in the auditorium at his residence office.

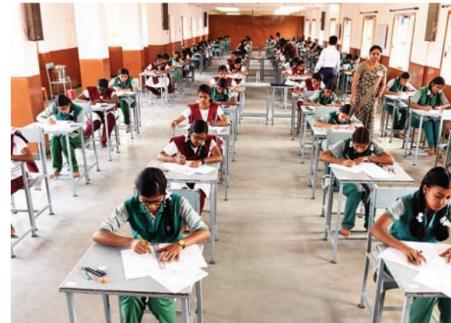
Vasudev Balwant Phadke was born on November 4, 1845 in Kelshi village of Konkan. He was moved to see the pathetic condition of the farmers during the British period. Vasudev Balwant Phadke was the first revolutionary of the Indian freedom struggle. He followed the armed path to attain freedom. By uniting the Koli, Bhil and Dhangad communities, he formed a revolutionary organisation named "Ramoshi". They robbed the wealthy British merchants to collect money for the freedom struggle. Phadke was captured in Bijapur on 20 July 1879. He was prosecuted and awarded punishment of Kala Pani. Adi revolutionary Shri Vasudev Balwant Phadke died in prison on 17 February 1883. Chouhan has tweeted that - "I pay floral tributes at the feet of the great freedom fighter Vasudev Balwant Phadke ji, who forced the British government's sleep to vanish by forming an armed organisation 'Ramoshi' to break the shackles of subjugation of Mother Bharati. You will always be a hero to future generations."

MPBSE MP Board Class 12 exams begin in offline mode

► THE CLASS 12 EXAMS OF THE MADHYA PRADESH BOARD OF SECONDARY EDUCATION BEGAN OFFLINE ON THURSDAY FOR OVER SEVEN LAKH STUDENTS BY FOLLOWING COVID-19-APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR, AN OFFICIAL SAID.

Team Absolute | Bhopal

The Class 12 exams of the Madhya Pradesh Board of Secondary



Education (MPBSE) began offline on Thursday for over seven lakh students by following COVID-19-appropriate behaviour, an official said.

During the last academic session, the exams were not conducted physically in the

wake of the coronavirus pandemic and students were evaluated on the basis of their previous results and marks of internal tests.

With the COVID-19 cases now declining, the students are this time appearing for the exams at various centres

set up across the state, the education board's public relations officer Mukesh Malviya said. Special arrangements have been made for students having flu-like symptoms to write their papers in a separate room, the official said. The students and other staff are following COVID-19-appropriate behaviour and adhering to the rule of wearing mask and other guidelines, he said. A total of 7,14,932 students, including some speech and hearing-impaired children, have enrolled for the exams, which will conclude on March 12, the official said.

The exams are being conducted at 3,586 centres, of which 287 have been identified as sensitive and 357 as hyper-sensitive, he added.

Farmers get amount of Rs 1.75 lakh crore in 22 months MADHYA PRADESH GOVERNMENT IS FARMERS' GOVERNMENT: CM

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has said that the state government is a farmer friendly government. The government stands with the farmers in every crisis, either it a natural calamity or a crisis like floods. It is never too late to provide the relief to the farmers after the damage to their crops. Even today, an amount of Rs 202 crore 90 lakh has been transferred to the account of one lakh 46 thousand 101 farmers for the damage caused to the crops of farmers in 26 districts of the state due to hailstorm in the month of January. In the last nearly two years, a total of about Rs. 1.75 lakh crore has been given to farmers under Kisan Samman Nidhi, zero percent interest loan and all other farmer-welfare schemes.

Chouhan was addressing the farmers through video conference today after transferring the relief amount from his residence.

Chief Minister said that after the loss of crop due to hailstorm last month, survey work was done within time-limit with the cooperation of Revenue



Department, District Administration and other departments. The list of affected farmers in the villages was prepared and displayed publicly.

Arrangements were made to give relief amount to each affected farmer. For all these works, all concerned officers-employees, public representatives, farmers and social workers deserve to be congratulated. Madhya Pradesh government will always stand with the farmer in his good and bad times. It is the responsibility of the government to encourage all sections including farmers by giving them necessary help on need. No stone will be left unturned in this.

Chouhan said that we have celebrated the birth anniversary of Sant Ravidas ji yesterday. We remember his verses, in which he has said - "Aisa Chahun raaj mein, jahan mile saban ko anna, chhota badon sab sam basai, Ravidas rahe sada prasanna." Chief Minister said that there should be such a state in which food is available to every human being. The state government is working in this direction, benefiting everyone, so that everyone should get food without discrimination. Food grains are also being distributed to about 5 crore families in the state.

CM PLANTED COCONUT SAPLING

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan planted a coconut sapling in the residence premises on Thursday. Chouhan has been planting saplings every day since the last Narmada Jayanti as part of his resolve. Chief Minister is inspiring people to plant saplings and inculcate the activities of environmental protection in their habit to save the earth and the coming generation from the dangers of climate change. The coconut sapling planted today is not only important from a religious point of view, but is also useful for health.



CM EXTENDS GOOD WISHES TO CLASS 12 STUDENTS

Bhopal: Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has extended good wishes to the Class 12 students for the examination. Chouhan has given a message to the students by tweeting - "The Board of Secondary Education class 12th examinations are starting from today, my best wishes to all my dear sons and daughters of the state who are appearing in this examination. Study, move ahead and build a golden future for yourself and the society."

This is my wish." Keeping in view the Covid, Chouhan has also appealed to the students to follow Corona appropriate behaviour in the examination centre. Chief Minister Shri Chouhan said that students should wear masks, keep sanitizing their hands and maintain a safe distance from each other.

CM EXPRESSED GRIEF OVER KUSHINAGAR ACCIDENT

Bhopal: Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has expressed grief over the accident tragedy occurred in Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh. Chouhan has prayed to God to grant peace to the departed souls at his lotus feet and strength to the family members to bear this deep sorrow and for the quick recovery of the injured.

MP Constantly Innovating In New Fields

- PM Modi to Inaugurate the Bio-CNG Plant in Indore on February 19
- Asia's Largest Bio CNG Plant
- Trenching Ground of Bhanpur of Bhopal Has Also Been Renovated
- Cafeteria Will Also Start In Bhopal
- New Projects in the State Being Operated With Public Cooperation

Team Absolute | Bhopal

Indore city has continuously raised its flag in the field of sanitation by getting the award as the cleanest city in the country. This city is now going to make a new achievement. On Saturday, February 19, Prime Minister Narendra

Modi will virtually inaugurate Asia's largest Bio-CNG plant to be built at the trenching ground of Indore city. Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan will also attend the programme. The preparations for the launch-programme are being finalised. Wet waste which was once a problem for everyone has become an achievement for Indore today due to which the state has got this boon in the form of Bio-CNG plant. The whole country will see this success of Indore, which is considered to be the largest city and commercial capital of the state. Mission directors of Swachh Bharat Mission from about 20 states of the country will also participate in the dedication programme of Bio-CNG Plant. Apart from this, other senior officials of the central government and states will also be present in this programme. All these officers will also visit those places of Indore city



where special work is being done in the field of cleanliness. Necessary arrangements are being made to ensure that there is no inconvenience to the guests. Efforts are also being made to

include women of Self-Help Groups, who have played a significant role in the field of cleanliness in habitations and remote areas. Social organisations, business organisations and other dignitaries, with whose cooperation Indore has made a special place in the country in cleanliness, will participate in this programme. This Bio CNG plant will be operated from 100% wet waste. This achievement has been made due to the guidance and determination of the state government, the activity of the local adminis-

tration and the passion of the citizens of Indore to do something good. In the survey of the company by which this Bio-CNG plant is being set up, it was found that more than 99 percent segregation purity has been found in the sample of the waste received from Indore, which was not found in the sample taken from any other state of the country. About 400 buses can be run daily with the 18 thousand KG gas generated from the Bio-CNG plant, which will not only help in environmental protection but will also make relative improvement in the air quality. Madhya Pradesh is making a distinct identity by presenting examples of excellent works in new areas. The trenching ground of Bhanpur in Bhopal has also taken a new shape. Last year, Chouhan had seen a site developed instead of a garbage dump in Bhanpur area. He inspected the development of the campus and the proposed garden construction in this area. A cafeteria is also about to start here. Chief Minister had said, "I would come here soon to have coffee."



EDITOR'S SPECS

Opposition uniting against BJP?

Ahead of Presidential election, chief ministers of various states are teaming up to counter the BJP. The latest initiative has been taken by Telangana Chief Minister K. Chandrashekhara Rao (KCR) who will be meeting with Maharashtra Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray on Sunday. The Maharashtra Chief Minister is dead against BJP and KCR, who backed the BJP on various issues in Parliament, is off late a fringe sitter. According to the Chief Minister's Office (CMO), the Maharashtra Chief Minister extended his full support to the efforts of the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) chief to fight "anti-people" policies of the BJP government at the Centre and for federal justice. The Shiv Sena leader was all praise for KCR's fight and told him that to protect the country from "divisive" forces, he has raised his voice at the right time. Not only the Mumbai meet is important but KCR is also meeting M.K. Stalin, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister and Pinarayi Vijayan, the Chief Minister of Kerala. Even Mamata Banerjee is likely to travel to Hyderabad to meet KCR. He even received a call from former Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda who offered full support to him. While KCR's new initiative is to save the fort as BJP is expanding its base in the Telangana and he was forced to take on the BJP due to domestic political compulsion as the party has been bailing out the BJP on key legislations in the upper house since 2014. The southern states and Maharashtra account for more than 200 Lok Sabha seats which could be crucial in the next Lok Sabha polls and also the states account for large electoral college as Parliament and states account half of it and if regional parties team up, it's unlikely that BJP will have a way in the choice of President elections. The outcome of five states which include UP will also impact the elections.

CONTINUING SUFFERING OF GUJJARS & BAKARWALS

Javed Beigh

Around mid of last month, officials of Jammu Development Authority (JDA) carried out demolition of homes of nearly a dozen Gujjar & Bakarwal families in Roop Nagar, Sector 6 of Jammu city, which sparked off protests all over Jammu & Kashmir. Gujjar families allege that JDA authorities came suddenly without any notice along with a heavy contingent of police and paramilitary forces carrying machine guns and bulldozers and demolished all houses. The JDA on its part said that it has retrieved 41 kanal of "prime land" in Roop Nagar, which was "illegally" occupied by Gujjar & Bakarwal families.

It is pertinent to mention that this is not the first time that a demolition drive was targeted at Gujjar & Bakarwal community in Jammu and Kashmir. In January last year 2021, a similar demolition drive was carried out in Gujjar colonies in Bathindi and Sunjwan areas of Jammu city and in Pahalgam in South Kashmir. Gujjar & Bakarwals are one of the largest Scheduled Tribe communities of India and amongst the most marginalised people in the union territory of Jammu and Kashmir. The historically persecuted community of Gujjar & Bakarwal have unfortunately faced racial and religious discrimination in both Kashmir valley and Jammu region. In Kashmir valley, even though Gujjar & Bakarwal community followed the same majority Islam faith as most Kashmiri Muslims, that did not unfortunately earn them any respect from wider Kashmiri community and Gujjar & Bakarwals continued to live on margins of Kashmiri society on mountains and forests surrounding plains of Kashmir valley region. The historic racial discrimination that Gujjars and Bakarwals faced in Kashmir valley has changed little in modern times. Similarly, Gujjar & Bakarwal community has also been victim of religious persecution in Jammu region, where members of the community have been on the receiving end of communal violence in large numbers since 1947. It goes to the credit of the Gujjar & Bakarwal community that despite facing so much persecution, discrimination and dehumanisation, the community has persevered against all odds. The members of Gujjar & Bakarwal community embraced education in a big way that has brought social, educational



and economic emancipation among a large section of Gujjar & Bakarwal community. Today, literacy has risen in the younger generation of Gujjar & Bakarwals and many young men and women from the community are pursuing higher education in larger numbers not only in Jammu and Kashmir but also all over India. Every year, an increasing number of young men and women from the community qualify for the civil service exam beating even youth from Kashmir valley and Jammu region. What has happened with poor Gujjar & Bakarwal families in Roop Nagar in Jammu city, however, is an example of harassment that the community continues to face till today. The Gujjar & Bakarwal community is the most peace loving, hardworking and nationalistic communities in Jammu and Kashmir, which has always supported the idea of India and yet it is distressing to see the community facing discrimination and harassment at the hands of both communal and casteist forces as well as the administration. The community has been specifically at the receiving end of communal elements in Jammu region, where incidences of attacks on Gujjar & Bakarwal hamlets have increased over last few years under the garb of accusations of the members of Gujjar & Bakarwal community "illegally" occupying government forest land. The low point for the community reached when the rape and murder of a young girl from the community caught the national attention few years back.

The two million strong community is also facing threat of dilution to its Scheduled Tribe status in the union territory of J&K from upper caste Potohari speaking Muslims of Jammu region, who are lobbying intensely for their inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe category of Jammu & Kashmir as "Pahari Muslims", the impact of which will shrink reservation opportunities for Gujjar & Bakarwal community in schools, colleges and other government educational institutes of J&K as well as in UT's government jobs.

The grievances of the community of Gujjar & Bakarwals that has always stood for peace in Jammu and Kashmir and supported its integration with the union of India should be listened to with full compassion and empathy. Jammu region, which has given shelter to many diverse communities, including Punjabi Hindu refugees from West Pakistan, Nepalis, Kashmiri Pandits, etc., has also embraced a large number of Gujjar & Bakarwal families, who have strong social, cultural and economic bonds with the people of Jammu region. The issues of so-called "illegal encroachment" shouldn't be allowed to become tools of harassment in the hands of officials both in Jammu region and Kashmir valley. Members of Gujjar & Bakarwal community have alleged that they face similar eviction threats from various government authorities even in Kashmir valley, where their dwellings in forest areas are often subjected to demoli-

tion drives by forest officials in the name of clearing "illegally occupied state land". Whether it is Kashmir valley or Jammu region, the Gujjar and Bakarwal community has been facing consistent discrimination and harassment, which is very unfortunate. The administration in both Jammu region and Kashmir valley must show empathy with the community and listen to their grievances in a sympathetic manner. The members of Gujjar & Bakarwal community are victims of historic racial and casteist discrimination, who have risen against all odds without indulging in any violence or unlawful activity. It should be the duty and endeavour of the administration of the Jammu & Kashmir UT to reach out to the members of Gujjar and Bakarwal community and resolve all their genuine and legitimate grievances in a timely and just manner. The people of Jammu and Kashmir owe a special responsibility to our brothers and sisters from Gujjar and Bakarwal community to amend for historic injustice done to them. I hope that officials of JDA will also listen to legitimate concerns of the families of poor Gujjar & Bakarwals, whose houses were demolished last month and rehabilitate them properly.

(Javed Beigh is General Secretary People's Democratic Front (Secular). The views expressed are personal)

international

Ukraine celebrates Day of Unity amid crisis

Kiev | Agencies

Ukkraine celebrated the national Day of Unity to consolidate people amid the looming crisis in the country.

In a televised address to the nation on Wednesday, President Volodymyr Zelensky said that Ukrainians are different, but they all are united by the desire to live in peace, happiness and with their loved ones, reports Xinhua news agency.

"We are all united by one desire: to live in peace, happily, as one family, with children, with parents. And we have every right to all this. Because we are at home, we are in Ukraine," Zelensky said.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal said that Ukrainians mark the Day of Unity to show the "friends and enemies" that Ukraine is united even in hard times. "Ukrainians have rejected their differences and are uniting in the face of possible threats. For a successful



future. We know how to do it, and our unity is our best weapon," Shmyhal wrote on his official Telegram channel.

Within the framework of the celebrations, Ukrainian enthusiasts unfolded a 200-metre-long national flag at the Olympic stadium in Kiev.

The blue-and-yellow flags were waved on government buildings, private houses and cars across the country to show the unity of the people.

Children in many schools and

kindergartens were asked to wear vyshyvanka, traditional Ukrainian ethnic clothing decorated with embroidery patterns.

In addition, the Infrastructure Ministry launched the Train of Unity from Ukraine's western city of Rakhiv to the eastern city of Mariupol that carried the flag through different regions across the country.

The ambassadors of the European Union countries laid flowers on the Wall of Remembrance in Kiev to mark the Day of Unity, showing their support for Ukraine, and paying tribute to all who have fallen in the conflict in eastern Ukraine since 2014. Some Western media had claimed that Russia could invade Ukraine on February 16.

Moscow, which has amassed well over 100,000 troops near the border, has repeatedly denied any plans to invade Ukraine. Earlier on Wednesday, Defence Minister Olexiy Reznikov said that the situation on the Ukrainian borders remains stable.

AT LEAST 78 PEOPLE KILLED IN LANDSLIDES, FLOODS IN BRAZIL

Sao Paulo: At least 78 people were killed by landslides, heavy rains and floods in the southeast Brazilian municipality of Petropolis in Rio de Janeiro state, the local civil defence authorities has said.

Heavy rains on Tuesday in the mountainous city, located 68 km from the city of Rio de Janeiro, caused more than 50 landslides, after it received in six hours more rain than expected for the whole month, leading to the mayor's office decreeing a state of public disaster, Xinhua news agency reported. "It is a war situation, cars on top of houses, mud, and people looking for their loved ones," Governor of Rio de Janeiro state Claudio Castro said on Wednesday. Civil defence Lieutenant Colonel Gil Keperns detailed during a press conference that the number of missing people remains unknown.

"Residents are looking for their loved ones under the mud," said the officer in reference to the landslide in Morro da Oficina, a hill where about 80 houses were swept away.

Sydney beaches closed after 1st fatal shark attack in 60 yrs

Sydney | Agencies

More than a dozen of popular surf beaches in Sydney were closed on Thursday, following the first fatal shark attack in the Australian city's waters in almost 60 years.

Shocked witnesses said the middle-aged man, whose name has yet to be released, was mauled by a three-metre-great white shark about 10 to 15 metres from the Little Bay shoreline on Wednesday afternoon, reports Xinhua news agency.

Locals told TV broadcaster Nine News that the area had been considered "one of the safest places for ocean swimmers". "We heard a yell and turned around," an onlooker told the media. "It looked like a car had landed in the water, a big splash then the shark was chomping at the body and there was blood everywhere."

Four ambulance crews, a rescue helicopter, water police and surf lifesavers rushed to the horrific scene but were unable to save the victim. "Unfortunately this person had suffered catastrophic injuries as a result of the attack and there were nothing paramedics could do when we arrived on the scene," Inspector Lucky



Phrachanh from New South Wales (NSW) Ambulance told reporters.

Some human remains and parts of a wetsuit were recovered about 90 minutes later, and the search for more resumed on Thursday with drones monitoring from above while lifesavers on jet-skis scoured the waters. Although it was the first lethal attack in Sydney waters since 1963, there has been a steady rise in shark attacks in recent decades, according to one of the nation's leading shark experts Phoebe Meagher, a wildlife biologist from Sydney's Taronga Zoo.

TWO-THIRDS OF AMERICANS SAY US ON WRONG TRACK: POLL

Washington: Two-thirds of Americans say that the US is on the wrong track, a new survey has revealed.

A new Politico-Morning Consult poll published on Wednesday found only 34 per cent of the respondents believe the country is going in the right direction, reports Xinhua news agency. Forty-three per cent of Americans say they "strongly approve" or "somewhat approve" of the job Joe Biden is doing as the US President, while roughly 53 per cent note they "somewhat disapprove" or "strongly disapprove" of it, according to the poll.

It also showed only 39 per cent of Americans say they approve of Biden's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, while 41 per cent give it a poor rating, with 16 per cent calling it "just fair". A growing number of states in the country, which has reported the world's highest coronavirus infections and deaths, have eased Covid-19 restrictions amid a decline in daily new cases after a surge driven by the Omicron variant. "Omicron cases are declining, and we are all cautiously optimistic about the trajectory we are on," Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told a virtual briefing on Wednesday. "We want to remain vigilant to do all we can so that this trajectory continues."



Global Covid caseload tops 417.4 mn

Washington | Agencies

The global coronavirus caseload has topped 417.4 million, while the deaths have surged to more than 5.84 million and vaccinations to over 10.25 billion, according to Johns Hopkins University.

In its latest update on Thursday morning, the University's Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) revealed that the current global caseload and the death toll stood at 417,467,901 and 5,849,166, respectively, while the total number of vaccine doses administered has increased to 10,257,109,696.

The US continues to be the worst-hit country with the world's highest number of cases and deaths at 78,169,874 and 928,490, according to the CSSE.

The second worst hit country in terms of cases is India (42,723,558 infections and 509,872 deaths), followed by Brazil (27,819,996 infections and 641,096 deaths).

The other countries with over 5 million cases are France (22,130,264), the UK (18,575,733), Russia (14,445,698), Turkey (13,173,859), Germany (12,927,635), Italy (12,265,343), Spain (10,744,394), Argentina (8,783,208), Iran (6,876,565), Colombia (6,026,988), the Netherlands (5,995,889), Poland (5,434,424) and Mexico (5,321,744),



the CSSE figures showed. The nations with a death toll of over 100,000 are Russia (335,521), Mexico (313,608), Peru (208,622), the UK (160,599), Italy (151,962), Indonesia (145,622), Colombia (137,439), France (136,856), Iran (134,238), Argentina (124,765), Germany (120,537), Ukraine (110,427) and Poland (108,887).

'HEZBOLLAH CAN PRODUCE PRECISION MISSILES, DRONES'

Beirut: Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah said that for the first time, the Lebanon-based group has the ability to turn thousands of rockets into precision missiles and produce drones inside the country.



"We have been producing drones in Lebanon for a long time, and whoever wants to buy them, submit an order," Xinhua news agency quoted Nasrallah as saying in a televised speech on Wednesday. Iranian experts helped Hezbollah to transform rockets into precision missiles, Nasrallah said, adding that his group has also increased its anti-drone capabilities which led to a decline in Israeli drone overflights.

Earlier this month, Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz had signed an administrative order to seize the assets of three Lebanese companies that allegedly supplied materials to Hezbollah on manufacturing precision missiles.

Meanwhile, Gantz vowed to continue offering humanitarian assistance to Lebanese citizens while acting resolutely in the face of the Iranian precision missile project operating from the heart of the nation.



ELECTION FOR MAHARASHTRA ASSEMBLY SPEAKER IN FIRST WEEK OF BUDGET SESSION: CONGRESS

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The election for the post of Maharashtra Legislative Assembly speaker will be held in the first week of the budget session starting here early next month, state Congress president Nana Patole said.

Talking to reporters at the MPCC head office here, Patole said as daily coronavirus cases are declining in the state, the Congress, a constituent of the ruling MVA alliance, will be holding 'janta darbars' (a forum for addressing people's grievances) after March 10.

Congress ministers will tour districts across the state and hold 'janta darbars' to solve the problems of people, he said. Janta darbars of ministers will also be organised at the state Congress head office in Mumbai, said Patole, who is also an MLA.

"After March 10, the work of the government and the party will be separated and it will be made more public-centric," he said.

A meeting was held at Tilak



Bhavan on Wednesday of all Congress ministers, MLAs and candidates who contested Lok Sabha and Assembly elections previously on Congress ticket. The meeting was presided over by Patole. Former Union minister Pallam Raju was also present during the

meeting. A discussion was held regarding digital membership drive and the current political situation in the state, Patole said.

In December last year, the Maharashtra government deferred its decision to hold the election for the speaker's post to avoid a con-

frontation with the Governor. Patole, however, said he doesn't think there will be any problem during the election.

"The election will be held in the first week of the budget session. Once the election programme is finalised, party leaders will announce the name of the candidate," he said.

The budget session of the state legislature will start from March 3. The speaker's post is lying vacant since February last year after Patole, who was elected to the constitutional position in end-2019, resigned to take charge as the state Congress chief. Patole asserted that no matter how much pressure the BJP government at the Centre tries to exert by "blackmailing" the opposition parties by using probe agencies like the ED, CBI, Income Tax, they cannot overthrow the Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government in the state.

Patole said all the three MVA partners (Shiv Sena, Congress, NCP) will unitedly fight against the "oppressive" tactics of the Centre and not succumb to the pressures put by the central agencies.

PM to dedicate 2 additional railway lines connecting Thane and Diva to nation

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will virtually dedicate two additional railway lines connecting Thane and Diva to the nation on February 18.

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will virtually dedicate two additional railway lines connecting Thane and Diva to the nation on February 18.

The Prime Minister will also flag off two suburban trains of the Mumbai Suburban Railway, followed by his address on the occasion.

Kalyan is the main junction of Central Railway and the traffic coming from north side and southern side of the country merge at Kalyan and moves towards CSMT (Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj



Terminus). Of the four tracks between Kalyan and CSTM, two tracks were used for slow local trains and two tracks for fast local, Mail Express and Goods trains. To segregate suburban and long distance trains, two additional tracks were planned.

"The two additional railway lines connecting Thane and Diva have been built at

the cost of Rs 620 crore and feature 1.4 kilometre long rail flyover, three major bridges, 21 minor bridges. These lines will significantly remove the interference of long distance train's traffic with suburban train's traffic in Mumbai. These lines will also enable the introduction of 36 new suburban trains in the city," Prime Minister's Office (PMO) said in a statement.

NPCI to deploy UPI payments platform in Nepal, 1st outside India

The international arm of the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) on Thursday announced to deploy Unified Payments Interface (UPI) in Nepal to bolster interoperable real-time person-to-person (P2P), person to merchant (P2M) and potential cross-border P2P remittances between Nepal and India.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The international arm of the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) on Thursday announced to deploy Unified Payments Interface (UPI) in Nepal to bolster interoperable real-time person-to-person (P2P), person to merchant (P2M) and potential cross-border P2P remittances between Nepal and India.

Nepal is the first country outside India to adopt UPI as the payments platform, driving the digitalisation of cash transactions. The NPCI International Payments Limited (NIPL), the global arm of the NPCI joined hands with the Gateway Payments Service Pvt Ltd, an authorised Payment System Operators in Nepal, and Manam Infotech Private Limited to deploy UPI in the country. "The partnership

will enable consumers within Nepal to transact swiftly using state-of-the-art UPI platform and deliver a seamless user experience. We are confident that this initiative will stand as a testimony to NIPL's technological capabilities and vision of scaling our unique offerings globally," said Ritesh Shukla, CEO of NIPL. It will also enable the way forward for real-time cross-border P2P remittances between Nepal and India. In 2021, UPI enabled 39 billion financial transactions amounting to commerce worth \$940 billion, which is equivalent to approximately 31 per cent of India's GDP. "The same UPI service has created a significant positive impact in India in terms of the country's digital payment transformation. We expect UPI in Nepal would play a pivotal role in transforming the digital economy of the country and dreams of building a less-cash society," said Rajesh Prasad Manandhar, CEO of GPS. Mobile penetration of over 135 per cent, with 65 per cent of the population using smartphones, provides a bedrock for seamless replication of the digital revolution in India to be replicated in Nepal. Over the next few months, all three companies will work closely together to deploy UPI in Nepal, along with all the functionalities and features presently available in India. We believe this partnership will eliminate all the barriers of payment transformation within Nepal and across the border thereby transforming the regional economy," said Naga Babu Ramineni, Director of Manam.

Maharashtra Thermal Power Station Worker Killed In Tiger Attack

On Wednesday night, the victim, Bhojraj Meshram, was returning from work when a tiger attacked him and dragged him into the jungle, range forest officer Rahul Karekar said.

Chandrapur | Agencies

A 59-year-old contractual worker of the Chandrapur Super Thermal Power Station was killed in a tiger attack in Maharashtra, an official said on Thursday.

In the recent past, three to four tigers, as well as some leopards and bears were sighted in a jungle near the thermal power station here, according to sources.

On Wednesday night, the victim, Bhojraj Meshram, was returning from work when a tiger attacked him and dragged him into the jungle, range forest officer Rahul Karekar said. After being alerted, forest officials reached the spot. The body was later shifted to the civil hospital for postmortem. The family of the victim was given an initial compensation of Rs 20,000 (out of the total Rs 15 lakh), the official said.

The remaining compensation will be paid after completion of the due



formalities, he added. On Tuesday, a tiger was spotted by some people

near the thermal power plant, triggering panic among its workers.

Minister of State for Energy Prajakt Tanpure had then directed Chandrapur collector to conduct a meeting with officials of the thermal power station, forest, police departments and civic commissioner to resolve the matter. On Thursday, a meeting was held at the office of the chief conservator of forests here to discuss the issue.

Notably, the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve is located in Chandrapur district. State Board of Wildlife member Bandu Dhotre said three to four tigers have been sighted in a jungle near the thermal power station in the recent past.

It has been observed that the natural habitat of tigers has changed following the availability of prey base in the jungle near the thermal power station and the area also provides a safe hideout to the wild animals, he said. Dhotre said incidents of man-animal conflict will increase in the area if proper steps to control it are not taken.

Veteran Shiv Sena leader and ex-minister Sudhir Joshi passes away

Veteran Shiv Sena leader and ex-minister Sudhir Joshi -- kin of former Lok Sabha Speaker Manohar Joshi -- passed away following prolonged illness here on Thursday, a party official said.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

Veteran Shiv Sena leader and ex-minister Sudhir Joshi -- kin of former Lok Sabha Speaker Manohar Joshi -- passed away following prolonged illness here on Thursday, a party official said. Joshi was 81 and had recently conquered Covid-19 to return home a few days ago from the Jaslok Hospital.

A prominent leader of Sena's 'old guard' from its inception, Joshi was unwell since the past few weeks, suffering from heart and related ailments. He breathed his last on Thursday afternoon.

Aggressive and a go-getter, Joshi was among the closest confidantes of Shiv Sena founder-patriarch, the late Balasaheb Thackeray, for many years in the fledgling days of the Shiv Sena that was attempting to carve its niche in state politics.

In 1973, he created history by becoming the youngest and only the second Shiv Sena Mayor of Mumbai, after which the party grew in leaps and bounds in city politics, now ruling in city politics, the BrihanMumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) uninterrupted for nearly three

decades. In 1995, when the first Shiv Sena-BJP government assumed office, Joshi joined his cousin and the then first party Chief Minister Manohar Joshi's cabinet as Revenue and Education Minister. However, after having several health issues, he voluntarily took a back seat in active politics around 1999. During his heydays, Balasaheb Thackeray had entrusted him with key tasks in the growing party with responsibilities such as President of the powerful All India Cabin Crew Association, various banks and insurance sector unions.

He also headed and guided the critical Shantik Lokadhikar Samiti, youth in government and private sectors, earning huge support among the 'sons of the soil'.

Bird flu confirmed in Maharashtra after poultry deaths at Thane farm

Animal husbandry commissioner says arrangements for culling 23,800 birds have been made as per protocol and efforts are on to understand the virus's transmission route.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The Maharashtra government on Thursday confirmed a bird flu outbreak in the state as poultry birds at a Thane-based farm died after being infected with the avian influenza A(H5N1) virus, and urged people not to panic.

According to animal husbandry commissioner Sachindra Pratap Singh, there were approximately 200 poultry birds at the farm in Velhevali in Thane district's Shahapur tehsil. When a few of the birds died on February 2, 5 and 10, the farm did not initially report the deaths. After it reported the deaths on February 10, samples were collected on February 11 and 13 and assessed at the animal husbandry department's disease investigation section in Pune. The samples were also sent to the Indian Council for Agricultural Research's National



Institute of High-Security Animal Diseases in Bhopal.

"We got confirmation last night that the birds were infected with avian influenza," Singh told the Indian Express. While there is no lake or pond around the village that can attract migratory birds, he said department officials were trying to understand the route of transmission. "Awareness has brought to us real-time information - and a team of officials has been sent to the spot to assess the situation," he said, adding that there was no need to panic because the officials were on alert to report any unusual mortality in birds. Singh said that con-

tainment measures had been taken within a one-kilometre radius of the farm and that 23,800 birds counted. "Arrangements for culling have been made as per protocol. Sanitization measures are also in place," Singh said. "All movement has been stopped so that nothing can escape that zone."

A bird flu outbreak was earlier reported at a poultry research farm in Bihar, according to the World Organisation for Animal Health. This is the second year running that Maharashtra has reported avian influenza. Between December 2020 and March 2021, the state reported the disease while the first bird flu outbreak was in 2006 in Nandurbar, which was the first in the country as well.

As per protocol, all poultry birds and eggs within a one-kilometre radius of the affected area have to be destroyed. During the last outbreak, Maharashtra culled more than 10 lakh birds and destroyed more than 60 lakh eggs. Poultry feed of around 83,000 kg was also destroyed to contain the spread of the virus. Poultry farmers were given Rs 3 crore in compensation. The industry suffered massive losses as consumers stopped eating chicken and eggs, although properly cooked chicken is safe for consumption.

India's first water taxi connecting Mumbai east coast with mainland sets sail

The long-awaited water taxi services linking Mumbai's east coast with the mainland in Navi Mumbai and other locations -- the first of its kind in India -- was inaugurated on Thursday by Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray in the presence of Union Shipping Minister Sarbananda Sonowal.

Team Absolute | Mumbai

The long-awaited water taxi services linking Mumbai's east coast with the mainland in Navi Mumbai and other locations -- the first of its kind in India -- was inaugurated on Thursday by Chief Minister Uddhav Thackeray in the presence of Union Shipping

Minister Sarbananda Sonowal. While Thackeray inaugurated the new Belapur Jetty, Sonowal formally flagged off the water taxi services with Deputy CM Ajit Pawar, Urban Development Minister Eknath Shinde, Ports Minister Aslam Shaikh, MoS Ports Abdul Sattar, Mumbai Port Trust Chairman Rajiv Jalota, Maharashtra Maritime Board CEO Amit Saini, Thane Collector Rajesh Narvekar, local elected representatives and other dignitaries.

Expressing gratitude to the Centre for prioritising the country's first water taxi here, Thackeray said that it will go a long way in improving connectivity with Mumbai along with the network of roads, flyovers, subways, the upcoming Mumbai Trans Harbour Link and other mega-infrastructure projects. "The country's first railway service was started by the British between Mumbai and Thane before it

quickly spread all over India. The city always sets a trend that is emulated by the rest of the country, after Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj ruled over the seas," said Thackeray. The water taxi service will not only benefit the people in travelling quickly -- from the present 90-100 minutes by road to 40-45 minutes by the sea -- but also give a fillip to tourist places like Elephanta Island, Kanhoji Angre Isle and other places on the mainland in the Konkan, besides spurring the local economy as more routes will be added in the near future. It would also give an option to the commuters coming to Mumbai from different parts of the Mumbai Metropolitan Region and help ease of commuting in and around the country's commercial capital, he said. Sonowal said that besides the water taxi and Belapur Jetty, the Centre is making efforts to develop various infrastructure

projects in all coastal areas of the country under the Sagarmala Project. "We are making efforts to provide better services to the people in the coasts, accelerate the cycle of economic development, generate employment, ease congestion on roads, etc. We plan to have more jetties in the Mumbai harbour area and depending on the public response, another jetty will be constructed here," Sonowal said. The Union Minister said that under the Sagarmala initiative, 131 projects worth Rs 1.05 lakh crore are earmarked for Maharashtra with financial assistance of Rs 278 crore to 46 projects since the state has huge potential for urban water transportation in Palghar, Thane, Mumbai, Raigad, Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg coastal districts. As per the officials, the work on Belapur Jetty started in January 2019 and was completed in September 2021 at a cost of Rs 8.37 crore with state.

Pune accounts for 25% of Covid-19 infections in Maharashtra

Across Maharashtra, there has been over 60 per cent reduction in new infections in the week (February 9-15) as against the previous week.5

Team Absolute | Mumbai

While there has been a definite reduction in new Covid-19 infections, Pune, however, accounts for 24.81 per cent of the cases in Maharashtra. Nagpur accounts for 8.12 per cent while Mumbai accounts for 7.30 per cent of the infections in the state.

Across the state, there has been over 60 per cent reduction in new infections in the week (February 9-15) as against the previous week. In this week, there were 31,503 cases while in the week Feb 2-8, there were 80,762 infections. In Pune district, around 7,816 new infections were detected in the week Feb 9-15 as against 22,719 cases in the week February 2-8. This shows a more than 65 per cent reduction in new infections. Nagpur reported 2,810 new infections between Feb 9-15 as against the previous week where



10,095 cases were detected. Ahmednagar and Buldhana too reported a decline in new infections according to the state health department report that was presented at the cabinet meeting on February 16.

Pune's Covid-19 weekly positivity rate is now less than 10 per cent while there are three districts which has a weekly positivity rate between 15 to 18 per cent. These include Buldhana, Gadchiroli and Amravati. The state's weekly positivity rate is 3.99 per cent and there are at least 13 districts whose average is less than that of Maharashtra including Mumbai and Thane. In Pune, the Covid weekly positivity rate is 7.99 per cent while districts of Nashik, Satara, Kolhapur Sangli and Sindhudurg are between 4 and 6 per cent, respectively.



KERI RUSSELL IN 'THE DIPLOMAT'

Actress Keri Russell has been cast in the lead role of the upcoming Netflix series 'The Diplomat'.

Los Angeles | Agencies

The series was ordered at the streamer in January. In the series, in the midst of an international crisis, a career diplomat lands in a high-profile job she's unsuited for, with tectonic implications for her marriage and her political future, reports variety.com.

Russell received three consecutive Emmy nominations and two Golden Globe nominations for best actress in a drama series for her starring role in the espionage series 'The Americans' The show aired for six seasons and 75 episodes on the basic cabler.

She also recently appeared in 'Star Wars: Rise of Skywalker' in the role of Zorii Bliss. Other recent feature credits include 'Free State of Jones', 'Dawn of the Planet of the Apes', and 'Antlers'.

Russell is best known for her starring role in the 'Felicity'. She played the title role in that series for its entire four season run, with Russell winning a Golden Globe for the show in 1999.

Sharon Stone: 'Basic Instinct' gave me a backbone

Hollywood star Sharon Stone says she learned "how to have a spine" after her iconic role in the 1992 movie 'Basic Instinct'.

Los Angeles | Agencies

Stone told Instyle: "I was 32 when I got the part of Catherine Tramell in 'Basic Instinct'. It was probably as late as you could be in your career without a big break. But from the moment I read the script, I knew I was the right person for the role. It was an intellectually complex part, and I felt like I had a real grasp on it."

Stone, who only made \$500,000 on the picture while her co-star Michael Douglas took home \$14 million, and made sure she was given the option to "keep the clothes" in her contract, femalefirst.co.uk.

She said: "People thought I was crazy, but the truth is I wasn't getting paid much compared to my male co-star, so keeping my costumes was a really smart thing to do."

The 'Catwoman' star said that she was asked to lose her knickers before filming the movie's famous interrogation scene as it was "reflecting the light".

Stone said: "The cinematographer told me that they couldn't see anything.



In those days, the monitors were much less sophisticated than they are now, so even when they played it back for me, I didn't see any issues."

Ryan Reynolds quashes rumours about Deadpool appearing in 'Multiverse of Madness'

Los Angeles | Agencies

Hollywood star Ryan Reynolds has put all rumours to rest with regards to his Deadpool character appearing in the upcoming Marvel Studios' film 'Doctor



Strange in the Multiverse of Madness', reports Variety. The actor told Variety that he's "not really in the movie".

However, as a respite to the fans of the merc with a mouth, he has confirmed that the third part of 'Deadpool' is "coming along".

Ryan also spoke with regards to 'The Adam Project', where he stars as the titular character, a fighter pilot in 2050 who befriends his 12-year-old self

played by Newcomer Walker Scobell when he travels back in time to 2022. The film serves as the reunion between Reynolds and director Shawn Levy with whom the former worked in 'Free Guy'. Mark Ruffalo and Jennifer Garner will play Adam's parents. In addition, it also stars Zoe Saldana and Catherine Keener. Talking about the film, Reynolds told Variety: "It felt like one of those big wish fulfillment movies with huge stakes and high concept, but it was really about something very personal as well, which is sort of what I loved about movies in the '80s -- what I loved about 'E.T.' and 'Back to the Future', and anything that (Steven Spielberg's) Amblin did... 'Goonies'.



Matthew McConaughey wants to appear in 'Magic Mike 3'

Matthew McConaughey, who appeared in the first part of comedy-drama 'Magic Mike', is still open to working in the third instalment of Channing Tatum's stripper franchise, reports Variety.

Los Angeles | Agencies

Matthew had earlier given a miss to the film's 2015 sequel 'Magic Mike XXL', is still waiting for his phone to ring about 'Magic Mike's Last Dance'. McConaughey jokingly said, "Channing Tatum, call me, bro! I haven't heard from ya!" when he was asked by Variety if he'll be back in the role of strip club owner Dallas.

"I don't know," McConaughey said. "I'd

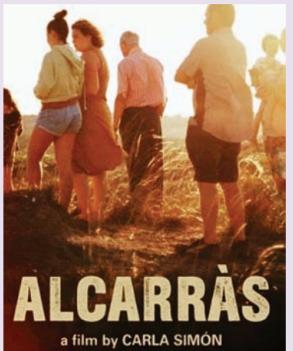
have to read (the script) first. It was a helluva lot of fun doing the first one." Tatum had announced in November that 'Magic Mike's Last Dance' directed by Steven Soderbergh, will be released on HBO Max. The film is all set to go on floors next month in London and Italy. Confirming the news on Twitter, Tatum had shared a picture of his script with the caption: "Well world, looks like Mike Lane's tapping back in."

SPANISH FILM 'ALCARRÉS' WINS GOLDEN BEAR AT BERLIN FILM FESTIVAL

Los Angeles | Agencies

Spanish director Carla Simen has won the Golden Bear, the top prize at the Berlin Film Festival, for her second feature 'Alcarrés', a moving drama about a Catalan farming family facing eviction from their land. She received the prize from jury president M. Night Shyamalan, capping a strong night for female filmmakers.

'Alcarrés' was one of the last Competition titles to unspool at the festival, but emerged as a hot favourite for the Bear following yesterday's premiere, with unanimous critical adoration for her unassuming but emotionally stirring film, featuring an ensemble of entirely non-professional actors, reports variety.com. With Simen's Golden Bear following a Venice Golden Lion win for French director Audrey Diwan's abortion drama 'Happening', which in turn followed her compatriot Julia Ducournaud's Palme d'Or triumph at Cannes for 'Titane', this marks the first time in history that the reigning winners of the most prestigious three prizes on the international festival circuit are all women.



Forrie J. Smith refuses to get vaxed, won't attend SAG awards

Actor Forrie J. Smith, who stars as Lloyd Pierce in drama series 'Yellowstone', will give a miss to the upcoming Screen Actors Guild Awards (SAG awards) as he has refused to bow down to the vaccination protocols at the venue.

Los Angeles | Agencies

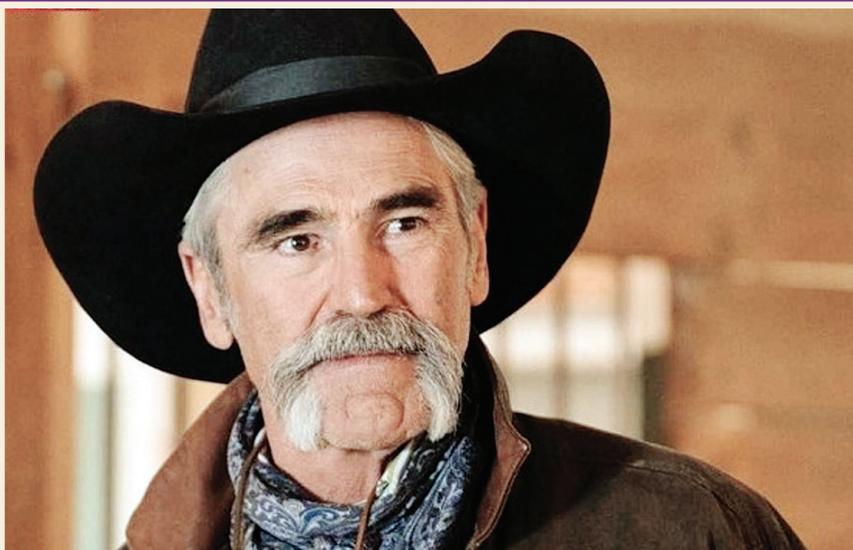
As per Variety, the cast members of 'Yellowstone' have been nominated in the top category of ensemble in a television drama alongside 'Succession', 'Squid Game', 'The Morning Show' and 'The Handmaid's Tale'.

Among those nominated from the drama series are Kelsey Asbille, Wes Bentley, Ryan Bingham, Gil Birmingham, Ian Bohen, Eden Brolin, Kevin Costner, Hugh Dillon, Luke Grimes, Hassie Harrison, Cole Hauser, Jennifer Landon, Finn Little, Brecken Merrill, Will Patton, Piper Perabo, Kelly Reilly, Denim Richards, Taylor Sheridan, Forrie J. Smith and

Jefferson White.

Smith shared a video on his Instagram clarifying that he is against vaccinations and thus won't be attending the SAG Awards later this month. He told his Instagram followers, "I want to apologize to y'all for not being at the Screen Actors Guild Awards. I mean no offense to anyone. I'm not vaccinated, and it's a requirement to be vaccinated."

"I'm not vaccinated, I will not get vaccinated. I haven't been vaccinated since I was a little kid. I don't vaccinate my dogs, I don't vaccinate my horses. I've never had a flu shot. I never will. I believe they compromise your immunities. It's just my beliefs. I just don't believe in that stuff", he added.



Maura Higgins



RANJI TROPHY

DHULL, RAHANE, SARFARAZ TONS HIGHLIGHT ON DAY ONE

Team Absolute | New Delhi

Centuries from India's U19 World Cup winning captain Yash Dhull, senior Test batter Ajinkya Rahane and youngster Sarfaraz Khan were the highlights on day one of the 2021/22 Ranji Trophy on Thursday.

On the day India's premier domestic cricket competition returned, hundreds coming out of the bat of Dhull, Rahane and Sarfaraz apart from Karnataka duo Manish Pandey and KV Siddharth stood out the most.

In Delhi's Elite Group H contest against Tamil Nadu at the Barsapara Cricket Stadium, Dhull scored 113 off 150 balls, including 18 boundaries, to continue his cricketing fairy tale.

Dhull opened the batting for Delhi after Tamil Nadu skipper Vijay Shankar elected to bowl first. Dhull watched his opening partner Dhruv Shorey get out for one followed by one-drop Himmat Singh dismissed for a duck as pacer Sandeep Warrier bagged both wickets. Dhull was firm in his first innings at the senior level, leading Delhi's recovery from 7/2 with a 60-run partnership with Nitish Rana (25) for the third wicket followed by a 119-run association with Jonny Sidhu for the fourth wicket. When Dhull was on 97, he was dismissed



by pacer M Mohammed but the ball turned out to be a no-ball, giving the youngster a reprieve. A cut through point off off-spinner Baba Aparajith took him to his maiden century in first-class cricket with his Delhi team-mates and support staff giving a huge round of applause. Dhull continued to fetch runs till he was trapped lbw by Mohammed for 113. In his knock, Dhull amassed 48 runs from off-side while scoring 65 runs through the on-side. The month of February has been a great one for Dhull, who captained India to winning the U19 World Cup final against England at Antigua. In the tournament, he made 229 runs in four innings at an average of 76.33. It includes 82 against South Africa in the tournament opener and 110 against Australia in the semi-final. In between, he missed

matches against Ireland and Uganda due to Covid-19 infection. After the World Cup triumph, Dhull was included in Delhi's squad for Ranji Trophy and also bagged an IPL contract with Delhi Capitals worth INR 50L. For Rahane, under pressure due to the lean patch in Test cricket, the timing of his hundred against Saurashtra in Mumbai's Elite Group D match at the Narendra Modi Stadium Ground 'A' couldn't have been better. Rahane reached his century in 212 balls, hitting 14 fours and 2 sixes along the way. He scored 60 runs through the off-side and 48 runs through the on-side. Giving him company in the mammoth 219-run stand for the fourth wicket was Sarfaraz, unconquered at 121 off 219 balls, including 15 fours and two sixes. The duo were essential in resurrecting Mumbai's innings from 44/3 to reaching 263/3 in 87 overs at stumps. Meanwhile, in the Elite Group C match at the Gurunanak College Ground in Chennai, Karnataka finished the day at 392/5 in 90 overs. Pandey, Karnataka's skipper, slammed an 83-ball century and then changed gears to make 156 runs off 121 balls before being dismissed by Shivam Chaudhary. His partner for the 267-stand, Siddharth, is still unbeaten at the crease with 140 not out off 221 balls, including 17 fours and two sixes.

FIH HOCKEY WOMEN'S WORLD CUP

India in Pool B with England, New Zealand and China

Bhubaneswar | Agencies

The Indian Women's Hockey Team has been placed in pool B along with England, New Zealand and China for the upcoming FIH Hockey Women's World Cup 2022 in Spain and Netherlands scheduled to begin from July 1.

The Indian Women Team recently secured their qualification for the World Cup after finishing third in the Asia Cup in Muscat. Speaking about the competition in their pool, Indian Women Goalkeeper Savita said, "It is a tough pool with England (World No.3) and New Zealand (World No.8) who are ranked above us and China can always spring a surprise. As a team, we have always believed we need to focus on ourselves and not what the opponent can do. But now that we know who we play in the pool stage, we can plan our preparations



accordingly and we look forward to the challenge."

The Indian Women's Team made it to the top eight for the first time in the previous edition of the World Cup when they drew 1-1 with England, lost 0-1 to Ireland, who went on to play the Final against World Champions Netherlands, and drew 1-1 against USA in the group stage. Savita further emphasised that the upcoming FIH Hockey Pro League matches

will help them prepare well in the lead up to the prestigious quadrennial event in July. While India is grouped in pool B with England, New Zealand and China, World Champions Netherlands are grouped in pool A with Germany, Ireland and Chile. In pool C, hosts Spain will face-off against Argentina, Korea and Canada and in pool D, Australia, Belgium, Japan and South Africa will take on each other.

BENGALURU OPEN

Arjun Kadhe, Rawat go down fighting, Myneni-Ramkumar in doubles semifinals

Bengaluru | Agencies

Wildcard entrants Arjun Kadhe and Sidharth Rawat went down fighting in the second round of the Bengaluru Open 2 ATP Challenger that also signalled the end of India's challenge in the singles event at the KSLTA Courts here on Thursday.

While Kadhe lost to third seed Enzo Couacaud of France 6-7 (7), 5-7, Rawat failed against Swiss Antoine Bellier to go down 6-4, 2-6, 6-4. However, two Indian pairs entered the semifinals in the doubles event. While Saketh Myneni and Ramkumar Ramanathan took a step closer to defending their title they won last week after getting past the Ukraine-German pair of Vladyslav Orlov and Kai



Wehnelt 6-4, 7-6 (3), N Sriram Balaji and Vishnu Vardhan combined well to overcome the duo of Markos Kalovelonis of Great Britain and Japanese Toshihide Matsui 6-3, 4-6, 11-9. Kadhe compensated his singles loss by pairing up with Alexander Erler of Austria and defeated the Indian duo of SD Prajwal Dev and Niki Kaliyanda Poonacha 6-1, 3-6, 10-6 to make it to the last four.

In the singles encounter, Kadhe did not show any kind of jitters in his match against the seeded Enzo. The Indian played some flawless tennis in the second set, which he won with two breaks in the fifth and seventh games. The final set was an exact replica of the opening set, only this time, Bellier was brilliant with his ground strokes and broke Rawat's serve in the 10th game grab a spot in the quarterfinals.

Kolkata | Agencies

After taking the ODI series 3-0 and making a winning start in the first T20I, a confident Indian team will be looking to make it two in a row when it goes up against the West Indies in the second T20I at the Eden Gardens on Friday. Despite missing some regular starters, India did well to win the first T20I by six wickets and take a 1-0 lead in the three-match series.

For West Indies, who defeated England 3-2 and then arrived in India, Friday's match becomes a do-or-die one. Kieron Pollard and Co. will need a collective effort to square the series and register their first win on the tour, otherwise, they risk going back home empty-handed.

India, on the other hand, will be pleased by Ravi Bishnoi's maiden international outing on Wednesday. With his googlies, Bishnoi changed the complexion of the match by tak-



ing out Roston Chase and Rovman Powell in the same over, taking the 'Player of the Match' award. His 2/17 in four overs set the base for India winning the first T20I. Bishnoi's per-

formance will please the Indian team management ahead of the men's T20 World Cup in Australia later in the year. On the batting front, despite a timely knock by Rohit Sharma at the

start and with Suryakumar Yadav finishing the chase, India will be hoping that the mini-wobble of three wickets for 21 runs will be corrected in the second match. For the West Indies, their top-order batters have to fire to post a total better than 157 in the first match and try to break the lean efforts from the ODIs. Nicholas Pooran shone for the visitors' with a 43-ball 61 apart from captain Pollard striking some boundaries in the final overs. But West Indies will be hoping that they will score more in the middle overs. They will be happy with the fact that their spinners, Akeal Hosein and Fabian Allen, managed to trouble the Indian batters in the chase of 158. Expect an even battle on Friday between two teams who are still trying out options on the road to the Men's T20 World Cup. For India, a win will extend their winning streak while West Indies will strive to correct their mistakes and stop the winning juggernaut of the hosts.

MEN'S ASIAN CUP 2023

INDIA TO HOST FINAL QUALIFIERS IN KOLKATA

New Delhi: After successfully hosting the AFC Women's Asian Cup in Maharashtra, the All India Football Federation (AIFF) is now set to host the Final Qualifying Round for next year's men's Asian Cup to be held in China.

India's bid to host the qualifiers at Kolkata has been accepted by the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), the AIFF informed on Thursday.

The AFC Asian Cup China 2023 Qualifiers Final Round will be held across three match days on June 8, 11 and 14, 2022, with the group winners, and the best 5 second-placed teams earning a ticket to the Asian Cup in China which is slated to kick-off on June 16, 2023. The draw for the final leg of the qualifiers is scheduled for February 24 in an online event from Malaysia. India have participated in the AFC Asian Cup finals six times, finishing runners-up in 1964 when the event was won by hosts Israel.



CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Bayern survive a scare, hold Salzburg 1-1 with a last-minute goal

Salzburg (Austria) | Agencies

The famous German resilience came to the fore as Bayern Munich fought back from a goal down to secure a 1-1 draw against Salzburg in their Champions League Round of 16, first leg match.

The German giants left it late as Kingsley Coman's last-minute tap-in cancelled out Chikwubike Adamu's first-half goal to deny Salzburg a famous Champions League victory in this round of 16 first leg.

With this result, Bayern's record-breaking unbeaten run away from home continues, though they came very close to losing it. Following a disappointing first half, Julian Nagelsmann's side raised their game in the second period and scraped a late, but deserved draw



the report said. The six-time winners will be in the driving seat when the two sides meet again in three weeks but Bayern need a much-improved performance to live up to their reputation as one of the tournament favourites.

LATE GOALS HELP LIVERPOOL QUELL INTER 2-0

Milan: In a match between two former champions, Liverpool rode their luck for most of the match before scoring two late goals from Roberto Firmino and Mohamed Salah to subdue Inter Milan in a Champions League Round of 16 match. Firmino came off the bench in the first leg encounter at San Siro on Wednesday night and opened the scoring with a clinical header from a corner in the 75th minute. Liverpool sealed their victory with another goal eight minutes later. Alexander-Arnold pumped a free kick into the area that was nodded down by Virgil van Dijk. In a position to latch on to the loose ball, Salah hit a first-time strike towards goal that took a slight deflection off an Inter player en route to the back of the net. The goal meant Liverpool will be a lot more comfortable when they meet their rivals again for the second leg a few weeks.

Matt Henry's 7/23 helps NZ bundle out South Africa for 95 in first Test

Christchurch | Agencies

Matt Henry made a memorable return to Test cricket after eight months and helped New Zealand blow away South Africa for 95 runs in their first innings in the first Test of the series here on Thursday.

Henry, who came into the side because Trent Boult was on paternity leave, bowled brilliantly to claim 7/23 as New Zealand shot out South Africa in two sessions to start the series on a rousing note.

His figures of 15-7-23-7 were the joint-third-best Test figures ever by a New Zealander after Ajaz Patel's 10/119 (v India at Mumbai in 2021), and Richard



Hadlee's 9/63 (v Australia at Brisbane in 1985) and equal with Hadlee's 7/23 against India at Wellington in 1976. New Zealand now have an excellent chance of taking an upper hand in the match and starting the series with a win.

Brief scores: South Africa 95 all out in 49.2 overs (Zubayr Hamza 25; Matt Henry 7/23) v New Zealand.

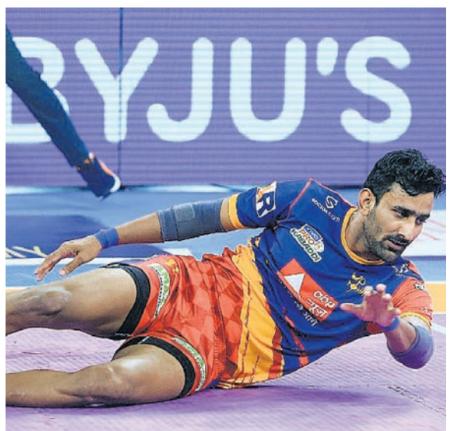
PKL 8: UP Yoddha beat U Mumba to clinch playoffs spot

Bengaluru | Agencies

UP Yoddha's resolute defence and game management helped them beat U Mumba 35-28 and reached into playoff in the Vivo Pro Kabaddi League Season 8, here on Thursday.

Sunder Gill was Yoddha's top-scorer with 8 points with defenders Ashu Singh, Shubham Kumar and Sumit picking 3 points each. The loss meant curtains for Mumbai's campaign. They became the 4th team to fall out of the playoffs race.

Mumbai's raiders Ajith Kumar and Abhishek Singh could not find a way past a well-oiled UP defence marshalled by captain Nitesh Kumar. U Mumba needed a win to stay in the hunt for a playoff spot but it was



Yoddha who started on the front foot. Pardeep Narwal scored a 3-point Super Raid in their first raid of the match

to set the tone. One could see the desperation in the Mumbai defence as they made unnecessary mistakes.

ISL 2021-22: Semi-final dates announced; Final to be held in Fatorda on March 20

Fatorda (Goa) | Agencies

The final of the Indian Super League (ISL) 2021-22 is scheduled to be held on March 20 at the Jawaharlal Nehru Stadium in Fatorda, the organiser of the league confirmed on Thursday.

The first-leg semi-finals will be held on March 11, and March 12. The return legs are scheduled for March 15, and March 16.

In one of the most closely-contested seasons of ISL, nine teams still remain in contention to advance into the Semi-finals. Season 2021-22 has been the most competitive ISL so far with only 19 points gap between the current top-placed team, Hyderabad FC (29) and NorthEast United FC (10), in 11th. The 'Away Goal' rule will not apply in the semi-finals this season. Teams with the highest goal aggregate in their respective two-legged ties will progress to the Final.





MANASI PAREKH EXCITED FOR HER UPCOMING FILM WITH PARESH RAWAL

Actress Manasi Parekh is all set to share the screen with veteran star Paresh Rawal in the upcoming film 'Dear Father'.

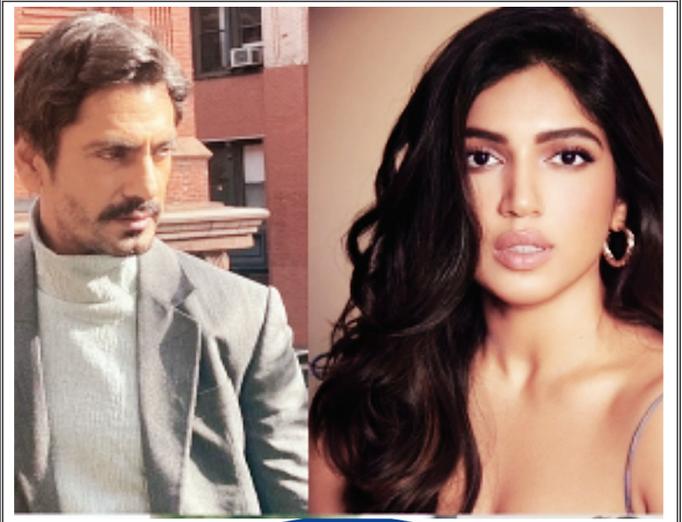
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Manasi reveals, "Pareshji had offered this role to me some time back, when he was making the play. But I couldn't, because I was already doing a television show and a Gujarati play at that time. I was really upset about dates not working out and really wanted

to work with him."

She added: "However, after some years when he called me back saying that the film is finally happening and asked me if I want to be a part of it, I immediately said yes. I have always been wanting to work with him and for me it's a dream come true. It's a very intense film and my character has a lot of confrontations with him"

'Dear Father' is all set to release on March 4.



NAWAZUDDIN, BHUMI TO STAR IN SUDHIR MISHRA'S THRILLER

Bollywood actors Nawazuddin Siddiqui and Bhumi Pednekar will be seen starring in filmmaker Sudhir Mishra's next titled 'Afwaah', a quirky thriller.

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Nawazuddin, who has previously worked with Mishra in 'Serious Men', said collaborating with the filmmaker once again and that too on such a unique subject is such an honour.

"Both Anubhav (Sinha) and Sudhir are known to delve into larger socially relevant subjects. I value that their cinema is about making a difference. I am glad to be part of a project where they both are collaborators. Bhumi is a fine actor and the chemistry with her will be worth exploring. This will be my first

with T-Series and I am looking forward to it." Bhumi added that Nawazuddin is easily one of the best actors we have in the country.

She shared: "When you are working with such a proficient actor, it makes you want to double your effort. Sudhir sir has always been on my bucket list. It is even more special because I am collaborating with Anubhav Sinha and Bhushan Kumar again after Bheed. I am extremely thrilled to be a part of this project." The film is being produced by Anubhav Sinha. He says 'Afwaah' is a novel story rooted in the heartland of India.

KUMAR SANU AND ALKA YAGNIK TO REUNITE ON STAGE FOR DUBAI CONCERT

Mumbai: Playback singers Kumar Sanu and Alka Yagnik will be coming together after five years to perform at a concert in Dubai as a part of 'The Legends of Bollywood show'.

Talking about the concert, singer Kumar Sanu said, "Alka and I had sung a lot of amazing songs in Bollywood films, and our duets used to create magic for the audiences. We are performing together on stage after five years and I hope to create new memories with the same magic and cherish the old ones."

"I always have had a homely experience performing for the warm crowd of Dubai and I am quite excited to perform there after years", he added.

Alka Yagnik shared her thoughts on reuniting on stage with her fellow singer, "It would be amazing to go back on stage with Kumar Sanu after years. Bringing back the 90s for Bollywood lovers in Dubai would be no less than walking down memory lane."

She further said, "And I feel we all need a little bit of joy and good memories through music after what we have gone through in these horrendous last two years. I can't wait to go back to what I do best, i.e., entertaining my audiences."

The two will perform at the Coca-Cola Arena in Dubai on February 26.



Alia stuns in silk chiffon saree at Berlin Film Festival



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Bollywood actress Alia Bhatt looked every inch regal dressed in an ivory silk chiffon saree by renowned designers Rimple and Harpreet during the screening of 'Gangubai Kathiawadi' at the ongoing Berlin Film Festival.

Alia made an appearance in a pristine white saree by the popular designer duo in Berlin on Thursday at the screening of the Sanjay Leela Bhansali's upcoming directorial at the event. Rimple and Harpreet said: "It was an absolute pleasure to design for Mr Bhansali and Alia Bhatt for the screening of 'Gangubai Kathiawadi' at Berlin film festival. Though we regularly style celebrities on red carpet & movies, this was special because the entire ensemble for Alia has been created exclusively for the screening, keeping her personal style & comfort in consideration."

The designers kept the thematic essence of the film in mind as well as creating a look that was a modern classic. It took approximately three thousand and four hundred man hours and a team of twenty five master karigars to complete the saree which features delicate handcrafted embroideries referenced from archival Edwardian and French Lace Shawls. "A full team of skilled karigars worked day & night to create the saree in record time," the designers added.

SHARIB HASHMI WANTS TO EXPLORE SLAPSTICK COMEDY

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The Family Man' actor Sharib Hashmi who was recently seen in web series 'The Great Indian Murder', says that as an actor he wishes to explore the genre of slapstick comedy and a dark character that he has never played before. He adds that success has given him the privilege of choosing scripts without feeling the pressure of earning money to pay the bills. In conversation with reporter, Sharib said, "While I never fear getting stereotyped, it is also true that as an actor I look for an opportunity to challenge myself because I fear feeling too comfortable in a specific zone. As a performer, if I get stuck in my comfort zone, I will become complacent and stop growing. "So pushing my own set boundary is very important for

my growth as a performer. So far, even though I have done a variety of roles in films and series, I have never done a slapstick comedy. Some of my favourite films are - 'Hera Pheri', 'Hungama'. I so wish to try some out-and-out comedy-drama. Also, I want to play a dark character...very very dark. I haven't done such part. Hopefully, I will get such an opportunity soon." Recently the actor has finished shooting for two films and talking about them he said, "I am playing an interesting part in Tahira Kashyap's feature film 'Sharma Ji Ki Bedi'. I have also finished shooting for an untitled film along with Vicky Kaushal and Sara Ali Khan in Bhopal. I am also playing something very different in the film 'Vikram-Veda'. That apart I am in the film 'Dhakad' and 'Mission Majnu'."



AJAY DEVGN STARTS SHOOTING FOR 'DRISHYAM' 2

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The shooting for the sequel of 'Drishyam' starring Bollywood actor Ajay Devgn has commenced. Abhishek Pathak is set to direct the next chapter in this franchise.

Talking about coming back with 'Drishyam 2', Ajay shares: "'Drishyam' was loved and it's a legend. I am now related to present yet another interesting story with 'Drishyam 2'. Vijay is a multidimensional character and he creates an engaging narrative onscreen. Abhishek Pathak (director) has a fresh vision for this film. I'm keenly looking forward to part 2, fill-



ing in the large shoes of the earlier film with people investing in the mystery and the characters." 'Drishyam 2' has commenced its shoot in Mumbai with Ajay Devgn and will be extensively shot in Goa in the following months. 'Drishyam 2' will also feature the star cast of the first film including Tabu, Shriya Saran, Ishita Dutta

amongst others. The film begins seven years after the events in the first film and tests Vijay's resolve to protect his family for whom he would cross any limits. This movie aims to provide justice to the 'crime-thriller' genre in every way possible. Taking over the director's seat for the film, Pathak shares: "Making an official remake of a successful franchise film is an honour and a challenge. "It's exciting to retell a story from your own perspective and vision by divergent visuals in the most justified yet extraordinary way. The setting and the mood of the film uplifts the very essence of the crux making it gripping from the very beginning."

INSTAGRAM PIC OF THE DAY



Deepika Padukane