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***Screens are no substitute for real life***  
***This year proved once and for all***



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"No matter how hard the past is, you can always begin again." Jack Kornfield

**Happy New Year 2021**  
**to our Readers and Supporters**

Today starts a new year, which offers not only a moment for reflection on what we have endured but also a chance to embrace hope for the year ahead.



**2021**





***Extending our best wishes to you, your family and readers of The South Asian Insider for a safe, happy, light-hearted, healthy and blessed 2021!***

*2020 was a year of reckoning. Our nation, and world, faced a collective tsunami- whether you call it SARS-CoV2, Corona virus, Covid-19, Wuhan Virus, China Virus or, taking into account the creative and expansive actions of our dear Friend in the South China Sea over the last decade, a biowarfare agent that has Pearl Harbored us over 100 times.*

*Having been infected with this "Trojan Horse" of a Virus, which has the Bats' unique "Spike Glycoprotein (S)" transplanted on to it, and survived it with God's Grace and support of dear friends, only to then have to face its secondary internal attacks, which may be perpetual as they are ever-changing as to their targeted body system or organ, we are conscious, as never before, just how precious life is. Indeed, every moment is truly precious as it may be our last. From this new reality, comes a desire to spend time only with people and things that matter: family & friends, and to whom we owe high fiduciaries duties, including, as a citizens protecting the United States from Enemies foreign and domestic.*

*We thank President Donald J. Trump for his service as POTUS, even as we welcome Joseph R. Biden Jr. as our 46th POTUS. Both were the choice of our fellow Americans. May God continue to find us worthy of His Blessings. Indeed, 2021 is pregnant with Hope - as on Noah's Ark.*

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# 3 British Sikhs Arrested On Suspicion Of Murder In India In 2009



**The arrests followed early morning raids on Monday on extradition warrants executed by West Midlands Police and all three were granted bail at Westminster Magistrates' Court in London under "strict conditions".**

(Insider Bureau)-Three British Sikhs have been arrested in the UK on suspicion of a murder conspiracy in India dating back to 2009, according to UK police. The arrests followed early morning raids on Monday on extradition warrants executed by West Midlands Police and all three were granted bail at Westminster Magistrates' Court in London under "strict

conditions". "Three men were arrested on Monday (December 21) by West Midlands Police following extradition warrants issued by Westminster Magistrates," West Midlands Police said in a statement.

"Two men, aged 37 and 40, were arrested in Coventry and a 38-year-old man was arrested in Wolverhampton. They were detained on suspicion of conspiracy to a murder in India

in 2009," the statement said. The trio are now expected to undergo proceedings to be extradited to India, with some separatist Sikh groups in the UK claiming that an order for such proceedings has been signed off by Home Secretary Priti Patel. The Sikh Press Association published a statement on behalf of the arrested men and claimed they have been held in connection with the 2009 murder of Rulda Singh,

a senior member of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), who was shot in Patiala and died a week after the attack. It further alleges that the development is linked with UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab's visit to India earlier this year. If the three are extradited they would almost certainly be tortured and have no chance of a fair trial," claimed Bhai Amrik Singh, Chair of Sikh Federation UK.

# Indian Expats From Saudi, Kuwait Stranded In UAE Get Free Accommodation: Report

**The expats have taken an indirect route of flying via the United Arab Emirates, to Saudi and Kuwait, since there were no direct flights from their home countries, the Gulf News reported.**

(Insider Bureau)- Around 300 expats, mostly Indians, stranded in UAE, after Saudi Arabia and Kuwait closed their borders to prevent the spread of the new strain of the coronavirus have been provided free accommodation, according to a media report on Friday.

The expats have taken an indirect route of flying via the United Arab Emirates, to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, since there were no direct flights from

their home countries, the Gulf News reported. They were caught off guard with the news about flight suspensions in their countries of residence, after finishing a 14-day mandatory quarantine in hotels and other paid accommodation in the UAE, it said.

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have closed their land and sea borders and suspended commercial flights over fears

about the new coronavirus strain, which is spreading fast in the UK. Dubai Markaz Centre's volunteers' wing Indian Cultural Foundation (ICF) tied up with construction firm Aasa Group to arrange the free accommodation and food to the stranded passengers, the report said.

Most of the 300 stranded expats are from the south Indian state of Kerala, said Abdul Salam Saquafi, ICF public relations manager.



# Indian Expat Jailed In UAE For Forging Employer's Signature 47 Times: Report

**The accused, identified as HYP, 29, in the news report by Gulf News, has also been ordered to pay 471,202 Dirham in penalties.**

(Insider Bureau)- An Indian expatriate in the UAE has been jailed for six months after he was found guilty of forging his employer's signature 47 times over two years, transferring 4,47,000 Dirham of office funds into his personal account, according to a media report. The accused, identified as HYP, 29, in the news report by Gulf News, has also been ordered to pay 471,202 Dirham in penalties. HYP is a native of Gujarat. He will be deported after his jail term ends. Speaking to Gulf News, HYP's employer

Kishanchad Bhatia, 72, said the accused was working at his Dubai-based firm, Transcontinental Indenting, for the last eight years as a senior administrator. HYP had access to the company's cheque books.

Bhatia, who moved from India to the UAE nearly fifty years ago, said in October this year he found a cheque book in HYP's office drawer which had no leaves but several blank counterfoils. This led to the suspicion that HYP was swindling office funds."

Subsequent investigations showed that all the missing cheques had been drawn in favour of HYP. We confronted him with the evidence and reported the matter to Dubai Police," Bhatia was quoted in the Gulf News report. "Police acted swiftly on my complaint and arrested HYP on October 18. Later, he was referred to Public Prosecution where he was charged with fraud. On December 16, a Dubai criminal court announced the guilty verdict," Bhatia said.





As we come to the end of a year that has been unlike any other in the modern times of Queens County (and, indeed, of our city, our country and the world), I want to take this opportunity to offer my best wishes in the New Year, to reflect on some of this office's 2020 accomplishments, and to reaffirm the principles and vision that guide us to the future.

At the beginning of the year, I referred to the mission of the new Queens District Attorney's office as 'brave justice,' but the challenges we were preparing to face did not yet include a worldwide pandemic that, to date, has claimed the lives of thousands of Queens residents.

COVID-19's consistent interruption of court proceedings led us to change and redefine our office since March 15th, but our work continued throughout. Here in Queens in 2020, we saw more than 20,000 cases arraigned in criminal court and handled more than 900 indicted cases. Our prosecutors interviewed witnesses and victims, in person, over the phone and via Webex and Zoom. We responded to crime scenes, hospitals, precincts and multiple other locations both local and out-of-state to investigate cases. We worked with our witnesses and victims to connect them with services as they needed.

Throughout this difficult year, the goals of my administration have remained constant: to keep the people of Queens safe by prosecuting drivers of crime... to protect our most vulnerable... to partner with our communities... and to work towards building an equitable criminal justice system.

My team and I have maintained a steady hand during turbulent times, whether taking down gun traffickers trying to smuggle illegal weapons from down South or prosecuting human traffickers who exploit and abuse troubled teens.

There is always more to be done, but I am proud to report that in our first year we have truly re-imagined the way the DA's Office works by fortifying our ties to the communities we serve, restructuring to more clearly focus on violent crime and those who would prey on our most vulnerable, and boldly breaking new ground by devoting an entire unit to investigating potential wrongful convictions.



## Looking Back, Forging Ahead



**MELINDA KATZ**  
DISTRICT ATTORNEY

### Protecting and Supporting Our Communities

Throughout years of public service here in Queens, I've learned that trust comes from building close relationship in all parts of the most diverse county in the nation. I am determined to open the doors of the DA's office to our communities, to invite them in, hear their concerns and make sure they know our office.

" To this end, I asked nearly 400 Queens residents from all walks of life to join our Community Advisory Councils. Among the Advisory Councils launched this year are the Latino, LGBTQ, African-American, South Asian/Indo Caribbean, Pacific Asian, Jewish and Clergy Councils, and two Labor Advisory groups, one focusing on the Building Trades and one focusing on Service Workers. We will continue to form new advisory councils as the opportunities arise, including a Middle Eastern/North African Advisory Council in 2021.

" Our enhanced Community Partnerships Division broadened our reach across the borough, participating in nearly 400 community-based events in 2020 and hosting thousands of attendees at cultural and heritage appreciation events, both on-line and in person.

" Together with NYPD and community leaders, we confronted the gun violence that exploded during the summer -- and continues to claim too many lives - with gun buy-back events that have taken more than 200 weapons off the streets. Each of these guns represents a potential tragedy averted. We also

organized a Rally for Peace that brought community members and leaders, clergy, cure-violence groups and law enforcement together in unity to condemn gun violence."

Crimes fueled by bigotry and hatred have no place in the most diverse county in the country. No one should have to endure being called a vile slur or being attacked simply because of the color of their skin, their religion or who they love. That's why I created a Hate Crimes Bureau, one of the first in the nation dedicated exclusively to investigating, prosecuting and deterring hate crimes.

" To break the cycle of crime and offer a second chance to young people in a community-based setting, we are working with Queens Defenders on a new diversion program at the Rockaway Community Justice Center that can hopefully serve as a model for replication in the future. The program is part of an overall emphasis on Alternative Sentencing Programs, when appropriate.

" Since the pandemic first hit, too many motorists have disregarded traffic laws and speed limits and are driving recklessly or under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol. Year-to-date, our office has seen a 27 percent increase in fatal collisions throughout the borough. Few choices are more selfish than driving while under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Under my administration, drivers are being held accountable for driving while intoxicated. I have ensured that dispositions on DWI cases are now more closely aligned with statutory

guidelines. While each case is examined on its own merits, many DWI cases are no longer eligible for reduced pleas as they had been in the past. We have lowered the blood alcohol levels acceptable for plea offers and seek stronger sanctions in aggravated circumstances. These new policies strengthen our ability to keep these drivers off the road and prevent further harm.

### Some of The Changes Within

" We've implemented new policies that make for a fairer, more just system here in Queens. This includes abandoning the use of the 180.80 waiver and top count plea policies that require defendants to waive some of their rights.

" Knowing that no system is without flaws, I established a Conviction Integrity Unit to reinvestigate and resolve credible claims of actual innocence or wrongful convictions. As a result of CIU's work, two men - each of whom had been incarcerated for more than 25 years - had their convictions vacated this year. The CIU, which is the first of its kind in Queens, is currently reviewing more than 80 cases. I also moved to vacate two separate 1996 convictions, based on clear evidence of unconstitutional discrimination in jury selection. The evidence of discrimination did not raise any questions about the defendants' guilt, and my office will re-prosecute them, but convictions obtained through such discriminatory practices could not be permitted to stand.

" Our Human Trafficking Bureau is dedicated

exclusively to combating human trafficking in Queens County. When young people are forced into prostitution with threats and physical violence, as we allege in cases being prosecuted this year, it is our obligation as a city to hold the traffickers accountable. The bureau aggressively prosecutes traffickers and buyers of sex, while offering survivors of trafficking access to meaningful support services. It also provides community outreach, education and information to help identify and prevent trafficking in our communities.

" The Violent Criminal Enterprises Bureau focuses on organized criminal activity to protect our neighborhoods from violent gangs, gun runners and drug traffickers. This summer, the VCEB and NYPD took down a gun trafficking ring that allegedly used the notorious "Iron Pipeline" to smuggle guns purchased in Virginia for illegal sale on Queens streets.

" The Housing and Worker Protection Bureau was created to stop the theft of property, wages and equity from hard-working residents and to punish those who put workers in danger. This past fall, the Bureau stopped an unscrupulous contractor from defrauding the city of more than \$1.5 million in stolen wages. The defendant pleaded guilty to skimming money that should have been used to pay fair wages to his contractors. More than a dozen workers got their hard-earned wages back thanks to the Housing and Worker Protection Bureau's efforts.

" I also established a Frauds Bureau where prosecutors are specially trained to aid residents of Queens, particularly the elderly, who are victims of embezzlement, organized theft schemes, confidence schemes, trademark counterfeiting, financial and investment scams, cyber- and environmental crimes.

I am happy to have this opportunity to update you on some of the movement here at the Queens District Attorney's office. From my family to yours, we hope the New Year finds you healthy, safe and happy. My wish is that, if nothing else, 2021 brings hope and allows us to be together again one day soon.



# Cabinet approves export of Akash missiles

**The export version of Akash will be different from the weapon system currently deployed by the Indian armed forces, the defence ministry statement said without specifying the differences in configuration.**

(News Agencies)-The Union Cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, on Wednesday gave its go-ahead to the sale of Akash surface-to-air missile systems to friendly foreign countries and created a high-powered panel for swifter approval to export of military hardware at a time India has set a target of clocking defence exports worth \$5 billion by 2024, officials said.

"So far, Indian defence exports included parts/components etc. The export of big platforms was minimal. This initiative of the Cabinet would help the country to improve its defence products and make them globally competitive," the defence ministry said in a statement announcing the decision. The committee set up to speed up

exports will have the defence minister, external affairs minister and the national security adviser on board.

The missile --- already in service in the Indian military --- has an indigenous content of 96%. The missile, which has a range of 25 km, was inducted into the Indian Air Force in 2014 and in the army a year later.

Officials said after its induction in the armed forces, several foreign countries had shown interest in the Akash missile during international and local defence exhibitions, and the Cabinet's approval would allow India to take part in tenders issued by various countries.

The export version of Akash will be different from the weapon system currently deployed by the Indian armed forces, the

statement said without specifying the differences in configuration.

"Besides Akash, there is interest in other major platforms like coastal surveillance system, radars and air platforms," the statement said, adding that the high-powered panel had been created to provide faster approval for export of such platforms.

The committee will authorise the export of major indigenous platforms to various countries, apart from exploring various options including the government-to-government route to sell military hardware abroad, officials said.

"The Government of India intends to focus on exporting high value defence platforms to achieve a target of 5 Billion USD of defence export and improve strategic



relations with friendly foreign countries," defence minister Rajnath Singh tweeted.

Experts described the development as positive. "India has already demonstrated its potential to manufacture defence equipment for exports. We are exporting a wide range of military hardware. The Cabinet approval for Akash export along with the setting up of the committee will boost our vision of becoming Atmanirbhar in the defence sector. It will also enhance India's stature in the global market as a

weapons exporter," said former Northern Army commander Lieutenant General BS Jaswal (retd). India exported defence equipment worth Rs 10,745 crore in 2018-19 --- seven times the figure in 2016-17. Officials said other defence platforms that hold export potential include the light combat aircraft, Astra beyond-visual-range air-to-air missile, Prahar surface-to-surface missile, supersonic cruise missile Brahmos, sonars, a variety of unmanned systems and battlefield radars.

## India extends UK flight ban till Jan 7, will impose restrictions thereafter



(News Agencies)-India has extended the suspension of flights from UK from December 31 till January 7 in a bid to contain the spread of a new strain of coronavirus, civil aviation minister Hardeep Singh Puri announced on Wednesday.

"Decision has been taken to extend the temporary suspension of flights to & from the UK till 7 January 2021. Thereafter strictly regulated resumption will take place for which details will be announced shortly," Puri said on Twitter.

According to officials aware of the development, the government may mandate RT-PCR tests on arrival for all passengers coming from UK after January 7.

On December 21, India joined a growing list of countries on Monday to seal off access to people who have been to the UK, suspending all flights to and from the country between December 23 and December 31 in order to stop the spread of a new strain of the Sars-CoV-2 virus.

"I foresee a slight extension of the temporary suspension. I don't expect that extension to be a long or indefinite extension. In the next day or two, we will

find out if any additional steps need to be taken, or when we can start easing the current temporary suspension," Puri said at a press conference on Tuesday.

India has been operating international flights through bilateral transport bubbles with 24 countries including UK since calling off scheduled overseas flight operations when it announced a nationwide lockdown in March.

The minister said passengers who arrived from the UK on December 21 and 22 were made to take an RT-PCR test for Covid-19 at the airport, with only those who tested negative

allowed to go home, where they were told to isolate themselves for seven days. Anyone who tested positive was taken to institutional quarantine.

"We went one step further. We went back till November 25 and any passenger who had come directly or indirectly from UK, we did some contact tracing and we did some genome sequencing," he said.

The aviation ministry is also coordinating with the ministry of health and department of pharmaceuticals for preparing the cold chain for the Covid-19 vaccine transportation, civil aviation secretary Pradeep Kharola said.

## Centre proposes committee to review farm laws, rules out repeal

(News Agencies)-Three Union ministers holding their sixth round of talks with protesting farm leaders on Wednesday rejected the demand to repeal the three agricultural laws cultivators say will hurt their livelihoods. The Centre, however, proposed to set up a committee to examine the new farm laws. Union ministers Narendra Singh Tomar, Piyush Goyal and Som Prakash also discussed the

possibility of a law on guaranteeing minimum prices for farm prices, said a senior farmers' representative present in the talks.

The ministers shared meals with farmers during a lunch break after the first round of talks, presenting a picture of bonhomie amid the tough negotiations. In the first round of talks earlier today, which was



followed by a lunch break, the farmers raised their core issue of scrapping three recent pro-reform laws. Among their clutch of

demands, farmers have also demanded a law to make federally fixed minimum prices, known as minimum support prices. "The ministers didn't say anything on this but said they wanted to discuss the demand for a law on MSP," said Joginder Singh Ugrahan, the leader of a faction of Bharatiya Kisan Union. In the second round of talks, which were on at the time

of filing this report, the government said a committee could be formed to scrutinise the three laws. A government official also explained the pros and cons of a law on MSP. The government argued that a law making MSP compulsory for even private traders, essentially prohibiting sale of any farm produce below state-set prices, could spark chaos in markets.



# Farm protests: Congress attacks BJP for 'aiding corporate interests', seeks swift resolution

**The Congress's criticism came as Union ministers Narendra Singh Tomar, Piyush Goyal, and Som Prakash began the sixth round of talks with 40 farmer leaders**

(News Agencies)-The Congress on Wednesday hit out at the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) for "only aiding corporate interests" while seeking a swift resolution to the farmers' protests and repealing of three farm laws enacted in September.

"The central government has met the farm leaders several times now. It has called the farmers again today, but how will they proceed when the government refuses to compromise," said

Congress leader Kumari Selja. She added the government should support the farmers and listen to their demands by repealing the three laws.

"The entire country depends on the farmers. It is time that this government should embrace them as well," Selja said. "People have lost faith in the BJP. Ten farmers from Haryana have lost their lives. The chief minister of Haryana should take a delegation to the Prime

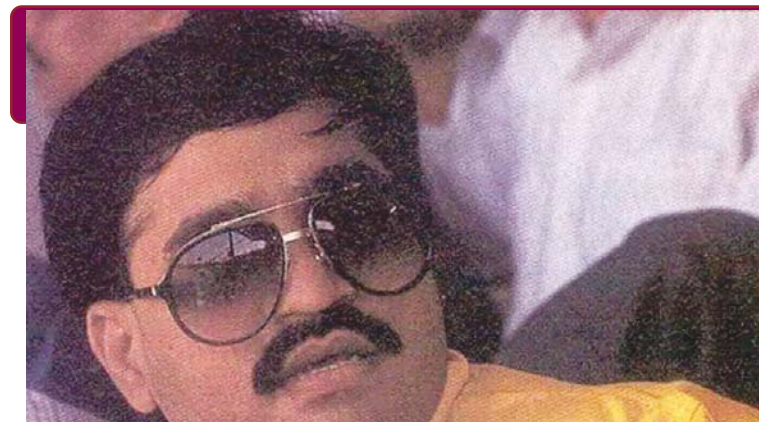
Minister and make him understand the situation on the ground."

Another Congress leader Pritam Singh accused the government of murdering democracy. "The talks with the government have been inconclusive." He said the government brings the farmers to the table but says the laws will not be undone. "It is the responsibility of the central government to break this deadlock by repealing the laws."



The Congress's criticism came round of talks with 40 farmer leaders on Wednesday amid their protests against the three agricultural laws.

## Probe on into criminal past of Dawood's aide Majeed's Jamshedpur accomplice



**Abdul Majeed Kutty was wanted, along with Dawood and Abu Salem, in serial bomb blast plot in Maharashtra and Gujarat.**

(News Agencies)- Police have intensified investigation into the criminal antecedents of fugitive underworld don and terror supporter Dawood Ibrahim and gangster Abu Salem's close aide Abdul Majeed Kutty's Jamshedpur linkman Md Inam Ali.

This comes after it came to fore that all of Majeed's documents were made at latter's Telco Barinagar-based residence and his two brothers were in jail on charges of murder, the police said on Wednesday.

Abdul Majeed Kutty, wanted along with Dawood and Abu Salem in serial bomb blast plot in Maharashtra and Gujarat on 1997 Republic Day and in connection to the smuggling of 4 kilograms of RDX explosives, 117 Pakistan-made and 13 Chinese-made pistols, 113 magazines, 750 cartridges and 10 detonators, was arrested by Gujarat ATS team led by DSP KK Patel and Mango police in Jharkhand on late Saturday night.

"Inam Ali is being interrogated and has revealed that he had met

Abdul Majeed Kutty in Dubai and Malaysia. He has, however, denied having any knowledge of Majeed's criminal past. He is very much under our radar and it has also come to fore that his brothers had been jailed on murder charges. His criminal antecedents are also being investigated," Dr M Tamil Vanan, Jamshedpur senior superintendent of police (SSP), said on Wednesday.

Police were also launching random checking of passports of which police verification was done manually till 2018 as Majeed's passport in his fake name of Md Kamal was made from Patna in 2017 on the address of Inam's residence at Telco Barinagar. Digital police verification of passports started after 2018. Inam met Kutty in Dubai for the first time in 1999 and again in Malaysia in 2007. A police team, led by Mango PS OC Vinay Kumar and Telco PS OC Akhileshwar Mandal, picked up Inam Ali, who is a Tata Motors employee, on Tuesday and interrogated him for over six hours during which he admitted

that Majeed's fake passport in the name of Md Kamal was made in Patna on the address of his Barinagar house in Jamshedpur in 2000. Majeed's Aadhaar, PAN and other documents were also made on this address.

Investigation has also found that trainee ASI Mahba Minz had given clean chit to Majeed in his report stating that Abdul Majeed alias Md Kamal was living at his grandfather Md Ashiq Ali's Barinagar residence from childhood and had gone away for 10 years for work. The report,

signed by Telco PS OC Akhileshwar Mandal on June 21, 2019, also stated that there was no criminal case against Majeed. His passport was renewed on the basis of this report from Ranchi. The case took a curious turn after a probe found that Ashiq Ali is Inam Ali's father who was murdered by Salim, brother of Telco Urdu School principal over a dispute in 2000. Soon after, Inam Ali's elder brother Irshad Ali alias Butto murdered the principal of Telco Urdu School. Both Salim and Irshad were in jail for these

two murders and later came out after a mutual compromise was done. Inam's younger brother Nijam Ali alias Chota Nijam too was in jail on murder charges and has many cases pending against him while his friend Bara Nijam was killed in a police encounter in 2007. Inam's family originally hailed from Pratapur in Siwan district of Bihar. Inam's fourth brother Kamruddin alias Karfu works as a safety officer in Qatar while their youngest brother Asif Ali is a civil contractor for the past 7-8 years.

## Maharashtra government stable, attempts to bring it down won't succeed, says NCP chief Sharad Pawar

(News Agencies)- Confident that any attempt by BJP to bring down the Maharashtra government won't succeed, NCP supremo Sharad Pawar has asserted that the Uddhav Thackeray-led Maha Vikas Aghadi dispensation is stable and it will continue to rule the state. He also slammed the Enforcement Directorate (ED) action against leaders of the ruling alliance and their family members as "misuse of authority".

"It has been a year now (since the Thackeray-led MVA government assumed office)... they (BJP) were to bring down the government in two months, then they were to do so in six months, then in eight months. But, nothing will happen," Pawar told PTI in an interview.

"It is a stable government and it will continue," he said. The MVA government comprising of Shiv Sena, NCP and Congress completed a year last month. All through this period, various BJP leaders have been saying that the government

will collapse, citing ideological differences among the alliance partners.

BJP and Shiv Sena had contested the 2019 assembly polls together, but their alliance fell through over the issue of chief ministership.

It was Pawar who is said to have then rallied Shiv Sena, NCP and Congress together to form the MVA government. The Maratha stalwart, who has been Maharashtra's Chief Minister four times and has also been union minister at the Centre in the past, is seen as the guiding force behind the functioning of the Thackeray-led government in the state.

When asked about the ED's notice to Shiv Sena leader and Saamana Editor Sanjay Raut's wife Varsha, Pawar said, "This is a misuse of authority." The ED had summoned Varsha for questioning in the over Rs 4,300-crore PMC Bank money-laundering case. She is now expected to appear before the central probe agency on January 5 after skipping the summons thrice.



# Night curfew imposed in Delhi on December 31 and January 1 from 11pm to 6am

**The curfew will be in place on December 31 and January 1 between 11 pm to 6 am, the DDMA said in its order, adding that not more than five people will be allowed to assemble at a public place and no new year celebrations, events or gatherings will be permitted post 11 pm.**

(News Agencies)-The Delhi Disaster Management Authority (DDMA) on Thursday imposed a night curfew in the national capital in order to check the spread of the coronavirus disease (Covid-19). The restrictions have been imposed just ahead of New Year celebrations.

The curfew will be in place on December 31 and January 1 between 11 pm to 6 am, the DDMA said in its order, adding that not more than five people will be allowed to assemble at a public place and no new year celebrations, events or gatherings will be permitted post 11 pm. "A detailed assessment of the situation in Delhi has been

made and considering the threat posed by the mutant UK strain of Covid-19 virus and after observing the local incidents of the pandemic in GNCT, Delhi, it is apprehended that gatherings, congregations and public celebrations of New Year pose a considerable threat of spread of the virus and may cause setback to the appreciable gains made in the suppression of chain on transmission of Covid-19 cases in Delhi," the order issued by the DDMA read. The authority, however, said that there will be no restrictions on interstate and intrastate movement of persons and goods during the curfew period. Earlier, officials told news agency PTI that police and fire

unit deployment has been beefed up, and traffic regulation planned. The restaurants and bars have been ordered to not host more than 50 per cent of their capacity during New Year celebrations. "Police presence will be strengthened in markets, around malls, five-star hotels, restaurants, pubs and bars," they added. Officials have also taken several measures to ensure women's safety. Meanwhile, Delhi Police Commissioner SN Shrivastava on Wednesday said that all public gatherings will be subjected to Covid-19 protocols adding that wearing of masks will be mandatory. "We will be making adequate arrangements



at places where people normally like to collect. But one thing would be that all such collections would be subject to Covid-19 protocols," he said.

Delhi on Wednesday registered 677 fresh coronavirus cases and 21 more deaths which pushed the overall tally to over 624,000. As many as 84,680 tests were carried out on Tuesday including 44,221 RT-PCR tests and 40,459

rapid antigen tests, according to the bulletin issued by the health department. Amid the concerns of the UK Covid-19 variant, the Delhi government has ordered setting up of isolation facilities at four private hospitals for passengers who travelled from or transitioned through the UK from November 25 till December 24 and have tested positive for the variant.

## New year, new rules: What all is changing from January 1, 2021



(News Agencies)-The first year of a new decade, 2021-2030, is round the corner. January 1, 2021, will not just be the beginning of a new year or a new decade, it will also be the beginning of a new month. As is the case with the beginning of every month, a new set of rules will come into effect from January 1, 2021 as well.

Some of the rules that will come into effect are as follows, as reported by Hindustan Times' sister publication, Hindustan:

1. The "positive pay system": In September, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) announced the "positive pay system" for cheques. The State Bank of India (SBI) will roll out this system from January 1, 2021. Under this, reconfirmation of key details will be needed for payments in excess of Rs 50,000. The cheque issuer will have to submit details like date, beneficiary name, payee, amount to the

drawee bank etc. electronically, through SMS, mobile banking, internet banking, ATM etc.

2. Prices of gas cylinders to be revised: Oil companies determine prices of Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) cylinders on the first of every month. The prices could be increased, kept unchanged or decreased. In December, the prices were increased on December 3 and, in total, increased twice this month.

3. Saral Jeevan Bima policy: Insurance companies will launch the Saral Jeevan Bima policy which will allow a person to purchase a term plan even at a low premium amount. Companies are introducing this policy as directed by the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority (IRDA).

4. FASTag to be mandatory: The Union transport ministry has made FASTags mandatory for all four-wheelers. In a bid to

**Several new rules, affecting a common man's life, are set to come into effect from the first day of the new year.**

encourage digitalisation, the Centre has decided to completely do away with cash transactions at all toll plazas across the country.

5. Transaction limit through contactless cards to be raised: RBI will raise the limit of transactions via contactless cards, using the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) from Rs 2,000 to Rs 5,000.

6. Prefixing zero while dialling from landline to mobile: Zero will have to be prefixed before a mobile number while dialling from a landline phone. The Department of Telecom (DoT) had accepted a proposal from the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) in this regard. 7. WhatsApp to stop working on some smartphones: Smartphones, which have an operating system (OS) older than

Android 4.3 or iOS 9, need to be upgraded for WhatsApp to work on these. This is because every year, WhatsApp stops working on outdated Android and iOS smartphones. 8. Cars and electronic appliances to get costlier: Automobile companies will increase car prices while those of TV, refrigerators, washing machines are likely to go up by 10%.

## Republic Day parade to be shorter, with fewer spectators due to Covid-19 protocols

(News Agencies)-Fewer people will be allowed to witness the Republic Day parade at Rajpath, with the government following strict social distancing protocols due to the Covid-19 pandemic, people familiar with the developments said on Wednesday. The parade itself will be shorter, with smaller marching contingents compared to previous years, the people said. No more than 25,000 spectators will be allowed at Rajpath this year, compared to over 100,000 people who usually turn up for the parade that showcases India's military might and cultural diversity, the people cited above said. Children below the age of 15 will not be permitted at the parade. The size of the marching contingents from the armed forces and the para-military will also be smaller. These squads will only have 96 participants compared to 144 in the ordinary course, officials said. The shortened route of the parade will see it end at the National Stadium

instead of the Red Fort, the officials said, adding that the number of cultural programmes will also be fewer. The Independence Day celebrations were also muted due to the pandemic this year, with fewer VIPs attending the August 15 event at Delhi's Red Fort while schoolchildren skipped it altogether. The Republic Day 2020 parade showcased several firsts. For the first time, Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid a wreath at the National War Memorial. Until 2019, tributes were paid to martyrs at the Amar Jawan Jyoti at India Gate. Also, the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) showcased its anti-satellite weapon for the first time. Jammu and Kashmir took part in the parade for the first time as a Union Territory. Its tableau was based on the theme "Back to Village". In August 2019, the government revoked the special status of the state by scrapping Article 370 of the Constitution and bifurcated J&K into two Union Territories - J&K and Ladakh.



# Northwest, central India may get brief respite from biting cold from January 1

**Minimum temperatures over most parts of northwest and central India are likely to rise by 3-5 degrees for three days from January 1, 2021 according to an IMD bulletin.**

(News Agencies)-Delhi's minimum temperature recorded at 8.30am was 3.3 degrees Celsius, four degrees below normal, on Thursday, said India Meteorological Department (IMD). According to IMD, there is likely to be relief from extreme cold

briefly from Friday. IMD also recorded dense fog both at Palam and Safdarjung stations with visibility under 50 metres.

Minimum temperatures over most parts of northwest and central India are likely to rise by 3-5 degrees for three days from

January 1, 2021 according to Thursday's bulletin.

"Cold wave" to "severe cold wave" conditions are likely over Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and West Madhya Pradesh in the



## Covid-19: Kerala prohibits public gatherings on New Year's eve

(News Agencies)-The Kerala government has issued an order prohibiting all public gatherings as part of New Year celebrations. Signed by principal secretary Dr A Jayathilak, the order has been sent to all district collectors and police chiefs says that all the celebrations on New Year's eve (December 31) should cease by 10 pm. The decision has been taken in view of the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) pandemic.

"Given the Covid-19 pandemic situation in the state, New Year 2021 celebration by the public is likely to result in a spike in the transmission of Covid-19, if extant Covid protocols are not adhered to," the order said.

It has made wearing of face masks, maintenance of social distance and sanitisation mandatory for those celebrating

new year. The order has said that lawful action will be initiated against people who fail to adhere



to these norms. Kerala is the latest to impose curbs on new year celebrations in the wake of the new strain of the virus that has been found in the United Kingdom. Delhi too imposed similar measures for December 31 and January 1. Maharashtra was one of the first states to impose a night curfew once the

new strain was discovered. The seven-hour curbs were imposed on December 22 and will continue till January 5. Karnataka, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Manipur and Rajasthan too have announced night curfew to check the spread of the virus. All these states have prohibited large gatherings and made Covid protocols, like wearing face masks and sanitising the area, mandatory.

next one day. Cold day" and West Madhya Pradesh on conditions are likely in isolated pockets over Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh, Delhi and West Madhya Pradesh during the next two days.

Dense to very dense fog is likely in some pockets is very likely over Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh, Delhi and West Uttar Pradesh on Thursday and Friday.

Ground frost is likely over Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan

and West Madhya Pradesh on Thursday.

Air quality in many parts of northwest India has deteriorated from "poor" on Wednesday to "very poor" on Thursday. Delhi's air quality index on Thursday morning was 331.

Due to an approaching western disturbance, light to moderate rainfall with isolated thunderstorm and lightning is likely over the Western Himalayan region and over the northwestern plains during January 2 to 5.

## Photo of the Week



On New Year's eve, a daily wage worker at Paiala is having his meal while thinking about his uncertain future.

Photo Courtesy: Prof. Rajdeep Singh Dhaliwal

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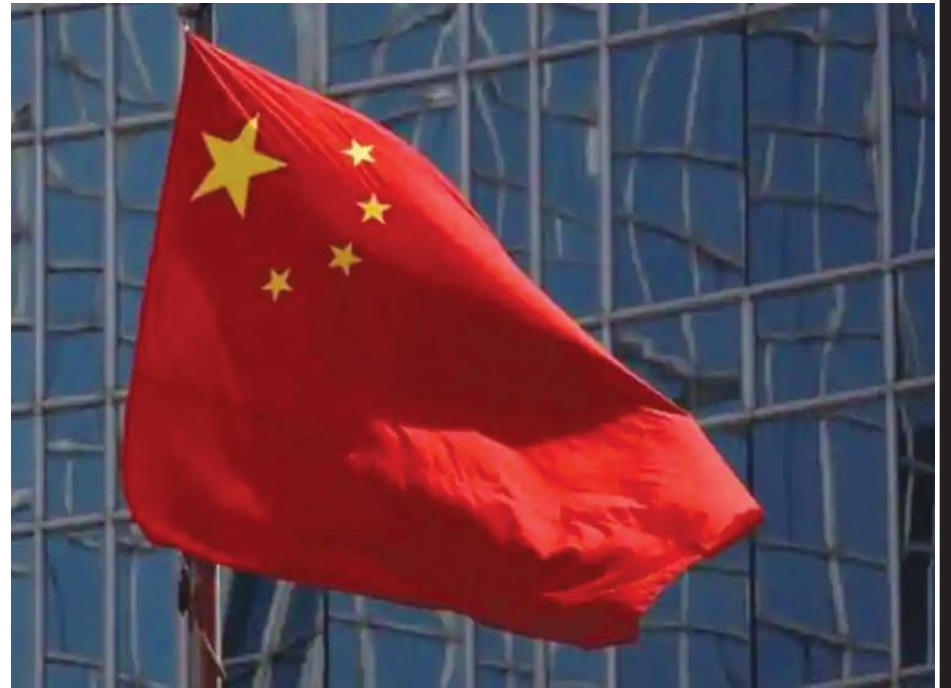
# Can the virus bring us closer? To deal with an aggressive China, its opponents must hang together

It is difficult to end this year on a celebratory note. If this year has taught us anything, it is to be conscious of our mutual vulnerability. The COVID-19 pandemic has been primarily seen as a public health crisis. However, it is an opportune moment to reflect upon the forgotten constitutional ideal of fraternity which is enshrined in the Preamble. Fraternity may well be the only treatment for the multitude of challenges that this pandemic has brought with itself.

The still-developing emergency has resulted in the death of more than 1.7 million people the world over and has pushed the global economy in a downward spiral. So far, the policy response to the pandemic entails standard measures such as strengthening the public health system and targeted economic support to the vulnerable sections. Given the scale and severity of the unfolding crisis, these measures are not nearly enough. Ironically, but fortunately, the pandemic has offered an opportunity to rediscover our political and constitutional order by invoking the forgotten principle of fraternity. The four fundamental goals of the Indian Constitution, as described in the preamble, are Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. In his closing speech to the Constituent Assembly, Bhimrao Ambedkar underlined the specific purpose of inserting "fraternity" in the constitutional text saying: "Liberty cannot be divorced from equality, equality cannot be divorced from liberty. Nor can liberty and equality be divorced from fraternity... Without fraternity, liberty and equality could not become a natural course of things. It would require a constable to enforce them." Unwittingly, Ambedkar may have also predicted the fate of the fraternity as a principle. If we take the first Republic day as our historical starting point, there is little doubt that Indian republic has made significant progress in its struggle for more liberty and equality, but that progress towards more fraternity has been, to put it mildly, disappointing. As is evident, the principle of fraternity enjoys an exalted status in the constitutional text but it has been denied a self-standing legal meaning and normative force in the actions of state. Its mainstream understanding in the public discourse is often limited to a notion rooted in political theory, which in a way neglects the potential utility of the principle. While liberty and equality have remained at the forefront both as constitutional principles and political ideals, the principle of fraternity did not have such a fate. Even in the academic world, rights-based claims relating to equality and liberty have continued to be a fertile ground for legal and political enquiry. The coronavirus crisis has compelled governments around the world

to take extraordinary measures to arrest the spread of the virus. Many countries, including India, saw prolonged lockdowns for months. With the news of the second strain of the virus, measures like lockdowns are also seeing a comeback. Enforcement of such norms is possible only by way appealing to fraternal ties amongst people. A crisis of this scale tends to strengthen a sentiment of fraternity in people. It goes without saying that political leaders ought not to take advantage of this impulse for narrow political ends. Rather, this sentiment must be translated into an act of sacrifice and service for those who are the worst affected due to the pandemic. Humanitarian work in any part of the world is seldom divorced from politics. However, in current times, we need to realise that both the pandemic itself and the consequent economic collapse are national problems. They can be addressed effectively only through a concerted effort towards collective action. Going forward, we need to make a choice between a do-it-alone mindset and a collectivistic mindset. While the former is a recipe for disaster, the latter requires a political response and will. During this crisis, ancient Indian traditions such as seva (service) have acquired a new potency and are filled with new meanings as the pandemic demands something bigger from all of us. The role played by political leadership during such times is extremely crucial as it can instil compassion for loss of those who are less privileged than others. In Political Emotions, Martha Nussbaum points out that, "all political principles, the good as well as the bad, need emotional support to ensure their stability over time, and all decent societies need to guard against division and hierarchy by cultivating appropriate sentiments of sympathy and love." Drawing from Nussbaum's work, strengthening the fraternal spirit in people is critical to stimulate and sustain the current efforts that require effort and sacrifice. More recently, Samantha Power also highlighted Nussbaum's idea when she said that this crisis will not end for anyone until it ends for everyone. So far, the messaging from political leaders while seeking cooperation from people has been prefaced with warnings of a crisis. Once the pandemic recedes, it is imperative that the ethos of mutual caring and support becomes a permanent feature in public life relevant for all times.

Developing a culture of fraternity requires cultivation of appropriate emotions and civic behaviour. In this pandemic, we all have been visited by our own mortality. It is an apt moment to embark on developing citizenship values and to cultivate fraternity which was once termed as the "unfinished tasks of our constitution" by L M Singhvi.



China's year of wolf warrior diplomacy is ending with a spate of sanctions. Beijing informally suspended visas for all Indians in September. Australia has been publicly battered, with China imposing barriers/bans on billions of dollars of exports. The world should not be surprised. China imposed similar sanctions against Japan and South Korea in the form of a rare earths ban and the expulsion of a retail chain. Go further back, and the Dragon's tactics include European countries, Mongolia, and The Philippines. Trade spats are a common across the world, but Beijing's actions are imposed in retaliation to sovereign political or strategic decisions. China was not responding to someone else's trade actions, it flexed economic

muscle to force another country to kowtow on an aspect of foreign policy. China's return on investment on these moves is mixed, but it is unlikely to change tack. Ultimately, Beijing carries out such policies because it faces no retaliation. If the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue is to develop some heft, it should consider how its members can assist each other in diversifying away from the Chinese market as well as softening the damage caused by Chinese trade sanctions. The Japan-led Supply Chain Resilience Initiative is a step in the right direction. That China's blockade of Australian coal has led to hundreds of Indian sailors being stranded in China is a reminder that its opponents need to band together.



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# Nitish Kumar trashes RJD's claims of defections from JD (U)

**Nitish Kumar said talks of JD (U) MLAs defecting to the RJD is baseless.**

(News Agencies)-In a big relief to the NDA camp in Bihar, chief minister Nitish Kumar said Wednesday that JD (U) was united and there was no truth in claims about party leaders defecting to any other party. His reaction came after the opposition RJD in the backdrop of growing uneasiness between the BJP and JD (U) over developments in Arunachal Pradesh claimed that 17 JD (U) MLAs were willing to change sides.

RJD leader Shyam Rajak claimed that 17 legislators from Nitish Kumar's party were in touch with them and all set to join the opposition party. "Seventeen JD (U) legislators are in touch with RJD through me. They are desperate to join RJD at the earliest but

we have stopped them as they will lose their membership due to anti-defection law," said Rajak.

The RJD leader claimed that JD (U) legislators were unhappy about the way BJP was asserting itself on Nitish Kumar in the new government.

Rajak, a former JD (U) minister, who returned to the RJD before the assembly election, said that talks with others are also on. "To evade anti-defection law, at least 25 to 26 legislators should defect at a time," he said and added that this will happen soon. Nitish Kumar, who stepped down from the JD (U) national president's post last Sunday called it a "baseless talk"

"All is well in JD (U). There is no weight in RJD claims. All these are baseless," the chief

minister said. JD (U) state president Bashistha Narain Singh advised RJD to stop talking absurdly. "First set your own house in order. Everything is fine in NDA," he said while the party's spokesperson Rajiv Ranjan said JD (U) legislators were united and RJD should keep its flock together. "There is no resentment in JD (U). Our party is upset over what happened in Arunachal but this does not mean that our legislators will get misguided. RJD in turn should keep its house together as many of the legislators are unhappy with Tejashwi Yadav's style of functioning," said Ranjan. Nitish Kumar's strong denial to RJD's claim has come as a big relief to NDA partners particularly the BJP, which found itself on the



backfoot after the JD (U) took aggressive posture following developments where six JD (U) MLAs defected to the BJP. "Nobody can break our (NDA) house. Nitish ji is our guardian and our mukhiya is strong," said deputy CM Renu Devi of the BJP.

On Tuesday, some RJD leaders had tried to lure Kumar by projecting him as PM candidate if he made way for Tejashwi

Yadav as Bihar chief minister. "Nitish Kumar should give up the chief minister's chair and pull out of the NDA. He should help Tejashwi Yadav form the new government and the RJD would return the favour by backing him as prime ministerial candidate in 2024," Uday Narain Chaudhary, a former state assembly speaker and RJD leader had said.

## Kapil Gujjar, who fired shot at Shaheen Bagh, inducted by BJP; expelled within hours



**Gujjar was detained by the police on February 1 this year following the firing incident and was booked for opening fire in the air at Shaheen Bagh, where protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) were held since December last year.**

Shaheen Bagh during the protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA).

Facing flak on social media, the BJP made a u-turn within hours and expelled Gujjar.

Citing his controversial involvement in the Shaheen Bagh shooting incident, the BJP's Ghaziabad unit stated that the party wasn't aware of Gujjar's role. The party has decided to show the exit route to Gujjar after learning about his criminal act.

Gujjar was detained by the police on February 1 this year following the firing incident and was booked for opening fire in the air at Shaheen Bagh, where protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) were held since December last year. He was later sent to two-day police custody.

On being detained by the police, the man was caught on camera saying, "No other community will have a say in this country.

Only Hindus will." Hindustan Times had reported that Gujjar, who opened fire less than 150 metres away from the Shaheen Bagh protest site, had told investigators he purchased the country-made pistol seven years ago for "celebratory firing" during his brother's wedding. He, however, claimed that he does not remember the name of the person from whom he purchased it, or how much he paid.

(Insider Bureau)-The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) after it inducted 23-year-old Kapil Gujjar who was arrested earlier this year for opening fire at Delhi's

## Ex-cricketer Mohammed Azharuddin escapes unhurt as his car overturns

**The accident took place on the Lalsot-Kota state mega highway under police station Soorwal in Rajasthan.**

(Insider Bureau)-Former captain of Indian cricket team Mohammed Azharuddin, along with four others, was safely rescued after his car overturned while he was on his way to participate in a programme in Ranthambore near the Sawai Madhopur district of Rajasthan on

Wednesday. The accident took place at the Fool Mohammad intersection on Lalsot-Kota state mega highway under police station Soorwal.

Soorwal police station House officer Chandrabhan Singh said all were rescued safely along with Mohammed Azharuddin from the damaged car. They

then travelled in another car to attend the programme.

A local man, Siraj Ali, who is an employee in a hotel was injured in the accident. He was rushed to hospital for treatment.

The accident was a result of one of the tyres getting punctured.





# Outrage on conversion misses the point: No community is entitled to be close-minded

**One person converting another is a political act under the garb of exercising religious freedom. However, any person's informed decision to embrace another faith out of their free will, untainted by extraneous factors, is and should be welcomed as a fundamental right.**

I disagree with The Indian Express's editorial on the matter of laws on inter-faith marriages and conversion ('Strike one', IE, December 1). The last couple of months have seen many high courts frowning upon the state's interference in interfaith marriages, being matters of personal choices. Alongside, several BJP-ruled states framed laws to regulate such marriages and any associated conversions. Are these pieces of legislation legally and logically viable? To answer this question, the matter must be viewed through two prisms: One, conversion of a bride before or after marriage; and two, an interfaith marriage without conversion.

An interfaith marriage where the bride converts has three key elements: One, a girl has to convert because she has to align with the religion and "culture" of the boy. Does this not reek of male chauvinism and patriarchy, which feminists across the globe have waged war against? They try to rationalise this by using disingenuous sophistry, that women have minds of their

own and thus, can make their own decisions. Yes, they can. Women are not being subject to criticism here. Nor are women in traditional households, who eat only after their husbands and/or touch their feet and/or are generally obsequious to them, either out of religious belief, love or devotion. We treat such husbands and the patriarchy surrounding them as criminal. Doesn't a man who expects that his wife should convert to his religion suffer from the same malaise?

Second, when a man has even a slight expectation of conversion, does it not exhibit his discomfort, for whatever reasons, to live with a person of another faith? This is bigotry. Third, conversion is predicated upon an abominable notion of the other faith being inferior and thus, comes from a community-level supremacist attitude. One fails to understand how the liberals reconcile these facts and do not deem the practice communal.

I firmly endorse B R Ambedkar and believe that to dismantle societal divides such as caste, religion, race and ethnicity, more

and more inter-community marriages must take place and are largely accepted by society. Consequently, should an interfaith marriage, sans conversion, be welcome? As a principle, yes. However, is the religion of the bride relevant? Ideally, not at all. The fact of a girl being from one community in a marriage and the groom being from another should be coincidental. But it is not. That is what causes the inter-community schism.

Due to a clear ban on the marriage of Muslim women to men of other faiths in their scriptures, and a majority of the community adhering to them and women having been steeped in the religion since childhood, in interfaith marriages involving Muslims, the girls mostly come from non-Muslim communities. Girls from non-Muslim communities are raised in a more liberal milieu, faith consciousness not being that important for them, especially in non-spiritual matters. Thus, though marriage is fundamentally an act of individual choice, at the macro



are heavily influenced by their communities before and after two years of conversion should be void, irrespective of the original religion of the convert. In today's era, religion ought to have no role in social, political and economic spheres and should relate only to spiritual aspects. It should be pronounced irrelevant in marital unions. All religious communities should raise their children with a sense of the irrelevance of religion in dealing and communicating with fellow citizens, including while choosing life partners. But, if a religious community deems it impossible to afford its womenfolk the agency to select partners of their choice, for religious compulsions or otherwise, for the sake of communal amity, it should forbid its men from forging an alliance with women of other faiths as well. Honest inter-community dialogue will work wonders.

as deliberate attempts to lure and deceive women from other communities, while restricting their own women from marrying outside the community. An honest liberal and feminist intellectual shall see this organic mental restraint on a Muslim girl as being completely devoid of her "agency". How are we to deal with these issues? We need laws regulating conversion. One person converting another is a political act under the garb of exercising religious freedom. However, any person's informed decision to embrace another faith out of their free will, untainted by extraneous factors, is and should be welcomed as a fundamental right. Conversely, if the conversion is for other reasons, including as a precondition for or consequence of marriage, it should be

## 2020: Remembering a horrific year that made us carry on with our lives in fear



**The speed with which the Covid-19 pandemic spread was scary, making one wonder what might have happened if the virus had been deadlier and the resultant fatality rate higher.**

Pandemics have come and gone. Mysterious and deadly, they have killed thousands and more each time they have reared their ugly heads and forced society to take evasive actions for survival. From the Spanish Flu to the cholera epidemics, history has a record of many such fear-inducing occurrences that have exposed

the helplessness of society from time to time. As 2020 fades away, most of us would reflect on it as the worst year in recent memory. SARS-CoV-2, an interconnected virus strain of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) which had caused the 2002-04 SARS outbreak, was first detected in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei in China, in December last year.

That would trigger a global medical emergency that is showing no sign of dying a natural death. The good news is that reliable and affordable vaccines to counter the menace are already on the way. At the same time, 2020 has issued a grim reminder that no other form of natural calamity can torment humankind as a pandemic does. It is not a flood or an earthquake whose destructive impact is limited to the affected territory. It is far, far worse.

The ongoing pandemic spread its vicious tentacles across the world in less than a year, leaving selfless healthcare

professionals reeling under unthinkable stress. Doctors and support staff did not have access to PPEs on many occasions, yet, they fought with exemplary courage and dedication to rescue the sick from the jaws of death. Still, many fell sick and died. Many more recovered. Celebrities like Donald Trump and Amitabh Bachchan tested positive, and so did the homeless. Robust economies hurtled towards a crash with India, one of the worst-affected nations, badly hit as predicted. The migrant worker often working as a daily wage suffered soon after professional establishments

in their city of work declared temporary closure. Unable to find their next meal, they started leaving for their homes to get the minimum for survival. Many of these journeys, often on foot, led to deaths on the way. The media reported many such tragedies even as a solution to end their suffering proved elusive. For months, we have been following the statistics of sickness and deaths, the numbers changing for the worse every day. Bill Gates had been prescient when he had observed, "The worst pandemic in modern history was the Spanish flu of 1918, which killed tens of millions of people."



# Mutant strains emphasise the need for strict controls

**It is important to keep the viral load in check so that the natural benefits India's population enjoys of broad-based immunity can be best made use of**

The Sars-CoV2 that has been recorded in the United Kingdom (UK), leading to a change of AA asparagine to tyrosine at position 501 and linking it to further increased transmissibility. This has caused immense concern, especially at a time when the emergence of vaccines had brought cheer and hope for the humanity. The new UK strain designated as VUI2020/12/01 (variant under investigation, year 2020, month 12, variant type 01) has recorded over 20 mutations, mostly silent, causing no change in the protein. Biologically, mutations represent steps in virus evolution under selection pressure of the host immunity. Experts in evolutionary biology view these as a system evolved by the virus to escape immunity or to enhance transmissibility. As the virus replicates, mutations happen in its genes continually through a process called "antigenic drift", causing minor changes in the surface protein. However, these small changes could accumulate over time, and result in newer viruses that could become antigenically

different such that the existing antibodies mounted by the host immune system to the original virus fail to recognise and neutralise them.

As of date, there is little information on the pathogenicity (ability to cause disease) and immunogenicity (ability to provoke immune response) of the new UK variant. The New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG) in UK has reviewed the new strain and found four interesting features.

One, its growth rate is ~71% higher than other variants, and two, the R-value shows an absolute increase between 0.39 and 0.93. The R value represents reproduction number and indicates an average number of secondary infections caused by an infected case. Value >1 suggests transmission to a number of individuals and higher spread of the disease. Three, the cycle threshold or CT value in the RT-PCR test suggests a decrease of about 2 and, four, the viral load suggests 0.5 increase in median log10 in new 501Y strain as compared to the original



501N. However, despite higher transmissibility, the new strain has not shown severe complications. It is also unlikely that it won't be responsive to the already developed coronavirus vaccines, although relevant data needs to be generated on that front.

The important question is why and how do these mutations occur and whether there is a role for host immunity in driving them? More importantly, could antibody treatment or other therapies have an influence in the process? The preprint of a recently submitted paper to medRxiv portal by the group in Cambridge, UK, led by Dr Ravinder Gupta, has focused exactly on these issues. The study is based on a single case report of an immune-compromised individual with chronic SARS-CoV-2 infection, lasting over 100 days and treated

with three units of convalescent plasma, two on day 65 and one on day 95 in an effort to neutralise the virus and treat the chronic infection.

The virus was detectable in the patient in all nasal swab samples collected at least 23 times over a period of 101 days, despite the plasma therapy. The authors investigated the SARS-CoV-2 evolution and found important changes in its genome caused by two new mutations in the spike protein, one a deletion of AA Histidine and Valine at positions 69 and 70 and, two, one AA replacement at position 796 (D796H). The authors state that while the two mutations did not increase infectivity of the virus, these might have been responsible for decreased sensitivity of the patient to convalescent therapy.

## 2021 strategic outlook: India must not yield any ground to China



**As India strives to ensure good relations with the US and Russia, revive its economy and build indigenous capabilities, it is vital that it does not yield ground to China and assertively raises issues that impact its core national interests.**

As the New Year dawns after what seems a long 12 months wracked by death, devastated economies and uncertainty, the global landscape remains in flux. Rivalries between global players will, however, get enhanced. The Covid-19 pandemic, which has caused anti-China sentiment to soar worldwide, highlighted the need for diversified sources of vital supplies such as pharmaceuticals and rare earths. This has prompted countries to accelerate geo-political realignments and develop new

supply chains. For India especially, the coming year heralds a phase of new uncertainties, necessitating deft diplomacy accompanied by a firm resolve not to yield ground on issues of sovereignty and national interest. An aggressive China, a malevolent China-Pakistan relationship and the growing strategic cooperation between Russia and China, with its attendant implications, will all be central to India's strategic policy.

Globally, the China-United States (US) relationship is perhaps the most crucial today. How it evolves during Joe Biden's term will be minutely watched. Any easing of policies followed by the earlier two US administrations will be oxygen to Chinese President Xi Jinping and make him more aggressive. Despite considerable US pressure, Xi has not wavered in his quest to make China a global power rivalling - if not surpassing - the US. Though the incoming Biden Administration is yet to formally articulate its policies, the President-elect has made clear that restoring the relationship with Europe will be a priority. This sentiment has been quickly reciprocated by European capitals. Biden and his nominees

for the posts of secretary of state and national security advisor, Antony Blinken and Jake Sullivan respectively, have also indicated that with China they would prefer talks to confrontation. Beijing has responded cautiously, but positively. Several Chinese officials and academics, including China's foreign minister Wang Yi and ambassador to the US, Cui Tiankai, have in past weeks reiterated the need to repair Sino-US ties, treat each other with "respect" and address common issues like the pandemic and climate change. They, and other Chinese interlocutors, have nevertheless held firm to Beijing's position on issues where differences exist. Whether this portends a shift in the Biden

Administration's focus away from the Indo-Pacific should soon be visible. Capitals in Asia, and some in Europe, will closely monitor if America reduces its security presence in the Indo-Pacific, decreases engagement with the Quad, and whether it dilutes support to Taiwan, Japan and the Philippines on security issues. Many Chinese experts hold a thinly concealed view that Beijing wields considerable influence among the US power elite, which will again be revived. Recent US media reports mention that China is establishing contacts with persons close to the Biden camp and point to Beijing's longstanding financial links with the Democrats, including with Biden's son.





## India needs a national surveillance plan

***With our massive population, over 10 million known cases, and undiagnosed cases probably numbering over twenty times that, India may well be the place for the next important variant to emerge. Going forward, we need as much caution within India, as for incoming international travellers.***

The announcement of a new rapidly spreading mutated variant of the Sars-CoV2 virus in the United Kingdom (UK) has been followed by a variety of reactions. It was always likely that a mutated Sars-CoV2 variant may emerge that is worse. While it is in UK today, with similar reports from South Africa and Brazil, it could easily be in India tomorrow. While this variant is currently in the spotlight, others may lurk in the shadows. Sars-CoV2 is a virus that like any other virus, makes billions of copies of itself inside infected patients. The longer it takes to eliminate the virus, the more such mutations may accumulate. If such mutations become beneficial for virus survival and propagation from human to human, they can rapidly spread in the community.

In the case of the variant first reported in UK, named lineage B.1.1.7, there is an unusually large divergence from its nearest ancestor, suggesting that it may have come from a person with a prolonged infection. These new mutations seem to have enabled it to spread more effectively. While measures such as hand-

washing, distancing and masks will remain effective, increased transmission rate could be devastating in countries where the infection is exponentially increasing and the health systems are under pressure. So far, this variant has not been associated with more severe disease or higher risk of death. We also do not expect this variant to be able to evade immunity induced by either previous infection or vaccines since this is typically due to recognition of multiple sites by antibodies as well as by immune cells. Therefore, based on available data, I do not see the B.1.1.7 variant as a major worry for India right now. But any increase in severity or reduction in immunity still needs to be carefully monitored, and rapid spreading in itself can increase avoidable deaths if health care systems get overwhelmed by numbers. Mass-scale production of generic drugs and vaccines was always our strength. The year 2020 has additionally seen India become more "atmanirbhar" in areas ranging from diagnostics to devices. The recent procurement by the Delhi government of over a

thousand Swasth-Vayu non-invasive BiPAP ventilators, indigenously developed at the CSIR National Aeronautical Laboratory, would have been difficult to imagine in 2019. Innovative diagnostics are also gaining traction. For example, we expect to be able to rapidly modify the CRISPR-based Sars-CoV2 test (Feluda) to discriminate the UK variant, if it is clinically required going forward. Thus, I expect any B.1.1.7 or related outbreak in India to be containable and in the worst case scenario, manageable.

Despite my conviction that we are well-placed to weather the current storm, complacency must be avoided. We should continue doing what we have already done well, and also prepare ourselves for new twists and turns in this pandemic, as well as for future ones.

A good start is to appreciate the molecular and epidemiological surveillance efforts by UK that have led us to know about this variant in a timely manner; hopefully early enough to limit its global spread. In India, Kerala and CSIR-IGIB have already conducted similar studies and

some other states had also expressed interest. Rapidly scaling up such capacity across India is achievable through national coordination; scientifically we are ready. This would help to not only to discover and limit spread of this variant, but also any future ones. After all, the virus mutates inside people. With our massive population, over 10 million known cases, and undiagnosed cases probably numbering over twenty times that, India may well be the place for the next important variant to emerge. Going forward, we need as much caution within India, as for incoming international travellers.

So how do we maintain surveillance of Sars-CoV2 and future pandemics? Regarding the emergence of worrisome strains or new pathogens, it is really not a question of whether, but when. Scientists had previously warned of a future pandemic based on identification of coronaviruses similar to Sars-CoV2, in China. Hopefully, we will do better in future.

Large scale sequencing is now easier than ever before. We

have successfully used sequencers (devices that can determine the sequence of DNA/RNA) that are as small as a pencil box and cost less than a high-end television, to sequence over a 1,000 Sars-CoV2 genomes at costs comparable to what an RT-PCR used to be in March 2020. These can become micro-labs that can take sequencing to point of care diagnostics, such that you sequence the sample to determine not only positive or negative, but also the strain, within the same day. We have also used larger machines to affordably sequence more than a 1,000 samples in a single run, which can be part of mega-lab national hubs serving lakhs. Using these technologies, we can ask questions limited not only to Sars-CoV2, but for any known organism e.g. for tuberculosis, as well as interrogate unknown ones such as a potential future pathogen. What is now required is a national surveillance plan of current and future pandemics, building capacity and preparedness. In the spirit of never wasting a good crisis, let us use the current public attention as a catalyst for change.



# Steps to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 if you are sick

**FOLLOW THE STEPS BELOW:** If you are sick with COVID-19 or think you might have it, follow the steps below to help protect other people in your home and community.

## Stay home except to get medical care

- **Stay home:** People who are mildly ill with COVID-19 are able to recover at home. Do not leave, except to get medical care. Do not visit public areas.
- **Stay in touch with your doctor.** Call before you get medical care. Be sure to get care if you feel worse or you think it is an emergency.
- **Avoid public transportation:** Avoid using public transportation, ride-sharing, or taxis.



## Separate yourself from other people in your home, this is known as home isolation

- **Stay away from others:** As much as possible, you should stay in a specific “sick room” and away from other people in your home. Use a separate bathroom, if available.
- **Limit contact with pets & animals:** You should restrict contact with pets and other animals, just like you would around other people.
  - Although there have not been reports of pets or other animals becoming sick with COVID-19, it is still recommended that people with the virus limit contact with animals until more information is known.
  - When possible, have another member of your household care for your animals while you are sick with COVID-19. If you must care for your pet or be around animals while you are sick, wash your hands before and after you interact with them. See COVID-19 and Animals for more information.



## Call ahead before visiting your doctor

- **Call ahead:** If you have a medical appointment, call your doctor’s office or emergency department, and tell them you have or may have COVID-19. This will help the office protect themselves and other patients.



## Wear a facemask if you are sick

- **If you are sick:** You should wear a facemask when you are around other people and before you enter a healthcare provider’s office.
- **If you are caring for others:** If the person who is sick is not able to wear a facemask (for example, because it causes trouble breathing), then people who live in the home should stay in a different room. When caregivers enter the room of the sick person, they should wear a facemask. Visitors, other than caregivers, are not recommended.



## Cover your coughs and sneezes

- **Cover:** Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
- **Dispose:** Throw used tissues in a lined trash can.
- **Wash hands:** Immediately wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, clean your hands with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.



## Clean your hands often

- **Wash hands:** Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. This is especially important after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing; going to the bathroom; and before eating or preparing food.
- **Hand sanitizer:** If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol, covering all surfaces of your hands and rubbing them together until they feel dry.
- **Soap and water:** Soap and water are the best option, especially if hands are visibly dirty.
- **Avoid touching:** Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.



## Avoid sharing personal household items

- **Do not share:** Do not share dishes, drinking glasses, cups, eating utensils, towels, or bedding with other people in your home.





# Trump creates a nightmare for Republicans in last-minute fight over \$2,000 stimulus checks



Republicans have a death wish, and it is also the right thing to do, they must approve the \$2000 payments ASAP. \$600 IS NOT ENOUGH!"

The president may think he is teaching Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., and other Republicans a lesson for not supporting him enough in challenging the November election results. But Trump is really damaging the chances that Republicans can hold onto two U.S. Senate seats in Georgia in Tuesday's runoff elections. If Democrats Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock win those two seats, the Senate will be equally divided between Democrats and Republicans, with 50 votes each. As vice president, Kamala Harris will cast a tie-breaking vote to give Democrats the narrowest of majorities.

If Democrats capture control of the Senate, you can bet they will endlessly investigate Trump.

Georgia Republican Sens. David Perdue (running against Ossoff) and Kelly Loeffler (running

against Warnock) now say they back ballooning the deficit with the \$2,000 checks to most Americans - but just a week ago they opposed such a move.

Three out of four House Republicans voted against the \$2,000 checks on Monday. But enough Republicans joined with all but two House Democrats and two independents to approve the boost in payments, enabling it to pass on a 275-to-134 vote. The measure needed 272 votes to pass under suspension of House rules.

With Republicans split on whether to support or oppose the \$2,000 payments, the GOP now appears divided and confused just days before the Georgia runoffs, when it should be united and principled to win the crucial elections.

Senate Majority Leader McConnell has responded to this mess by buying time.

In addition to his \$2,000 check proposal, Trump has made additional demands on Congress. McConnell says

Trump's demands regarding \$2,000 checks, repealing liability protections enjoyed by social media platforms, and investigating voter fraud are "linked together" and the Senate will start to debate them this week.

If all those Trump ideas are packaged into one bill, Democrats will complain that the final product is a poison pill they can't swallow.

And if this bill combining three separate issues is passed in the Senate, there's no way a compromise with the House's version could be agreed to before this Congress turns into a pumpkin on Sunday. At that point, members of the new Congress elected in November take office and will have to start from scratch to come up with new legislation. The irony is that most Republicans and many Democrats know that tossing free money out of a helicopter is a terrible way to help the economy or even individual families.

By John Fund

President Trump's last-minute about-face on the size of stimulus checks for most Americans to help deal with the economic harm caused by the coronavirus pandemic has turned Washington upside down only days before a new Congress is sworn in. Trump's negotiators had agreed to \$600 per person in stimulus checks and had gotten that measure through both the Democratic-controlled House and the Republican-controlled Senate before Christmas. The bill the payments were wrapped into was a typically flawed mixture of needed spending and slabs of

Jimmy Dean-sized pork. But Trump's White House had itself requested much of the pork - including the foreign aid he's now railing against - and never called for \$2,000 per person checks until the bill had passed both houses of Congress.

But now suddenly the president says it's time to add \$350 billion to the deficit and is teaming up with Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., to fight for the extra spending.

Politically, the president's move has created a nightmare for his fellow Republicans. Trump tweeted Tuesday: "Unless

## Women must be centre-stage in water and sanitation



In May 2014, India was shaken by the rapes of two adolescent girls in rural northwest India, when they were out in the evening to defecate in an open field. In a recent study in the Indian Journal of Gender Studies on Women's Experiences of Defecating in the Open, one respondent said: Some men would hide and watch us defecating and then talk about it. This often put my husband to shame and even led

to quarrels, with my husband scolding me for not remaining hidden.

Fortunately, sanitation continues to be central to the government's agenda. With the Covid-19 pandemic, it is recognised that by addressing sanitation and water issues, we improve hygiene, health, gender, and livelihoods. The Swachh Bharat Mission 2.0 (SBM) aims, among other things, to find solutions for sustained behaviour change,

addressing women and their personal hygiene needs.

There is a growing consensus now that whereas the statutory framework relating to sanitation is gender neutral in its approach, the policy framework does recognise gender-related issues. However, when it comes to implementation, it is evident that sanitation-related needs and vulnerabilities of women need to be better addressed. Examples such as women not being

**In 2018 the rallying call of the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) campaign of "Satyagraha se Swachhagrah" - rode on the back of the big change in sanitation habits in India .**

consulted in decisions taken on sanitation-related matters such as the building and use of toilets and failing to take into account the prevalent socio-cultural norms, which for generations have defined the status of women as one that needs to be protected from all forms of exposure, while, at the same time, forcing them to defecate in the open even if this is in groups, substantiate this contention. Nor should communication only focus on women, as if men could do whatever they liked; 100% open defecation free, cannot be achieved without men also being engaged.

The famous promotional videos of SBM casting its celebrity ambassador, Vidya Balan portrayed a scene, where the protagonist asked a man on his

wedding day whether he had a toilet at home, to which the answer was negative. This prompted the person to ask the bride to remove her veil explicitly giving a message that a man who lets his wife defecate in the open has no right to let his wife observe purdah. In other words, the man has to build a toilet to be able to enforce the purdah system. Later, the video was amended to "clean" the message - all communication needs to be re-checked through a gender lens. Several research studies have indicated that girls drop out of schools due to inadequate sanitary facilities being provided especially during their menstruation periods. Facilities need to be provided - and their awkwardness needs to be addressed too.





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# Air pollution: CAQM's role is still hazy

***There is still confusion about which agency has what sort of role in combating the problem.***

People in the national capital and nearby areas spent almost half of last week breathing severely polluted air. The concentration of ultra-fine PM2.5 and fine PM10 particles in the air was over 10 times the level considered safe for breathing. Blanketed by a layer of smoke and fog, the outdoors were hazardous for the young and the elderly. In the last five years, this description will hold true for possibly any random period of time in the winter. The problem became such that this year, the Supreme Court appointed retired Justice Madan Lokur to oversee the efforts of several disparate authorities - only to be convinced by the government to walk back

on the move after it appointed a new statutory body, the Commission on Air Quality Management (CAQM).

With statutory powers that cut across federal lines, CAQM was billed as a super commission, comprising officials from several states and agencies that can take the individual steps collectively pivotal to addressing the problem. CAQM was notified on November 5, almost in the middle of the November 1-15 period when the crisis typically peaks. Experts said the move was ill-timed, and amounted to reinventing the wheel at a time when the problem is most acute. Over the following weeks, many of these concerns were borne out

as the authority admitted it needed time to familiarise itself with the problem and the machinery that exists at present. It was on November 13 that CAQM asked the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) to coordinate efforts.

More than a month later, there is still confusion about which agency has what sort of role in combating the problem. With the previous SC-appointed Environment Pollution (Prevention and Control) Authority dissolved, central and state pollution control boards - the agencies that issue directions - have lacked clear policy guidelines for preemptive and mitigating measures. One of



the examples of this has been the lack of any curbs on construction work this year (although such a measure has been complicated by the Covid-19 lockdown earlier in the year). Last year, construction work - one of the most significant contributors of dust - was banned for most part of the winter.

While it is understandable that any new agency will require time to come up to speed with a problem, Delhi and its neighbourhood should not need to submit itself to the mercy of the weather - at present the only factor that appears to mitigate the problem.

## Winter shelters for the homeless: Don't cut corners

For the last few days, the northwestern part of India has been in the grip of a cold wave or severe cold wave conditions. This situation is likely to continue in the National Capital Region for the next three days. With the mercury dipping, the homeless in Delhi have been using free-of-cost night shelters set up by the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB),

which, as of December 30, has shelter homes (RCC building, porta cabins, tents and temporary buildings) at 281 locations for 8,299 people. According to the DUSIB, on Tuesday night, 6,509 people stayed at these shelter homes.

However, just setting up shelter homes is not enough. According to a report in ThePrint, a news portal, facilities

at many of the shelters ---- bedding, toilets and water ---- are not adequate. Thanks to Covid-19 and social distancing norms, these DUSIB shelters are now forced to admit a fewer number of people. A study by Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN), a non-profit, also found many shelters were not functional. There is also a discrepancy in the numbers of

homeless people. According to HLRN, the number of homeless in Delhi at any given point is around 150,000-200,000. DUSIB claims that its 2014 survey showed 16,000-17,000. The variance in numbers suggests that there is an urgent need to assess the correct number and then review the arrangements made for them. The problem of homeless people and shelters is

symptomatic of a larger problem: The lack of adequate and safe housing.

It is imperative that people have access to housing (including social rental housing and hostels) with adequate facilities (water, electricity, sanitation) and also access to affordable housing finance, including rental and ownership.

## Lessons India can learn from the vaccine rollout in other countries



***This provides an opportunity to tweak or overhaul protocols in time***

smooth elsewhere too. In Germany, delays were reported at several sites after temperature logs showed some of the vaccine boxes did not maintain the temperatures required for the Pfizer-BioNTech dose - potentially damaging stocks. In Canada, which approved two vaccines, supplies came in a slow trickle. In the United Kingdom, where Pfizer estimated four million doses were made available, only 800,000 have been administered. Teething troubles are not uncommon in any exercise with such a number of moving parts - the factory-to-syringe process includes a range

of people and modes of transportation - but they can be costly at a time when we are racing against the pandemic. These experiences hold important lessons for India. The country did well to begin mock drills, giving its digital management platform as well as human resource training an early shakedown. The exercise covered seven districts in four states and exposed crucial areas that need improvement well in time. But, in a country over 1.3 billion people, such dry runs must quickly be replicated in more districts. Officials must look at the

experiences in other countries and keep open the scope to tweak or overhaul protocols, including how India selects and prioritises the groups of people who are first in line for a dose. Just like its early legwork on the delivery side, the government must now intensify efforts to ensure supplies by announcing its first purchase deals. Regulatory processes are expected to reach crucial breakthroughs shortly (a key meeting was scheduled for Wednesday afternoon), which should give the government the confidence to commit to purchases.

In the fortnight between December 14, when the first American received a coronavirus vaccine, and December 29, the United States vaccinated 2.13 million people. The country has done more vaccinations than any other across the world, and its tally represented close to 50% of the inoculations carried out globally till Tuesday. In itself, reaching 2.13 million people over 14 days is not a small order - but it is one that falls short of expectations. American authorities expected to vaccinate 20 million people by the end of 2020. Instead, rollout has been hobbled by time lost in quality checks, managing vaccination reporting tools and planning distribution flows. The first month of vaccine rollout has not been



# Trump has set Republicans up to fail in Georgia

In keeping with its surreal qualities, 2020 won't really end in December. The full outcome of the November election will only be known after January 5, when Georgia voters choose the two senators who will determine which party controls the US Senate -- and thus President-elect Joe Biden's ability to pass laws. The truly strange part of this prolonged battle for the Senate is that if Democrats win, it will be in large part thanks to the bizarre behavior of a Republican president, who didn't just energize Democrats and repel many moderate Republicans, but, through his consistent undermining of the electoral results in Georgia, triggered a mind-boggling campaign that persuaded some Republicans not to vote at all. In short, Donald Trump and his malignant campaign to overturn the results of the election have thrown the state Republicans into chaos, complicated their ability to craft a believable message and may well cost Republicans control of the Senate. Undoubtedly, they are both tight races, so it's foolish to predict the outcome. But since I already did, I will double down and say the odds now favor Democrats Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock. That's remarkable not only because



Georgia Democrats have faced a steep climb in statewide races for decades, but because both candidates are facing incumbents who enjoy enormous advantages in name recognition and ad spending, he headwinds pushing against Republican Sens. Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue have been gusting out of the Oval Office, Mar-a-Lago and the golf course from where Trump has been battling the results of the November election with a barrage of falsehoods and limp lawsuits. While Georgia Democrats remain exhilarated and energized after pushing Biden across the finish line in November, Trump seems determined to form a circular firing squad. It's further evidence of

Trump's flailing efforts to stay in power, which show little concern for the collateral damage he is causing his party or the country's democracy, for that matter. He has viciously attacked Gov. Brian Kemp and Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger -- both Republicans -- and repeatedly questioned the credibility of Georgia's election systems. That, to put it mildly, is not the best way to turn out the vote. In a pathetic effort to curry favor with a president they fear, one who displayed little interest in them when he campaigned in Georgia earlier this month, Loeffler and Perdue demanded that Raffensperger resign, unctuously bowing to Trump. Even Kemp, after being

mercilessly humiliated by Trump, showed what looked to me like an embarrassing lack of self-respect, posting a picture of himself and his daughter at a White House Christmas party. Trump's fiercest advocates have launched their Samson option: If he can't keep power, they'll bring down the party with him by calling for a boycott of the election. Yes, incredibly, there's a Republican call for a boycott of the elections. Trump attorney Lin Wood, a favorite of the QAnon crowd, is advising Georgians not to vote for Perdue and Loeffler. It's unclear how many will heed the call, but it's worth remembering that Georgia just elected to Congress a QAnon devotee, Rep.-elect Marjorie Taylor Greene. In a close

election, the boycott could make the difference. Trump has scheduled a campaign visit for January 4, but that may be too late. Millions have already voted. Besides, the President is looking politically worn and weak after delaying signing the Covid relief bill and facing the first veto override of his presidency. Trump's refusal to accept defeat has also created another problem for GOP candidates, depriving them of what could be their most persuasive argument to voters. With Democrats controlling the White House and the House of Representatives, Loeffler and Perdue could tell voters that putting them in office would help Republicans act as a check on Democrats. After all, many voters like divided government. But since Loeffler and Perdue can't openly acknowledge that Trump lost, they can't make that case forcefully. Instead, Republicans are reduced to ugly tactics: commercials filled with falsehoods and a campaign to suppress voters, particularly in blue-leaning counties. Georgians are on the pummeled side of a firehose of campaign commercials. Negative ads are the order of the day, but the GOP's are filled with an astonishing proportion of falsehoods, such as claiming that Warnock has a "Marxist ideology."

## Dr. Fauci lied about coronavirus to manipulate our behavior - that's appalling



Thanks to our news media's monomaniacal obsession with President Trump, few have paid attention to an important interview that Dr. Anthony Fauci gave last week, in which he acknowledged that he selectively lied to the American public about the coronavirus and what was needed for our national recovery. The story is

straightforward. For most of this year, Dr. Fauci and other scientists in our public health establishment have been telling Americans that about 60 to 70 percent of the nation would need a vaccine in order for us to reach herd immunity and make the coronavirus a non-issue.

But, speaking with The New York Times, Dr. Fauci admitted that

he believes the real number is in fact significantly higher - perhaps 75 to 90 percent - and he declined to be forthright because he felt the country wasn't ready to hear it. Only now did he say that he feels he has the freedom to "nudge this up a bit" without discouraging the nation. I am sure that Dr. Fauci - the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases - made the decision to mislead with nothing but good intentions. However, let's be clear about what he was doing: lying to the American people in order to manipulate their behavior. The American people deserve the truth; they also deserve accountability. When elected representatives make decisions, they can be held responsible by the public. But when public health officials

with decades of experience and leadership within our nation's institutions short-circuit the political process and make these decisions themselves, they deny the American people that same opportunity - and to change course if desired. After all, accountability is a central tenet of representative government. It's the best way to ensure that the vision of what is being enforced by decision-makers matches the values of the population who have elected them. Over the past year, difficult choices have had to be made: How do we allocate scarce personal protective equipment? Is it safe to play a high school football game? How should we prioritize vaccine distribution? They're not easy questions, but people should be trusted to make these decisions

for themselves armed with facts honestly presented by public officials. And when it comes time to make decisions as a community, elected officials at every level of government must lead. Passing the buck to unelected technocrats avoids accountability and means falling back on two fallacies: first, that science gives us a straightforward playbook for answering questions facing decision-makers; and, second, that those technocrats are the only legitimate interpreters of the facts. As the COVID-19 pandemic has made clear, things are never so clear-cut. For example, early on in the pandemic, there was a question of whether wearing a mask could be an effective tool to stop the spread.

By Sen. Marco Rubio



# Kamala Harris And India's Laws Against "Love Jihad"

The unpredictable impact of Trump's post-defeat temper on Georgia's January 6 Senate runoffs intrigues me as I wait and watch in Illinois. Also fascinating, and of course noticed by many, is the similarity in the political disputes that India and the U.S. witness.

Moreover, there is at least partial similarity, also marked by many, in the styles of Modi and Trump, both of whom seem to enjoy the mic, the camera, and theatrics. Not all the likenesses between India and America are concurrent, however. Thus it was a long time ago that the U.S. witnessed parallels to India's current "love jihad" fever. In at least 16 American states, persons of different races could not legally marry until 1967, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the so-called anti-miscegenation laws were unconstitutional. Connoting a "risky" mixing of genes and races, the term miscegenation had been coined during the Civil War (1861-65) by slavery defenders who warned that freeing slaves would result in

interracial marriages. If California had been one of those 16 states, Tamil Nadu's Shyamala Gopalan, who as a 19-year-old had immigrated there in 1958, could not have married Donald Harris, an immigrant from Jamaica in 1963. But that was not the case. Shyamala and Donald could and did marry, and Kamala Harris, born to the couple in 1964, is today on the cusp of being sworn in as America's Vice-President.

In earlier decades, America had witnessed wide dissemination of the bogey of African American males desiring White women. That spectre upended actual history, where male slaveholders forced Black female slaves to bear their children, thereby creating the great bulk of America's lighter-skinned Blacks. Today's desi tale of Muslim males supposedly seducing Hindu females in a widespread "love jihad" conspiracy resembles the bogey to which White America had been receptive before the 1960s. However, I haven't yet found an American parallel, current or

historical, for the sick story being circulated in India of a large conspiracy among Muslim males for trapping Hindu females so as to (a) increase the Muslim percentage in India's population and (b) bring terrorists to birth.

Human beings falling in love with, and wanting to marry, a pardesi or a bahri, somebody outside one's traditional circle, is something that everyone understands. Males duping females of any circle for sex, property or money is also, unfortunately, something known to all eras and every society. But would anyone believe that young Indian men who desperately need work (to feed parents, grandparents, siblings, perhaps other relatives, and themselves) would spend time and energy plotting to seduce an "outsider" female merely in order to increase the percentage in the population of their community? And to patiently and carefully raise terrorists at home?

Some would indeed believe such a tale. Such as those who've been brainwashed to think of another caste or community as



people who are unnecessarily dangerous, or expendable, or both. It is not at all unthinkable that people would organize a racket for ensnaring women. But it is unthinkable that a giant scale "love jihad" racket has been running in India for years, eluding not merely the families involved but also the country's huge, talented and suspicious police forces. It is also hard to accept that such a racket has persuaded a large number of poor Muslim males to capture and convert unsuspecting Hindu women for the sake of census figures, and for producing terrorists.

Love happens. It doesn't require planning or organizing. A racket,

however, doesn't just happen; it is wickedly arranged. Instead, however, of busting any of the numerous rackets that regularly fleece our hapless citizens, some state governments, led by that of U.P., have thrust ordinances or laws to obstruct inter-faith love and inter-faith marriage! There's no need for me to dwell on the coercive and, according to several experts, unconstitutional features of the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance, 2020, which Governor Anandiben Patel signed into law towards the end of November. The ordinance claims to deal with forcible conversion and fraudulent marriages, in other words, with "love jihad".

## Pawar's Advice To Mamata On How To Take On Amit Shah



Mamata Banerjee, 65, has the toughest of opponents - Union Home Minister Amit Shah - in her endeavour to get a third term as Chief Minister of Bengal. The last few weeks have seen some key members of her party transplanted firmly to Shah's side in the BJP.

Finally, some astute realpolitik help is at hand - Sharad Pawar, who is the architect of the improbable ruling alliance in Maharashtra headed by Uddhav Thackeray, will visit Banerjee in Kolkata in the first week of the new year; plans are being

chalked out for them to address a joint rally in Kolkata.

Banerjee and Pawar both quit the Congress to set up their own regional parties. They plan to highlight the Modi government's assault on federalism. Pawar, one of the canniest operators in Indian politics, described by PM as his "political guru", at the age of 80 and on the back of his successful booting out of the BJP government in Maharashtra, has emerged as the life coach to regional leaders threatened by the Modi-Shah electoral juggernaut.

Just weeks ago, the BJP went full nuclear on the local elections in Hyderabad, parading its top leaders there to campaign against Chief Minister K Chandrasekhar Rao ("KCR"), whose party won the most seats but watched the BJP make huge gains at its expense. That experience presumably delivered goosebumps for other regional parties that play footsie with the BJP in parliament, voting with it on important issues, or helping out by abstaining from a crucial vote. These parties include those of KCR, Navin Patnaik in Odisha, and MK Stalin in Tamil Nadu where megastar Rajinikanth is making his political debut, one which could prove instrumental for the BJP.

Authoritative sources confirm to me that Pawar has been on an extended outreach with all these leaders to persuade them of the existential threat imposed by a maximalist BJP. Pawar has, to them, held up Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar as an example of how the BJP tramples

over allies when required to emerge as the senior partner. Interestingly, Pawar and Banerjee have also reached out to Congress Chief Ministers including Ashok Gehlot, Bhupesh Baghel and Amarinder Singh but not to the Gandhi family. Pawar is also in regular touch with Kamal Nath who has emerged as a new trouble-shooter for the Congress (despite losing his own government in Madhya Pradesh earlier this year).

The political impulse driving these "chats" is to find common federal/regional play book against the BJP cornering ever-increasing parts of the territory of these regional heavyweights. A senior leader from Pawar's party told me that he has reached out to all opposition forces except those in Uttar Pradesh, who seem to be thrall to the BJP.

Pawar is believed to have advised Banerjee to tone down the public aggression and angst against Amit Shah's trips to Bengal (Shah will be back there on January 12 to hold his next set

of rallies). An unusually Banerjee heard him out patiently. The second piece of advice from Pawar was that she should publicly declare that no member of her family will hold office - this to counter Shah's jibes of dynasty rule based on the growing influence of her nephew, Abhishek Banerjee. Leaders of Banerjee's party say that while she has made this proclamation, the media is deliberately underplaying what is a hugely significant announcement. After Pawar conjured up a team of rivals to form the government in Maharashtra, his political stock has soared; always keenly aware of his political status, he would like to be the "eminence grise" of a united opposition. Of course this includes the hugely influential post of UPA chairperson currently held by Sonia Gandhi, interim Congress chief. Gandhi wants to retire and some senior leaders of the Congress feel there is merit in a "ghar wapsi" of Pawar to the Congress.



# NCB chief defends small catches, says can't allow drug lords free run in narcotics sale



**"We are under a lot of criticism as to why we are catching small amount of cannabis from people. The problem is not small or big amount. It is that we are giving the field to these peddlers and drug lords to have an open field to sell their drugs," the NCB chief said.**

(News Agencies)-Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) chief Rakesh Asthana on Tuesday said that the agency might have been be "criticised" for apprehending people possessing small amount of cannabis but it cannot allow free run to drug lords and peddlers in selling narcotics and ruining lives. Speaking at an online conference organised by the Global Counter Terrorism Council on anti-money laundering and combating financing of terrorism, Rakesh Asthana said that drugs abuse scenario in the country was "quite grim".

"We are under a lot of criticism as to why we are catching small amount of cannabis from people.

The problem is not small or big amount. It is that we are giving the field to these peddlers and drug lords to have an open field to sell their drugs... it is a vague and complicated problem and the solution is not very simple," Rakesh Asthana said.

"The only thing is that we should be serious about it. We are trying to make state police agencies aware about the problem and carry out operations to curb the supply side," the NCB chief said. The NCB chief said that India sandwiched between the 'golden crescent' of drug trafficking, Pakistan, Afghanistan

and Iran, and the 'golden triangle', Myanmar, Laos and Thailand.

"Ninety-five per cent of the world's heroin is manufactured in these two regions. Heroin is being pushed into the country from the Myanmar and Pakistan-Afghanistan side... the whole of northeast and northwest is badly affected. The amount of money which is generated (by drug trade) is mind boggling," Asthana said on Tuesday. The NCB chief stressed that the drug problem in India was huge and could only be handled if state agencies joined hands with the central agencies. If acted upon seriously and in a collective

and coordinated manner the problem can definitely solved, he stressed. The NCB has been criticised in the recent past for apprehending people who possessed small amounts of drugs such as marijuana or cannabis, with experts saying the federal anti-narcotics agency should rather focus on large syndicates active in this illegal trade. Asthana quoted a survey conducted by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in 2018-19 to claim that India was the biggest consumer of opioids, such as opium, heroin and pharmaceutical drugs, in the world.

## Eknath Khadse seeks 14 days time from ED due to Covid-19 symptoms



**As per the statement attached in the tweet, Khadse said, "Doctors have advised rest for 14 days and the same has been conveyed to Enforcement Directorate. ED officials have agreed to the request."**

(News Agencies)-Eknath Khadse, former BJP leader who recently joined Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), failed to appear before the Enforcement Directorate on Wednesday, citing health problems.

The NCP leader tweeted that he was going to appear from the financial probe agency on Wednesday but he has developed symptoms of Covid-19 for the past two days. He said that he has already undergone the test for the virus and the result is awaited.

As per the statement attached in the tweet, Khadse said, "Doctors have advised rest for 14 days and the same has been conveyed to Enforcement Directorate. ED officials have agreed to the request."

Khadse was issued the summons last week by the ED to appear in connection with the Pune MIDC land deal case. While speaking to India Today TV on Saturday, Eknath Khadse

had confirmed the development and said, "I have received the summons from ED asking me to appear before the agency on December 30, 2020 today. My family had bought a piece of land in Bhosari in Pune. Later it was claimed that it was an MIDC land."

He added, "My wife had purchased the land and I have no direct link with the purchase. Earlier, the same matter was investigated by the Pune Anti Corruption Bureau and then Nashik Anti Corruption Bureau (ACB) but they have submitted a closure report in the matter while one of the branches is in process of submitting the closure in the high court. Also, the Income Tax Department had sought all information and we have provided it."

In April 2017, the ACB registered the case against Khadse, his wife Mandakini and son-in-law, Girish Chaudhary, on orders of the Bombay High Court. The

case was registered on allegations of a realtor named Hemant Gawande, who had alleged that Khadse had defrauded exchequer in the Bhosari MIDC land deal case.

Khadse on Saturday said, "Justice Joting had also

conducted inquiry through the commission appointed to investigate the matter. The land deal has been investigated four times, and now, ED is investigating it." "I have cooperated with all the agencies earlier and have provided all

documents to agencies and the commission. This time also, I will co-operate with ED officials and join the investigation," the NCP leader said. The statement issued by Khadse on Wednesday also said that he will fully co-operate with ED once he recovers.

## Chinese communists in India: Why it is a cause of concern

(News Agencies)-A recent news report pointed to the presence of Communist Party of China (CPC) members serving in several institutions that operated in India or had a connection with India. In one instance, at least one former employee of the Indian Consulate in Shanghai was identified as a CPC member. A report in September this year had referred to a Chinese technology firm collecting open-source information about prominent Indians from all walks of life. Both reports are the result of a multi-country investigation by an international consortium of journalists.

Neither reports should be the subject of such surprise or alarm as has been the case in India. For one, membership of the CPC is a ladder to success in any kind of activity in China. Naturally, CPC members will be found in every institution in China, and in every Chinese organisation abroad.

Further, the presence of politically affiliated individuals is not a uniquely Chinese phenomenon. Americans are often organised politically abroad and don't shy either about

revealing such affiliations. The Chinese might not be open about it but they do gather at their local embassy functions for Party activities.

Secondly, the open-source collection of information or intelligence on prominent individuals of note is what any self-respecting intelligence agency, market risk analysis agency or academic specialising in a country or region would do. However, there is something about the nature of the CPC and its objectives and operations that is worth examining in details, and which marks it as being different from political parties elsewhere. The CPC is somewhat of an exclusive club with a high barrier to entry. As in other polities, people join the CPC in order to either work for the public good or to achieve personal interests. But sending an SMS or giving a missed phone call to join a political party, as it happens in India, would be out of the question.

In India, political parties compete for adherents while in China, the CPC's monopoly on power means that the best and the brightest compete to join it.



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# What went against Rajinikanth in politics

**Actor Rajinikanth has shelved his plans to launch a political party for Tamil Nadu election 2021. He cited recent illness as a God-sent signal prompting him to change his plans. What contributed to Rajinikanth's political decision.**

On December 31, 2017, actor and wannabe politician Rajinikanth made a euphoric announcement to his fans that he would launch a political party to change the fate of Tamil Nadu. Rajinikanth said his political outfit would contest "all 234 assembly seats in the state".

That day, Rajinikanth floated the Rajini Makkal Mandram (RMM) literally meaning Rajini People's Forum or loosely, the Rajini fan club. The RMM appeared to be the frontrunner to his political outfit.

**SINCE THE BIG ANNOUNCEMENT**

The RMM had a logo that changed twice within two months to remove two symbols -- lotus, also the BJP's election symbol, and cobra snake. Both have religious significance for the Hindus. Rajinikanth, for many observers, has been close to the BJP-RSS in his ideological

leaning. Though nothing concrete took place in the last three years to indicate that Rajinikanth was serious about launching his political outfit, he kept making statements to fuel speculation about his political plunge.

In 2018, Rajinikanth announced that his political party would strive for "spiritual politics". Rajinikanth explained his spiritual politics as "honest and corruption-free" politics.

Rajinikanth reiterated his commitment to spiritual politics on December 10 this year when he confirmed that he would announce his political party in January 2021 to contest Tamil Nadu Assembly election that is likely to be held in April-May next year.

But within three weeks, Rajinikanth made another about-turn on his political party launch with a three-page statement on Twitter that he posted on

Tuesday. AN ANTI-CLIMAX IN THE END

The statement reads: "With extreme sadness I say that I can't enter politics. I alone know the pain I went through while announcing this decision."

"Without entering electoral politics, I will serve the people. This decision of mine will disappoint my fans and people but please forgive me," Rajinikanth said in the statement. The announcement came just two days after he was discharged from a Hyderabad hospital, where he had been admitted last week following fluctuations in blood pressure levels.

Before shelving his political ambitions, Rajinikanth in March this year had announced much to the surprise of his fans that he was "not interested" in the chief ministerial post in Tamil Nadu. Rajinikanth also said that he would lead the party and only



"advise" the government that his party would form after winning the election. And, that 70 per cent of his party members would be below the age of 50.

**LONG PRELUDE TO A THUD** Rajinikanth has long weighed his political options in Tamil Nadu -- going by his political statements that began in 1996 with his outbursts against then Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa. Then, her AIADMK lost the 1996 Tamil Nadu Assembly election for which Rajinikanth took credit saying his public statements against Jayalalithaa had cost her power in the state. Rajinikanth has issued statements in favour

of or shown support to a political party or coalition since 1996. In recent years, Rajinikanth has shown an inclination towards the BJP. He did not talk about his political ideology but he positioned himself more nationally rather than align with regional or Dravidian politics of Tamil Nadu.

Rajinikanth had a strained relationship with Jayalalithaa and also with her mentor MG Ramachandran, the founder of the AIADMK, whose emergence during 1970s and 1980s put Dravidian politics as the only political ideology in Tamil Nadu.

## Rahul Gandhi will be Rahul Gandhi. Will Priyanka be Congress president?



**Lok Sabha MP Rahul Gandhi is reluctant to assume Congress's leadership again. Sonia Gandhi is indisposed. A non-Gandhi Congress chief may not be acceptable to the party. Will Priyanka Gandhi be next Congress president?**

Rahul Gandhi's decision to fly away from the country just ahead of the Congress's 136th foundation day has stirred debate over the future of the party's leadership. The word doing the rounds in the Congress is that Rahul Gandhi has given a strong message that he will not buckle under internal pressure to lead the party once again, at least in near future.

The Congress has to hold an election for the president's post. But with the second rung of Congress leadership preferring to wait for Rahul Gandhi to reconsider his decision, the election is being delayed. The interim president arrangement for Sonia Gandhi, who has not been

keeping in good health and had to skip the Congress foundation day event, has gone on longer than expected.

The pressure within the Congress to elect a full-time party president is growing. The pressing need led a group of 23 senior leaders - including several former Union ministers - to write a letter to Sonia Gandhi urging her to hold an election. The G-23, as they came to be known within the party, later became the target of the Gandhi family loyalists, who took the demand as a push to have somebody from outside the family in the Congress president's chair.

**RAHUL GANDHI IS CONGRESS PREMIER BUT...**

Congress spokespersons have at different stages said majority of the party workers and the working committee members want Rahul Gandhi back as the party president. Rahul Gandhi has remained the decision-maker in the party.

His interventions during Rajasthan political crisis and recently during the assembly election in Bihar, where he sent his own team to manage state polls for the party are testimony to his preeminence in the Congress. But he has remained firm on his decision not to officially assume the role of Congress president.

Rahul Gandhi currently holds no official post in the Congress. He is simply a Lok Sabha MP from Wayanad in Kerala.

**ANOTHER STOP-GAP FORMULA**

A formula was floated during the political slugfest caused by the G-23's letter. The formula was to

have four to five deputies under Sonia Gandhi as Congress president. This committee under Sonia Gandhi was to run the daily affairs of the party and take all key political decisions. This arrangement was to work until Rahul Gandhi agreed to return as Congress president.

Apparently, Rahul Gandhi is against this formula. Further, when this formula was proposed, Sonia Gandhi had Congress's crisis manager Ahmed Patel and astute politician Motilal Vora among her advisers. With the passing away of the two since then, the Congress battles with the same leadership question again.

**SUPPORT FOR PRIYANKA GANDHI**

This is where Priyanka Gandhi Vadra comes in the picture. Unlike her brother, Priyanka Gandhi holds an official position - general secretary - in the Congress. She has played active

role in handling crises that the party has faced since Rahul Gandhi stepped down as the Congress president in 2019.

Priyanka Gandhi came at the forefront of Congress politics in January last year as the party eyed recovery in Uttar Pradesh. Though she failed to revive the Congress's prospects in the Lok Sabha, Priyanka Gandhi has kept her focus on the politically most important state of the country. She has already launched preparations for 2022 Uttar Pradesh Assembly election.

Following Rahul Gandhi's resignation in May last year, several Congress leaders rooted for Priyanka Gandhi for the Congress president post. Among them were Sriprakash Jaiswal, Abhijit Mukherjee, Bhakt Charan Das and Anil Shastri. They said if Rahul Gandhi is not interested, it was time for Priyanka Gandhi to take charge of the Congress



## No meaningful outcome of talks with China on border row: Rajnath Singh

(News Agencies)-Defence Minister Rajnath Singh said that while the next round of talks on the military level can take place anytime, the status quo in Ladakh continues.

Defence minister Rajnath Singh on Wednesday said that talks with China on disengagement and de-escalation in eastern Ladakh where the two countries have been locked in a border row for eight months, have not yielded any meaningful solution even as both sides are yet to announce a date for the next round of military dialogue. In an interview to news agency ANI, Singh said neither side would scale down their military deployments in the sensitive sector as a result of the status quo there. He said the continuing stalemate was not a positive development.

Both India and China are prepared for a long haul in the Ladakh sector and are firm

about holding forward positions along the LAC through the harsh winter months.

Singh said the ninth round of military talks with China to reduce border tensions could happen anytime. "Both sides have exchanged messages over the hotline on what issues need to be discussed," Singh said.

"It is true that in order to reduce the standoff between India and China, talks were taking place on the military and diplomatic level. But no success has been achieved so far. There will be a next round of talks on the military level which can take place anytime. But no meaningful outcome has come and there is status quo," he said.

Experts said talks were unlikely to yield any positive outcome in the short term.

"However, it is important for us to continue the dialogue. At the same time, it is critical that we stay prepared for a skirmish as

the Chinese will make endeavours to recapture the strategic heights on the Kailash range.

Moving back will be a loss of face for China and also dent their philosophy of creeping assertiveness," said former Northern Army commander Lieutenant General (retd) BS Jaswal (retd).

While India has consistently pushed for comprehensive disengagement at all flashpoints and restoration of status quo ante of early April during the military talks, the Chinese side wants the Indian Army to first pull back troops deployed on strategic heights on the southern bank of Pangong Tso.

The Indian Army swiftly moved and occupied a series of key heights to prevent the PLA from grabbing Indian territory on the southern bank in a stealthy midnight move on August 29.

## Pakistan's Covid-19 death toll crosses 10,000-mark

**Pakistan reported 2,155 new Covid-19 cases, bringing the total infection count to 477,240. The number of active cases in the country stands at 37,080.**



(News Agencies)- The coronavirus death toll in Pakistan crossed the 10,000-mark on Wednesday with 55 new fatalities in the past 24 hours.

The country reported 2,155 new Covid-19 cases, bringing the total infection count to 477,240. The number of active cases in the country stands at 37,080.

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# Each year, 1,000 Pakistani girls forcibly converted to Islam



(News Agencies)-Neha loved the hymns that filled her church with music. But she lost the chance to sing them last year when, at the age of 14, she was forcibly converted from Christianity to Islam and married to a 45-year-old man with children twice her age. She tells her story in a voice so low it occasionally fades away. She all but disappears as she wraps a blue scarf tightly around her face and head. Neha's husband is in jail now facing charges of rape for the underage marriage, but she is in hiding, afraid after security guards confiscated a pistol from his brother in court.

"He brought the gun to shoot me," said Neha, whose last name The Associated Press is not using for her safety.

Neha is one of nearly 1,000 girls from religious minorities who are forced to convert to Islam in Pakistan each year, largely to pave the way for marriages that are under the legal age and non-consensual. Human rights activists say the practice has accelerated during lockdowns against the coronavirus, when girls are out of school and more visible, bride traffickers are more active on the Internet and families are more in debt. The U.S. State Department this month declared

Pakistan "a country of particular concern" for violations of religious freedoms - a designation the Pakistani government rejects. The declaration was based in part on an appraisal by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom that underage girls in the minority Hindu, Christian, and Sikh communities were "kidnapped for forced conversion to Islam... forcibly married and subjected to rape." While most of the converted girls are impoverished Hindus from southern Sindh province, two new cases involving Christians, including Neha's, have roiled the country in recent months.

The girls generally are kidnapped by complicit acquaintances and relatives or men looking for brides. Sometimes they are taken by powerful landlords as payment for outstanding debts by their farmhand parents, and police often look the other way. Once converted, the girls are quickly married off, often to older men or to their abductors, according to the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. Forced conversions

thrive unchecked on a money-making web that involves Islamic clerics who solemnize the marriages, magistrates who legalize the unions and corrupt local police who aid the culprits by refusing to investigate or sabotaging investigations, say child protection activists.

One activist, Jibran Nasir, called the network a "mafia" that preys on non-Muslim girls because they are the most vulnerable and the easiest targets "for older men with pedophilia urges." The goal is to secure virginal brides rather than to seek new converts to Islam. Minorities make up just 3.6 percent of Pakistan's 220 million people and often are the target of discrimination. Those who report forced conversions, for example, can be targeted with charges of blasphemy. In the feudal Kashmore region of southern Sindh province, 13-year-old Sonia Kumari was kidnapped, and a day later police told her parents she had converted from Hinduism to Islam. Her mother pleaded for her return in a video widely viewed on the internet: "For the sake of God, the Quran, whatever you believe,

please return my daughter, she was forcibly taken from our home."

But a Hindu activist, who didn't want to be identified for fear of repercussions from powerful landlords, said she received a letter that the family was forced to write. The letter claimed the 13-year-old had willingly converted and wed a 36-year-old who was already married with two children.

The parents have given up. Arzoo Raja was 13 when she disappeared from her home in central Karachi. The Christian girl's parents reported her missing and pleaded with police to find her. Two days later, officers reported back that she had been converted to Islam and was married to their 40-year-old Muslim neighbor.

In Sindh province, the age of consent for marriage is 18 years old. Arzoo's marriage certificate said she was 19.

The cleric who performed Arzoo's marriage, Qasi Ahmed Mufti Jaan Raheemi, was later implicated in at least three other underage marriages.

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# Why Are Pakistani Leaders Revealing Their Secret Visits to Israel Now?

*Pakistanis love to hate Israel, but their state has had relations with the country for decades.*

Over the last few weeks, the debate over recognizing Israel has picked up in Pakistan. The debate is not necessarily news, but this is perhaps the first time we've gotten a deeper look at the degree of contact between the two countries.

The first question that comes to mind is why has the debate picked up now? Prime Minister Imran Khan and other senior government officials have denied on several occasions that Pakistan is planning on establishing ties with Israel. In one recent interview, Khan explicitly said that the United States and other countries have ramped up pressure on Pakistan following Israel's deals with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

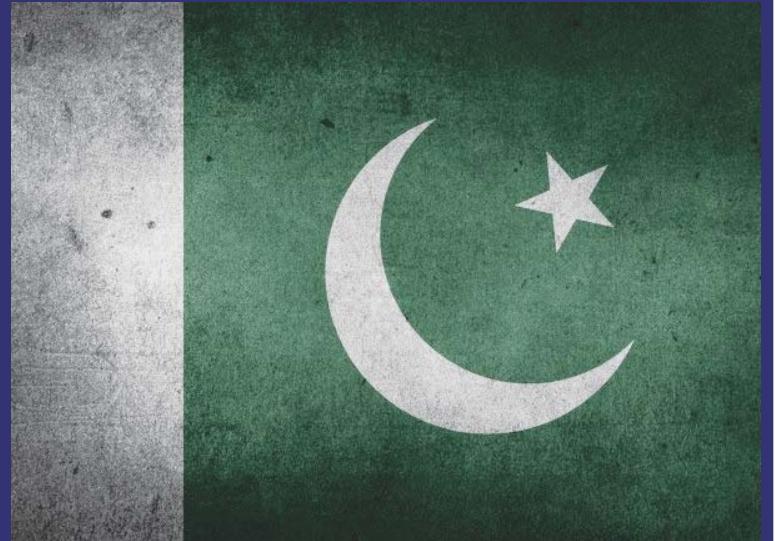
When questioned if Muslim countries were among those applying pressure on Pakistan, Khan said: "There are things we

cannot say. We have good relations with them."

"I have no second thought about recognizing Israel unless there is a just settlement, which satisfies Palestine," he added.

It is possible that Pakistan may have come under pressure from countries like Saudi Arabia, its allies in the Gulf region, and the United States to establish diplomatic ties with Israel. "Riyadh has been arm-twisting Islamabad for months, because Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman wants to 'normalize normalization,' before Saudi Arabia makes a formal move towards Israel," an article published in Haartz claimed, citing Pakistani government sources. While Pakistan has been quick to reject any such claims publicly, new evidence suggests that it may have been Islamabad that is eager to normalize ties rather than the

other way around. Put bluntly, Israel never had a problem with establishing a working relationship with Pakistan. It is Pakistan that has never been able to decide whether it wants to be friends with Israel or oppose it under an illusory policy of protecting the Muslim ummah's global interests. The question of Israel presents Pakistan's foreign policy with a dilemma: Islamabad is not clear if it wants Islam in its foreign policy or a foreign policy that is formulated more realistically to achieve national objectives in the international environment. What is unfortunate is that Pakistan has stabbed itself in the foot by assuming, for decades, that the Saudis and their Arab affiliates would love to hate Israel forever. Pakistan's leaders should have understood after the partition that foreign governments, including majority Muslim countries, were not interested in its so-called efforts



to unite the Muslim ummah or Pakistan's so-called championship of the cause of the Muslim world annoyed many Muslim countries with much stronger historical and civilizational roots. The situation is best explained by a joke made by Egypt's King Farooq: "Don't you know that the Islam was born on 14 August 1947," he said, pointing to Pakistan's founding and its leaders' efforts to centralize their role as defenders of the Muslim world's

interests. The Pakistani leadership, for decades, normalized hatred against the Jewish state through its Islamization efforts domestically. Meanwhile, the country's leaders have covertly dealt with Israel and also sent and perhaps received delegations to explore options to normalize ties. Recently, a leader of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, Ajmal Qadri, claimed that former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had sent a delegation of Muslim scholars, including him, to Israel.

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# Covid-19: Sri Lanka forcibly cremates Muslim baby sparking anger



watch your baby son being burnt?"

'No evidence'

Political, religious and community leaders representing the Muslim community have repeatedly requested the government to change its "cremate only" policy, pointing to the more than 190 countries allowing burials, and World Health Organization advice. It has even taken its fight to the Supreme Court, but the cases were dismissed without an explanation.

The government argues burials could contaminate ground water,

BBC. "And I haven't seen any evidence to suggest it spreads through dead bodies. A virus can only multiply in a living cell. Once a person dies, the ability of the viruses to multiply decreases." He added: "Dead bodies aren't buried right in running water. Once you bury the body six feet under wrapped in impermeable wrapping, it is highly unlikely it would contaminate running water."

There had not been much sympathy for the plight of the Muslim community - but the forced cremation of baby Shaykh has changed that.

her experience: "While I was tying it, a mother and daughter duo crossed the road and joined me with their own white cloths. Till I came they were worried someone may be watching."

"I couldn't quite make out what the mother was trying to say at first because we all had our masks on. Then she said, 'The baby was only two-days-old no? Sin. This way at least my heart will be satisfied'."

The white cloths disappeared overnight, believed to have been removed by authorities, but the anger did not.

Hilmy Ahmed, the vice-president of the Muslim Council of Sri Lanka, told the BBC it was clear this was all part of a "racist" agenda, targeting the Muslim minority.

"The government doesn't seem to be responding to anything based on science," he said. "They don't seem to take into consideration the advice of virologists or microbiologists or epidemiologists. This is racist agenda of a few in the technical committee."

"This is probably the last straw for Muslims because nobody expected this little baby to be cremated," he added. "That also without even showing the child to the parents."

The forced cremation of a 20-day-old Muslim baby in Sri Lanka has highlighted the government's controversial order to burn the bodies of all those who died of Covid. Critics say the decision is not based in science and only intended to target the minority community. BBC Sinhala's Saroj Pathirana reports.

Mohamed Fahim and his wife Fathima Shafna were thrilled when their baby boy Shaykh was born on 18 November after a six-year wait.

But their joy was short-lived.

On the night of 7 December, they noticed the baby was struggling to breathe. They rushed him to the capital Colombo's best children's hospital, the Lady Ridgeway.

"They told us the baby was in a severe condition and was suffering from pneumonia. But then, around midnight, they did an antigen test and told us the baby was positive for coronavirus," Mohamed Fahim, who drives a three-wheeler for a living, told BBC Sinhala.

Doctors then tested Mr Fahim and his wife but they were both negative.

"I asked how my baby was positive when both of us, even the mother who was breastfeeding him, were negative?"

Despite tears and pleas, the anxious couple were sent home by officials who said more tests were needed. They were told to call the hospital for updates.

The next day, they were informed that their baby had died of Covid. Mr Fahim repeatedly asked doctors to conduct a PCR test to reconfirm this, but they refused.

Then, doctors asked him to sign a document authorising the cremation of their child, as required by law in Sri Lanka.

Mr Fahim refused: the cremation of bodies is forbidden in Islam,

considered a form of mutilation, forbidden by Allah. Muslims also believe in the resurrection of the physical body, and cremation is thought to prevent this.

And he is not alone. Some Muslim families have refused to claim the bodies of their dead, leaving the government to cremate them on state expense, while many will not accept the ashes of their loved ones.

Mr Fahim says he repeatedly asked for his baby's body to be handed back to him, but officials said no. The next day, he was told his son's body was being taken to the crematorium.

"I went there but I didn't enter the hall," he says. "How can you

based on the say-so of an expert committee, the composition and qualifications of which are unknown.

World-renowned virologist Prof Malik Peiris, however, has questioned the theory.

"Covid-19 is not a waterborne disease," Prof Peiris told the



## The nation learning to embrace flooding

When this year's monsoon season hit Bangladesh, it wasn't an ordinary flood. Within weeks, one quarter of the country was underwater. "We've been managing flood relief efforts in the region for 10 years," says Ahmed Imtiaz Jami, president of Obhizatrik Foundation, a charity and volunteering organisation in Bangladesh. But the 2020 floods were a step-change. "It just wasn't the same." Nearly 1.3 million homes were damaged, hundreds of thousands of people were marooned, and hundreds died.

Yet monsoon flooding is increasingly being recognised to be as vital to the delta nation as it is destructive, raising a difficult question: how do you allow the life-restoring properties of floods to continue nourishing the land, while providing protection against the worsening floods of the future?



A dizzying latticework of 230 rivers crisscrosses Bangladesh. Three of those rivers are the massive Brahmaputra-Jamuna, the Ganges (or Padma, as it is known in Bangladesh) and the Meghna, which eventually empty into the Bay of Bengal. Along with water, these river systems carries between 1-1.4 billion tonnes of fertile silt through the country every year, forming the foundation for much of the country's agriculture. They are also the reason why Bangladesh is one of the world's hardest hit

countries by climate change. With future climate change, flooding in Bangladesh is predicted to become more extreme due to cyclonic storm surges and rising sea levels. Under a "moderate" climate change scenario, flooding will become more intense and cover greater areas, with two crucial crops - Aus rice and wheat - declining by 27% and 61% respectively as a result. Much of the nation is exposed, as 80% of Bangladesh is flood plain, with the majority of the country a

metre or less above sea level. Sheikh Hasina, Prime Minister of Bangladesh, called sea-level rise a "planetary emergency", and one of which Bangladesh will bear the brunt.

Troubled waters

Many of the conventional methods to cope with flooding in Bangladesh have tried to defy the flood-prone nature of the delta nation. After the 1987 and 1988 floods, for example, there was a Flood Action Plan of 1990 with at least 26 feasibility studies and pilot projects carried out in an effort to make the country "impregnable" to water. Shafiul Azam Ahmad, who has been a water and sanitation specialist at the World Bank and a regional consultant for Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal, describes the period as one of rapid investment into structural interventions. But they didn't work out as planned. "Serious waterlogging followed," says Ahmad.



# EU sets aside China's rights record, seals pact with Prez Xi that may upset US

**EU's big win, as its leaders have projected the agreement with President Xi Jinping, deals a huge blow to the US President-elect Joe Biden's hopes of rebuilding the transatlantic alliance in an effort to take on an assertive China.**

(News Agencies)- Chinese and European Union leaders sealed a landmark investment pact on Wednesday that would make it easier for their companies to invest in each other's economies despite concerns around Beijing's patchy labour rights record. President Xi Jinping had intervened earlier this month to extend key market access concessions to businesses under the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) that had been under discussion for years. President Xi's concession persuaded the European Union to accede to the pact that Brussels expects to open up lucrative opportunities for its businesses. Today, the EU and China concluded in principle negotiations on an investment agreement," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen tweeted after a video call with President Xi that also involved EU Council president Charles Michel, French President Emmanuel Macron; and German Chancellor Angela Merkel who holds the rotating presidency of the EU till tomorrow and was seen to have pushed hard for the deal. President Xi, according to a Reuters report, told the meeting that the investment deal will offer bigger markets and a better business environment for both Chinese and European investments. It shows China's determination and confidence in opening up, President Xi said, adding that the pact would stimulate the global economy, promote economic globalisation and free trade. But the EU's big win, as its leaders have projected the agreement, deals a huge blow to the US President-elect Joe Biden's hopes of rebuilding the transatlantic alliance in an effort to take on an assertive China. There has been no reaction from the United States to the agreement so far; there will be more than one. President-elect Biden's choice for national security adviser Jake Sullivan had earlier this month tweeted the incoming Biden administration's request to hold "early consultations with our European partners on our common concerns about China's economic practices". Polish foreign minister Zbigniew Rau too had called for more consultations and



transparency to bring EU's transatlantic allies on board. "A good, balanced deal is better than a premature one," the minister tweeted last week. Members of European Parliament too have expressed concern at the EU rushing through the agreement. Indian officials who have been tracking the negotiations say President Xi's concession was timed to get the agreement done and dusted before the end of Germany's presidency and the Biden administration takes charge in a few weeks. One official said the promptness with which the EU had set aside concerns around China's rights record also erodes its credibility as a defender of human rights, and that of its lawmakers.

## ***The Peoples Party for Hempsted is launching candidates to run for village elections on March 16th, with focus on creating a culture of inclusion, public safety, economic development and halting tax hikes.***

(By a Staff Reporter)- Envisioning a fresh start and a village rebranding as a place where everyone feels welcomed with safer streets and creating job opportunities for future generations.

The Peoples Party for Hempstead was formed by concerned community members, with intent to remedy a blatant lack of inclusion across the largely diverse village population. Residents are tired with the lack of transparency, and lack of equal opportunities from failed policies.

Many residents have lived in the village for decades and experience a deliberate lack of inclusion. Latinos hold exactly zero public offices in the village, while its racial makeup is 45% Hispanic. That, is an inequity they aim to resolve. Accordingly, THE PEOPLES PARTY will run candidates who are committed to protecting all Village residents regardless of race, country of origin or religion. They aim to be deliberate about including the entire village population in the decision-making processes of the local government and are certain that new voters, will help elect a diverse administration that actually reflects village demographics.

THE PEOPLES PARTY FOR HEMPSTEAD will run candidates committed to:

" Addressing the devastating lack of COVID-19 testing sites and personal protective equipment (PPE) made available to residents. In effect, immediately protecting the health of the community while reversing its reality as a pandemic epicenter

" Pursuing economic recovery  
" Reducing crime through prevention measures and increasing communication between the community and the police department  
" Creating better paying local jobs  
" and Lowering taxes that have attributed to high foreclosure rates due to it's being one of the heaviest taxed villages in the nation.

They believe the Village has exceptional potential because of its diverse population and it is ready for an equitable chance to create a thriving village. They are demanding the inclusion, required for positive change. As the PEOPLES PARTY FOR HEMPSTEAD begins to ramp up their campaign, they will mobilize members of both Democratic and Republican parties. With strong efforts to wake a sleeping giant, the party stands to end a generational culture of exclusion, effecting every resident.

"For too long, Hempstead has been referred to as a dangerous place and that must end. Future generations deserve an affordable, safe place to live that they can enjoy and feel proud to call home. Together, we can achieve this." said Herb Flores, a longtime Minority Affairs representative and Latino-rights activist who the PEOPLES PARTY FOR HEMPSTEAD will run for Mayor. If elected, Flores will represent the largest village in the State of New York and he intends to be deliberate about implementing a culture of inclusion.

## ***Small Business Eviction & Foreclosure Moratorium Introduced in NY State Senate***

(News Agencies)- CARLE PLACE, NY - State Senator Anna M. Kaplan announced the introduction of legislation in the New York State Senate that will protect New York small businesses struggling due to the COVID-19 pandemic from the threat of foreclosure or eviction until May 1, 2021.

"We just enacted historic legislation to protect homeowners and tenants from the threat of foreclosure and eviction during the pandemic, but we need to come back and make sure New York's small businesses are protected too," said Senator Anna M. Kaplan, Chair of the New York State Senate Committee on Commerce, Economic Development, and Small Business. "Small businesses are the backbone of our community and our state economy, and we need to give them the opportunity to get back on their feet without the looming threat of being closed down for good." The bill, s.471, will: Prevent Small Business Evictions: This bill creates a Standardized Hardship Declaration Form, which commercial tenants with fewer than 100 employees can submit to their landlord or court to prevent or halt an eviction if they

have a financial hardship related to, or during COVID-19 that prevents them from being able to pay their rent in full or move. Once a tenant has signed this form, they may return it to their landlord or to a court to prevent a landlord from filing an eviction or suspend an eviction proceeding already underway until May 1, 2021, in addition to other protections. Protect Against Foreclosure and Tax Lien Sales For Small Commercial Property Owners: This bill provides protections against foreclosure and tax lien sales to any small commercial property owner. Property owners will be able to access foreclosure and tax lien sale protection by filing a Standardized Hardship Declaration Form with their mortgage lender, local assessor or court, similar to that created by the eviction protection proposal. The owner will declare, under penalty of perjury, a financial hardship that prevents them from paying their mortgage or property taxes because of lost income, including reduction in rent collections; and increased expenses. Prohibit Negative Credit Reporting and Discrimination in Extending Credit:



# Congressman-elect Luke Letlow dies after battling Covid-19



(News Agencies)-Congressman-elect Luke Letlow has died after being diagnosed with Covid-19, his spokesman confirmed Tuesday evening.

"Congressman-elect Luke Letlow, 41, passed away this evening at Ochsner-LSU Health Shreveport due to complications from COVID-19," Letlow spokesman Andrew Bautsch

wrote in a post on the Republican congressman-elect's Facebook page.

Letlow's family, he said, "appreciates the numerous prayers and support over the past days but asks for privacy during this difficult and unexpected time."

Two Republican sources also confirmed Letlow's passing to

CNN. The News-Star in Monroe, Louisiana, was first to report Letlow's death.

Letlow had announced his diagnosis on his Facebook page on December 18, writing that he was "at home resting, following all CDC guidelines, quarantine protocols, and the recommendations of my doctors."

Days later, Letlow posted that he was undergoing treatment at St. Francis Hospital in Monroe before a statement from his office on December 23 said he had been transferred to Ochsner LSU Health Shreveport Academic Medical Center.

Dr. G.E. Ghali, the chancellor of LSU Health Shreveport, said in a statement at the time that Letlow was in "stable condition

in the Intensive Care Unit" and was receiving the drug Remdesivir and steroids as part of his treatment.

News of Letlow's death was met with an immediate outpouring of support for the congressman-elect's family.

"Luke Letlow is now with our Creator, but his premature departure from this world is a huge loss to Louisiana and America. Just weeks ago, voters overwhelmingly chose Luke to represent them in Congress," Rep. Garret Graves, a Republican of Louisiana, tweeted.

"They saw what so many of us know of Luke - kind, smart, quick-witted, God-fearing, hard-working, honest and just a good guy."

That message was echoed by New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell, a Democrat, who said in a tweet, "We are heartbroken to learn of the passing of Congressman-elect Luke Letlow."

"He was a promising young leader who loved Louisiana deeply. Our prayers go out to his family and loved ones."

Louisiana GOP Sen. John Kennedy similarly tweeted that he was "heartbroken" by the news.

"For years, Luke has served LA tirelessly. More than that, Luke was a loving husband and father," Kennedy said. "Please join us in praying for the Letlow family during this time of incredible loss."

## Girlfriend of Nashville bomber told police in 2019 he was building explosives in an RV, records show



(News Agencies)-A woman who said she was the girlfriend of the man who set off the Christmas Day explosion in Nashville told police last year he was making bombs in his recreational vehicle, according to a statement and documents the Metropolitan

Nashville Police Department provided to CNN. On August 21, 2019, police received a call from an attorney representing Pamela Perry, the woman who said she was the girlfriend of the bomber Anthony Warner, the Metropolitan Nashville Police

Department said Tuesday. Her attorney, Raymond Throckmorton, said she had made "suicidal threats to him via telephone."

When police arrived at Perry's home, they found two unloaded pistols near Perry, who said they belonged to Warner. She told officers she did not want them in the home any longer and that Warner was "building bombs in the RV trailer at his residence," according to a "matter of record" report from the MNPd.

The police also spoke to Throckmorton, who once represented Warner and was also present at Perry's home. He told authorities Warner "frequently talks about the

military and bomb-making. (Throckmorton) stated that he believes that the suspect knows what he is doing and is capable of making a bomb," the report said.

CNN has reached out to Throckmorton for comment about his account -- first reported by the Tennessean -- but has not yet heard back.

An officer observed Warner's home for several days, but found no evidence of bomb making, according to Metro Nashville Police Chief John Drake. It would have required a sign of a crime being committed, or that a bomb was being made, to obtain a legal search warrant or subpoena, Drake said.

"I believe officers did everything they could legally. Maybe we could have followed up more -- hindsight is 20/20," Drake said. "The officers did not have probable cause to get a search warrant. There was a call for service on a lady who had two guns, who needed care, and so we, you know, she needed some assistance. There was nothing else there to say OK, yeah -- you have to have probable cause."

An officer asked Throckmorton over the phone whether he could look inside the RV behind the home. The attorney told the officer Warren "did not care for police" and "I'm not going to be able to let y'all do that," according to Drake.

## Colorado officials suspect they've found a second case of UK coronavirus variant

Health officials in a Colorado county believe they've found a second local case of a coronavirus variant from the United Kingdom -- one that experts have said may be especially contagious.

That news Wednesday came a day after the first known case of the variant in the US was announced in Elbert County.

Both the confirmed case and the suspected instance involve National Guard members who had been working at the Good Samaritan Society assisted living facility in Simla, about 45 miles northeast of Colorado

Springs, health officials said. Neither are residents of Elbert County, and they are isolating outside the county, health director Dwayne Smith said. There is "no indication at this point" that this event has gone beyond the facility and into the larger community, he said.

The men were part of a team of six Guard members deployed to the Good Samaritan Society--Simla after a recent outbreak of Covid-19 caused a staff shortage. The first man had no known travel history, Gov. Jared Polis said Tuesday. In part because of that, there is a good chance the

variant has been spreading within the community, William Haseltine, chair and president of the global health think tank ACCESS Health International, told CNN on Wednesday.

The variant emerged in the UK in September, and US health officials have said in recent days as it became prevalent in the United Kingdom that it was probably already in the United States. In California, San Diego Supervisor Nathan Fletcher said a 30-year-old man with no travel history has the UK variant of the virus. The Colorado health department has been in



communication with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention about its cases. Smith did not know when the variant could be verified or ruled out definitively in the second

person, he said. He was not able to comment on travel history for the men and said the state health department notified the county about the two men on Tuesday afternoon.





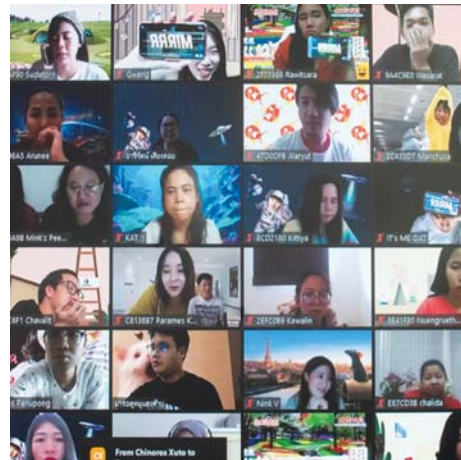
# This year proved once and for all: screens are no substitute for real life

(SAI Bureau)- How we will ultimately remember the pandemic of 2020 is not yet known. Right now, it is the omnipotent crisis, dominating every waking moment. For those with any interest in the news, there are the daily death totals, surpassing those of 9/11, and reminders that a vaccine is here but not here, still many months away from ending this hell for good. But a more deadly pandemic in 1918 and 1919 was largely lost to history, swallowed by the end of the first world war and the roaring 20s, the mass death hardly making a groove in the long-term psyche of the nation. The generation that lived through coronavirus may talk about it until they die or choose, like their ancestors in the early 20th century, to bury it away and focus on new horizons.

Covid-19 has shown us, at least, what will be necessary and what we can absolutely do without. There are white-collar jobs that can be performed adequately from home. For some companies, large offices in central business districts are an extravagant waste of money. Hygiene, we hope, will change forever, with routine hand-washing and occasional mask-wearing in crowded areas becoming normalized in America. One hundred years ago, survivors of the flu pandemic learned about the importance of fresh air and proper ventilation, and this is a lesson we were forced, under horrific circumstances, to internalize anew.

We learned, too, what it is we don't want - a world utterly consumed by screens. Yes, we will maintain our smartphone addictions, and laptops and tablets will continue to consume much of our time inside our homes. The

pandemic has boosted Zoom stock by 500%. For many of us, this has been 2020: one Zoom after another, human faces in little boxes. In the early months of the pandemic, there were Zoom birthday parties, Zoom cocktails, Zoom Easters and Zoom Passovers. The life we had lost needed to be approximated, as much as possible, by Zoomworld, forging connections and alleviating boredom. After a while, I didn't want to



Zoom any more. I'm sure I wasn't alone. Each drifting gaze, faulty connection, and wistful joke about the time we'd all be indoors at the bar again was a reminder of what I had lost. As the year drifted on and I tried to navigate a world with such conflicting public health guidance, friend meet-ups sporadically scheduled, I knew that I never wanted to endure another social interaction on a screen again. It was reality flattened and condensed, drained of what it should be. The longer I spoke to the distant, pixelated face in front of me, the more I remembered that this facsimile of my prior life wasn't anything close to what I wanted. Children had it worse. For years, tech maximalists

had sold us a future of education-by-screen; why have physical classrooms at all? The internet offered unlimited possibility. Information was everywhere, easily summoned at a keystroke. Students of the 21st-century classroom would merely need lessons uploaded to their screens. A teacher only had to be a face trapped in a sleek tablet. As we've learned, remote learning in public schools has been a disaster. Yawning inequality gaps have only been exacerbated, with the wealthiest students enjoying an in-person education at private schools while poorer students suffer in school districts that have sent many of them home. Not all students have functioning internet. Others live in chaotic households that make daily learning impossible. In December, families sued the state of California, alleging school districts failed to provide "basic educational equality" for children of color from low-income backgrounds during the pandemic.

Rectifying this divide - universal broadband access is a worthy goal - would make remote learning more viable, but it is still a lackluster substitute for the socialization that comes with education in a physical classroom. Students make friends, learn from each other, and form crucial bonds with their teachers. Young children are in particular need of in-person learning. Adequate mental and emotional development can't happen in isolation.

Many people understood this before the pandemic. But for a long period of time, there were those that argued that more tech would bolster the education experience. To boost test scores - of course, big tech loved a lengthy

standardized test - just pay for an interactive whiteboard in every classroom and shell out for individual tablets. Why was this better? Well, it was shiny and new.

Higher education, long overpriced, faces its own post-pandemic reckoning, with many smaller schools threatened with closure. College students may find some educational functions can be performed remotely. Yet the MOOC revolution and online-only schools will not be able to supplant the surviving colleges and universities that prioritize in-person education. Few students that endured a year of Zoom classes will demand more of them when the pandemic ends. Professors, meanwhile, will be eager to resume life inside a classroom, where lively discussions and genuine learning can take place naturally without the mediator of a Zoom screen.

The pandemic made it easy to imagine an approaching dystopia: one in which, in the coming years, we would all sequester ourselves away from light and air, too terrified to venture outdoors. Instead of heading to the bar or the gym, we would build worlds of our own within our four walls, content to approximate the reality we once knew.

Instead, we rediscovered parks and trails, flocked to beaches, and revolutionized city streets with outdoor dining. We wearied of our devices. There is no app or program that can replicate a friend's laughter across the table or a teacher's lesson at the front of a classroom. After the pandemic, in a post-vaccination world, we will race back to our old lives. Zoomworld will belong to history.



# 'Won't withdraw protest': Farmers stick to resolve as talks yield little progress

We won't form any committee," All India Kisan Sabha's Punjab president Balkaran Singh Brar said after meeting with the government representatives. We'll discuss MSP in next meet," Brar told news agency ANI.

Marking a shade of progress, the government on Wednesday said consensus has been reached on two issues out of four after the sixth round of talks with the protesting farmers' unions.

The government and farm unions reached some common ground to resolve to protest farmers' concerns over rise in power tariff and penalties for stubble burning, but the two sides remained deadlocked over the main contentious issues of the repeal of three farm laws and a legal guarantee for MSP.

The next meeting will be held on January 4, agriculture minister



Narendra Singh Tomar said. The minister also said that the talks were held in a good environment and ended with a positive note.

Tomar said the union leaders kept insisting on the repeal of the three farm laws, but the government side tried to explain

to them the benefits of the Acts and sought to know specific problems faced by the farmers. On farmers' demand for a legal guarantee for procurement at Minimum Support Price (MSP), the minister said the government has already said that it is ready to give a written assurance.

This meeting comes after a long gap as after the last meeting the situation resulted in a standoff with farmers being stern on their demand for a complete withdrawal of the laws and the Centre on not accepting it.

The meeting at Vigyan Bhawan in the national capital started around 2 pm and went on for over four hours. Though there was no definite answer to farmers' demands, the environment on Wednesday was amicable as the leaders mingled with the central representatives during lunch and evening snack time.

## 'There is much to do'

Yet, we have to take all precautions in the foreseeable future."

Thanks to a people-powered approach, the fight against COVID-19 has been extremely spirited. As one user commented on the first day of the year beginning with PM Modi's speech on his dream project (Light House Projects), the Prime Minister wrote, "Every project is a dream project. There is much to do, much to work on so that we can bring a positive difference in the lives of the poor and downtrodden." Thank you and hoping you too have a wonderful 2021.

Every project is a dream project. There is much to do, much to work on so that we can bring a positive difference in the lives of the poor and downtrodden. <https://t.co/wPH5FsQEQh>

Thanks! Wishing you a happy 2021.

I am sure India will continue its strides towards good governance, benefitting people across the length and breadth of our nation. <https://t.co/LhkJaM6sPU>

## New coronavirus strain in India: Here are some states where cases have been found



Karnataka: The state which seems to have borne the brunt of the new coronavirus strain is Karnataka. In addition to three who were found positive on Tuesday, four more tested positive on Wednesday, taking the total to seven. The four, who are from Shivamogga, belong to the same family and had recently returned from the UK.

Delhi: Of the 20 people found positive, four are from Delhi. They tested positive on Wednesday and have been isolated in separate rooms at the capital's Lok Nayak Hospital. None is symptomatic for Covid-19 and all continue to be stable, authorities said. Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh: At least one returnee each to the three southern states have tested positive for the new coronavirus strain. Tamil Nadu health

secretary J Radhakrishnan confirmed on Tuesday that a UK returnee to the state was positive. The cases from Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, meanwhile, were reported from Warangal and Nellore, respectively.

Uttar Pradesh: A two-year-old girl was found positive in the country's most populous state, prompting health officials to issue an alert, Hindustan Times' sister publication Hindustan has reported.

West Bengal: The state recorded its first case of the new strain on Wednesday, news agency PTI quoted Bengal health officials as saying. The patient is the son of a senior official of the Calcutta Medical College and Hospital and had recently returned from London, PTI reported.

## Why our banks are timebombs

India Today Editor-in-Chief Aroon Purie talks about how India's banking system is heading for a catastrophe and how to avert it, in the December 28, 2020 edition of the India Today Magazine.

In a move designed more to buttress her socialist credentials than for any compelling economic reason, Mrs Indira Gandhi nationalised 14 of India's largest private banks, which held 85 per cent of the country's deposits, in 1969.

Over the years, these nationalised banks have deepened bank penetration in the rural hinterland and increased credit to agriculture, although some have argued that this could just as well have been achieved by exercising social control over private banks. Meanwhile, the

collateral cost to the Indian economy has been enormous as it set in motion a gravy train on which politicians and crony businessmen have taken a free ride ever since. There have been loan melas where banks were forced to extend credit with little chance of recovery, thanks to electorally-dictated populist compulsions. Today, about 65 per cent of India's banking sector (by deposits) is state-owned, and Indian banks were among the most unprofitable in the world in 2018-19. Run as political

fiefdoms and with all the attendant inefficiencies of government-owned businesses, India's public sector banks (PSBs) are giant black holes sucking in trillions of rupees of taxpayers' money. The government has spent roughly Rs 3.5 lakh crore in recapitalising PSBs in the past few years. This



is the entire outlay for the Jal Jeevan Mission, announced in August 2019 to provide piped drinking water to all households. This August, RBI's annual report said frauds cost banks Rs 1.86 lakh crore in FY20, of which PSBs accounted for 80 per cent. This figure is six times the government's intended expense on women and child development. It's a crying shame that the taxpayer should be bearing the cost of bank malfeasance when the money could be used for more

meaningful purposes. Last month, business circles were rattled by the impending collapse of yet another bank. The RBI stepped in to write off Rs 318 crore worth of debt and Rs 336 crore of equity to bail out Lakshmi Vilas Bank. Mercifully, this was small change, but it drew attention to

the looming crisis non-performing assets (NPAs), as bad loans are called in banking parlance, posed. NPAs stood at Rs 9.4 lakh crore as of June 2019.

This number, four times India's entire health budget, now rocks the struggling ship of India's economy. Most of these loans were extended in the rising tide of India's economic boom a decade ago when Indian bankers lent indiscriminately, especially to the then-booming money-guzzling telecom and real estate sectors. Of late, however, the existing NPAs are beginning to look like just the tip of the iceberg, with an expanding mass of bad loans lurking below the surface.



# The Worst Predictions of 2020

*This year was impossible to predict. But that doesn't mean people didn't try.*

On the last day of 2019, President Donald Trump joined in on New Year's Eve celebrations at Mar-a-Lago, ringing in 2020 with what was, in retrospect, a terrible prediction about the year ahead.

"We're going to have a great year, I predict," the president told assembled guests. "I think it's going to be a fantastic year."

Over the past 12 months, a global pandemic has killed at least 1.65 million people, including more than 333,000 Americans. The economy cratered as people stayed home and commerce slowed. Schools were shuttered and classes held on Zoom - a video-conferencing company relatively few had heard of before March. Fire-choked air turned the sky orange on the West Coast. Saving the U.S. Postal Service became a political rallying cry. Moments of collective pride, like the Olympics, were canceled. Trump himself became just the third president in American history to face an impeachment trial in the Senate, and, in November, became just the fourth president in the past 100 years to lose reelection.

With the benefit of hindsight, it was most certainly not a great year. In fairness, though: Who the hell could have accurately predicted what we experienced in 2020?

In an annual tradition, POLITICO Magazine decided to look back at some of the most audacious, confident and spectacularly incorrect prognostications about the year we just lived through. Here, 32 predictions about 2020 that weren't exactly made with 20/20 vision, if you will.

Donald Trump, Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders will all get Covid - and it'll kill one of them before Election Day

PREDICTED BY SCOTT ADAMS, MARCH 12

One of the more unexpected character arcs of the Trump era is the emergence of "Dilbert" creator Scott Adams as a pro-Trump political commentator. Adams, a "trained hypnotist" with a self-proclaimed expertise in the rhetorical dark arts, has made any number of dazzlingly confident predictions over the past four years. But few are quite as grim as his March 12 tweet predicting that before



November 3, Sanders, Biden and Trump would all contract Covid-19 - and one of them would die from it.

It's December, the election is over, and all three men are still alive. Though Trump did contract coronavirus before Election Day, after a hospitalization and VIP treatment, he quickly recovered. Kanye West will destroy Biden's chances by siphoning off black support

PREDICTED BY GIANNO CALDWELL, JULY 5

"If @kanyewest is serious about running for President he will cripple the black vote against @JoeBiden," Gianni Caldwell, a

Fox News political analyst and conservative podcast host, tweeted on July 5, a day after West announced his candidacy. "He will most certainly ensure that @realDonaldTrump will win because without the black vote Biden is toast."

In the end, Yeezy received roughly 68,000 votes for president. Biden received more than 81 million, roughly 7 million more than Trump. Exit polls by Edison Research showed Biden winning the support of 87 percent of Black voters.

The coronavirus will simply "go away"

PREDICTED BY DONALD

TRUMP ... MANY, MANY TIMES March 6: "It'll go away."

March 10: "Just stay calm. It will go away."

March 12: "It's going to go away."

March 30: "It will go away. You know it - you know it is going away, and it will go away, and we're going to have a great victory." March 31: "It's going to go away, hopefully at the end of the month. And, if not, hopefully it will be soon after that."

April 3: "It is going to go away... It's going - I didn't say a date. ... I said 'it's going away,' and it is going away."

April 7: "It did go - it will go away."

May 15: "It'll go away - at some point, it'll go away."

June 15: "At some point, this stuff goes away. And it's going away."

July 19: "I will be right eventually. You know, I said, 'It's going to disappear.' I'll say it again."

Aug. 5: "This thing's going away. It will go away like things go away."

Aug. 31: "It's going to go away." Sept. 15: "It is going away. And it's probably going to go away now a lot faster because of the vaccines."

Oct. 10: "It's going to disappear; it is disappearing."

Oct. 24: "It is going away; it's rounding the turn."

It's the end of December, and

though vaccines are starting to be distributed, there is no sign that the coronavirus is disappearing, despite the fervent wishes of the "herd immunity" crowd. Nationwide, the virus is in the middle of a third wave that dwarfs those earlier in the year. On July 17, the summertime coronavirus spike hit its apex in terms of daily new cases in the U.S.: 76,334. Today, that number would be the lowest daily total we've seen in more than two months. We've marked more than 100,000 new cases every single day since Nov. 4, the number of fatalities from Covid has reached record highs, the 10 deadliest days since the start of the pandemic all happened this December, and the caseload is likely to increase in the coming weeks due to travel during the holidays. We'll know who won the presidency by 10 on election night

PREDICTED BY JAMES CARVILLE, NOV. 2

In the run-up to Election Day, a strain of thinking emerged that the polls showing a tightening race between Trump and Biden were actually undercounting Biden's support. Among those who embraced this thinking was James Carville, the famed Democratic strategist who helmed Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign.

## Astronauts ring in new year from space with zero gravity ball drop for 2021

The people of Earth rang in the year 2021 with fireworks and social distancing amid the global coronavirus pandemic last night. Even astronauts in space found a way to celebrate in their own unique way: a ball drop in zero gravity. In a video from the International Space Station on New Year's Eve (Dec. 31), five of the six astronauts living aboard the orbiting lab revealed what ringing in 2021 would look like in space. All they needed was a globe of the Earth.

"We wanted to take a moment to wish all of you a very happy New Year," NASA astronaut Kate Rubins said in the video, which NASA released on YouTube.

"One of the most famous New



Year's Eve traditions is watching the ball drop in Times Square in New York City," NASA astronaut Victor Glover added, referring to the iconic celebration in which thousands of revelers pack New York City's Times Square to watch a glittering ball drop at midnight to mark the new year. This year, as New York City

works to limit the spread of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, officials blocked off Times Square to most revelers.

"As many of us celebrate the new year from home, we brought this famous tradition to space to share with you," NASA astronaut Mike Hopkins said in the video. "Since we are in zero gravity, we

have a special twist," added astronaut Soichi Noguchi of the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency.

That twist? In zero gravity, the ball can drop up.

"3, 2, 1, happy New Year!" the astronauts cheered in the video, which they did prerecord ahead of the actual new year.

"We hope this inspires you to celebrate in your own way," NASA astronaut Shannon Walker added just ahead of that final count.

Glover, Hopkins, Noguchi, Rubins and Walker are part of the International Space Station's seven-person Expedition 64 crew, with Russian cosmonauts Sergey Kud-Sverchikov and Sergey Ryzhikov of Roscosmos rounding out the team.



# For a Healthier 2021, Keep the Best Habits of a Very Bad Year

Our 7-Day Well Challenge will show you how to build on the healthy habits you learned during pandemic life.

Here's a better way to start the new year: Skip the traditional January resolutions and make time for some New Year's reflection instead.

Take a moment to look back on the past 365 days of your life. Years from now, when you talk about 2020, what stories will you tell? Will it be clapping for health care workers every night at 7 p.m.? Or perhaps it will be a memory from the months spent mostly at home with family members - or the pandemic "bubbles" you formed that helped friendships grow stronger. Maybe you will tell the story of losing someone you loved or remember finding strength and resilience you didn't know you had.

While reliving much of 2020 may sound like a terrible idea, psychologists say it's a better way to start the new year. Looking back will help you build on the lessons you learned, and you may even discover some hidden positive habits you didn't realize you had started.

"I don't think we've given ourselves enough credit," said Kelly McGonigal, a health psycholo-



gist and lecturer at Stanford University and author of "The Willpower Instinct." "I don't think we have had the emotional appreciation that we need and deserve for the kind of year many people have had. The reflection that's needed right now is a real, honest and self-compassionate look at what's been lost, who's been lost and what it is that you want to choose to remember about 2020. Reflection is a way of being ready to move forward into the new year. I say that every year, but I think that it's especially true for this

year."

## Reflections vs. Resolutions

Reflecting on what you accomplished in 2020 - and what you missed or lost - is also a healthier path toward self-improvement than the typical New Year's resolution. Studies consistently show that New Year's resolutions don't work. By February, most people have abandoned them.

The problem with many resolutions is that they tend to be inherently self-critical and stem from a sort of magical thinking that with one big change - some

weight loss, regular exercise, more money - life will be transformed. "It's just too easy to look for a behavior that you regularly criticize yourself for, or feel guilty about," Dr. McGonigal said. "It's that false promise of, 'If you change this one thing, you'll change everything.'"

Studies show that one of the best ways to change behavior and form a new habit is to bundle it with an existing behavior - what in the science of habit formation is called "stacking." It's the reason doctors, for example, suggest taking a new medication at the same time you brush your teeth or have your morning coffee: You're more likely to remember to take your pill when you piggyback it onto an existing habit. Adding steps to your daily commute often is a better way to add exercise to your day than trying to carve out a separate time for a daily walk. By reflecting on the lessons of the past year, we can stack and build on the good habits we started in 2020. Maybe that involved figuring out new ways to exercise when gyms were closed, strengthening friendships forged through our social bubbles, organizing our homes for 24-7 living and learning, learning to cook healthier meals or making ourselves accountable for the care of others. Now, with the distribution of vaccines and the end to the pandemic in sight, you don't need to abandon those changes - instead, try building on them. The first challenge is listed below. Then, starting Monday and every day next week, the 7-Day Well Challenge will identify a popular quarantine habit and offer a new strategy for turning it into a healthy lifelong habit. Just

sign up for the Well newsletter, and you'll receive a daily email reminder to join that day's challenge.

Quarantine clapping became a nightly ritual in many parts of the United States and around the world as a collective thanks to health care workers. It was both a show of community and a show of gratitude. The experience was what sociologists call "collective effervescence," which happens when people simultaneously come together and take part in a group ritual. Clapping for essential workers had the effect of "both unifying and energizing the group for action toward a common cause, such as persevering through the pandemic," said Joshua W. Brown, professor in the department of psychological and brain sciences at Indiana University Bloomington. "Group expressions of gratitude can be empowering for both those expressing it and those receiving it."

Perhaps you showed gratitude in other ways. Did you offer larger tips than usual to delivery and restaurant workers? Did you find yourself saying a heartfelt thank you to the grocery and pharmacy workers at checkout? When things got tough at home, did you remind yourself and your children of all the things for which you felt grateful? I adopted a regular gratitude hand-washing ritual, thinking of 10 things to be grateful for - one for every finger I washed.

Why it matters: Numerous studies show that people who have a daily gratitude practice, in which they consciously count their blessings, tend to be happier, have lower stress levels, sleep better and are less likely to experience depression. In one study, researchers recruited 300 adults, most of them college students seeking mental health counseling. All the volunteers received counseling, but one group added a writing exercise focused on bad experiences, while another group wrote a letter of gratitude to another person each week for three weeks. A month later, those who wrote gratitude letters reported significantly better mental health. And the effect appears to last. Three months later the researchers scanned the brains of students while they completed a different gratitude exercise.

## Portland kicks off 2021 with a riot for the new year

Portland rang in the new year with a riot - as vandals wreaked havoc throughout the Oregon city, tossing Molotov cocktails and attacking law enforcement with rocks and bricks, police said.

The crowd convened around 7:45 p.m. near Chapman Square downtown, the heart of protests that raged in the city throughout 2020.

Portland police said at least two Molotov

frozen water bottles at officers from the Federal Protective Services and Multnomah County Sheriff's Office. Some were struck by paint-filled balloons,

or the use of force, including but not limited to impact weapons and tear gas."

The group also destroyed property, including shattering a Starbucks window, KOIN reported.

The planned protest was billed as being "in solidarity with BLM" with "no streamers, no megaphones, no masters," according to online posts. "New year, same goal," the



cocktails were thrown and commercial-grade fireworks were launched at the federal courthouse and Justice Center, which some rioters attempted to break into.

The crowd also set multiple fires and chucked rocks, bricks and

which Portland police said may have been "laced with a caustic substance as it caused burning to the skin."

A riot was declared just before 11 p.m. and cops warned protesters that if they didn't leave the area, they'd be subject to arrest "and/

post said.

The raucous protest broke up around 2 a.m. only after police used inert smoke and some impact munitions.

Police said arrests were made but that information was not immediately available.



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# 2020 India Recap: From Ram Mandir bhoomi pujan to Bihar election - Top defining stories

The year 2020 will be remembered most for -- Covid-19 pandemic. The country was under lockdown for most part of the year. The strict restrictions affected people from all walks of life but 135 crore Indians encountered it bravely and presented an example for the world. Here are a few key events that took place during the pandemic in India:

**BIHAR ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS**  
In a year that left the world in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, Bihar pulled off a mammoth electoral exercise which saw the NDA retain power but a reinvigorated opposition snapping at its heels. While the NDA emerged victorious, its composition underwent a change with the entry of smaller players like Jitan Ram Manjhi's HAM and Mukesh Sahni's VIP. More importantly, the BJP emerged as the stronger partner, returning with a tally far greater than that of the JD(U), a development that is expected to alter power equations in the times to come. The JD(U) blamed the slump in its tally on the brinkmanship of LJP leader Chirag Paswan, who pulled out of the NDA and fielded candidates against many of Nitish Kumar's nominees.

In the opposition camp, Lalu Prasad's younger son and heir apparent Tejashwi Yadav came of age, steering the RJD to an impressive performance in the assembly polls, though the Grand Alliance helmed by his party fell short of getting a majority. Quite expectedly, accusatory fingers were pointed towards the Congress which seemed to have pulled the five-party coalition down, contesting 70 seats but winning only 19. In contrast, the moribund Left performed beyond expectations, with the CPI, CPI(M) and the CPI(ML) together winning 20 out of the 29 seats the three parties contested.

In the 243-strong assembly, the NDA enjoys a slender majority with 125 seats. The Grand Alliance has a tally of 110.

## INDIA-US TIES

India-US ties were elevated to 'comprehensive global strategic partnership' during President Donald Trump's visit to India in 2020, a year when the two countries solidified their



## DEFINING STORIES



relationship at an unprecedented scale and pace despite the COVID-19 pandemic and the domestic political stalemate due to the presidential elections here. The two countries held the US-India 2+2 framework just days before the presidential elections on November 3, reflecting the maturity in the bilateral ties. India is only the second country to have this kind of 2+2 dialogue, which has become the leading mechanism to discuss issues across the breadth and depth of the relationship.

President Trump's historic visit to India (in February) captured a period of remarkable growth in the relationship. And this was demonstrated by President Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's decision to elevate the relationship to a comprehensive global strategic partnership.

India and the US signed the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement for Geo-Spatial Cooperation (BECA), with which the two countries have inked all the all four foundational agreements to bolster defence ties. During the year, the US and India launched an unprecedented cooperation to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Pharmaceutical companies from both countries collaborated to expand global supplies of critical medicines and are cooperating on vaccine development.

President-elect Joe Biden, who defeated incumbent Trump in the bitterly-fought election, has spoken about his vision for the US-India partnership as well as on standing with India in facing

threats in the region. His running mate Kamala Harris, who is of Indian origin, scripted history when she became the first ever woman vice president-elect of the country. The US-India relationship is expected to touch new heights in 2021 under the presidency of Biden, who is known to be a strong proponent of closer India-US ties since his days as a Democratic senator in the 1970s and played a key role in getting the approval of the Senate for the landmark bilateral civil nuclear deal in 2008.

## INDIA-CHINA TIES

China's transgression attempts in Ladakh caused the most serious damage to the bilateral ties with India in over four decades. The two Asian giants reported strain in ties after armies of the two sides clashed in the Galwan Valley of Ladakh. India lost its 20 soldiers in June. The Indian side also caused severe damage to Chinese PLA. Media reported that as many as 40 Chinese soldiers were killed in the clash. This was the first such incident involving fatalities after a gap of 45 years. As a result, the relations deteriorated to a new low with the two sides opening multiple channels of talks to restore the ties. India and China have held several rounds of talks in the last few months to resolve the standoff. But the two countries have failed to resolve their border dispute. Both countries have steadily established military infrastructure along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Lakhs of Indian and Chinese troops remain deployed in the region even nine months after the deadly clash.

India has also retaliated by banning Chinese apps and putting Chinese investments under greater scrutiny. Nine months since the border tensions began, lakhs of

## RAFALE JOINS IAF

Back in July, the Indian Air Force (IAF) added more air superiority with the induction of the Rafale fighter jets from France. The jets landed at the Air Force base at Ambala.

The first batch of five Rafale jets arrived in India on July 29, nearly four years after India signed an inter-governmental agreement with France to procure 36 of the aircraft at a cost of Rs 59,000 crore. The second batch of four to five Rafale jets arrived in November.

The Rafale jets are India's first major acquisition of fighter planes in 23 years after the Sukhoi jets were imported from Russia.

Rafale is a twin-jet fighter aircraft. It can operate from both an aircraft carrier and a shore base. It is categorised as a 4.5 generation fighter aircraft due to its radar-evading stealth profile. The fighter jet can reach almost double the speed of sound, with a top speed of 1.8 Mach.

Rafale's induction took place amid the border standoff with China along the Line of Actual Control in eastern Ladakh. Notably, Rafales have strong combat experience in the middle-east, Africa, and Afghanistan.

Experts have said that Rafale's induction will be a game-changer for India in the regional politics of South Asia.

## RAM MANDIR

The defining image of 2020 could very well be the bhoomi puja in

Ayodhya for a Ram Mandir. The ceremony was performed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi with a mask on his face to guard against COVID-19. The ceremony in August was watched live on TV by millions, just months after the Supreme Court settled the decades-old land dispute over the site on which the Babri Masjid stood till 1992.

Ayodhya continued to remain in focus after the groundbreaking. In Lucknow, a special CBI court recorded the final statements of 23 people including BJP stalwarts LK Advani, MM Joshi, Kalyan Singh and Uma Bharti who were accused of a conspiracy to demolish the mosque. It acquitted all of them.

As the Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Trust went about the process of getting work started on the site, another trust unveiled the blueprint of a mosque which will come up in the district's Dhannipur village, replacing the Babri Masjid.

## FARM LAWS

Thousands of farmers, mostly from Punjab and Haryana, are currently staying put at Delhi's borders with Haryana and Uttar Pradesh in protest against the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act, 2020, the Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020 and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020. They have expressed apprehension that these laws would pave the way for the dismantling of the minimum support price system, leaving them at the "mercy" of big corporations.

However, the government has maintained that the new laws will bring farmers better opportunities and usher in new technologies in agriculture. The government argues that the three farm laws will remove the middlemen and allow farmers to sell anywhere in the country. Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself has repeatedly assured a number of times that the MSP will continue and the laws are aimed at doubling the income of farmers.





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# Is 2020 the worst year for civilisation? Here's what historians say

**Many are convinced 2020 is a cursed year, the worst in the history of human civilisation. But is it really so?**

The year 2020 started off with a terrible bushfire in Australia that killed or displaced 300 crore animals. Then came the Covid-19 pandemic that infected almost 30 million people and killed nearly 10 lakh worldwide till the filing of this story.

Economies around the world collapsed, job losses are at a peak and several sectors witnessed a doom. Natural disasters followed in different parts of the globe, leading to further bloodbath. India, for example, witnessed floods, cyclones, earthquakes, and a bloody border confrontation all in the past eight months. Many are convinced 2020 is a cursed year, the worst in the history of human civilisation. But is it really so? India Today Data Intelligence Unit (DIU) went back in time in search of the answer.

536 CE and following years Let's look at why one must thank their lucky stars that they live now, and not 15 odd centuries ago.

To begin with, the problem with 536 CE was the weather it turned bad when two massive volcanic eruptions covered the Earth with dense fog and blocked out the sun. Temperatures dropped, and in parts of the northern hemisphere, it began to snow in summer. And naturally, it messed up the food supply chain and caused famines all across present-day Europe and neighbouring regions.

Michael McCormick, Francis Goelet Professor of Medieval History at Harvard University, says, "The year 536 was bad for food production and much else probably globally, but at least in the northern hemisphere. Even more important may have been the as yet ill-understood links with subsequent volcanism over the following years, the triggering of the Late Antique Little Ice Age in 536 and most important, the outbreak of the Justinianic Pandemic of the bubonic plague, beginning 541 in Egypt." What McCormick was saying was that soon after 536 CE was over and people somewhat began to relax, a bad case of plague hit Europe around 541 CE and drove the last nail through the heart of the Byzantine Empire. Even in those dark days when antiquity was making way for the medieval period in Europe, fingers were pointing eastwards,

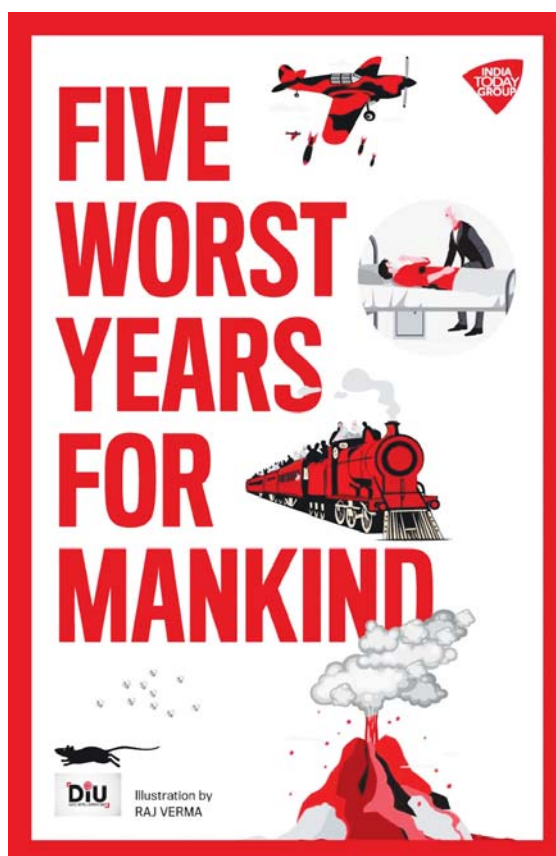
blaming China and the orient for sending them the plague.

Those early Europeans were naturally upset because the plague hung around for some 200 hundred years particularly in the Mediterranean region. By the time it petered out around 750 CE, it had killed around 100 million people.

Plague wise, it was all hunky dory for the next six centuries, but then the black days returned in the West. Between 1347 and 1352, a bubonic plague that origi-

Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History", says, "In the 1918-20 pandemic, India suffered at least 10 million deaths from influenza, and it's quite possible that the toll exceeded 20 million. Case mortality for Indian soldiers in the British Army exceeded 20 per cent. On top of that, crop shortages combined with continued export of food to support British war efforts, caused near-famine conditions in some areas."

So the years 1918 to 1920 must have been bad for those who lived in those times, but in India, people still speak about the Great Bengal Famine of 1770s with a shudder. That particular famine wiped out a third of the population of the larger Bengal region, which included parts of present-day West Bengal, all of Bangladesh and parts of Bihar and Odisha. Historians later calculated that at least 10 million people had died out of



nated from Central Asia accompanied Mongol travellers and traders and made its way into Europe.

And once again, a plague that rose in the East did away with about a quarter of Europe's then population. For nearly 600 years since, though there were smaller epidemics here and there in the West, the world did not see a pandemic till the Flu hit in the early 20th century.

The Spanish flu pandemic The year was 1918 when H1N1 influenza turned into a pandemic, infecting nearly one in every three people in the world. Some 500 million people were infected and 50 million died. In India, it hit in the northern parts of the country, leading to an estimated 12-13 million deaths, which was around 4-6 percent of the population.

John M Barry, an American historian and author of "The Great

starvation in the years from 1769 up till 1773. Traces of the pain and trauma of the famine can be found in Bengal's literary references.

When questioned which would be the worst year for humanity, historian Rana Safvi says misery is subjective, and different people would call different years their worst, depending on their experiences.

Misery is subjective and there are many events that humanity has survived not collectively as a species but as a subset of that identity. Wars, conquests, colonisation and slavery have killed millions around the world subset identities dreadfully impacting humankind as a whole. Horrors of modern-day war If we go back a hundred years (that is when our grandparents or great grandparents were living), some 20 million people perished



in a span of just four years. About 75,000 were Indians fighting a white man's war World War I. Just 30 years later, Adolf Hitler set off to conquer the world. Result: 85 million civilian and military lives were lost in the Second World War. This time, 2 million Indians died for the sake of the King or because of his call for war.

But the Indian death toll did not take into account another famine that primarily happened because the British overlords took grain out of Bengal for their armies at war. The Bengal famine of 1943-44 witnessed three million deaths due to starvation. The older generations still remember those horrid days, and multiple films and books have kept the hunger alive in the psyche of the younger generations.

The year 1943 could vie for the epithet of Bengal's worst year, but modern-day Bangladesh might object because of 'Operation Searchlight' that the Pakistani Army unleashed in then East Pakistan in 1971. This operation was aimed at curbing the Bengali nationalist movement which was opposing Urdu imposition by West Pakistan.

It is another matter that 1971 also turned out to be the year that Bangladesh was born, but estimates say three million people died in the genocide, mainly of Bengali Hindus, and 10 million were driven away across the border into India.

For people of Jewish faith, the years with Hitler at the helm in Germany would be the worst as he evolved a factory system to kill 6 million Jews and usurp everything they owned from life to gold teeth to even the skin on their bodies. It was the worst systematic experiment ever carried out on human beings. For someone in Japan, 1945 would probably be the worst year in the country's history because of what 'Little Boy' and 'Fat Man' did when the US dropped these

nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The year 1947 could also be in the running for the worst year ever for the Indian sub-continent. While two countries were born that year, an ancient land bled, shedding tears of blood as centuries-old roots were uprooted and chopped in a gory dance of creation and destruction.

Historian Rana Safvi, when asked which year she believes is the worst in Indian history, said, "For me, though I wasn't born then, but as I've heard and read, 1947 would be the worst year. The Partition displaced 15 million people and killed over a million." There is no beginning to the accounting, forget the ending, of indigenous tribes wiped out in Australia and Northern America, the common Flu decimating the Polynesian Islands, colonial armies running amok, slave traders hunting humans in the African bushes, leaders such as Joseph Stalin and Mao Tse-tung dehumanising and killing fellow countrymen by tens of millions, the ethnic cleansing of 1.5 million Armenians by the Ottomans of Turkey, the Hutu-Tutsi killings in Rwanda, monuments of empty skulls in Cambodia, and endless other miseries, all of it dependent on who got stuck where and in which year. Which brings us to our year of being and is it the worst ever. Historian John M Barry says, "2020 is not even close to the worst year to survive."

Experts have mixed opinions Professor Michael McCormick, who had claimed 536 AD to be the worst year, had this to say about 2020: "It has clearly been a bad year so far and we are only 2/3 of the way through. And it's important to realise that medium- and long-term consequences of most events remain hidden for some time as the complex chains of causality form over weeks, months, decades, and even centuries, until astute journalists and historians begin to detect them."



# 2020 Tested Us Beyond Measure. Where Do We Go From Here?

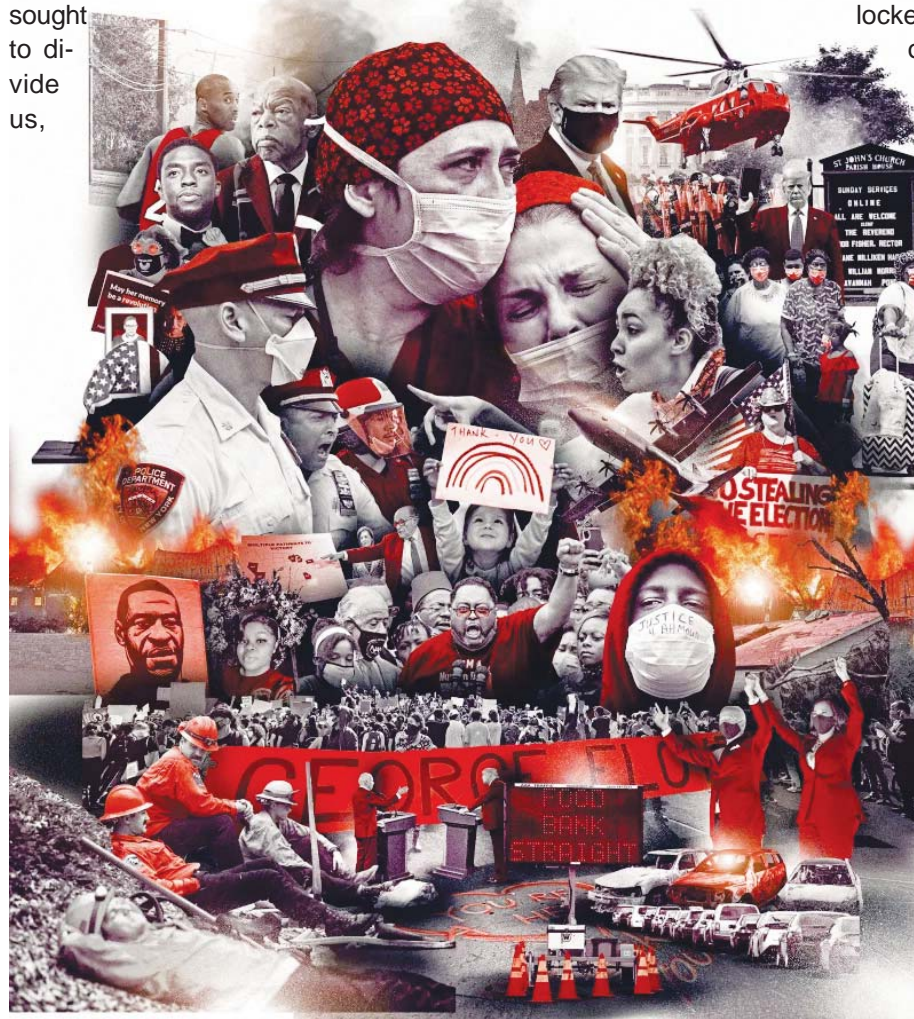
This is the story of a year you'll never want to revisit.

There have been worse years in U.S. history, and certainly worse years in world history, but most of us alive today have seen nothing like this one. You would need to be over 100 to remember the devastation of World War I and the 1918 flu pandemic; roughly 90 to have a sense of the economic deprivation wrought by the Great Depression; and in your 80s to retain any memory of World War II and its horrors. The rest of us have had no training wheels for this—for the recurrence of natural disasters that confirm just how much we have betrayed nature; for an election contested on the basis of fantasy; for a virus that originated, possibly, with a bat only to upend the lives of virtually everyone on the planet and end the lives of roughly 1.5 million people around the world. My job as a film critic is to look at movies and tease out their connections both to the greater world and to our lives. If 2020 were a dystopian movie, you'd probably turn it off after 20 minutes. This year wasn't doomily thrilling, like a fictional apocalypse. It was, in addition to being wrought with pain, maddeningly mundane, the routine of the everyday turned against us.

Our most debilitating threat this year was a sense of helplessness, and it ran unchecked. Although it's universal among humans to believe in their own fortitude, Americans, in particular, are conditioned to believe they can triumph over any crisis. But not since the spread of fascism in the 1930s—a threat America didn't actively recognize until the dawn of the 1940s—have we been faced with so many abnormal events that have been so egregiously distorted by aberrant leadership. We confronted the unspeakable, only to be deviously reassured that none of it was a big deal. A virus will magically "disappear." Don't worry, every vote will be counted—maybe. America will be great again, if only everybody would just get back to work—and though a mask is optional, wearing one sure makes you look dumb.

Gaslighting has been a major feature of American civic life since 2016, but in 2020 it reached new heights of outlandishness, making many of us feel as if we'd been pushed to the other side of the

looking glass. We spent countless hours stuck at home and connected to the often untrustworthy hive mind of social media, wringing our hands and pointing out injustices, only to end up feeling even more paralyzed by the very people who are meant to protect us. The enemy sought to divide us,



and succeeded.

And COVID-19, it turns out, was the greatest gift that the enemy could have hoped for. Helplessness met its evil twin, a partner in crime that would only magnify its mad power: isolation. In March, when major U.S. cities joined others worldwide in locking down as a defense against the virus, Americans who could work remotely figured out how to do their jobs at home. So many didn't have that privilege and lost their jobs, with no means to pay their rent or mortgage and no way to feed their families. Hunger became a major theme of 2020, presenting challenges even in countries with the means to assuage it. At the same time, parents across the world, no matter their means, hustled to take care of—and homeschool—their kids.

Meanwhile, essential workers, from grocery-store clerks to transportation professionals to hospital nurses and physicians, continued to show up for duty. We'd see clips of health care workers in the news, their faces marked

by hours of wearing PPE, their eyes leaden with weariness. Sometimes unable to hold back tears, they'd describe a new addition to their daily routine: watching patients die when they could no longer keep them alive. At a designated time each evening,

many of us

leaned out of our windows, armed with pots and wooden spoons or just our oddball cacophony of human voices, and raised a ruckus in support of those workers. It was the least we could do, at a time when we had no idea what to do.

That began in March, the onset of a period in which most of us felt encased in our own lonely snow globes, looking out at a world that seemed to be falling apart. Realistically, the world had started falling apart long before: horrific Australian bushfires had been raging for months and would not be quelled until midyear—just in time for wildfire season in the American West, with its own brazen cycle of devastation. Pictures from either of these scenes—unsettling orange skies in normally paradisiacal parts of California, aerial views of doomy plumes of smoke covering the Australian landscape—would feel apocalyptic in any year. But in 2020, with so many of us hunkered down inside, it was particularly alarming to reckon with the fragility of

the natural world. To think of it burning away—not least because we humans have failed it with our poor stewardship—invites despair. Because face it: humans can often be terrible, making rash, selfish decisions at best and murdering one another at worst.

Through most of 2020, to be locked inside and looking out was to feel peculiarly powerless. And even as we grew to feel more remote from the world as individuals, it also seemed that individual nations had begun to curl in on themselves, motivated by misguided notions of their own power and self-sufficiency. What does an "America first" agenda mean in a country that fails its own citizens when it comes to protecting them from a deadly virus? In the worst months of 2020, we were a nation that could barely take care of itself, let alone help anyone else through a crisis.

Worse yet, we were on our way to becoming a nation that didn't want to help anyone else, even when it was in our own interest to do so. And democracy—not a badge you can earn, Scout-style, but a practice and a discipline that needs careful tending—came to seem wobbly and fragile even in places that have long professed to believe in it. As if it were a previously fashionable fad we'd all become tired of.

The pages on this strange calendar just kept turning, with the menace of the pandemic bleeding through all of it. Public figures who meant a great deal to us—Ruth Bader Ginsburg, John Lewis, Kobe Bryant, Chadwick Boseman—were wrested away. And in May, the killing of George Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis ignited righteous anger not just across the country but around the world. The ruthlessness of that act revived attention to similar outrages earlier in the year, particularly the killings of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery. It also reminded

us how often, throughout history, Black people had suffered similar injustices, with no recourse, no means of changing the status quo. And then in August, even with the whole world watching, police in Kenosha, Wis., shot and partially paralyzed another Black man, Jacob Blake, as three of his children watched from the backseat of his car.

The toxic traditions of injustice and inequality in America are no secret. A sequence of tragic events finally caused more white people to wake up. Whether this heightened awareness of the racism that has plagued our country since its founding translates into actual change remains to be seen. That's just one of many question marks waiting for us in 2021 and beyond. After a year of so many changes, will we change radically too?

We learned a lot in 2020—but what, exactly, did we learn? The bromides are already flowing freely: We slowed down. We learned what was important. We played board games and did jigsaw puzzles and really talked and listened to our children. All of those are undoubtedly good things, and we nod in solemn agreement when our neighbors enumerate those little blessings. But do any of them capture the microtexture of what our lives were like this year? In our cities, when we were told we shouldn't go out at all except for occasional exercise, walks in the sunshine became the thing we hung onto. How lucky we were to be able to do that, at least! In the suburbs, our restricted routines opened new routes of creativity: we might drive out of our way to catch a spectacular sunset, or finally tackle a hiking trail we'd always meant to explore. Then came the time when it became possible to meet a friend for a takeout glass of wine—this became the summer of lukewarm and acidic rosé in a plastic cup, but it represented a privilege and a pleasure that, in earlier months, we weren't sure we'd have.

When museums finally reopened, carefully limiting capacity, we were able to reacquaint ourselves with paintings we love, with golden objects that had been placed in the tombs of kings 3,000 years ago, with vessels that our ancestors used for simple but essential tasks like toting water from here to there.



# Thank God it's 2021!



© Adam Gray/SWNS for DailyMail.com

Hello 2021, and goodbye 2020! The year of the COVID-19 pandemic ended with the famous ball drop in a deserted Times Square while millions watched from home, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio dancing with his wife onstage, and partygoers packing into a Miami nightclub to ring in 2021.

New York's Times Square is usually at the center of the world's New Year's Eve celebrations, with tens of thousands of people packing in to the commercial hub every December 31st to watch the ball drop at midnight.

De Blasio was seen pushing the button to start the crystal ball's descent as his wife, Chirlane McCray stood by his side. The pair then danced into the new year onstage.

The mayor later tweeted that 'as a city, as a community, we have been through so much this year'. 'We showed our resolve and proved New York City will come back stronger than ever,' he wrote in the caption of an image showing him and his wife dancing.

This year, the time-honored tradition was modified amid the ongoing pandemic, with members of the public prohibited from gathering in the area for the first time since the ball-drop began back in 1907.

However, modest throngs of people gathered just outside the police perimeter, which took on the feel of a tailgate as midnight neared. Many said they wanted to end a challenging year on their own terms.

Three hours later, Los Angeles, Las Vegas and the rest of the

West Coast also marked the end to the year in muted fashion, with California currently in the grips of a huge spike in coronavirus cases.

On Los Angeles' Venice Beach, an unusually large crowd of people gathered to cheer the final sunset of the year over the pacific, and to say goodbye to 2020. The gleam of Las Vegas also brought large crowds, with thousands of people walking on the Strip by early evening despite a plea from the governor to avoid gatherings.

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In 2021, we're going to show people what it looks like to recover, to come back,' the mayor



added.

Shortly after the ball dropped, TV host Andy Cohen slammed de Blasio for how he's handled issues in the city.

'I just don't need to see that at the beginning of 2021,' Cohen said, referring to de Blasio and his wife dancing. 'Do something with this city!' Cohen said as CNN's Anderson Cooper laughed. 'Honestly get it together,' Cohen yelled.

Others also took to social media to slam de Blasio for his leadership over the Big Apple.

'@NYCMayor way to ruin NYE in NYC. You should be ashamed of yourself,' one person wrote.

**Year of the pandemic ends with the ball drop in a deserted Times Square, Bill de Blasio dancing on stage and nightclubs packed in Florida where indoor parties are allowed - while millions are forced to celebrate at home**

Another shared: '2020 was just another year during which @NYCMayor destroyed NYC.'

Some celebrity performers took to stages set up in the mostly empty square to sing to a small group of masked essential workers.

In the final minutes before midnight, Jennifer Lopez sang the Aerosmith classic Dream On beneath a blast of confetti.

A brief burst of fireworks blasted and more confetti flew as the countdown hit midnight.

The only people allowed into the area were media and invited first responders who have been hailed as the 'Heroes of 2020.'

The audience also saw performances by Miley Cyrus and Megan Thee Stallion.

'I think I feel hopeful. It can't get much worse than the last year,' 31-year-old actress and nanny Jordan Mann, of Brooklyn, said. 'I'm just really hoping that we have a lot more wisdom next year from the leaders in our country and that they'll actually be able to help us out,' she said.

New Year's Eve celebrations first began in Times Square back in 1907, and people have gathered there every year since.

President-elect Joe Biden, who will take office in January, sounded a positive note as the US, the worst-hit country by COVID-19, is nearing 20 million recorded infections and 345,000 deaths.

'I'm more optimistic about America's chances than I've ever been,' he said in a video interview on ABC's countdown program.

'America can do anything and I'm absolutely positively confident, confident we're gonna come back and come back even stronger than we were before.'

However, for many weary New Yorkers, there does not seem much to celebrate.

On Wednesday, The Big Apple reported its highest ever daily increase in coronavirus cases, with nearly 6,000 new infections confirmed across the five boroughs. Hospitalizations and deaths are also increasing at an alarming rate. Gov Andrew Cuomo is now preparing to reopen the Javits Center field hospital, designed to treat an influx of COVID cases. In Florida, President Donald Trump's friends and family members gathered at his Mar-a-Lago estate for his annual New Year's Eve gala.

Trump and First Lady Melania were forced to forgo the festivities on Thursday to resolve the highly-anticipated COVID relief bill in Washington, but still hosted hundreds of guests at the Palm Beach resort.

Other members of the Trump clan were seen dressed to the nines as they gathered at the opulent ballroom to ring in the new year. Earlier in the evening, the president's eldest son Donald Trump Jr, who turned 43 on Thursday, and girlfriend Kimberly Guilfoyle shared a video message wishing everyone a happy new year from the venue.

'We just wanted to wish you guys an incredible new year. Obviously 2020 has been a little bit nuts and rather crazy, I don't think anyone's going to be upset about moving on from this one,' Don Jr, said.

Trump's younger son, Eric, 36, also shared a picture posing alongside wife Lara at the party.

On Thursday afternoon Times Square was eerily empty, with the area cordoned off to the public and police patrolling nearby sidewalks to enforce social distancing.

The Big Apple is battling against a second wave of COVID-19 infections, as well as soaring rates of violent crime, an uptick in closing businesses, and a drastic drop in revenue.

Hopes for a brighter 2021 have been dampened by news of a dismally slow roll-out of the coronavirus vaccine, with a paltry 29.7 per cent of available doses administered across New York as of Wednesday.



# 2020 Flashback: 12 stories, 12 months that changed India forever

By any standards, 2020 will forever be remembered as the bearer of a global economic meltdown brought about by a deadly contagion -- the novel coronavirus. Here is an attempt to look back at events and stories that captured the attention of Indians this year.



To describe 2020 as yet another year would be a great injustice. Almost a hundred years after the Spanish Flu instilled fear in the hearts and minds of people across the globe, regardless of their nationality or the colour of their skin, an unholy encounter between a bat and what is speculated to be a pangolin, pushed the human race to the brink of chaos in 2020.

For this reason, 2020 will remain a fresh wound in human memory for as long as we remain to be the sum total of flesh and blood. By any standards, the 20th year of the third millennium will forever be remembered as the bearer of a global economic meltdown brought about by a deadly contagion -- the novel coronavirus. To describe the shared feeling of 2020 in the words of Charles Dickens, "We were always more or less miserable, and most of our acquaintance were in the same condition."

While it is extremely difficult summing up the year 2020 in merely 12 news stories, here is an attempt to look back at events and stories that captured the attention and the collective conscience of an India gripped in the throes of a pandemic.

January - JNU besieged!

Five days into 2020, the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi turned into a battleground with armed mobs terrorising the campus which is hailed as the cradle of India's brand of socialism. For anyone who chooses to ignore the importance of JNU, it is important to note that apart from retaining its position in the top three of the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) rankings for

four years in a row, the university is also the alma mater of two sitting Union ministers -- Nirmala Sitharaman (Finance) and S Jaishankar (External Affairs). On January 5, a mob made its way through the JNU campus, charging at everything and anyone in its way. With covered faces, members of this mob attacked students inside the Sabarmati hostel. Stones were also pelted

termed the incident "unfortunate" and the Delhi Police registered a case in this regard.

Interestingly, the police claimed violence occurred in parts of the JNU campus that were not covered by CCTV cameras. Even more interesting was the fact that lights inside the campus, as well as streetlights, were switched off during the attack. To add to it, it is still a mystery

police, both by students and teachers. Videos of the attack were circulated widely on social media but in November, a fact-finding committee of the Delhi Police gave a clean chit to the guard force in connection with the January 5 violence. No arrests have been made in this case.

February - Riots erupt in Delhi While 2020 started off as somewhat of an anomaly with nationwide protests against the Centre's CAA-NPR-NRC trifecta, it took sixty days for the year to take a riotous turn. At a time when US President Donald Trump (who's now on his way out from the White House) was basking in the warmth of India's hospitality, one of the 11 districts in the country's capital city of Delhi erupted into violence. Reports of a communal riot in parts of Delhi's northeast dis-

trict, India's most densely populated district, first came to light on February 24. From five on February 24, the death toll rose to

the riots had claimed 53 lives. The Delhi Police registered 254 FIRs and arrested or detained 903 people in connection with the violence. In the chargesheet, the Delhi Police insinuated that the riots were part of a 'conspiracy' by a group of activists protesting against the CAA-NPR-NRC trifecta. Most matters related to the northeast Delhi violence are still being heard in court.

The riots even found mention in Parliament where the Opposition cited instances of Delhi Police allegedly aiding rioters while the central government maintained that the riots were part of a conspiracy.

March - Justice in India: Delayed, not denied At 5.30 am on March 20, India's quest for closure in the 2012 Nirbhaya gang-rape case met its inevitable end. Four men accused of sexually assaulting and brutalising a 23-year-old medical student, who died of her injuries, were executed for the crime that unleashed a wave of collective anger across the country.

For most, the justice that took eight years to take its form was the same as injustice. However, for Asha Devi and her husband who ran post to pillar seeking justice for their daughter, March 20, 2020, was the beginning of a new chapter in their lives.

All four convicts were awarded death penalties by a fast-track court in 2013. The punishment was later upheld by the Delhi High Court in 2014 and the Supreme Court in 2017. By 2020, review petitions in courts and mercy pleas to the President had been turned down. The 'black' warrants dictating the final moments of the lives of the four con-



at a peace march led by the JNU Teachers' Association (JNUTA). The fracas can is believed to have originated from disagreements between the Left-led JNU Students' Union (JNUSU) and the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) over registration for the winter session. Up in arms against the revised fee structure approved by JNU VC Jagadesh Kumar's administration, the JNUSU issued a call for a "complete university strike". Many believe it is this rift between the JNUSU and the ABVP that resulted in the events of January 5. The three-hour ordeal of the JNU students triggered outrage with everyone, from the Supreme Court Bar Association to political parties and even movie stars, denouncing the mindless violence. HRD Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal

why security guards associated with Cyclops, the security agency responsible for JNU's protection, were not present at



the time of the attack, almost like the policemen guarding Marlon Brando's hospital room in the first edition of the Godfather.

Complaints were made to the

25 in two days and had climbed to 42 by February 28. By the time IPS officer SN Shrivastava took over as the new police commissioner of Delhi on February 29,



victs were signed on March 5. The four -- Mukesh Singh, Vinay assaultants were captured. Shockingly enough, the cops recovered 8.



Sharma, Akshay Thakur and Pawan Gupta -- were hanged at the Tihar jail as the sun rose over Delhi on March 20.

April - Frontline heroes and the nationwide lockdown

There is no doubt that the last week of March changed the face of the planet forever. In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared a nationwide lockdown starting March 25 to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, which originated in China in late 2019. On the day that the lockdown came into effect, India had reported a total of 600 confirmed cases of infection and 12 virus-related deaths.

Since the outbreak, frontline workers have been at the forefront of the fight against Covid-19 with many even losing their lives in the line of duty.

That being said, the story of Punjab Police sub-inspector (SI) Harjit Singh highlighted the many complexities of what initially seems like a straight-forward story. On April 12, SI Harjit Singh was part of the police party on 'naka' duty outside a vegetable market in Punjab's Patiala to minimise movement and ensure compliance to Covid-19 guidelines.

Eyewitness accounts revealed that a group of men drove their SUV through the police barricade near which SI Singh was stationed. When he confronted the men, one of them pulled out a sharp-edged weapon and chopped off the policeman's hand. The assaultants fled the spot and were traced to the Nihang Dera Complex which also houses Khichdi Sahib Gurudwara. This was followed by a heavy exchange of gunfire between the assaultants and the Punjab Police resulting in a stand-off which though in unequal measure, brought back anxious memories of Operation Blue Star. The police's strength prevailed and 11

hand-held weapons, cartridges, two petrol bombs, LPG cylinders, bottles of chemical substances and Rs 39 lakh in cash from inside the Nihang Dera Complex. SI Harjit Singh, whose hand was chopped off while trying to en-



force the lockdown, spent 18 days at PGIMER in Chandigarh where doctors managed to reattach his hand. The Punjab Police sub-inspector received a hero's welcome as he returned to his home in Patiala where he was showered with petals.

Many frontline workers who dedicated themselves to India's fight against Covid-19, however, were not as lucky and had to face discrimination, eviction and even social ostracisation simply because they were doing their jobs.

May - Death by exodus: Life on the road

All said and done, no image stuck to the hearts and minds of urban India more than that of a sea of people walking hundreds, even thousands of kilometres, sometimes barefoot, to return to their native homes. There are millions of stories of these labourers who were treated as mere 'migrants' and evicted from their rented homes or refused payment by their employers.

However, the most important of these stories is the one country

employees of a steel firm in the Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation (MIDC) zone in Jalna district. Like thousands of others who had no choice but to return to their native homes during the lockdown, the labourers

walked alongside the road from Jalna to Badnapur before deciding to move to the railway track. After walking another 36 kilometres, they decided to lie down on the railway track where



they fell asleep. A freight train carrying empty containers of petroleum products from Cherlapalli in Telangana to Manmad in Maharashtra ran over the labourers, killing 14 of them on the spot. Another two died on their way to the hospital. Like them, hundreds of labourers never managed to return to the families that were waiting for them back home.

June - India, China lock horns in Galwan

Originally from Madhya Pradesh, 16 migrant labourers who were returning to their native homes on foot were killed when a goods train ran over them between Maharashtra's Jalna and Aurangabad districts. All of the victims were aged between 20 and 30. The men were em-

As if a deadly virus wasn't enough of a worry for India, the situation suddenly spiralled out of control along India's eastern border on June 16.

On the morning of June 16, unconfirmed reports started pouring in about a violent face-off between Indian and Chinese soldiers at Galwan Valley in eastern Ladakh. Soon after, statements by the Indian Army and the Ministry of External Affairs confirmed that such a face-off did take place in the early hours of June 16 but neither the Indian Army nor the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) fired a single bullet. It was later revealed that Indian Army troops led by Colonel Santosh Babu of 16 Bihar Regiment approached the Chinese near a border point to discuss a way forward for disengagement when they were attacked. Sticks, stones and clubs wrapped in barbed wire were used in the face-off that lasted for more than three hours.

As many as 20 Indian soldiers lost their lives in the Galwan Valley clash while the Chinese incurred an unknown number of casualties. The incident prompted both India and China to mobilise tens of thousands of troops along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh. Ever since the Galwan Valley face-off, both New Delhi and Beijing have been struggling to normalise relations.

July - Restarting Indian industry: Lessons learnt the hard way

Less than two months after a gas

were trying to revive Unit V after it tripped the night before when the accident took place.

Fourteen workers were killed and another 9 suffered serious injuries. This was the second such boiler explosion at NCLIL's thermal power station-II in Neyveli in two months. On May 7, a boiler explosion at the plant's Unit VI killed five persons, including two staff members. Reports later revealed that cost-cutting and non-compliance to safety guidelines resulted in the two accidents that claimed 19 lives in a period of 60 days.

Similar negligence resulted in a massive fire in Oil India Limited's Baghjan Oil Field in Assam's Tinsukia district. The fire, that raged for 159 days claimed the lives of two firefighters and caused irreparable environmental and ecological damage.

August - A tabletop tragedy

As the country was still getting used to life in a post-Covid world, an Air India Express aircraft skidded off the runway at Kozhikode (Karipur) International airport in Kerala on August 7, killing 18 people. At the time, there were 184 passengers, four crew members and two pilots on board the flight from Dubai to Calicut airport. The aircraft was part of the Government of India's 'Vande Bharat' repatriation initiative to bring back expats from foreign countries.

A total of 18 people, including former Indian Air Force (IAF) test pilot and the commander of the flight Captain DV Sathe and his co-pilot Akhilesh Kumar Sharma, lost their lives in this tragedy.

The aircraft, an Air India Express Boeing 737 (AXB1344), overshot the tabletop runway while landing at Calicut airport amid heavy rain. According to reports, the aircraft fell into a valley 35 feet below and broke into two pieces but did not catch fire. Without wasting any time, the Civil Aviation Ministry issued an order to the Air Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB) to initiate a probe into the accident. A team of experts was also dispatched to Kozhikode the very next morning following a meeting of top officials of the Civil Aviation Ministry, the Airport Authority of India (AAI), Air India and the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA).

September - 'Historic' Monsoon session of Parliament

A consensus was reached between the Government of India and Opposition parties to hold an 18-day Monsoon session of Parliament from September 14 till October 1.



# January 2020: List of important days

There are several festivals and important days that are celebrated in January. Read the below-given list.



Every day is a new beginning. As the year wraps up, make your self ready and kick off the first day of the year with a bang. Boost your productivity, reduce all stress, make a fresh start and set new goals. January is the first month of the Gregorian calendar consisting of 31 days. Have you ever wondered how January got its name? It is

named after the Roman god of doors, Janus, because this month is the door to the year represents all beginnings and possesses the ability to see all things past and future. As Buddha said, "No matter how hard the past, you can always begin again." There are several festivals and important days that are celebrated in January. Read the below-given

list. The several festivals and important days that are celebrated in January are as follows:

January 1- New Years Day  
January 01- Global Family Day  
January 02- Guru Gobind Singh Jayanti  
January 02- Mannam Jayanthi  
January 06- World Day for War Orphans  
January 09- NRI Day

January 11- Missionary Day  
January 11- Death anniversary of Lal Bahadur Shastri  
January 12- Swami Vivekananda birth anniversary  
January 12- National Youth Day  
January 14- Lohri  
January 14- Bhogi  
January 15- Pongal  
January 15- Makar Sankranti  
January 15- Army Day

January 16- Thiruvalluvar day  
January 23- Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Jayanti  
January 24- National Girl Child Day  
January 25 - National Voters Day  
January 25 - National Tourism Day  
January 26- Republic Day  
January 26- International Custom Day  
January 28 - Birth Anniversary of Lala Lajpat Rai  
January 29- Basant Panchmi, Saraswati Puja  
January 30- Martyrs Day, Shaheed Diwas  
January 30- World Leprosy Eradication Day  
India is a land of diversity with different cultures, events, and festivals. As a secular country, India has a list of important days to celebrate festivals in January.

## 20 reasons 2020 WASN'T the worst year in history

***Yes, we all hated 2020. It was a terrible year. But even in terrible times, wonderful things happen. Here are 20 of them. They will brighten your day.***

This was the year we learned a whole new vocabulary – lockdown, PPE, furlough, Covid-19. It was the year that the facemask went from being inconceivable to being ubiquitous. It was also the year where businesses and industries crashed, unemployment rose dramatically, events were canceled, airports ground to a halt, and loneliness and separation became a way of life for people everywhere. It was a year dominated by recession, sickness and death. It was the year of corona. There is absolutely no denying it — 2020 was a horrible year.

And if all the heavy global disruptions of the pandemic weren't enough, it was also possibly the worst year yet in terms of climate change as massive wildfires swept Australia and the United States, once-in-a-century storms and extreme weather events became increasingly common, and climatologists discussed the possibility of force 6 hurricanes. But it wasn't all bad. Truly. 2020 shouldn't be consigned to the scrap heap of history, because despite it all, many amazing things did happen. Here are a few of them. Read them and take heart. Humanity is often at its best during adver-



sity. Suddenly things are getting normal in the Middle East. In the space of just a few months, normalization deals were announced between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and then Morocco and Bhutan. And still more are expected. Flocks of Israelis celebrated by flying directly to Dubai for the first time in their lives – 50,000 reportedly this month alone – and a flurry of cooperation agreements have followed in health, education, technology, disaster response and even shoes, and everything in between.

Initially it seemed the agreements would merely formalize what had been going on in an unofficial capacity for years, but it soon became apparent something much bigger was happening here. There's genuine excitement and optimism on all sides. No one can keep up with the huge number of new deals and partnerships being created. Life in the conflict-ridden Middle East is suddenly looking entirely different and the consequences of these agreements are likely to be felt not just here, but all over the world, for many years to come. Corona sent Israel into innova-

tion overdrive. Present the Startup Nation with a massive and seemingly impossible challenge, and Israel's entrepreneurs put their heads down and get to work. As the corona crisis ramped up, hundreds of Israeli companies pivoted sharply, turning technologies designed for completely different challenges into answers for some of the biggest issues facing us all in Covid times. Facemasks, ventilators, Covid tests, online communication and learning, air purifiers, online health – Israeli companies developed wave after

wave of imaginative and outside-the-box technologies to help the world combat its biggest crisis in a century.

Israel sends corona aid around the world (despite problems at home)

There aren't many places in the world that can boast of having got through Covid-19 well, and Israel certainly can't. We went from being the biggest success story of the corona period – reducing corona numbers to just 20 a day – to being one of the worst, with a peak in September of 9,000 new cases in a day. We've already been through a second lockdown, and will enter a third one next week. Despite this, Israel managed to send aid to a host of countries suffering the impact of corona. We sent doctors to Italy, PPE to the US, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Australia, and to Syrian refugees. We sent hygiene kits to Guatemala, ran education and awareness programs in Vanuatu, and offered stress relief to US health workers. Israeli psychologists began offering free counseling online to American medical personnel and an Israeli aid group offered free stress-management webinars to Chinese first responders.



# Year Ender 2020: Top 15 Science & Technology achievements of 2020

In 2020, major achievements in the field of science and technology took place globally. As UAE became the first country to launch the first Arab space mission, the Indian government decided to open the doors of ISRO for private players. From the missile testings to the discovery of an Earth-size habitable planet, do not miss the list below consisting of the top 15 scientific achievements.

NASA launches 4 astronauts into space on its own after a decade

- o On November 15, 2020, a SpaceX spacecraft carried 4 NASA astronauts into outer space. With this mission, NASA hopes that the International Space Station will remain fully staffed.
- o The US has spent nearly a decade without the ability to send

astronauts into space as in 2011 its Space Shuttle Program retired.

- o NASA earlier had to rely on Russia's Soyuz Spacecraft to send its astronauts to ISS which also left the laboratory understaffed.

Click here for more details

Aarogya Setu: India launched its first COVID-19 tracking Mobile App

- o The Government of India on April 2, 2020, launched Aarogya Setu app which is the country's first COVID-19 tracking app.
- o The app can be easily downloaded from the Google play store as well as the Apple app store. It had garnered more than 5 million downloads in just 3-4 days of its launch
- o The app aims at informing the users about the best practices,

risks, and advisories for the containment of COVID.

Kepler-1649c: Earth-sized habitable zone planet founded by NASA

- o An earth size exoplanet was founded by a team of scientists. The planet was discovered while reanalyzing the data of the Kepler Space Telescope.
- o The zone is said to be habitable because of the area around the star where the planet can easily support liquid water.
- o Of all the exoplanets discovered, this one is located 300 light-years from Earth and is very much similar to Earth's size and temperature.

SMART: DRDO successfully test-fires Supersonic Missile Assisted Release of Torpedo

The Supersonic Missile Assisted

Release of Torpedo- SMART was successfully test-fired by DRDO on October 5, 2020.

- o SMART is a missile assisted release of the anti-submarine Torpedo system for anti-submarine warfare.

- o It will help in establishing and strengthening India's anti-submarine warfare capabilities.

SMART: DRDO successfully test-fires Supersonic Missile Assisted Release of Torpedo

- o The Supersonic Missile Assisted Release of Torpedo- SMART was successfully test-fired by DRDO on October 5, 2020.

- o SMART is a missile assisted release of the anti-submarine Torpedo system for anti-submarine warfare.

- o It will help in establishing and strengthening India's anti-submarine warfare capabilities.

NASA names its headquarters after its first African-American female engineer

- o NASA's headquarter building in Washington, D.C. will be named after Mary. W. Jackson. She was the agency's first African-American female engineer.

- o Jackson was an aerospace engineer and a mathematician who had led programs that worked on the upliftment of women within NASA.

- o W. Jackson also inspired the story behind the non-fiction movie and book 'Hidden Figures'.

IN-SPACe: Government welcomes private industries in space activities

The government

of India announced IN-SPACe (Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre) on June 24, 2020. The institution aims at guiding the private industries in the space activities with the help of encouraging policies.

- o The centre is not a new institution but the government has decided to extend its role into ISRO where they will be supplementing each other's work.
- o ISRO will carry out activities or projects and the new facility with the help of the private sector will help in filling the gap and fulfilling the demand.

The first female head of the Human Space Flight Program of NASA

- o Kathy Lueders has become the first female head of NASA's Human Space Flight Program.

- o She was earlier a commercial crew manager and has been directing the space agency's efforts of sending astronauts to space on private spacecraft.

- o Kathy Lueders was able to successfully manage both the commercial cargo and commercial crew program. She began her career in NASA in 1992.

Successful test firing of Hypersonic Technology Demonstration Vehicle by India

- o DRDO on September 7, 2020, successfully test-fired the Hypersonic Technology Demonstration Vehicle, off the coast of Odisha.

- o The successful flight test enabled the demonstration of Hypersonic air-breathing scramjet technology. It is also a major technological breakthrough for India.

- o This testing has also paved the way for the development of more critical materials, technologies, and hypersonic vehicles.

Hope Mars Mission: First-ever Arab space mission launched by UAE

The United Arab Emirates on July 19, 2020, launched Hope which is an unmanned space probe to Mars. It was launched from the Tanegashima Space Centre in Japan.

- o The mission which aims at studying the atmosphere of the red planet is a historic one as it made UAE the first Arab country to achieve this feat.

- o The probe is expected to reach Mars by March 2021. It was delayed twice earlier because of the bad weather.

Sputnik V: Russia became the first nation to launch a Coronavirus Vaccine

- o Russia became the nation to launch the world's first Coronavirus vaccine. It became the first country to officially and successfully register the vaccine.

- o The vaccine was developed jointly by the Gamaleya Research Institute and the Defence Ministry of Russia.

## 2020 was bad — but not nearly the worst

2020 will go down in infamy for all the obvious reasons, but history shows it doesn't actually rank among humanity's worst years.

Why it matters: The past is a foreign country, and that goes doubly so the deeper we dig. Understanding just how far we've come from the years when life was nasty, brutal and short can help us put the pain of 2020 in perspective, and appreciate the progress we need to defend.

What's happening: You could take your pick of statistics that underscore just how terrible 2020 was. Here's an obvious one: the U.S. is on track to record more than 3.2 million deaths this year, the highest in the country's history.

That represents more than 400,000 additional deaths from the previous year, for an annual increase of about 15%.

It wasn't just the pandemic — drug overdose deaths this year are on track to be the highest ever

in the U.S.

The big picture: It's numbers like these that prompted my former colleagues at TIME magazine to give 2020 the Adolf Hitler treatment.

Yes, but: As even the TIME piece acknowledges, the U.S. has had



worse years.

In 1918 the U.S. lost tens of thousands of people in the trenches of World War I and hundreds of thousands more in the Spanish flu pandemic.

Deaths that year rose an astounding 46% from 1917, and life expectancy dropped by nearly 12 years, compared to a likely three-year decline in 2020.

Background: Go back further and widen your lens, and far more terrible years begin to crop up.

Take 1816, known as the "Year Without a Summer" thanks to a massive volcanic eruption in 1815 that spread sun-blocking ash throughout the atmosphere. Average global temperatures fell and crops failed, leading to what one historian called "the last great subsistence crisis in the Western world."

Or 1349, perhaps the worst year of the Black Death pandemic, which would eventually kill a third or more of Europe's population alone, equivalent to at least 247 million deaths today.

And don't forget 536, which the journal Science memorably called "the worst year to be alive." A volcanic eruption in Iceland early that year cast Europe and parts of the Middle East and Asia into a literal dark age, intensifying famines and hastening the spread of bubonic plague.

Be smart: What those annals of horrors have in common is that they concentrated the two conditions that have been the default state of most of humanity until fairly recently: disease and starvation. For all but a tiny elite, humanity until the 20th century was caught in a Malthusian trap, with any opportunity for significant population growth or material improvement constrained by limited agricultural productivity. In fact, it was only during terrible pandemics like the Black Death that living standards in medieval England leapt up, simply because the survivors — nearly all of whom were subsistence farmers, like the vast bulk of humanity — were able to take advantage of suddenly vacant but still fertile land.



# Farm Laws, Fertility And Religion

***These protests are not just a reaction to the farm laws. It is a moment in time when political, social and spiritual forces have converged under unprecedented circumstances.***

Mohkam Singh, a 65-year-old farmer from the Khalsa warrior community of Ludhiana, radiates a quiet conviction. What you see here is a Sachh Yug," says Singh just outside a tent at the Singhu border. "Outside, there's a Kal Yug where people are fighting to prove which religion is greater."

Protesting farmers such as Mohkam are not only against the Centre's new farm laws but are also against the erosion of the spiritual identity of agricultural communities across India. At both Singhu and Tikri borders, we witnessed a cry from farmers for recognition of their sacred relationship with the soil. For them, execution of the laws will not only play into the hands of private merchants but also disrupt their identity as "toilers and givers of grain."

Not only that, the farming communities believe they are humanity's call to conscience in

the fight against climate change. Undermining them could shrink the scope of a collective movement towards a greener and more spiritually conscious planet. While demonstrations, poetry readings, film screenings and ladles of generosity at langars have been highlighted as the means to surcharge the community spirit at these protest sites, it's also important to understand the religious underpinnings of the farmers' protests.

In the expansive demonstration spaces we visited last week, we saw the critical role of religion in informing this grassroots movement. The Nihang Sikhs, for instance, with their ornamental attires and displays of martial skills are here to set a different tone from a purely ceremonial one.

Part-farmers, part-religious leaders, they believe the protests are a reassertion of the rights of the underclasses-farmers, women

and religious minorities-while they are there to merely provide the spiritual impetus in this "holy land." The Nihangs asserted that the political leadership has undermined the solidity of the movement shaped by eclectic traditions from Punjab and Haryana, along with interfaith work. Muslims from Punjab's Malerkotla district, who have been helping the farmers since the inception of these protests, have now set up community kitchens on the borders. In return, Sikh farmers are rallying around their Muslim brethren during prayer rituals. A Muslim man from Malerkotla told me the only religion at these protests is the urge to stand together.

Around these sites, Christian trusts and philanthropists are doling out free medicines to ailing farmers and their families. Trolleys and vans with banners announcing interfaith work by Christian charitable



organizations suggest this isn't a one-dimensional movement. At the community kitchens, Sikh women can be found flipping rotis beside Hindu women sorting vegetables for the day's langar. A few steps ahead, Muslims are preparing Biryani. While the memories of the resilience of anti-CAA protestors across religious lines have invigorated the protests this year, the farmers want to keep their movement exclusive. "The farm laws will tear apart the entire country," said Mata Singh, a Sikh farmer. "Farming is fertility, and these laws will disrupt the cycle of life if they're allowed to pass."

Even the women have joined the chorus. They believe the protests are not just against the laws, but also against the upturning of the social and spiritual identities of farming women. "Discrediting our value in the ecosystem is like discrediting the importance of tribal and agricultural deities across spiritual traditions," they noted. The farming women were especially critical of the inaction over the deaths at these protests, including that of Haryana-based Sikh priest Baba Ram Singh, who shot himself near Singhu "to express anger and pain against the government's injustice."

## How the TMC is fighting the BJP juggernaut in Bengal



**The Trinamool Congress has made dramatic changes to its organisational power structure and launched two key mass outreach programmes**

If you are a dispassionate political observer how do you make sense of the extreme claims made by Bengal's two main players. The Union home minister, Amit Shah, has argued that the Bengal Bastion will fall to the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) conquering troops with a 200-seat victory and Prashant Kishor, strategist for the Trinamool Congress (TMC), has dramatically declared that he will quit his profession if the BJP is able to cross double digits in

the 294-seat strong assembly. For the BJP, the conversion of Bengal's cultural Hindu into a political Hindu is a long-standing project. It has invested a vast scale of resources in building a grassroots apparatus - there are tens of thousands of Sangh volunteers across the state's villages - and it has reason to draw confidence from its performance over just the last few years. In fact in the three years between the last assembly election in 2016 and the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the party's

strength rose from six assembly segments to 121. While Mamata Banerjee held onto her base, there was a distinct move from Left-supporting voters to the BJP in this time, leading to many "Baam se Ram" memes. To win Bengal, however, the BJP would have to significantly better these numbers. And it is here that the TMC is confident that its fortress will not crumble. There are two things both sides agree on. First, that this will be a ferociously-contested election but with a one-sided outcome. In other words, Bengal will throw up a clear winner. The second is that the Bengal chief minister, Mamata Banerjee had, in the last elections, to borrow the words of an aide, "made the mistake of being complacent and

dismissive about the BJP, both organisationally and individually." The TMC is determined to not make those mistakes again. There are several reasons why Mamata Banerjee's party believes it will prove to be the bulwark against the Modi juggernaut in the east. The first is what Kishor calls "the denominator effect." Given that 30% of Bengal's voters are Muslim, the TMC argues that the BJP is playing for only 70% of the voter base while the TMC is courting a larger base of 100%. In a bipolar contest, the BJP, thus needs a way higher strike rate than the TMC, something like 65% of that 70% voter pool, to deliver a win. Yes, in 2017, the BJP did handsomely win Uttar Pradesh, another state with a

sizable minority population. But this could be because of the triangular nature of the contest there where a nearly 40% vote share enabled a BJP win. That same percentage would not deliver Bengal to the BJP. The TMC believes that the geographical spread of Bengal's biggest districts will work to its advantage. Just like pan-India politics - six states account for 300 Lok Sabha seats - in Bengal, nine key districts account for 184 of the seats. Including 24 North Parganas, Hooghly, Nadia, Murshidabad, South 24 Parganas, Paschim Bardhaman, Paschim Medinipur, Purba Medinipur and Howrah, these are all areas where the TMC is still holding its own.



# Donald Trump's influence will evaporate once he leaves office. Here's why

Donald Trump's refusal to concede the election has fueled intense speculation about his post-presidency: will he start a new conservative cable network? Will he act as a kingmaker in the Republican party? Will he run for president again in 2024?

Underlying all of these rumors is the assumption that Trump will continue to hold sway over a significant voter base. But this is by no means assured. It seems just as likely that, over time, Trump's trajectory will land him closer to associates like Steve Bannon and Rudy Giuliani - hosting a middling podcast and hawkling branded merchandise while trying to fend off prosecution.

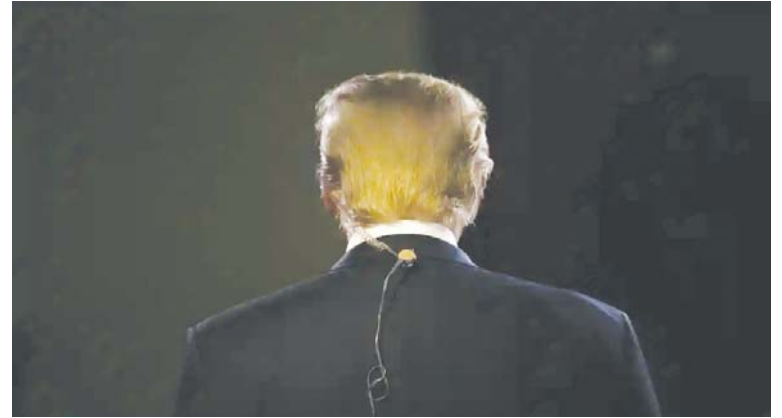
The media echo chamber which now insists that Trump will be a titanic political force for years to come sounds increasingly similar to the one that, five years ago, claimed he was no more than a flash-in-the-pan celebrity candidate. The glaring underestimation of Trump in the past and probable overestimation of his prospects today actually stem from the same error: the

belief that Trump's political appeal rests mainly on his personality cult, not on any association with a certain set of policy arguments. Trump did not win the presidency in 2016 simply because he had a cameo in Home Alone 2 and an uncanny talent for Twitter. He also outlined a wide-ranging, if inchoate, critique of the bipartisan policy consensus that had dominated American politics since the end of the cold war: a failed combination of "neoliberal" economics at home and military adventurism abroad. Moreover, Trump's critique was based on national interests rather than the (often treacly) left-liberal moralism of progressive Democrats, thus scrambling ideological categories and establishing himself as a candidate with a unique appeal among key constituencies.

Trump's larger-than-life persona, ubiquitous presence in pop culture and peculiar media savvy were certainly assets in 2016, as they are today. But the critical policy factors that set Trump apart in his first campaign have diminished considerably since

then. First, after one term in office, it is clear that the Republican establishment changed Trump more than he changed the party. Although his administration's policy record is a mixed bag, the shift in rhetoric over four years was unmistakable. Attacks on hedge fund managers and pharma executives became rarer and rarer, replaced with praise for tax cuts, cheering on the Dow, bashing "socialism" and lauding supreme court appointments. To be sure, arguments can be made for all of these things, at least among conservatives, but they are arguments that Ted Cruz or even Jeb Bush could make, albeit less theatrically. Of late, Trump's combativeness has focused almost exclusively on allegations of election fraud and cringe-inducing self-pity; most people are already tuning it out.

Meanwhile, as Trump has drifted away from the more substantive themes of 2016, others have embraced them. Up-and-coming politicians like Senator Josh Hawley and pundits like Tucker Carlson have articulated more coherent right-populist



arguments than Trump ever has. Senator Marco Rubio is leading an ambitious attempt to rethink Republican economic policy, while figures like Representative Matt Gaetz have emerged as passionate critics of foreign interventionism. It made little sense for these and other prominent Republicans to criticize the 45th president while he was in office. Should Trump enter the 2024 race, however, he will find the populist "lane" of the Republican primaries far more crowded. The Democratic party has also changed. Joe Biden campaigned on a "Made in America" industrial policy program, something Trump never really countered in the 2020 campaign. Politics, of course, is

about much more than policy. Yet those who believe in the invincibility of Trump's personality cult - including, it seems, the president himself - hold a view of American democracy that is at once too cynical and too naïve.

On the one hand, the average voter is not motivated entirely by tribal loyalties and subrational impulses (though the average media personality might be). Even if wonkishness is an undesirable trait for presidential candidates, big-picture policy visions matter.

On the other hand, turning out enthusiastic audiences at rallies and commanding a large social media following are much less important than is commonly believed.

## Explainer-Where are we in the COVID-19 vaccine race?



Britain on Wednesday became the first country in the world to approve a coronavirus vaccine developed by Oxford University and AstraZeneca, prioritizing the rapid deployment of the shot as it battles a major winter surge driven by a new, highly contagious variant of the virus. The following is what we know about the race to deliver vaccines to help end the coronavirus pandemic that has killed more than 1.7 million people worldwide:

**WHO IS FURTHEST ALONG?** U.S. drugmaker Pfizer and German partner BioNTech are the COVID-19 vaccine trailblazers.

On Nov. 18, they became the first in the world to release full late-stage trial data. Britain was the first to approve the shot for emergency use on Dec. 3, followed by Canada on Dec. 9 and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on Dec. 11. Several other countries including Saudi Arabia and Mexico have

also approved it. The European Medicines Agency (EMA) approved the shot on Dec. 21 and India is accelerating its review.

The World Health Organization could decide whether to give its emergency use approval for the Pfizer candidate by the end of the year as part of its COVAX programme aimed at providing shots for poor- and middle-income countries.

**WHAT ABOUT MODERNA?**

Moderna Inc came a close second to Pfizer in many countries after it released a full data analysis for a late-stage trial on Nov. 30 showing a 94.1% efficacy rate for its vaccine.

The United States authorised Moderna's vaccine on Dec. 19 while Canada approved the shot on Dec. 23 and the EMA will do so on Jan. 6.

**THE UK NOD FOR ASTRAZENECA**

The UK's approval for AstraZeneca's vaccine is a major win for a shot seen as crucial for

mass immunisations even as questions have swirled about the robustness of its trial data.

The British company announced interim late-stage trial data on Nov. 23 showing a half-dose followed by a full dose had a 90% success rate while two full doses were 62% effective. The more successful outcome, however, emerged in a much smaller number of participants, and AstraZeneca is conducting more testing to see if that success rate holds up in a wider population of volunteers.

The questions over the most effective dosing pattern have complicated the approval process. While India is conducting an accelerated review, it has asked for more data. AstraZeneca is also in discussions with the EMA, which is conducting a rolling review of the vaccine.

India is expected to make a decision on whether to approve for the two full-dose regimen of the shot soon. Its review does not

include the more effective dosage.

**WHO ELSE IS IN THE RUNNING?**

U.S. drugmaker Johnson & Johnson plans to deliver trial data in January 2021, teeing it up for U.S. authorization in February if its shot is effective. It reduced the enrolment target for its clinical trial to 40,000 volunteers from 60,000 on Dec. 9, potentially speeding results which are tied to how quickly participants become infected.

U.S. firm Novavax is running a late-stage trial in Britain with data due in the first quarter of 2021. It expects to start a large-scale trial in the United States this month.

France's Sanofi and Britain's GlaxoSmithKline, however, announced a setback on Dec. 11 in their attempts to develop a vaccine. The drugmakers said it showed an insufficient immune response in older people in mid-stage trials and that they would start a new study in February.



# The Drivers Of 2021

***Explained in nine points: How all spheres of activity are undergoing sea changes in India***

India is witnessing transformations at an unprecedented speed and scale. The transformations are across all spheres of activity, impacting the socio-economic and political fabric of this country. There is clearly a move towards improving livability, making it easier to do business and improving the economy. From a governance perspective, the role of the people are evolving from being a mere voter, tax-payer and a general bystander on majority of the issues to an active participant and influencer on majority of policy issues. There has been a renewed focus on global issues such as environment and sustainability, thereby bringing about strong measures to comply with global best practices. There have been visible audacious plans proposed and implemented by the government which have helped address the pressing issues plaguing the country's development. The nature of the economy has also evolved from being a highly monsoon dependent to being virtually drought proof, that has helped provide the policy headspace to the government to drive growth & development. Many initiatives launched by the government have led to a phenomenon of Competitive Federalization thereby promoting country-wide development. The enablement through wide-scale technology adoption (growing usage of drones, wireless technology etc.) and innovative processes has led to improved efficiency and greater success. The growth in opportunities and urbanization in India has led to a large population being attracted to move to India. India is now being perceived as a land of opportunities and the destination of the future.

It is also leading to friction being created among the old and the young, the traditional versus the forward looking, the Haves and the Have-Nots.

1. Changing demographics of the most youthful nation

Demographics continue to be a major driving force for the growth and much else in India. India accounts for nearly 17% of the world's population[1] and is experiencing rapid demographic changes, with wide implications not only for the country but also across other regions of the world. The key demographic trend is the increasing youthfulness of the country. Roughly 50% of the population is less than 24 years old. The implications of this demographic structure have started playing out on the key trends in this country. Cable TV was introduced in the country around 25 years ago. Internet came about 20 years ago. So, we have a large part of the population that has grown up with significantly higher exposure to information and global trends. Hence, their higher levels of aspirations are driving the



direction in which this country is going. This youthful population is technologically more skilled, socially more aware, politically more involved and economically more aspirational. Many of them are what is popularly called the "Digital Natives". This enables a greater penetration of technology, leading to a Digital

Pervasiveness in the country. Their economic aspirations are leading to rapid urbanization and also the trend of large number of start-ups and entrepreneurship flowering. India's working-age population is expected to balloon up, making India the largest contributor to the global working population. This would also

make India an even larger market. It will also provide a global workforce required for "Make in India". However, we need to capitalize on this demographics in the coming decade, through human resource development on an urgent basis, else India will be left in chaos with a high population and no growth.

## 2020: The people vs the Indian State

The anti-CAA protests, the defiance of migrants, and now the farmers' stir show that the everyday practice of democracy is a powerful corrective in the face of arbitrary and unilateral State decisions

Three events defined India's political landscape in 2020. The protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), the migrant labour crisis that unfolded as workers defied lockdown orders and asserted their rights, choosing to walk home in the face of adversity, and agitating farmers knocking on Delhi's doorstep. Voters continue to invest their faith in the ruling dispensation, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's popularity is unshaken, and India's political opposition remains moribund. Yet these protests and assertion of rights represent a critical juncture in our politics. Democracy is defined as much by elections as it is by social processes that moderate State power. This is the power of protests and their centrality in India's current political moment. As we look back at 2020, it is worth reflecting on the possibilities and

limitations of our politics, expressed through these critical events. The year 2020 dawned with protests against CAA. Secularism's last sigh, CAA

Muslims, increasingly alienated by a politics that uses the State machinery to strengthen its ideological project and normalise prejudice. These anxieties are a



protesters raised a brief glimmer of hope for a new politics. A politics that could free us from the opportunistic secularism of the past and the Hindutva juggernaut of the present by upholding constitutional values and redefining secularism. But the protests were also an expression of deep anxiety among India's

reminder of why the grammar of secularism is so central to India's post-colonial project of nation-building. The ethos of secularism is a necessary antidote to communalisation and politicisation of religion, and the violence that these can unleash. It is a measure of just how deep the politics of prejudice has

penetrated the Indian State that within weeks the CAA protests became an instrument in the hands of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to deepen communal polarisation. Politicians and mobs could chant "goli maro....." with visible State sanction, while the political opposition, caught in its own cynical opportunism, afraid of alienating the Hindu vote, watched in quiet acquiescence. The pandemic enabled the State to crush protests, use its coercive powers to intimidate citizens and deepen prejudice with "love jihad" laws. In the aftermath of the protests, CAA and National Register of Citizens have receded to the background, but the political project has emerged stronger. Politics around the protests exposed the extent to which mainstream party politics is being shaped by the Hindutva consensus and how deep Muslim anxieties now run.



# Apple removes Vybe Together app used to arrange parties during Covid



Apple has pulled an American app that encouraged users to meet at secret underground gatherings during the coronavirus pandemic.

The Vybe Together app, which promoted private parties, has

been removed from the Apple App Store, had its account on TikTok banned, and scrubbed most of its online presence, with the app's creators telling The Verge that Apple had banned it. Vybe Together billed itself on

TikTok and its website as a place to organise and attend mostly illegal parties in contravention of social distancing laws, using the tagline "Get your rebel on. Get your party on."

"Miss playing beer pong, flirting with strangers, and generally just having a blast with the crew? Vybe is here for you," the website read.

Users were asked to submit a profile before they were allowed to sign up, an application process that involved submitting the applicant's Instagram handle, as well as uploading pictures of themselves partying. The application allowed people to create private events "no randoms

will show up" at. Users could then apply for invites to events, hoping the host would deem them "interesting" enough to approve them. Once on the list, guests would wait to receive details of the location two hours before the event's starting time. One of Vybe Together's co-founders said the app had a few thousand users, and that a few thousand additional applicants had requested access since the company started publishing videos on TikTok. The app's FAQ page - now deleted - acknowledged that Covid-19 was "a major health problem to the country, our communities, our friends and family", but

claimed the app was designed to promote "small gatherings" rather than "large scale parties", which it described as "dangerous". "But Vybe is a compromise [...] We could be living, at least a little during these times with Vybe." It remains unclear whether the app - which has only a few hundred followers on Instagram - substantially instigated illegal or unsafe gatherings, although it promoted "gatherings every weekend" in a TikTok video. Vybe Together's creators have been contacted for comment. Their Instagram account includes the message: "App Store took us down!!! We will be back!!!"

## If you want to travel next year, you may need a vaccine passport

Now that coronavirus vaccines are starting to roll out in the US and abroad, many people may be dreaming of the day when they can travel, shop and go to the movies again. But in order to do those activities, you may eventually need something in addition to the vaccine: a vaccine passport application.

Several companies and technology groups have begun developing smartphone apps or systems for individuals to upload details of their Covid-19 tests and vaccinations, creating digital credentials that could be shown in order to enter concert venues, stadiums, movie theaters, offices, or even countries.

The Common Trust Network, an initiative by Geneva-based nonprofit The Commons Project and the World Economic Forum, has partnered with several airlines including Cathay Pacific, JetBlue, Lufthansa, Swiss Airlines, United Airlines and Virgin Atlantic, as well as hundreds of health systems across the United States and the government of Aruba.

The CommonPass app created by the group allows users to upload medical data such as a Covid-19 test result or, eventually, a proof of vaccination by a hospital or medical professional, generating a health certificate or pass in the form of a QR code that can be shown to authorities without revealing sensitive information. For travel, the app lists health pass requirements at

the points of departure and arrival based on your itinerary.

"You can be tested every time you cross a border. You cannot be vaccinated every time you cross a border," Thomas Crampton, chief marketing and communications officer for The Commons Project, told CNN Business. He stressed the need for a simple and easily transferable set of credentials, or a "digital yellow card," referring to the paper document generally issued as proof of vaccination.

Large tech firms are also getting in on the act. IBM (IBM) developed its own app, called Digital Health Pass, which allows companies and venues to customize indicators they would require for entry including coronavirus tests, temperature

checks and vaccination records. Credentials corresponding to those indicators are then stored in a mobile wallet.

In an effort to address one challenge around returning to normalcy after vaccines are distributed widely, developers may now have to confront other challenges, ranging from privacy issues to representing the varied effectiveness of different vaccines.

But the most pressing challenge may simply be avoiding the disjointed implementation and mixed success of tech's previous attempt to address the public health crisis: contact tracing apps. Early on in the pandemic, Apple (AAPL) and Google (GOOG) set aside their smartphone rivalry to jointly develop a Bluetooth-based



system to notify users if they'd been exposed to someone with Covid-19. Many countries and state governments around the world also developed and used their own apps.

"I think where exposure notification ran into some challenges was more of the piecemeal implementation choices, lack of federal

leadership ... where each state had to go it alone and so each state had to figure it out independently," said Jenny Wanger, who leads the exposure notification initiatives for Linux Foundation Public Health, a tech-focused organization helping public health authorities around the world combat Covid-19.

## Tiffany shareholders back LVMH takeover, ending long-drawn dispute

U.S. jeweler Tiffany & Co's shareholders on Wednesday approved a \$15.8 billion deal with France's LVMH, ending an acrimonious dispute between the two luxury retailers that had stretched for more than a year.

At a virtual special stockholder meeting, more than 99% of votes cast were in favor of the deal.

Billionaire Bernard Arnault-led LVMH made the first offer late last year, but as the luxury industry slipped into a turmoil due to the COVID-19 pandemic the company backed out from its promise to close the deal. LVMH also cited French political



intervention to delay completing the acquisition until Jan. 6, pushing Tiffany into a legal battle in September to force LVMH to honor the deal. Tiffany had earlier said its sales were improving, citing demand recovery in the United States ahead of the holiday season and China, one of its biggest markets. LVMH then renegotiated the deal price, lowering it by \$425 million. The deal, now cleared by regulators, is expected to close in early 2021. As agreed in October, LVMH will pay \$131.5 per share, down from \$135 in the original deal signed late last year.



# Here's what we know about the new coronavirus variant found in US



The United States' first known case of the new coronavirus variant was discovered in Colorado on Tuesday, according to state health officials.

The variant, called B.1.1.7, has been linked to the United Kingdom. The man who was infected is in his 20s, is isolating and appears to have no travel history, according to Gov. Jared Polis.

That man had been working at an assisted living facility in Elbert County. Health officials suspect, but have yet to confirm, that another man who worked there also came down with the variant,

the county's public health director said Wednesday.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom announced Wednesday that the new variant has been found in the southern part of his state. Here's what we know about the variant:

The new variant came from the UK

The new variant is believed to have originated in southeast England, according to the World Health Organization.

Public Health England says backward tracing, using genetic evidence, suggests the variant emerged in September. It then

circulated in very low levels until mid-November. But scientists did not know whether the mutation originated in southeast England or was introduced there from elsewhere, said Sharon Peacock, professor of public health and microbiology at the University of Cambridge.

Some experts have suggested the new variant could have been amplified because of a superspreader event, meaning the current spike in cases could also have been caused by human behavior.

The new variant spreads more quickly

Health authorities from around the world have said the variant does not appear to be more deadly than previously identified coronavirus strains.

Initial analysis showed that while the variant appears to be more transmissible, there is no evidence it is linked to a higher risk of hospital admission or death, according to Public Health England.

Scientists advising the UK

government have estimated the variant could be up to 70% more effective at spreading than others. Peter Horby, chair of the UK's New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG), said last week that scientists were "confident" the new variant is "spreading faster than other virus variants."

Speaking at an emergency meeting of the UK Parliament Science and Technology Committee, Horby explained that the new variant has "some kind of biological advantage to make it spread faster."

Scientists still don't have a complete picture as to why, he said, but they are investigating several scenarios.

There is preliminary evidence to suggest the new strain results in a person holding a higher viral load, which means the virus is easier to pass on, Horby said. Scientist Neil Ferguson, a member of NERVTAG, said the variant may be more infectious for children.

"There is a hint is that (the variant) ... has a higher propensity to infect children," he said at a news briefing last week organized by the Science Media Centre, though he cautioned that more data was needed. Severe illness due to Covid-19 is still relatively rare for children.

The new variant raises questions about vaccines

There are no signs yet that the current vaccine front-runners won't work against this new variant, experts and drugmakers have said.

The companies behind the first two vaccines to gain authorization in the United States -- Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna -- are testing their shots to double-check that they're effective against the variant.

The coronavirus has mutated before, and both firms say their vaccines worked against other variations of the virus.

Some US-based scientists have said it's possible the new variant might, to a small extent, undermine the vaccines.

## How to harness brain science for a better life, explained by a neuroscientist

Many of the ideas and metaphors in popular culture about how the human brain works don't stand up to scrutiny.

That's a prevailing theme in Lisa Feldman Barrett's new book "Seven and a Half Lessons About the Brain," released in November. Barrett is a university distinguished professor of psychology at Northeastern University in Boston, where she directs the school's Interdisciplinary Affective Science Laboratory. She also holds appointments at Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital. She has made significant contributions in helping to understand the fundamental nature of emotion. Her pioneering research in neuroscience has landed her among the top 1% of most cited scientists in the world, and a 2019 Guggenheim Fellowship in neuroscience.

Here Barrett answers seven and a half questions about how brain science can help you have a more productive and prosperous life.

Barrett: Actually, in the first draft of the book, it had seven lessons. But an early reader suggested splitting the first lesson into two parts, which is the lesson on brain evolution. The first half lesson is really just a short peek into a much larger

story on brain evolution so I thought calling it "a half" sounded reasonable. Having a science book called "Seven and a Half Lessons" does indicate that I hope this is supposed to be fun and entertaining.

CNN: Something else that stuck with me is how you wrote that the human brain is constantly making predictions about what it expects to see, and you talked about it as a "carefully controlled hallucination." How do our brains give us information about the world that isn't exactly true?

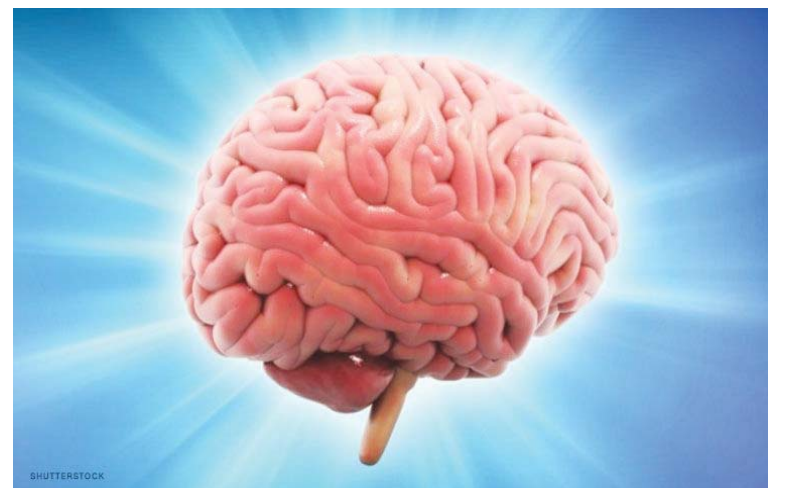
Barrett: Think about the last time you were drinking a glass of water. Within a couple of seconds you feel less thirsty. And that's actually a remarkable thing, because the water that you drink doesn't reach your bloodstream for about 20 minutes. How is that water quenching your thirst so quickly? And the answer is because your brain has learned from past experience that drinking water makes you less thirsty, so your brain is making a prediction.

It predicts that you'll feel less thirsty, and that prediction becomes your experience, and so your thirst diminishes quickly. And so really what your brain is doing is predicting -- the brain actually operates by prediction all the

time. The process is largely invisible to you. But it's happening under the hood and everything you've experienced is some combination of what's in your head.

CNN: So our brains predict what will happen before it happens. Are we slaves to our own brains, or can we consciously get around this to retain our free will? Barrett: The question is really whether a brain is a slave to itself, or is there an opportunity for free will?

Free will is a topic that philosophers have been debating forever. A little book isn't gonna settle it, but from understanding



how the brain predicts, we can shed some light on the question of free will. It's true that your brain

predicts your actions and launches your actions before you're aware of them.

## Coronavirus has been with us for a year. Here's what we still don't know

When China first reported cases of coronavirus to the World Health Organization on December 31, 2019, it was described as a mysterious new strain of pneumonia. It didn't even have a name.

Within two weeks, Chinese scientists had identified the virus' genome sequence, the genetic code that makes up the virus. Within three weeks, the first test kits had been created and then shared by the WHO. And just over 11 months since the virus

was reported to the WHO, the first people were vaccinated, making the shots the fastest vaccines ever developed.

The speed at which we've learned about coronavirus is unprecedented and scientists say we already know a remarkable amount.

But one year on, with more than 81 million reported infections and 1.7 million deaths around the world, there's still a lot we don't know about Covid-19.

Those unknowns range from the

basics -- such as how the virus started -- to the more complicated questions, including how will this pandemic end?

"We have learned a tremendous amount, but in terms of understanding anything in any real detail, we've got miles and miles to go," said Maureen Ferran, an associate professor of biology at Rochester Institute of Technology. "This is going to keep virologists and public health officials busy for decades."



## We Can Be Heroes movie review

# Priyanka Chopra hams her way through Robert Rodriguez's silly superhero film

**We Can Be Heroes movie review: A hammy Priyanka Chopra headlines the adult cast in director Robert Rodriguez's silly superhero film, aimed squarely at kids.**

We Can Be Heroes

Director - Robert Rodriguez

Cast - Priyanka Chopra, Pedro Pascal, Haley Reinhart, YaYa Gosselin, Boyd Holbrook, Sung Kang, Taylor Dooley, Christian Slater

With virtually nothing in it for the people who actually pay for Netflix subscriptions, We Can Be Heroes is the sort of kids movie that is pretty much inaccessible to anyone over the age of 13.

Directed by Robert Rodriguez, who has, to put it mildly, one of the strangest filmographies ever, it feels like the culmination of a creative experiment that the filmmaker has been tinkering away at for decades. We Can Be Heroes is a stealth sequel to Rodriguez's 2005 film The Adventures of Sharkboy and Lavagirl in 3-D, but the cat was let out of the bag before the

movie's release - probably because this film's target audience wasn't alive when Sharkboy and Lavagirl were adventuring (in 3-D!).

Watch the We Can Be Heroes trailer here

Tying We Can Be Heroes to his old film, however loosely, is perhaps the only attempt that Rodriguez makes at appealing to adults - besides, of course, a subplot that involves a President who can't string a sentence together, because he's so dumb. Priyanka Chopra hams it up as Ms Granada, who is essentially a power-suit-wearing manifestation of corporate America. She's the evil CEO of Heroics, a team of superheroes who're kidnapped by tentacled aliens in the film's opening scenes. With the planet under attack and their parents in peril, it falls upon their children, led by

Missy Moreno (YaYa Gosselin) to rescue them from the aliens and save the world.

Priyanka's got the pitch of her performance right - We Can Be Heroes is a silly movie, in which everyone is operating on cartoon frequency - but I wish she'd have chosen one accent and stuck to it. Is Ms Granada supposed to be Hispanic? Then why does she sound like a SoBo girl who spent a semester abroad?

While the adults have very limited screen time across the board, Priyanka plays quite a pivotal role in the movie. In fact, poor Pedro Pascal and Boyd Holbrook appear to have drawn the short straws. I wouldn't be surprised if you told me they finished filming all their scenes in a couple of days.

Heck, I wouldn't be surprised if you told me Rodriguez finished filming the entire movie in a

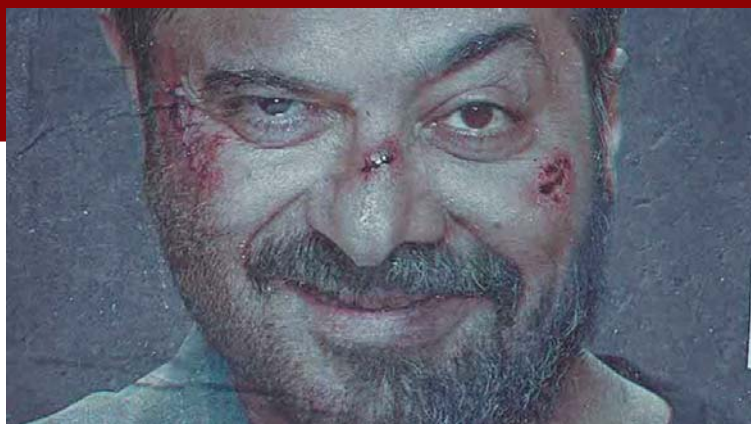


week. It has the sort of DIY aesthetic that was cute (and even a little admirable) back when the filmmaker was a Rebel Without a Crew, but he was unshackled from restraints such as limited budgets and lack of studio support years ago. He no longer needs to perform every job on the film - as per usual, Rodriguez is credited as director, writer, producer, editor and cinematographer here - but this message and the promise of a sequel. Worryingly, Rodriguez how to make movies. Well, that's unfortunate. Because only a few

## AK vs AK movie review:

# Anil Kapoor unleashes inner Chembur against Anurag Kashyap in inventive but inconsistent Netflix film

**AK vs AK movie review: Inventive but inconsistent, director Vikramaditya Motwane's Netflix film, starring Anil Kapoor and Anurag Kashyap has a twisted spirit, but ties itself up in knots towards the end.**



AK vs AK

Director - Vikramaditya Motwane

Cast - Anil Kapoor, Anurag Kashyap

More like a deranged Dogme 95 experiment than the salacious Bollywood slugfest that was promised by its misguided marketing campaign, AK vs AK is an inventive but inconsistent film that achieves moments of movie magic, but often struggles to maintain the integrity of its internal logic.

Directed by Vikramaditya Motwane and starring Anil Kapoor and Anurag Kashyap as exaggerated versions of

themselves, AK vs AK is a gonzo romp that isn't afraid of biting the hand that feeds. The film industry, it suggests, devotes more time to creating false idols than memorable cinema, all in service of an audience whose loyalties can switch on a dime. 'Shameless' is the word that Kapoor uses to describe himself in an early scene, his eyes misty with memories of a glorious past. That's the secret to his sustained success. He's on stage with Kashyap at a MAMI interaction, where their clashing ideas about filmmaking come to the fore. While Kapoor - a product of the

80s - is someone who believes that the star is the most important component of a film's (commercial) success, Kashyap counters by reciting the auteur theory at him.

As tempers flare, Motwane allows the exchange to escalate, which might help provide necessary context to viewers unfamiliar with the these two men.

In many ways, it is impossible to appreciate the full scope of the picture without having at least a cursory idea of who Kashyap and Kapoor are. More than anything else, though, Motwane taps into the impressions that've been created of them in the public - sometimes in tandem with the press, and on other occasions, without their consent. Kashyap in the film is still bitter about Kapoor having passed on his edgy scripts many years ago, back when he was the new kid

on the block and Kapoor had a 'superstar' image to protect. But the times have changed, and the status quo has shifted. Now, Kashyap is making movies for Netflix, and is revered by college kids with strong broadband connections. Kapoor's days as a leading man, meanwhile, are behind him. So when the actor suggests that Kashyap cast him in a project, the filmmaker, without even bothering to look up from his phone, says that he is no longer interested in working with him.

This simmering anger reaches a boiling point on that MAMI stage, when in an act of profound pettiness, Kashyap commits career kamikaze by hurling a glass of water on Kapoor's face. The incident sparks outrage in the industry, and Kashyap is immediately made a pariah. Even Nawazuddin Siddiqui won't risk working with him.

Fuelled by resentment, Kashyap concocts a dastardly plan. He kidnaps Kapoor's daughter - the actor Sonam Kapoor - and gives him till sunrise to locate her. He then lays out the rules: he will trail Kapoor relentlessly, with a cameraperson in tow, and film his every move. Together, they will make a hostage thriller unlike any the world has ever seen.

There's a rather sinister tone to AK vs AK. The whole thing hinges on the premise that Kashyap, who's cultivated a very particular Twitter persona - one day he's recommending a good film, and on the next he's scheming a mass protest - could be crazy enough to do something like this. At one point in the movie - and I was stunned that they chose to retain this moment, considering its real-world implications - Kashyap smacks a woman across the face in a fit of anger.



## Gal Gadot and Patty Jenkins to reunite for Warner Bros' Wonder Woman 3

Just a few days after the release of Wonder Woman 1984, Warner Bros. has announced that the third installment in the franchise is in process. In a statement, Warner Bros. chairman Toby Emmerich said that Gal Gadot will reprise her role as Diana Prince/Wonder Woman and Patty Jenkins will once again write and direct the film. Earlier, Jenkins had said that she had already mapped out Wonder Woman 3. However, she began to have doubts due to the pandemic and the resulting disruption in theatrical business. Now that it has been officially confirmed, Wonder Woman fans can finally rejoice. GAL GADOT-PATTY JENKINS TO CONCLUDE LONG-PLANNED THEATRICAL TRILOGY



Wondr Woman 3 will be the last film in the franchise. "As fans around the world continue to embrace Diana Prince, driving the strong opening weekend performance of Wonder Woman 1984, we are excited to be able continue her story with our real life Wonder Women - Gal and Patty - who will return to conclude the long-planned theatrical trilogy," Emmerich said.

### HOW DID WONDER WOMAN 1984 FARE AT BOX OFFICE?

According to Warner Bros., Wonder Woman 1984's opening weekend went better than expected, selling \$16.7 million in tickets in 2,100 theatres in North America, despite the coronavirus pandemic restrictions still in effect in many cities. The film was released simultaneously on HBO Max, where it will play for a month before continuing in theatres. Wonder Woman 1984 hit Indian theatres on

December 24. Many Bollywood celebrities went to the theatres to watch the film.

### ABOUT WONDER WOMAN 1984

Wonder Woman 1984 is the sequel to the 2017 film Wonder Woman. The release date for Wonder Woman 1984 was postponed several times due to the coronavirus pandemic before Warner Bros. decided to release it on HBO Max and theatres at the same time. The film also stars Chris Pine, Robin Wright, Kristen Wiig and Pedro Pascal. Gal Gadot will appear as Wonder

Woman in Zack Snyder's four-part Justice League cut as well. The film is set for a March 2021 release.



## It's been overcast but you can still count some stars

**It's been a year of losses, but not one devoid of cinematic joy. Here's a list of things that made me happiest in dismal 2020.**

What a year! When historians of the future write about the entertainment business, 2020 will be a watershed, like the advent of sound or television or streaming - an event that changed the DNA of the business. Only some 90 Hindi films were released this year - against an annual average of about 400. And even of those 90, just a few made it to the theatres while most have seen only an OTT release. Covid-19 has cost the Indian film industry an estimated Rs 10,000 crore. The year saw other losses too, of the incalculable kind, in the deaths of Irrfan and Rishi Kapoor, the tragedy of Sushant Singh Rajput and its aftermath. Yet, even in this dismal year, there have been sparks of joy. Here are some of the things that made me happy:

Diljit Dosanjh: There were few things on the internet this year funnier than Diljit fighting with Alexa. He speaks in his

Punjabified English to the device, which refuses to comply. Their quarrel cheered me up for days. Diljit also created, in lockdown, a best-selling music album called G.O.A.T. And he went where even the mightiest Bollywood stars fear to tread, standing up for a cause he believes in. With the farmers' protest, Diljit took a frontline position, drumming up support and getting into a Twitter spat with Kangana Ranaut that had us all scrambling to decode his

fast and furious Punjabi tweets. We need more heroes like this one.

The emergence of the actor-star: The one positive effect of the pandemic has been the denting of Bollywood's deeply entrenched star system.

Without the pressure of opening-day figures, truly talented artists have had the opportunity to shine. It's been heartening to watch wonderful actors such as Pratik Gandhi, Jaideep A h l a w a t , Divyenndu Shama,

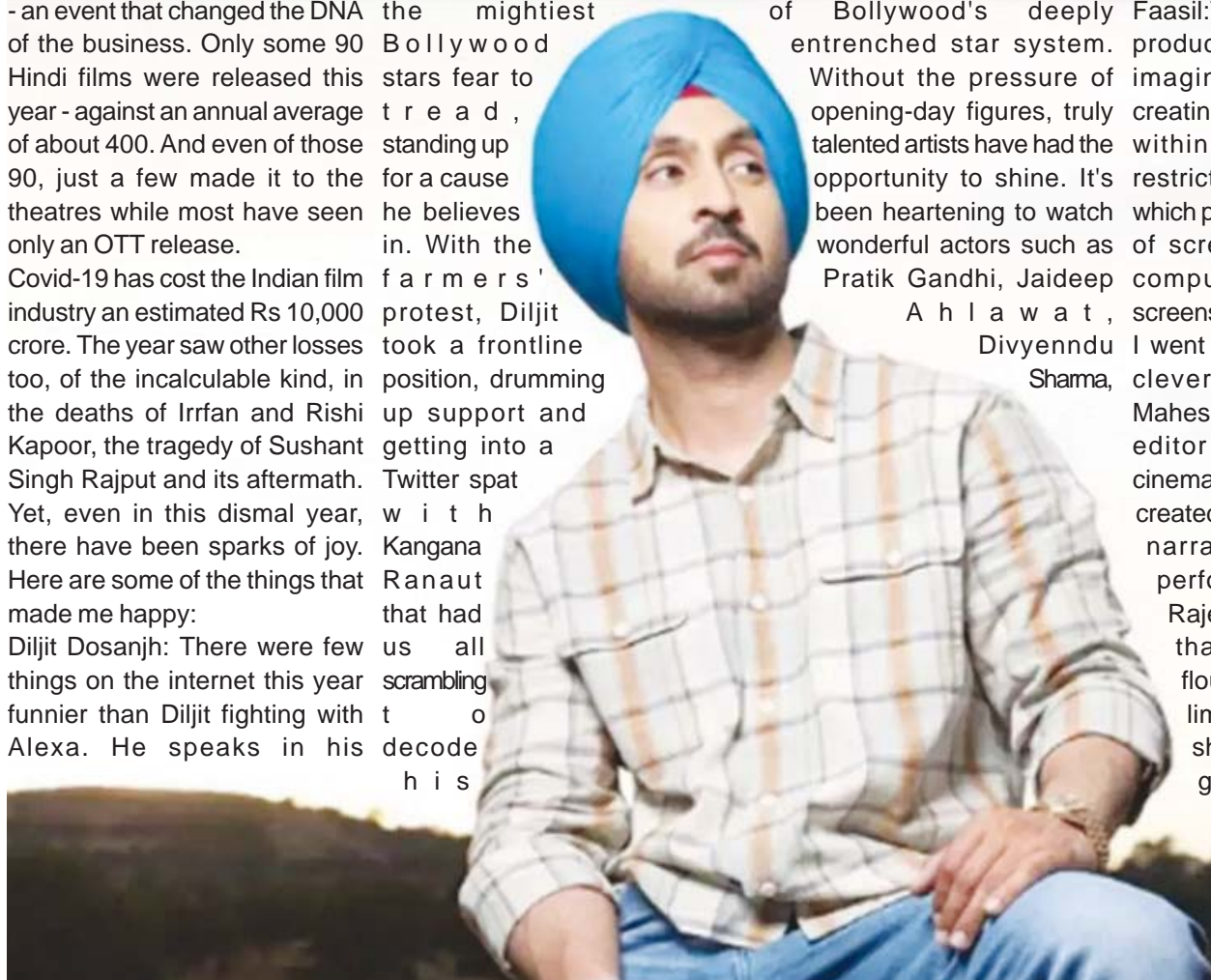
Shreya Dhanwanthary, Tripti Dimri and so many others get the spotlight. I hope this continues even when we are all congregating in theatres again. Mahesh Narayanan and Fahadh Faasil: The director and actor-producer put their collective imagination and might into creating C U Soon, a film shot within the most stringent restrictions of the pandemic, which played out entirely on a set of screens (phone screens, computer screens, CCTV screens, Google Maps screens). I went in expecting something clever and gimmicky but Mahesh, who was also writer, editor and virtual cinematographer on the project, created a surprisingly emotional narrative with a standout performance by Darshana Rajendran. The film proved that genuine artists can flourish under the harshest limitations. And then, the show doesn't just go on. It goes on with aplomb.

Streaming platforms:

I am a theatre loyalist, but this year I discovered the beauty of long-form narratives. Shows like Scam 1992, Paatal Lok, Panchayat and Aarya showcased the richness of acting, writing and craft that the industry is capable of. These stories sustained us.

Rajkumar Rao as Aalu in Ludo: Aalu is a man so besotted with his school friend Pinky that even after she marries and has a baby, he goes to her house every day, just for a glimpse of her from afar. He is an Amitabh Bachchan fan, but because Pinky loves Mithun Chakraborty, Aalu grows his hair out and goes about looking like an extra from Disco Dancer. When Pinky eventually meets him, Aalu is so overcome that he runs to another room and weeps. There is such sweetness and untainted devotion in Aalu that we have no option but to fall in love with him. Rajkumar is excellent and Pritam's song, Hardum Humdum, the cherry on the cake.

**By Anupama Chopra**





## Kiara Advani posts pic in backless dress from Maldives. Fans ask where is Sidharth Malhotra

**Kiara Advani has shared a picture of herself in a backless dress from the Maldives. The actress is holidaying in the island country with Sidharth Malhotra.**

Kiara Advani is all set to welcome 2021 in the Maldives.

The actress jetted off to the island country with rumoured boyfriend Sidharth Malhotra. Today, she shared a picture of herself enjoying a beautiful view of the ocean.

**WHAT DID KIARA SHARE?**

In the picture, Kiara is seen wearing a backless dress with her back towards the camera. She captioned the post as, "Lookin at you 2021."

**FANS SAY WHERE IS SIDHARTH?**

Many fans commented on Kiara's post with heart and fire emojis. Some, however, asked her about Sidharth's absence from the picture. One fan even asked Kiara to give photo credit to Sidharth.

Take a look at some of the comments by fans:

**KIARA AND SIDHARTH SNAPPED AT AIRPORT**

Kiara Advani and Sidharth Malhotra were spotted at the



Mumbai airport today morning. They arrived at the airport dressed comfortably for their travel.

**KIARA, SIDHARTH'S DATING RUMOURS**

The dating rumours of Kiara Advani and Sidharth Malhotra have been doing rounds for quite some time. Things got a bit clearer when Kiara appeared on The Kapil Sharma Show with her Laxmii co-star Akshay Kumar.

When Kiara was asked questions about her personal life, whether she is dating someone. Kiara said, "Whenever I talk about my personal life, it will be when I'm

married."

Akshay, however, revealed Kiara's secret and said, "Ye badi Siddhanto wali ladki hai (She is a girl of principles)." Hinting that she is dating Sidharth Malhotra.

## Kangana Ranaut back in Mumbai, Congress tweets reminder for anti-drugs agency

The Maharashtra Congress on Wednesday reminded the Narcotics Control Bureau, probing the alleged Bollywood-drugs nexus, that actor Kanagana Ranaut, who claims to have information on the drugs links in the film industry, is back in Mumbai. The party sought to know when the actor would be summoned by the anti-drugs agency.

On September 9, the NCB arrested actor Rhea Chakraborty over drugs-related allegations following actor Sushant Singh Rajput's death. The agency had also summoned actors Deepika Padukone, Sara Ali Khan, Shraddha Kapoor, among others, for questioning.

The Congress put out an old video of Kangana Ranaut

Wednesday morning.



where she is heard saying that she was a "drug addict".

"Dear NCB, She is bk! When will you call @Kangan Team for this video? Also Modi govt gave Y category security to her (she is still enjoying at the cost of exchequer) as she wanted to give info abt drug racket in bollywood. She is still hiding info abt crime which is an 'offense.(sic)', Maharashtra Congress general secretary and spokesperson Sachin Sawant tweeted the 14-second video clip on

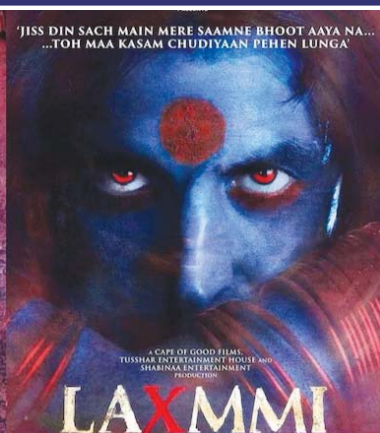
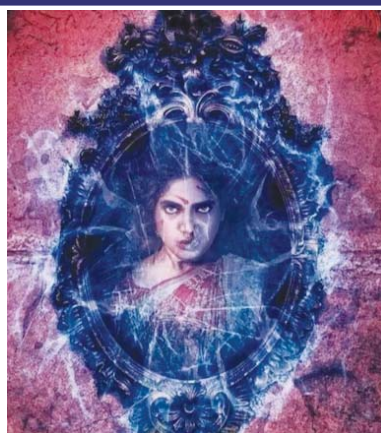
**Kiara Advani**

## Durgamati on Amazon Prime feels like Laxmii 2.0. Why did Akshay Kumar do it to us?

At a time when movie buffs had their eyes and heart set on Christopher Nolan giving them an IMAX experience with Tenet, thereby rescuing them from their forced abstinence from truly experiencing cinema, Akshay Kumar was giving us his version of Inception. For he gave us two movies back to back - Laxmii and Durgamati, both remakes of South Indian films, and both pretty much a copy of each other too. A remake and sequel of a remake which is also a remake. Confused? We were too after we streamed the Bhumi Pednekar-starrer Durgamati on Amazon Prime Video.

**LAXMII AND DURGAMATI, TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN**

On November 9, 2020, Akshay's Laxmii dropped on Disney+Hotstar, a remake of



2011-released Tamil film Kanchana, both helmed by Raghava Lawrence. A little over a month later, on December 11, he, as a presenter, gave us Durgamati, a remake of the Telugu film Bhaagamathie, both directed by Ashok G.

The biggest difference in these two is that while Akshay headlines the cast in the first,

he is simply providing behind-the-camera support as a producer on the latter. The story, the premise, even the fact that both films belong to the horror genre, anyone who has watched both will tell you, make them uncannily similar. Why would he choose to do that, is one of those mysteries that always remain unsolved at the end of a

horror film.

**NAME CHANGE, POSTER, HUMANS POSSESSED BY DEMONS**

Okay, so a human being haunted and ultimately possessed by a spirit is common in horror films. So in that, Durgamati and Laxmii are similar. But what would you say about the colour-scheme of the posters of the two films? The look on both Akshay and Bhumi are similar, the poster heavily relies on blue and red to create a mystery about the character, and both have blood-shot eyes. Why?

Stretching it a bit further, Laxmii, originally Laxmii Bomb, had to change its title because a certain section of the audience wasn't happy about it. No such explanation was given about

Durgamati when it changed from Durgavati overnight. Like we said, certain mysteries are forever left unresolved.

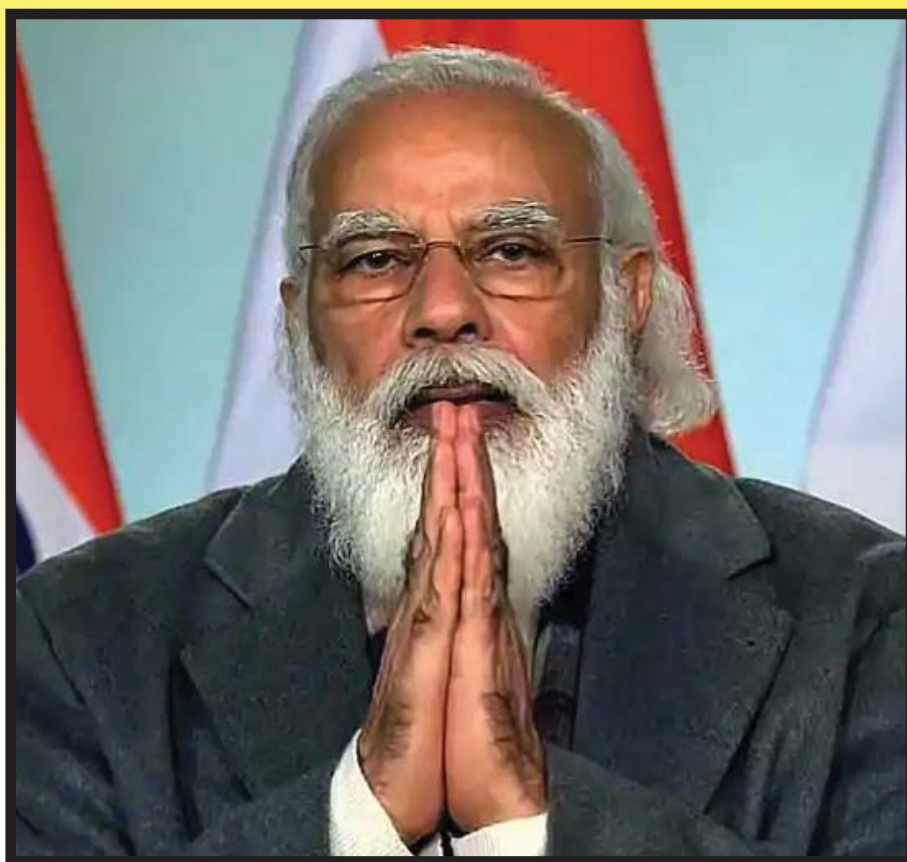
**BOLLYWOOD AND HORROR** Bollywood's tryst with horror hasn't been a particularly memorable one. There have been a few standout ones - Tumbad, Stree, Pari perhaps - but for each of these, there's a Bhoot Part 1: The Haunted Ship or the Raaz or the Haunted series. Sheesh! So why would Akshay decide to give us two films in the same genre, back to back?

The optimists in us were still hopeful, pinning our hopes on his 2007-released Bhool Bhulaiyaa, not entirely horror, but a psychological film with a ton of comedy, nonetheless.





## 'There is much to do'



(SAI Bureau)- Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday took to Twitter and replied to a few Twitter users who wished him a happy new year or tweeted about some achievements.

Early in the day, singer Lata Mangeshkar wished PM Modi and offered her regards for PM Modi's mother. Thanking 'Lata didi' for her wishes, PM Modi wrote, "Your best wishes inspire me to work for the country with new energy." After that, PM Modi replied to a few tweets on the micro-blogging platform. Replying to one user by the name Dev GC Pal who tweeted about Covid-19 in 2021, PM Modi wrote, "Thanks to a people-powered approach, the fight against COVID-19 has been extremely spirited.

(Contd on page 31)

## The year is almost over, but scars will remain



(SAI Bureau)- Over the past decade, ultranationalists have been on the rise the world round. In France and the United States (US), especially, this problem has become significant. But while the consequent religious and racial conflicts increased in frequency and intensity, the year saw some changes that nobody could have imagined. Who could have predicted that the prime minister of Israel would visit Saudi Arabia? Who could have imagined that at the behest of an outgoing United States president, Mossad's agents would seek to weaken the nuclear capability of Iran by killing

(Contd on page 30)

## New coronavirus strain in India

Here are some states where cases have been found



(SAI Bureau) - The number of returnees to India from the United Kingdom, who have tested positive for the new coronavirus mutant genome discovered there in September, has risen from six on Tuesday to 20, the Union health ministry reported on Wednesday. The returnees, who have tested positive, are from a number of states.

Here are some of the states/Union territories (UT), returnees to where have been found positive for the new Covid-19 strain:

(Contd on page 31)

## 'Won't withdraw protest' Farmers stick to resolve

(SAI Bureau) - Firming up their resolve, the farmers' unions protesting the three contentious farm laws on Wednesday said that they will not take back their movement and won't form a committee to scrutinise the legislation as asked by the government. The remarks from a farm union representative came after nearly five hours long



meet between the Centre and 40 farm unions at Vigyan Bhawan in the national capital. Thousands of protesters, primarily from Punjab and Haryana, have

been camping at borders around Delhi in the bitter cold asking for the rollback of three laws pushed for clearance by the government in September this year. The farmers have alleged that the laws will

lead to corporate dominance of the farm sector and erode their incomes. "Talks were positive today. The government has been saying that we should end agitation and form

a committee. But we didn't listen to them. We won't take back our movement.

(Contd on page 31)

