

# The Assam Rising

Projecting the best of Northeast India everyday

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## NEWS IN BRIEF

### 54 crude bombs found

**Kolkata, June 6 :** At least 54 crude bombs were detected on Saturday night at Khidderpore and Hastings crossing in the southern fringes in Kolkata, averting a major tragedy. The bombs were recovered by Kolkata police hardly 20 metres away from a BJP office that was used during the election. As per reports, the 54 bombs were kept in four sacks that are mainly used for the packing of fruits. team of police, bomb squad and officers from anti-rowdy section rushed to the spot and recovered the bombs and subsequently diffused it. Police officials said apparently the bombs were crude but an explosion of so many bombs could have caused serious damage. "We have started investigation to find out how the bombs came there. The CCTV footage is also being examined," said a police officer.

### Protest against erosion

**Guwahati, June 6 :** Residents of the Fakirganj village in Assam's South Salmara Mankachar district on Saturday staged a protest on the banks of the Brahmaputra against rampant erosion in the area. They also immersed effigies of Dhubri MP Badruddin Ajmal and South Salmara MLA Wajed Ali Choudhury in the river as a mark of protest. The Fakirganj village has been reeling under the problem of erosion for years and residents live in constant fear of the Brahmaputra devouring their homes and land. Residents of the village alleged that Ajmal and Choudhury have failed to take any measure to check erosion despite the assurance the duo gave before the recent Assam assembly elections that took place in April this year.

### AASU plants 5,000 saplings

**Guwahati, June 6 :** The AASU in an ambitious move to afforest 250 bigha land planted 5,000 saplings on the barren land at Japanggaon in Balimahi Chapori of the river Brahmaputra in the flood-prone Janjimukh area on the occasion of World Environment Day on Saturday. The aim is to create an environment for birds to nest and to provide fodder to a herd of elephants which cause depredation in nearby villages. The green project to create a landscape which in future could attract tourists was started on June 5 last year by the Jorhat district unit of All Assam Students' Union (AASU) and the Teok regional unit. The land now has 20,000 saplings growing into trees with villagers tending to the plants. An AASU member said the project, once completed, may contribute to efforts in tackling elephant depredation by a wild herd that moves along the bank of the Brahmaputra causing destruction of paddy fields and trees in riverine village areas including Majuli.

## Congress urges PM Modi to stop sale of two HPC-run paper mills



**Guwahati, June 6 :** The Assam Congress has urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to stop the auction of two state-run closed paper mills of the

state. The Nagaon Paper Mill at Jagiroad and Panchgram Paper Mill at Jagiroad run by Hindustan Paper Corporation (HPC) have remained closed since

March 2017 and October 2015. The employees of both the paper mills have not got salaries since 2017. Assam Pradesh Congress Committee (APCC) president Ripun Bora in a letter urged PM Modi to recall the auction notice issued by the official liquidator on June 1. The Assam PCC chief pointed out that the Prime Minister had made repeated commitments during the election campaigns of 2016, 2019 and 2021 that the two paper mills would be revived

by giving a special economic package. "Other senior BJP leaders, including Sarma and his predecessor Sarbananda Sonowal, had also assured the people of the state that the two paper mills would be revised at any cost as it is the "lifeline of the people of Brahmaputra and Barak Valley", the Rajya Sabha MP said. Against this backdrop, the employees of these two paper mills, their family members, bamboo growers and suppliers, unemployed youths, small businessmen and the people of the state in general expect that the government will not take the hard decision to sell the two paper mills built on over 2000 acre of land to private parties, Bora said. "I urge you to explore a comprehensive plan of revival of the two paper mills, Contd...Page 6

## Two more arrested in Assam doctor assault case

**Guwahati, June 6 :** The Assam Police on Saturday arrested two more people, including a woman, in connection with an alleged attack on a junior doctor at a Covid care centre in the Hojai district, taking the total number of arrests to 28 so far. Earlier in the day, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma met the assaulted doctor, to enquire about his health. He also held a discussion with a delegation of the Assam state branch of the Indian Medical Association on several issues of doctors welfare, particularly the security of on-duty



doctors. Recent incidents of attack against doctors by the beleaguered relatives of patients have raised a lot of concern about the safety of the healthcare workers in India. On Friday, the Na-

tional Human Rights Commission (NHRC), India, had called for an action taken report from the Assam chief secretary, the director-general of police and Assam government Contd...Page 6

## Assam imposes new COVID-19 restrictions, what's allowed, what's not

**Guwahati, June 6 :** The Himanta Biswa Sarma-led Assam government on Friday (June 4, 2021) announced new lockdown-like restrictions in the state, which will remain in place from June 6 till June 16. Ear-

ly, the curfew timings in the state have been reduced from 1 pm to 5 am daily. The state government's order read, "In partial modification of the order issued vide Order No. ASDMA.28/2021/86 dated 25th May, 2021 and in

Authority, Assam, hereby issues the following directives which will be uniformly applicable across the State (both urban and rural areas) with effect from 5 AM of June 6, 2021 and will remain in force till 5 AM of June 16, 2021. Here's list of what's allowed, what's not:- All government and private offices will remain closed till June 15. - Total ban on the movement of individuals from 1 pm to 5 am at all days. - Restaurants and other eateries can take dine-in guests up to 12 noon, individuals can take away their food till 1 pm and after that only home delivery of food will be allowed. - Restaurants operating within a hotel or resort can allow outside guests up to 12 noon. However, in-house guests of hotel/resort ordered to give only room service after 12 noon. - All inter-district transport services and movement of people to and from other districts will remain suspended. - Cold storages and warehouses may continue after 12 noon. However, sale counters, showrooms Contd...Page 6



lier, the lockdown-like restrictions in the state were supposed to be lifted on June 5, but in the view of the COVID-19 situation the state government decided to extend it for 10 more days. The authorities revealed that the

exercise of the powers, conferred under Section 22(2) (h) of the Disaster Management Act, 2005, the undersigned, in his capacity as Chairperson, State Executive Committee of the State Disaster Management

## India sees lowest single-day rise in COVID-19 cases in two months, records 1.14 lakh new infections

**New Delhi, June 6 :** India saw its lowest single-day rise in COVID-19 cases in two months and recorded 1.14 lakh new infections, as per the data by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare on Sunday (June 6, 2021). The country main-

tained the declining trend and reported less than 2 lakh daily cases for the 10th consecutive day. India sees lowest single-day rise in COVID-19 cases in two months. The weekly positivity rate is currently at 6.54% and Contd...Page 6



## Chief Minister Sarma reviews Industries and Commerce Department

Asks Industries department to create a demand driven industrial landscape



**Guwahati, June 6 :** Chief Minister Dr. Himanta Biswa said that the industry sector which contributes to 39 per cent of the total state GDP, needs perpetual thrust of the key areas like start ups, ease of doing business etc. to provide a push to the industrial landscape of the state. Taking a review of the schemes of the Industry and Com-

merce Department in his office in Janata Bhawan today, Chief Minister Sarma said that the department needs to take key initiatives to boost the confidence of the stakeholders for the development of industries in the state. Taking a look of the North East Industrial Development Scheme, Sarma asked Principal Secretary Industries

and Commerce Dr. K.K. Dwivedi to expeditiously dispose the 'proposals of interests' submitted for starting several new projects under the scheme in Assam. Chief Minister Sarma taking a comprehensive view of the size of the total lands in Assam for industrial use, asked the Principal Secretary to prepare a plan for Contd...Page 6

## Education Minister Pegu Shares Website for Complaints of Scooters Distributed to Meritorious Girl Students

**Guwahati, June 6 :** Education Minister Pegu Shares Website for Complaints of Scooters Distributed to Meritorious Girl Students by Govt Pegu said that they have started distribution of pending scooters to meritorious girl students observing COVID protocol by : Sentinel Digital Desk | 6 Jun 2021 11:41 AM Guwahati: Assam Education Minister Ranajo Pegu on Saturday posted a tweet sharing de-



tails of a website where girl students who have received scooters from the government can lodge their complaints if any about the scooters. Pegu tweeted, "For any complaint on dis-

tribution of Scooters to meritorious girl student write to scootercomplaint.dhe@gmail.com" For any complaint on distribution of Scooters to meritorious girl student write to scootercomplaint.dhe@gmail.com - Ranajo Pegu (@ranajopegu) June 5, 2021 Also Read - A Tribute to Bana Lata Das Assam government has distributed 22,000 scooters to number of girl students, where Former

Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal highlighted schemes such as PM Ujjala, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Jan-Dhan Yojana etc. He also spoke about the 'Arunodoi' scheme which benefits several lakh women of the State and said last year that State governments' welfare schemes in the last four and a half years have touched the lives of 70 lakh families including women and helped Contd...Page 6

## High alert sounded in Lakhimpur as NEEPCO releases excess waters from Ranganadi dam



**Guwahati, June 6 :** The water level of Ranganadi river rising after release of dam waters from Ranganadi Hydro Electric Project. High flood alert has been sounded in Lakhimpur of north Assam following release of excess waters from the dam of Ranganadi Hydro Electric Project (RHEP)

on upstream of the river at Yazali inside Arunachal Pradesh on Saturday afternoon. NEEPCO is releasing 605.25 cumecs of water through its Gate No. 4 of the dam of the hydroelectric project at 5 pm on Saturday causing rise of water level alarmingly on the downstream of Ranganadi river in Lakhimpur district. According to District Emergency Operational Centre (DEOC) at North Lakhimpur, RHEP's Gate No. 4 was in open status at 6.15 in the evening at the 4000 mm water level. The BEOC data also shows that the water level of the RHEP dam has risen from 300 mm at 2.16 pm to 4,000 mm within four hours at 6.15 pm at Gate No. 4. The Contd...Page 6

## BJP leader Suwendu Adhikari and his brother booked for allegedly stealing relief material

**New Delhi, June 6 :** The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader Suwendu Adhikari and his brother Soumendou Adhikari have been booked for allegedly stealing relief material from the Purba Midnapore's Kanthi Municipality office in West Bengal. The police

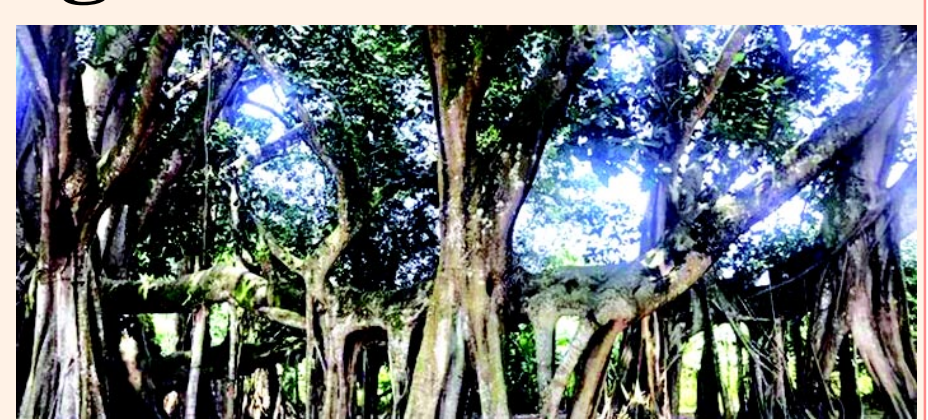


said that an FIR has been lodged against the Adhikari brothers on the complaint submitted by Ratnadip Manna, a member of the Kanthi Municipal Administrative Board, at Kanthi Police Station on June 1. "On 29 May 2021 at 12:30 pm as per direction of Suwendu Adhikari and his brother and former Municipal Chief Contd...Page 6

## Students celebrate 209 years of Asia's 2nd largest tree in Assam

**Guwahati, June 6 :** Students observed the "World Environment Day" on Saturday by celebrating the completion of 209 years of Asia's second largest tree at Jalikhata village in Assam's Bajali district. They celebrated the occasion by planting saplings in the premises of the Jalikhata temple where the tree is located. Locals

believe that the banyan tree, which spreads over four bighas of land, is 209 years old. Environment activists and nature lovers had celebrated the completion of 207 years of the tree on this day in 2019. The people of the area had gathered in huge numbers to cut a cake weighing 60 kg on the occasion last year. The famous Contd...Page 6





# Scroungers, lefty lawyers... the Tories duck scrutiny by inventing enemies

The high court ruled that the standard of living at Napier barracks was 'not adequate' and criticised the 'detention-like' setting. You cannot say anything coherent without generalising, and so, and to generalise, the British will lose their rights to challenge an over-mighty and underwhelming state because they hate foreigners more

have a picture of Conservative voters cheering Priti Patel and Johnson on as they bash asylum seekers only to discover, too late, that the government has abolished their right to challenge plans to drive a road through the fields next to their home or build houses on their village green. Or indeed challenge any unlawful government decision. With a

condemned thousands to needless deaths. When an appointments panel refused to make Paul Dacre chair of Ofcom, because a former editor of the Mail was unlikely to defend impartial broadcasting, Johnson would not accept its decision. He created a new interview panel and told it to try again. Last week, another independent adviser,

darkness. The Home Office put 414 asylum seekers, who had committed no crime, into the abandoned camp. It left them in cramped, badly ventilated dormitories rather than house them in the hotels the pandemic had emptied. Decent accommodation might have produced headlines about scroungers living in luxury and that would never do. There was a "very clear steer to eliminate the use of hotels for contingency accommodation", said Mr Justice Linden as he noted the political imperative to keep the tabloids happy. "Home Office staff were rarely present, which led to dangerous shortcomings." Although they were not meant to be prisoners, the men were locked in a camp surrounded by barbed wire and patrolled by security guards. There was one serious fire, the site was riddled with plywood and asbestos, while an inevitable Covid outbreak saw nearly 200 inmates and staff go down. Johnson wants to stop judges examining such horrors for many reasons. He does not want to pay compensation to victims, as the judge's ruling that detention at the Napier barracks was unlawful may force him to do. He does not want to allow the courts or anyone else to force ministers and civil servants to work hard and do their duty. And he is very keen on keeping the Conservative-voting public in a politically useful state of ignorance. But as so often, the simplest explanation is the best. As a triumphant leader with an unassailable majority, Johnson does not believe anyone should hold him to account. The Napier barracks are named after Sir Charles Napier (1782-1853). He was a hero of the Napoleonic wars, whose horse was shot from underneath him twice in the Peninsula campaign. He was also a surprisingly liberal general by 19th-century standards. In the late 1830s, he commanded 6,000 troops in the north of England with orders to crush the Chartist movement. Far from regarding the campaign to democratise Britain as a threat, however, Napier sympathised with the Chartist demand for one man, one vote, and condemned the poverty endured by the new working class. If there was trouble, he said, "Tory injustice and Whig imbecility" were its root causes. Plus ça change.



than they love political accountability. The Johnson administration knows that as long as it portrays asylum seekers as cheats arriving in the UK illegally and their solicitors as activist "lefty lawyers", tricking the trusting public into allowing scrounging aliens to remain on our island, it can end scrutiny of its abuses of power. Stopping accountability is, after all, its prime purpose. Journalists and academics write so much about populists you can be forgiven for thinking they are complicated men. They could not be simpler. The answer to the question what do populists want is that they want power: to win it, maintain it and prohibit opposition to it. Boris Johnson's government ducks every hard issue from the abysmal state of social care to declining productivity. Instead, it proposes to put scrutiny of its actions beyond the reach of the courts by restricting judicial review of unlawful state decisions. Ministers will sell secrecy as a defence against today's sly lefty lawyers and forget to add that judicial review has existed for 400 years. I

typically indolent concern for the truth, the justice secretary, Robert Buckland, maintained that the government's review of the courts had found a "worrying" trend of judges moving beyond their rightful sphere. In truth, the review panel, chaired by former Conservative minister Lord Faulks, no less, found no "overall trend that you could extract" and recommended only minor changes. Buckland swore to uphold the law when he took office and then sanctioned Johnson's plan to break international law during the Brexit crisis. You can expect nothing better from him. The dismissal of independent advice, however, is as characteristic of the populist when the will to power is upon him as the contempt for truth. Sir Alex Allan, Johnson's ethics adviser, resigned after he found evidence that Patel bullied civil servants and Johnson decided to defend her rather than basic standards. Johnson ignored warnings from doctors and epidemiologists about the dangers of releasing lockdown too early and

Sir Kevan Collins, went. He resigned because his recommendations to save the education of Covid-disrupted pupils were replaced by Rishi Sunak's "half-hearted approach [that] risks failing hundreds of thousands". As a triumphant leader with an unassailable majority, Johnson does not believe anyone should hold him to account. Populism wants a good press rather than good government. Johnson will calculate that hurting pupils won't hurt the Conservative party, whose support is dominated by pensioners without school-age children. He can count on the rightwing press and the instinctive beliefs of Tory voters to hold that asylum seekers are criminals because they arrived illegally and forget how hard it is for genuine victims of persecution to travel to Britain legally. For all that, I still do not see how anyone apart from sociopaths can look at the high court's judicial review of conditions in the Napier barracks on the Kent coast last week and conclude that ministers can be safely left to govern in

## Nick Cohen

# Just enjoy your success, Kate Winslet, Your husband can take care of himself

Why do highly successful women feel they must overpraise spouses who merely do what women do all the time? Kate Winslet is having a "moment" with the television series Mare of Easttown and deservedly so. Still, why did she feel the need to uber-gush about her husband, Edward Abel Smith (Richard Branson's nephew, formerly self-christened Ned Rocknroll) in a recent New York Times interview? According to Winslet, Abel Smith is a "super-hot, superhuman stay-at-home dad" and an "absolutely extraordinary life partner". He looks after her and the children. Although dyslexic, he helps Winslet with her lines. He maintains his zen with veganism, yoga, breath work and cold swims. His long hair makes him resemble "an ocean warrior". Note to Kate: there are acceptable levels of spousal gushing and then there's "umbrella for the journalist, please!". Winslet adds: "He didn't particularly plan on meeting and marrying a woman who is in the public eye and therefore having been so judged." And there perhaps you have it: while Winslet stops short of technically de-alpha-ing herself, she could be endeavouring to ensure that her husband doesn't feel quite so beta. Is Abel Smith a stay-at-home dad or is he still head of marketing, promotion and astronaut experience for Uncle Richard's firm? It seems odd that a man should be eulogised for supporting his wife. Women do this all the time - does it qualify them as "superhuman"? Is Abel Smith's ego so fragile that Winslet must

lates a man and it's up to the woman to make that right, to make the neutered male's contribution bigger by making herself smaller. That all too often such women are paranoid about unmanning their spouses and feel they must lay the praise on super-thick to the point where it borders on relationship damage control. This kind of thinking is the knotweed of gender dynamics - it never quite goes away. Last year, in equality-minded Sweden, there was a study about how women who become CEOs divorce faster than men who become CEOs. Still, there are always couples bucking such trends and Winslet and Abel Smith could be among them: Abel Smith, growing up around fame and therefore not cowed by it; Winslet, a thespian supernova, but one who wants real love in a real life. Still, for all the accomplished women out there, it bears noting that it must be a rare successful man who'd worry for a solitary second about losing his woman because of it. In 2021, it's a tragedy if women feel they'll be punished and abandoned for what they've earned. It would take a saint not to laugh on learning from the Electoral Commission that Laurence Fox (actor turned anti-woke-Flashman) received almost as much money in donations (£1,153,300) as the Liberal Democrats for the London mayoral race and yet his Reclaim party still only managed to come sixth, garnering 1.9% of the vote share. Then again, Fox managed to beat Count Binface and you can't take that away from him. Other news from the Electoral Commis-

## Barbara Ellen



lavish praise on him or he might have a panic attack about being an A-list house husband with a sideline in astronaut experiences? Or is this beyond Winslet and Abel Smith and more about the great unspoken curse of successful women generally? The idea, even now, that men are conditioned to resent female success. That female power emascul-

sion includes the large Tory donation from Peter Cruddas, the businessman Boris Johnson made a peer last December against House of Lords advice. What a mysterious coincidence. Back to Fox. His mayoral war chest, like all of his funding, came from Jeremy Hosking, the wealthy, Brexit-supporting fund manager. Now what? Will Fox finally admit (to himself, if no one else) that he may have taken a wrong turn? He trashed his career and his reputation to spend more than a million quid of someone else's money to stand as a "man of the people" and ended up only just beating the equivalent of Screaming Lord Sutch. Still, every cloud and all that... At least the one person who seems to like Fox happens to be a multimillionaire. Does Britain really need to strengthen its borders against European youngsters on school trips? Forthcoming post-Brexit requirements are likely to cut the number of European young people visiting the UK by half. Continental tour operators dealing in school excursions say that the UK used to account for 90% of trips, but now inquiries are about Ireland, or previously less travelled territories such as Malta and the Netherlands. This is as depressing as it is unnecessary. Despite appeals, the UK government has refused to exempt young Europeans from the new passport and visa measures on the grounds that it is "committed to strengthening the security of our border". Against what: the existential threat of European schoolkids wanting to see the London Eye? Among those particularly affected will be non-EU European pupils (generally immigrant children), as the UK will no longer allow them to visit under the "list of travellers" visa scheme, meaning considerable extra expense and administrative aggravation. Who could blame European schools for thinking that the UK is just not worth the bother? This isn't just about London - the changes will affect towns and cities across the UK, notably all the businesses that offer European pupils educational, residential, hospitality or tourist facilities, which rely upon a steady flow of young overseas visitors. It's also another door slamming shut on our relationship with Europe, all the more heartbreaking because it involves young Europeans, aka the future. Most of us remember overseas school trips as a blast. Far from elitist, for some people, myself included, they were the only chance to go abroad as a minor, with the added bonus of doing so without your parents. Young people benefit from these short cultural-cum-educational trips, and UK businesses need the custom, so why is an exemption out of the question? Let's face it, Britain feels increasingly shut.

# Corner shops got us through lockdown, Now delivery apps could destroy them

When the first lockdown came into force in the UK last March, supermarket delivery slots vanished. Many people - myself included - began to rely on our local corner shops, stocked with toilet roll and bakers' yeast. They were somewhere you could pick up a bottle of wine after a shell-shocking day of home schooling, or replenish basics like pasta and rice. They provided a lifeline for families, elderly and isolated people, and those without cars. These days, though, no sector can flourish without tech companies trying to muscle in. You may have already seen the adverts for apps like Weezy, Jiffy, Getir and Dija: these companies promise they can deliver your groceries faster than it would take you to walk around the corner and back. They cater to harried parents who have run out of nappies, students with late-night munchies, and desperate dinner party hosts short on booze. Since the pandemic began, about \$14bn in venture capital funding has rushed into instant grocery apps, while delivery apps are already targeting vacant high street properties to establish "dark stores" - fulfilment centres that are not open to shoppers or the public - close to homes. In logistics and delivery services, the last leg of the journey between retailers and consumers - the bit between local distribution hubs and your house - is the hardest to crack. By inserting themselves into this "last mile", grocery delivery apps remove the need for trips to the corner shop. In doing so, they pose an existential threat to local high streets and

small convenience stores. Plenty has been written about Deliveroo and other companies that have disrupted takeaway food, but the grocery sector is far bigger. Total grocery sales in the UK amounted to £190bn in 2018; convenience retail accounted for around £40bn of this. By comparison, the restaurant delivery market is worth an estimated £11.4bn. Still, convenience retailing is a low-margin business. The input costs for a corner shop are far higher than those of the large supermarkets that wield huge market power over their suppliers. Many eke out a modest living working long and unsociable hours. But these businesses are resilient be-

Asian or Asian British. If delivery apps take over, only a portion of the nearly half-million people who work in the sector might be redeployed as delivery riders or shelf-pickers in dark stores. Many may be replaced by robots. More intriguing still is the business model of new grocery delivery apps. The "last mile" is unavoidably expensive, and a basket

## Michelle Meagher

must be worth enough to cover the cost of delivery but also small enough to fit on a bike. On-demand purchases rarely line up to allow riders to fulfil many orders at once. Given these challenges, you may

playbook: lure in users, crush the competition and form a monopoly. It's the same model favoured by companies such as Uber, which has never turned a profit but attracts investors who are betting on future monopoly earnings. Traditional convenience stores cannot compete against the might of global finance. Unfortunately, the only institution that might intervene, the Competition and Markets Authority, is failing to see the problem. Last summer, the CMA approved Amazon to take a minority stake in Deliveroo. In its extensive investigation report, it noted that "Deliveroo is offering a 'Deliveroo Essentials' service from its Editions sites." The company's "essentials" service is a grocery delivery service, while Deliveroo Editions are "dark kitchens" that serve delivery-only food - restaurants without diners. Deliveroo is well-placed to merge these two lines of business. According to this version of the future, our local high streets look very weird indeed. Consumers will be able to buy groceries from dark stores where they can't physically shop, or order restaurant food from dark kitchens where they can't dine. And what will count as essential products? My corner shop sells Turkish kefir alongside Polish kielbasa, West African fufu flour, gluten-free spaghetti and heritage tomatoes - a

hyperlocal offering to cater to a few north London streets. Delivery apps may turn all this flavoursome variety and richness into bland uniformity. Even if you look forward to a future where you can order a pint of milk to your door at the touch of a button, this shift matters for our high streets and communities. Delivery apps siphon wealth out of local areas and into the pockets of distant shareholders, venture capitalists and giant platforms. We need new ways to understand and intervene in this shift - starting with the UK's competition authority. The CMA must look beyond consumer wallets and take into account the effects of mergers and monopolies on employees, small businesses and communities. Capping commission charges to suppliers, blocking mergers in the sector, and breaking up and properly taxing monopolies would help. The CMA's months-long investigation into Amazon and Deliveroo entirely missed the emergence of all the instant grocery players now vying for dominance. Regulators must start thinking more like venture capitalists if they are to keep up. In the meantime, buying direct from local businesses can help. Two-thirds of convenience stores are located in villages and housing estates, not the city centres in which many of the grocery startups are experimenting. According to James Lowman, the chief executive of the Association of Convenience Stores, "the social utility of convenience stores is maximised in remote locations. They will face these competitive pressures last, but may feel them more acutely." Once these local stores are gone, they're gone.



cause their fixed costs tend to be low, with few overheads or staff. They're also an important employment route for immigrants: 44% of store managers across the UK are

wonder why investors are pumping vast sums into fledgling startups with no track record that are offering heavy price discounts. What they're betting on is the tech startup

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# Share vaccines or climate deal will fail, rich countries are told

**London, June 6:** Progress on climate change could be scuppered by developing nations if they are not given equitable access to vaccines, Boris Johnson has been warned, as rich nations come under new pressure to donate more doses. Figures compiled by the Observer show that the wealthiest nations, including the UK, have enough vaccines to inoculate their populations more than twice over. Before a three-day G7 summit beginning in Cornwall on Friday, a growing number of influential figures believe failure to agree a vaccination plan for poorer countries could lead to them refusing, or being unable, to work with rich countries in the battle against the climate crisis. Johnson will seek to calm tensions on Sunday by calling on the world's wealthiest nations to help vaccinate the entire global population by the end of 2022. "Vaccinating the world by the end of next year would be the single greatest feat in medical history," the prime minister said. "I'm calling on my fellow G7 leaders to join us to end this terrible pandemic and pledge will we never allow the devastation wreaked by coronavirus to happen again. On Saturday, the number of people in the UK to receive a vaccination topped 40 million. It was reported by the Sunday Telegraph that the head of the UK's vaccines taskforce, Kate Bingham, was to receive a damehood, which would be unveiled in the Queen's birthday honours list next weekend. In a key week for UK diplomacy, Johnson is hoping to use the G7 gathering to lay the

groundwork for Cop26, the vital UN climate summit being held in Glasgow in November, to which it is hoped rich and developing nations will send delegations. But as rich nations face accusations of stockpiling vaccines, Paul Polman, the former chief executive of Unilever and chair of the International Chamber of Commerce, said the two biggest global challenges were becoming increasingly, and dangerously, linked. "We can't have global solidarity and trust around



tackling climate change if we do not show solidarity around vaccines," Polman said. "Developing countries will not come with more ambitious targets [on emissions] if they do not see developed countries showing some solidarity on vaccines, and climate funding." The chances of success at Cop26, Polman said, "will be significantly higher if we address this vaccine issue." The secretary general of the Commonwealth, Patricia Scotland, agreed that vaccines were closely linked to climate action. "There is an obvious link between equitable access to vaccines and action on climate change," she said. "Only if we invest in equitable vaccine access and stand against vaccine nationalism will we beat Covid-19. Only if we ensure every country is able to afford

to deal with its climate challenges will we be able to reach a meaningful agreement on a way forward." Greta Thunberg, the climate campaigner, has said she will boycott Cop26 unless developing countries get a fair share of vaccines, and some NGOs have called on developing countries in the talks to do the same. Joss Garman, the UK director of the European Climate Foundation and a former adviser to the Labour party on the environment, said there was a risk that the Cop26 talks could suffer the same fate as the collapsed Copenhagen summit in 2009 unless a deal was done on vaccines. "The savage impact of Covid is costing developing countries around \$1 trillion every year," said Garman. "Overwhelmed by this immediate and ongoing health and financial crisis, almost 100 countries have yet to put forward their climate plan for Cop26." Others have explicitly made their efforts on carbon contingent on more assistance from rich countries. Unless the G7 puts together a package on vaccines and debt relief, success at Cop26 could be in real jeopardy. "A senior government source said UK ministers realised that the needs of developing nations on issues including vaccines, debt relief and access to green funds had to be addressed if Cop26 was to be a success. "We know developing countries want recognition from the G7 that there's now a triple unfairness: they didn't burn the fossil fuels in the first place to develop their economies, they haven't got the cash to protect themselves from climate change, and they haven't got the jobs to protect

themselves from Covid. The PM's pledge to share vaccines is about acknowledging this - it's an act of solidarity and there will be more ahead from this G7 as the UK demonstrates it is determined Cop26 will work for all, especially climate-vulnerable countries." New data shows that Canada, the UK, the EU, the US and Japan have collectively procured 5.3 billion vaccine doses despite having a collective population of just over 1 billion, according to the Global Health Innovation Center at Duke University in the US. Considering most vaccines require two doses for full vaccination, it means the world's wealthiest countries could "double vaccinate" their entire populations and be left with plenty to spare. Canada has the highest number of procured doses per head, with a total of 381 million procured vaccine doses for a population of just over 37 million. That would be enough to give each person 10 doses if all vaccines pass phase 3 trials. The UK will have enough doses to give each of its people seven doses, the EU six per person, the US three per person and Japan two per person. In comparison, most low- and middle-income countries are struggling to procure doses through either direct deals or the global vaccine-sharing initiative Covax. Colombia and Indonesia currently have enough to give an average of 0.9 doses per person, South Africa has 0.5 doses per person, and Pakistan has just 0.1. Johnson has previously pledged to donate most of the UK's surplus vaccine supply to poorer countries, but this process has yet to start.



Children have a water fight at Lake Ontario in Mississauga, Ontario, Canada.

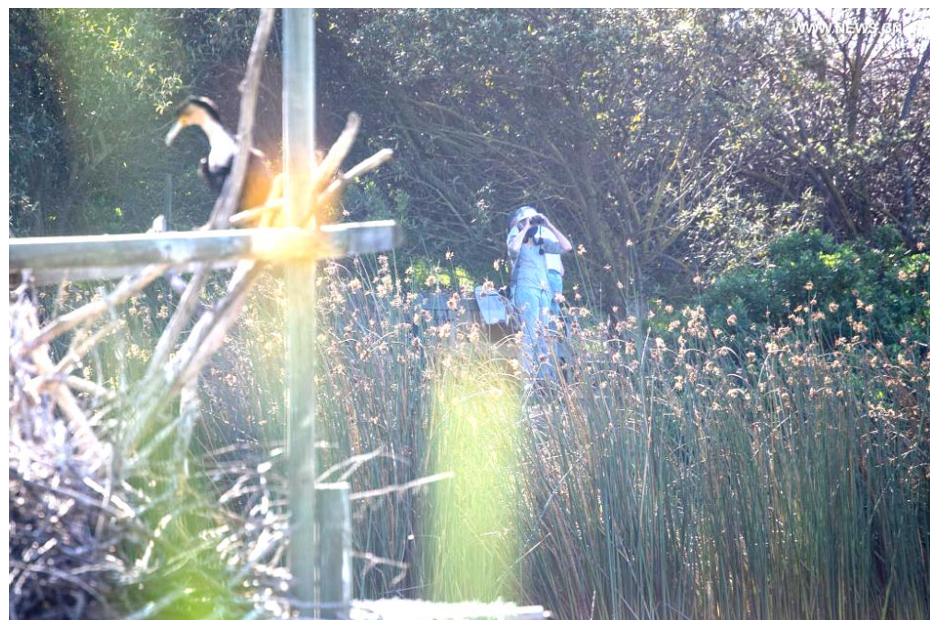
## China, Fauci and hoaxes: Donald Trump targets usual suspects in return to stage

**Beijing, June 6:** Donald Trump has returned to the stage in predictable fashion as he launched a more active phase of his post presidency: criticising Covid expert Anthony Fauci, calling for China to pay reparations over the pandemic and denouncing the New York attorney general's criminal investigation into his business dealings. At a GOP convention in North Carolina on Saturday night, Trump was introduced by the state's party chairman Michael Whatley as "our president", a nod to Trump's baseless claims that the 2020 election was stolen from him through voter fraud, which Trump branded on Saturday "the crime of the century". His appearance had all the hallmarks of his signature campaign rallies, complete with a musical playlist heavy on Elton John. Urging Republicans to support only Trump loyalists in next year's midterm elections, Trump teased the prospect of another presidential bid of his own in 2024, but vowed first to join the campaign trail for those who share his values in next year's fight for control of Congress. "The survival of America depends on our ability to elect Republicans at every level starting with the midterms next year," he said early in a rambling speech that lasted nearly an hour-and-a-half. Some party leaders worry that a rise of pro-Trump candidates in the coming months could jeopardise the GOP's fight for control of Congress in 2022. While Trump remains a dominant force within his party, he is deeply unpopular among key segments of the broader electorate. He lost the last election by 7 million votes after alienating Republican-leaning suburban voters across the country. The former president joined wider Republican criticism of Fauci - the US's leading infectious diseases official - for asking Americans to wear masks to guard against the virus and for at times being sceptical of a hotly contested theory that the virus escaped from a laboratory in Wuhan, China. He called Fauci "not a great doctor but a great promoter" for his frequent television appearances. "But he's been wrong on almost every issue and he was wrong on Wuhan and the lab also," Trump said. Trump's own handling of the pandemic, in which nearly 600,000 people in the United States have died and he himself was infected, was a factor in his loss to president Joe Biden in 2020. He also called on China to pay \$10tn in reparations to the US and the world for its own handling of the virus, and he said nations should cancel their debt to Beijing. Trump said a criminal investigation launched by the New York attorney general's office was "the ultimate fishing expedition" and the latest attempt by Democrats to bring him down after two impeachment sagas when he was president. "It's been a five-year witch hunt, hoax after hoax," said Trump. "They'll never stop until November of 2024." New York's attorney general, Letitia James, has been investigating whether the Trump Organization

falsely reported property values to secure loans and obtain economic and tax benefits. Trump's speech to hundreds of Republican officials and activists was the opening appearance in what is expected to be a new phase of rallies and public events. Out of office for more than four months and banned from his preferred social media accounts, the former president hopes to use such events to elevate his diminished voice. His advisers are already eyeing subsequent appearances in Ohio, Florida, Alabama and Georgia to help bolster midterm candidates and energise voters. On Friday, Facebook decided to suspend his account for two years, after he



incited supporters to attack the US Capitol in service of his lie that his defeat by Biden was the result of electoral fraud. At the end of the suspension period, Facebook said, it would work with experts to assess the risk to public safety posed by reinstating Trump's account. In contrast to the mega rallies that filled sports arenas when Trump was president, on Saturday he faced a crowd that organisers estimated at 1,200 seated at dinner tables inside the Greenville convention centre. Many more followed along on internet streams. The former president waited more than an hour to advance falsehoods about the 2020 election, which he described as "the crime of the century". Since leaving the White House, Trump has regularly made baseless claims that the last presidential election was stolen. The claims have triggered a wave of Republican-backed voting restrictions in state legislatures across the country, even though Trump's cries of voting fraud have been refuted by dozens of judges, Republican governors and senior officials from his own administration. Trump focused his early remarks on Biden's White House, which he called "the most radical left-wing administration in history". "As we gather tonight our country is being destroyed before our very eyes," he said. Democratic National Committee spokesman Ammar Moussa took a shot at Trump in a statement released ahead of his speech. "More than 400,000 dead Americans, millions of jobs lost, and recklessly dangerous rhetoric is apparently not enough for Republicans to break with a loser president who cost them the White House, Senate, and House," Moussa said. Invited to the stage briefly, Trump daughter-in-law and North Carolina native Lara Trump announced she would not run for the Senate because of family obligations. "I am saying no for now, not no forever," she said.



Visitors enjoy the view in the Intaka Island nature reserve in Cape Town, South Africa

## Cryptocurrencies may remain merely a bit on the side

**London, June 6:** When Google announced that bitcoin traders would be allowed to buy advertising space on its pages from August, central banks were alerted to the next likely surge in publicity for cryptocurrencies. The increasing activity around digital currencies has not gone unnoticed at the Bank of England, and on 7 June Threadneedle Street's brightest will publish a consultation document, setting out how a publicly operated electronic coinage system - one that would rival bitcoin - might work. The report is a staging post in the bank's work on digital currencies, and will also assess the prospects for so-called stable coins, ones whose value is pegged to something

operates outside banking regulations. Bitcoin allows payments to be sent between individuals' digital wallets without anyone else knowing they happened, which is why it has been called a money-launderers' paradise. Larry Summers, former economic adviser to Bill Clinton, has criticised the US Federal Reserve for its apparent lack of concern about the rise of digital currencies. This criticism could not be levelled at Sir Jon Cunliffe, the Bank's deputy governor for financial stability, who has given several speeches on the subject and said last month that it was "probable" that the state would need to issue some form of digital cash to retain the public's trust in money. "The knowledge that under stress depositors have the option to switch into state money may be important in preventing a more general loss of confidence in money," Cunliffe said. That presumes digital currencies will become big business and millions of people who opt to store money in an electronic wallet and pay for a service with it - only to become disillusioned when the service is not provided - deserve a back-up option. Cunliffe is part of a taskforce examining the benefits and challenges of digital currencies and he will also present the findings of a consultation that asked how much people wanted it and why. The banking industry will be interested to hear how the current form of digital money - used by most of us for payments from our phones, computers and debit cards - should be scrapped in favour of one that, while it looks modern, will, once surrounded by protections and regulations, operate much like money. Summers was an early enthusiast, but now says cryptocurrencies could be something akin to gold - kept to one side of mainstream money transfers. "Gold has been a primary asset of that kind for a long time," he said. "My guess is that crypto is probably here to stay as a kind of digital gold." Maybe that would suit the Bank of England just fine.



that already has a value. Bitcoin is many things, but a stable coin it is not, according to Brian Davidson, economist at Fathom Consulting. Bitcoin fails the three main tests of a currency - that it is a store of value, that it qualifies as a unit of exchange and that it is a unit of account. Its supporters say the rocketing value of bitcoin - from below £2,000 four years ago to £45,000 in April - shows it is a store of value but, says Davidson, by the same measure it could also be worthless one day. And its volatility - bitcoin's value has slumped 40% to about £26,000 since that April high - means holidaymakers wouldn't know from one day to the next how much they had to spend. However, the idea of a publicly formulated and operated digital currency, backed by the Bank of England and, ultimately, the British government, runs against all the tenets of a digital currency like bitcoin, which

## Suspected extremist attack on Burkina Faso village kills 130 people

**Burkina Faso, June 6:** Suspected extremists have killed more than 130 civilians in an overnight attack on a village in northern Burkina Faso, the government said on Saturday, in one of the worst attacks in the country beset by jihadist violence. The assailants struck during the night on Friday, killing residents of the village of Solhan in Yagha province, near the eastern border with Niger. They also burned homes and a market, the government said, describing

around 20,000 refugees from neighbouring Mali who have fled from jihadist attacks. No group has claimed responsibility. Attacks by jihadists linked to al-Qaida and Islamic State in west Africa's Sahel region have continued to surge this year in Burkina Faso, as well as in Mali and Niger. In 2018 there were under 200 fatalities in Burkina Faso, rising to almost 2,000 last year. The violence in Burkina Faso has rapidly displaced more than 1 million people since 2019, while the largely arid country is also hosting



the attackers as terrorists. Roch Kabore, the president, lamented the attack, the worst recorded since jihadist attacks erupted across the country in 2015, destroying ordinary life for millions of mainly impoverished people. "I bow before the memory of the hundred civilians killed in this barbaric attack and extend my condolences to the families of the victims," he said. "Several injured have succumbed to their wounds and new bodies have been discovered. The still provisional toll is 138 deaths," one local official said to Agence France Presse on Saturday evening. "The bodies were buried in mass graves. There are dozens injured." The government announced three days of national mourning, while details from the attack were still emerging on Saturday. In a separate attack, 13 civilians and one soldier were killed by gunmen in the northern village of Tadaryat late on Friday, security sources told AFP. The gunmen raided the community's motorbikes and cattle, local residents

## Cattle thieves kill 66 villagers in Nigeria

**Kebbi, June 6:** A gang of cattle thieves have killed 66 people in raids on seven villages in north-west Nigeria's Kebbi state, police say. Dozens of assailants on motorcycles attacked seven neighbouring villages in Danko-Wasagu district on Thursday, Kebbi state police

spokesman Nafiu Abubakar told on Saturday. "We have established 66 people were killed in the attacks," which targeted Koro, Kimpi, Gaya, Dimi, Zutu, Rafin Gora and Iguenge villages, Abubakar said. "Investigation is still going on to ascertain the extent of destruction wrought by the bandits and search for more bodies is still on," he added. Policemen were deployed to the area to forestall further attacks while residents of the affected villages fled their homes, said Abubakar. The assailants were believed to have launched the attacks from

neighbouring Zamfara or Niger states, where criminals are known to maintain camps. In April nine policemen were killed in the area in a shootout with gunmen who invaded a village in nearby Sakaba district to steal livestock. Abubakar told AFP at the time. North-west and central Nigeria are a hub of criminal gangs of cattle thieves who raid villages, killing and abducting residents for ransom after looting and burning homes. The gangs, called bandits by locals, maintain camps in Rugu forest which straddles Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna and Niger states. Driven by financial motives, the gangs have no ideological leanings - but there is growing concern they are being infiltrated by jihadists from the north-east waging a 12-year old insurgency to establish an Islamic state.



shows a view of Intaka Island nature reserve in Cape Town, South Africa



## THE ASSAM RISING

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## Theory of Covid's origins

Joe Biden wants to know if the coronavirus pandemic originated in a laboratory. On Thursday, the president ordered US intelligence agencies to "redouble" their efforts to find exactly when and how the virus jumped into humans, and the two scenarios he suggested were an infected animal, or a laboratory accident. Just last year, that second utterance would have got a person dismissed as a kook and a conspiracist; but an increasing number of mainstream figures, from those in the press to influential scientists and government officials such as US chief medical adviser, Anthony Fauci, are at least open to the idea that the pandemic may have started with a containment failure in China, or a souped-up virus experiment gone wrong. If you're just tuning in, bleary-eyed and wondering how yet another thing you were told couldn't possibly happen appears to be on the verge of becoming reality, you're not alone. But there is a straightforward way to see what the possibilities are, what scientists currently think, and what information might resolve the dispute once and for all. First, in the early days of the pandemic, nearly every scientist and media figure with any sort of platform assured the world that the pandemic had a natural origin. A coronavirus that naturally infected bats gained the ability to infect humans through normal evolution in the wild or farmed captivity. This had historical precedent: both the original Sars virus in 2003 and the Mers outbreak in 2012 arose in this way. And the viral genome, shared by Chinese scientists early in the pandemic, and since sequenced around the world thousands of times, didn't show any obvious signs of manipulation: it didn't use any well-known viruses as a basic framework, or have the genetic equivalent of bore-holes and cut-marks. All of these are decent arguments, but not overwhelming. A matter of low attention bandwidth at the height of the first wave, an overall deference to authority, and a general wariness about conspiratorial-sounding theories, led the animal-leap case to be presented and repeated with airtight surety. And this left it open to attack. Something that should have been widely acknowledged back then is that scientists often do research with viruses that includes manipulating them to become more effective, or to infect other species - even humans. The justification for this is to learn about viral behaviour, and track how a pandemic threat might evolve. This is called "gain-of-function" research, and lots of people think it's a bad idea. What is also known for sure, is that the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), nearby to the first recorded outbreaks, is the world's premier collector of wild bat coronaviruses, has grown them in their in-house laboratories before, and had the expertise to conduct gain-of-function experiments. If you wanted to create a pandemic coronavirus in a lab, the WIV would be a hell of a place to do it. And so there are now several theories about the pandemic strain coming out of the WIV, ranging from one of their on-file natural coronaviruses infecting a lab member; an ill-advised gain-of-function strain doing the same; or a purposely human-targeted bioweapon strain being accidentally or intentionally unleashed. Given the lab's capabilities, that's the full range of careless, reckless, or purely evil possibilities. This means that some version of a lab-leak was always circumstantially and scientifically plausible. Each theory also neatly appeals to a certain sort of person, what you might call the fringes of both sides. If you're the radically credulous mainstream sort, the natural origin story fits the bill. A naturally emerging viral pandemic is a complex process that the experts say is likely to happen. It's the way things have happened before. People in positions of authority - say, running a biohazardous lab - are highly competent and probably trustworthy. Mystery solved by association. If you thrive on contingency and conspiracy, however, the lab-leak theory is catnip. A single, discrete event, perpetrated by individuals, and then - if true - surely covered up. Whether you think it was an accident or a doomsday device, access to the lab offers the possibility of a smoking gun, if only you could investigate. Given what we know, both sides are at a deadlock. The WIV had what armchair detectives would call motive, method and opportunity, but there's no proof that Sars-CoV-2 was ever in the lab. On the circumstantial side, the hole is as deep as you want to go - people have dug into irregularities in the institute's virus catalogue, there is an "anonymous intelligence report" about WIV members becoming sick with a pneumonia-like illness in November 2019. Do your own research, as they say. But parsing cold war-style intrigue from a desk chair a world away rarely makes anything clearer. When it comes to the science, there isn't a knockout blow either way. Viruses have multiple evolutionary avenues in front of them, from simple mutations to swapping entire genetic regions with closely related pathogens. Some of these can be worked around or reconstituted in a lab with little trace. Given that the major changes Sars-CoV-2 acquired to become pandemic-ready don't mirror those in any closely related coronavirus, its emergence was either a rare event - or we simply don't know very much about wild coronaviruses. The first is possible and the second is surely true. At the same time, if it was created in a lab, the creators took a circuitous route, not using known strains or structures, and not always optimising the virus in obvious ways. Reflecting this, scientific arguments are deep in the weeds at the moment, arguing over the likelihood of one RNA sequence or another arising by natural or artificial means. So far they have served only to keep the window open on both sides. So where did the virus that actually started the pandemic come from? For the natural-emergence side, finding a coronavirus in a bat or intermediate animal that is more genetically similar to Sars-Cov-2 than those currently on record would demonstrate a clear, plausible evolutionary path. The closer the better, and bonus points if it had a physical path to the outbreak as well. This would never amount to an airtight case - meaning some version of lab-leak will always be with us as a fringe theory - but it would placate the majority of scientists. Efforts are ongoing, but could take years. For the lab-leak side, it's all about the source. Getting access to the WIV strain archive, the lab notebooks, regulatory filings, access to researchers. Again, if these turned out to be squeaky-clean there would always be a fringe alleging a cover-up. But if it is a case of research-gone-wrong, there would probably be evidence in the institute. The greater problem, though, is that access to the WIV isn't likely to happen any time soon. Scientists, the US government, and the WHO have asked for openness and cooperation from the Chinese state, and have been predictably stonewalled. And so, like many other times over the past year, we're stuck without a clear answer. The point has been made that, epidemiologically, none of this really matters. Lab or not, the pandemic happened and is still going. But finding its origin would be hugely consequential. A natural origin would absolve any one person, but further confirm that our nature-encircling world is incubating pandemic disease at an unprecedented rate. A lab-leak would tarnish the job of scientific research for a lifetime and prove some of the worst people in the culture war - partially - right. I think I'd prefer the first case, but even more than that, I'd like to know the truth.

# Don't reduce the debate to 'Modi is a Fascist' level

## India needs better critique of populism

To understand seven years of the Narendra Modi government and its unique approach to communication, we should begin with a different anniversary. A few days from now, it will be two years since a shocking act of vandalism took place in a small island in the Tungbhadra near Hampi: the desecration of Nava Brindavan, the sacred Tulsi plant bearing shrine of the 15th century Dvaita philosopher Sri Vyasa Tirtha. Unlike many commercialised pilgrimage sites, the Nava Brindavan island is little known outside the Dvaita tradition. For violence to enter a place like this was brutal, a violation not only of cultural sanctity, but of nature too. What makes this site important is not just the monuments, but the fact that the whole valley, with its hills and boulders, still remains as it did for hundreds of years, a sacred geography undisturbed by "development". Greed got here too. The second point of disbelief around this incident, and one that takes us to the issue of communication in the age of Prime Minister Modi, is the way a particular reaction spread on Twitter. Despite the gravity of this desecration, within hours, a cheerful, self-congratulatory tone was on display: Would the rebuilding have happened if "Pappu" been Prime Minister instead of Modi? Could the "new, confident, Hindu" have rebuilt the Brindavan without the inspiration of Modi? Some might say the positive tone averted needless communalism. Yet, a divisive angle was not absent either. Look at us, the tweets went, we don't protest or riot when our sacred sites are violated, unlike... (those people). This sort of boastfulness is now a regular feature of the Hindu response system on social media. Most recently, it was in evidence again when a Charlie Hebdo cartoon mocked Hindu gods over the Covid-19 tragedy in India (We don't heed! We're Hindus!). I share this story because this is one example of what the "on the ground" communication of the movement that has brought Prime Minister Modi to power, and keeps him there, looks like. A few weeks ago, I wrote a sharp criticism in ThePrint of Prime Minister Modi's approach to communication in the face of a severe national calamity. Since then, the prime minister has expressed grief, but has also assured his followers that "the country has given a befitting reply to those who conspire against it," a reference perhaps to the "toolkit" circus. Whatever the truth might be, the deeper question I wish to explore here is the polarisation that has left India divided between two alternate conceptions of reality. Each side seems deeply invested in believing what it wants to, that "Modi is a fascist" or that "Modi is a Messiah." I disagreed with the fascism accusation prevalent in academia and Western media in 2014, and I also disagree with the savior cult that dominates social media. I say this not to sit on the fence but to ask that what we need is a

better critique of propaganda and power than what we have had till now; a critique of both, global corporations like Twitter and Facebook and Netflix, as well as the power of populist political figures and their powerful machines. We need a critique, perhaps, from Left and Right, and not just of them. I think that we are polarised today, at least in part, because social media (and some legacy media too) have got us wedded to our worst beliefs about our opponents. We are now "always on," seeing and being seen on social media, communicating not for connection, but for image. We write less to share, more to perform. The

ruling party makes a spectacle of harassing two young women by turning communication memos into a nation-breaking bogey called a "toolkit" (Disha Ravi and Saumya Verma), it will fail to make a case morally when it has to prosecute someone or something far more serious. And conversely, when critics of the ruling party protest crimes against women with images that violate reason and sanctity by depicting Hindu deities and symbols in violently sexualised forms, they come across not as principled opponents but as bigoted Hinduphobes. Polarisation is one part of the problem today. What may be even

and "Vishwa Guru" initiatives, this government seems out of its depth in the real world, putting on a show of doing instead of actually doing, and at best piling on to a failing "RW" bandwagon no matter how distasteful its record in the West has been. The truth is that doing takes knowing, and knowing takes, well, listening. Unfortunately, Sita Ram Goel seems to have got this one right too. As he wrote in Time for Stock Taking: Whither Sangh Parivar, "The Sangh Parivar never touches anything which does not originate from within it." It is one thing to be a social service organisation and be that way. It's quite another to be ruling a whole nation in a highly interconnected world with the same attitude. I return in conclusion to the Nava Brindavan incident. It is not surprising, perhaps, that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as a ruling party tried to put a cheerful spin on it instead of a negative one (as was the case with the temple desecrations in Andhra Pradesh earlier this year where a different party governs). But the question remains. Does the ruling party have a story beyond mere reactive spin? If so, what is that story? How does India under the BJP see people, cultures, the land, nature, history? From 2014 to 2015, when some pracharakas were kind enough to reach out and present me with books about their history and worldview, I came to believe that critics were misinformed in seeing the Sangh's goal as being a far-right Hindu religious State. Their books were hardly about Hinduism as we knew it; gods, culture, aesthetics, none of it figured. At best, this was self-help and management for the people, emphasising service and national pride as a method of personal transformation ("man-making"). Their larger political vision, at least in principle, was Deendayal Upadhyaya's Integral Humanism, a post-Independence sequel to Gandhi's Hind Swaraj. Unfortunately, we have seen little of Deendayal Upadhyaya besides his name these last few years. The Modi government's attitude to communication instead seems to have, as its guiding aesthetic, a peculiar form of dehumanisation, embodying a cold, objectifying view that reduces human beings to numbers and targets. It does not see people as who they are, but only as either followers, enemies, or future converts. Whether it's called "vikas" or "Hindutva" it still doesn't augur well. India seems to be ruled by a technocracy that supporters think its morality and its opponents think is religion. The BJP has done well so far running with the hares and hunting with the hounds on the question of Hinduism, but eventually, the questions must be answered. What does Hindutva mean to it, an indigenous vision of decolonisation or mere copy-cat Right-wing nationalism? How does the BJP expect to address the disappointments of Hindus fighting off the State's destructive intrusions into sacred spaces from Kerala to the Himalayas?



"gotcha" moment (as it is called in America), or the "befitting reply" (as it is called in India), seems to be the only communication goal of leaders today. We are in a race to extreme isolation and social fragmentation. Every word, every tweet, seems to be one-way, a label or accusation, rather than an invitation to consider. We brand each other as "Right wing" or "Left wing" (and I have to dust off one such awkward label I got last month: how on earth does a columnist for a paper with "Wall Street" in its name get away calling a Hind Swaraj-advocating professor a "Hindu Right" intellectual!). We smear each other as "bhakts" or "anti-nationals." We call upon friends and family members to perform denunciations. We boast of locking up our elders because they voted wrongly. We are, to put it mildly, being played by the very things we can't stop playing with (the documentary The Social Dilemma is a good, if not perfect, critique for the times). I fear that if we don't make an effort to see others as something bigger than either props or rivals to our image on our phones, we will soon forget how to relate with each other. And the language of politics we use at the moment, sadly, is stuck in this polarising, performative mode too. When criticism is virulent and seems motivated by bigotry and bias rather than truth, people eventually reach a point where they will never believe their perceived rivals, a "boy who cried wolf" dilemma as it were. When the

worse is the catastrophic consequences of a government accustomed to one-way, top-down communication eliminating the role of expertise in guiding public affairs. As early as March 2020, professor of public health Rama Baru wrote in Hindustan Times that a nodal communication agency was essential during a pandemic. One year later, it appears that not only do we still lack that sort of specialised communication arm in an emergency, but we also have a subversion of the very idea of communication by the government itself. A key indicator is the hefty 97-page document published in The Wire earlier this year entitled Report of the Group of Ministers on Government Communication. The presence of some respected journalists there notwithstanding, the meetings read like a scene out of the Dilbert cartoons, full of wishful lists and magical numbers: "We should track 50 negative and 50 positive influencers" (Irani, p. 9); "We need to identify 10 big narratives and then how to work on how to take the messages to the common people" (Jaishankar, p. 11); "Around 75% of media persons are impressed by the leadership of Shri Narendra Modi" (unknown, p. 15); "Narrative is fueled by around 20-30 people" (Javadekar, p. 10). And of course, the only qualitative idea that the ruling party seems to have for global messaging: "The right-wing parties of other countries need to be roped in so that some common ground can be found" (Thakur, p. 14) Like its many "Soft Power"

## Environmental conservation by Indian Railways crucial to help India meet COP21 commitments

Most countries across the planet are now concerned about climate change as the impact of unprecedented carbonization of the atmosphere becomes more evident. Global temperatures are expected to rise by 1-1.5°C with the existing use of fossil fuels. Both the Arctic and Antarctic ice caps are melting rapidly, with regular reports of breakage. Several reports warn of an increase in sea levels of up to 6ft by 2100, potentially endangering many urban conglomerates and cities at seashores. The rate of severe tropical cyclones, hurricanes, forest fires, and droughts is increasing, as is the abnormal movement of animal and sea life towards the poles as oceans get warmer. The COP21 (Conference of the Parties) in 2015 in Paris pledged to achieve zero net emissions of greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 to curb rising temperatures. Another global conference is planned for 2026 to take stock and deepen the pledge commitments. The US has rejoined COP21 and China has committed to becoming carbon neutral before 2060. India, under Prime Minister Modi's leadership, has committed to increasing the share of alternate energy production capacity to 40% by 2022 and increasing forest cover to 33%. As of now, India is the only country on track to meet its commitment. Nearly 10% of overall energy consumption is met by alternate energy, and a 175,000MW install base of alternate energy - primarily solar

and wind - is on track to be completed by 2022. The Indian Railways (IR) - the fourth-longest railway system in the world - is a mega-consumer of fossil fuel in India, in the form of diesel. For India to significantly reduce its carbon footprint, it is imperative for IR to rework their incoming energy sources and consumption efficiency.

### TV Mohandas Pai

In this regard, IR has undertaken a series of steps to become carbon neutral and uphold its commitment to the nation's energy mandate and is doing remarkably well at that. IR has planned to move away from diesel as a primary fuel source to electric traction. During the 2014-21 period, 24,000 route KM(RKM) has been electrified as against 4,337RKM during the 2007-14 period. It is on track to complete 100% electrification of BG by December

2023; 71% is complete with 18,800RKM to go. At 100% electrification, the savings is estimated at INR 14,500 crore annually. IR's electrification program will significantly reduce operations costs, enable heavier train loads, allow longer and faster journeys, and reduce overall energy consumption. Further, IR is exploring and installing innovative technologies and management techniques to further reduce its carbon footprint. Switching to direct supply from overhead power equipment to carriages and using energy-efficient equipment for AC carriages and maintaining temperatures between 24-26°C will conserve energy. Electric engines are being re-engineered and manufactured in India to use higher horsepower, particularly 12,000 HP, and containers are being switched to double stack - when these come into use, trains can average 50+ kmph speeds as opposed to the current 25 kmph, there will be lesser hold-ups through better signalling, and longer trains reduce costs with faster turnaround of cargo. The boost in manufacturing of electric locomotives, from 264 in 2013-14 to an estimated 905 in 2021-22 is enabling this shift from diesel rapidly. IR is also focused on measures to save water with the use of Bio Toilets that use vacuum technology, mechanical washing of carriages, mechanised cleaning of carriages, faster pumping of water for use in trains, and rainwater

harvesting across its extensive property base. These initiatives are already leading to huge savings in water consumption. Switching from diesel to electric locomotives will not produce the desired carbon footprint reduction unless the electricity to power the engines comes from clean sources. Currently, 70% of India's electric energy comes from thermal plants; this is slated to reduce to 50% by 2030. IR has already installed 114MW worth of solar on the rooftops of 1000+ stations and 400+ service buildings. Another 25,000MW of land-based solar power is being planned with storage facilities as well. IR is also planning to buy 150MW green power from the market to augment its production. Further, LED bulbs have been installed across all stations, buildings and railway installations for efficiency.

IR's initiatives to make the railways more energy efficient will have a massive impact on the Indian economy - faster transport of goods at lower costs. IR can target a 45% share of goods traffic in 2030 compared to the current 27%; reducing road carriage and thereby reducing the use of fossil fuel, the need for crude imports, and India's overall carbon footprint. India's success in reducing its carbon footprint and meeting its COP21 commitments largely depends on how massive consumers of energy transform themselves. On this World Environment Day, it is heartening to note how the Indian Railways is leading the way in this transformative period.





# How artificial intelligence is driving the future of consumer experience

**Mumbai, June 6:** From recommendation engines to digital footprint-based hyper-personalisation, the technology sorts through innumerable product choices to help the consumer make informed decisions. AI tools are set to transform the future of consumer experience. The technology is already ubiquitous. You can notice its presence throughout the customers' buying journey. Celebrities like Malaika Arora, Suresh Raina, Rana Daggubati, Pratik Gandhi, Dia Mirza, Sania Mirza, Neeraj Pandey, Shital Bhatia and many others come in support of Discovery India's #StopTheMelt campaign. Discovery India partners with UN India and WWF India to launch #StopThe Melt campaign on World Environment Day. Cost and the low commercial factor involved is certainly a key in exploring the options of mobile gaming in the times to come. Why the future of digital gaming is on mobile devices. Consider this scenario of an e-commerce purchase. When the consumer is wading through a limitless marketplace, AI lends a helping hand. From recommendation engines to digital footprint-based hyper-personalisation, the technology sorts through innumerable product choices to help the consumer make informed decisions. Financial transactions have

become faster as well as more secure and convenient with AI and blockchain. AI-driven supply-chain planning along with IoT capabilities ensure efficient and effective distribution and subsequently, fulfillment of customer needs. Chat-bots ensure quick and easy resolution of customer issues. Human operators now only need to deal with sensitive tickets. The presence of artificial intelligence throughout the customer journey is undeniable. To give precise context to what we have discussed in the earlier section, below are few use case examples that fuels how AI is driving current consumer experience and how future is mere continuum of the same. With AR glasses, a regular joe can watch TV and immediately know where to purchase the attire a celebrity is wearing, or the coffee-table being used in a set. Going one step further, the AR glasses can show how the attire is going to fit the user in a mirror or how well the coffee-table ties up the room decor. Adaptive gaming is where AI creates maps, difficulty levels, and customises boss monster stats and skills based on the skill level of gamers presenting challenging and exciting and strictly not disheartening gaming experience. The Reface App, besides the entertain-

ment value where you pretend to be the Hulk or Captain Jack Sparrow, gives users the opportunity to try on different hairstyles and make-overs before they commit to it long-term using GAN models. Streaming services like Netflix make recommendations even based on the portion where



you pause a movie or skip parts of it using Reinforcement Learning based Adaptive Recommendation Engines. Thanks to success stories such as the ones elaborated above, heavy investments are being made in the space of AI, specifically across data and cloud services to ensure cheaper, faster, and more accurate computation. Researchers are working on new processors. Data collection and processing methods are being optimised continuously. Innovative algorithms are being developed every second.

All of this has resulted in one significant development - the presence of AI across every realm of life of an average consumer. Businesses too must start building AI-led capabilities to meet new expectations as well as measure the experiences of their consumers. Measuring consumer experience - the gaps in traditional techniques. The traditional and mainstream tools for consumer experience measure Customer Satisfaction (CSAT) and Net Promoter Scores (NPS). These techniques, however, are no longer effective. They do not communicate key parameters such as what the customer truly thinks about the product, service, or experience. Therefore, they are not ideal for sophisticated consumer experience analysis fit for the age of AI. Let me give you an example. You have just purchased something online. As part of your feedback, the business asks you to rate the product on a scale of 0 to 10. It also asks you to indicate your satisfaction with the product on a scale of 0 to 5. How often do you end up filling these forms? Such surveys often give skewed insights to businesses. The true intention of these ratings, i.e., to generate emotional responses regarding the customer's experience, is not fulfilled. These numbers only paint

half the picture. Further, just these two questions are not enough to capture a consumer's breadth of experience with a brand. AI can amass large sets of qualitative data and analyze it using tailor-made methodologies. It starts with analyzing qualitative data (social media comments, customer reviews and feedback CRM systems, call center feedback, etc.). AI-powered linguistics-based natural language processing (NLP) is then applied to identify and map the keywords in the qualitative dataset. The insights generated can then be leveraged to understand consumer experience holistically and enhance experience outcomes. Therefore, qualitative data has become the touchpoints for AI to provide refined and credible analysis and insights. Businesses must aim to leverage insights gleaned from this data to deliver delightful customer experiences. Befriend AI for a holistic understanding of your customers and deliver to their expectations. Artificial Intelligence has a lot of potential to help businesses understand their customer needs and deliver enhanced experiences. Allow the technology to do the heavy lifting in the form of data collection and analysis and focus on sharpening your consumer experience outcomes. The stage is set.

## BSE StAR MF inks pact with Godavari Urban Multi State Credit Co-Op Society, Nanded

**Mumbai, June 6:** Through this pact, BSE StAR MF aims to promote investment behaviour by spreading awareness and on-boarding new investors among prospective customers in areas, primarily rural, served by GUMCCSL. Further, it will enable both parties to instill collaboration with meaningful outcomes. Mutual funds distribution platform StAR MF has joined hands with Godavari Urban Multi State Credit Co-Op Society Ltd, Nanded to deepen its network of over 70,000 registered distributors, stock exchange BSE said on Friday. In order to deepen rural engagement for greater financial inclusion, BSE StAR MF and Godavari Urban Multi State Credit Co-Op Society Ltd, Nanded (GUMCCSL) signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU). The EBP programme aims to address environmental concerns, reduce oil import bill and provide remunerative income to farmers. World Environment Day 2021: Target to blend 20% ethanol in petrol advanced, says PM Modi. Nikhil Kamath, co-Founder, Zerodha and True Beacon Idea Exchange: Bust in private equity space imminent. Everybody's valuation is inflated, says Nikhil Kamath, co-founder, Zerodha & True Beacon. Through this pact, BSE StAR MF aims to promote investment behaviour by spreading awareness and on-boarding new investors among prospective customers in areas, primarily rural, served by GUMCCSL. In addition, it aims to facilitate cooperation between BSE StAR MF and rural markets in areas such as financial inclusion, investment goals, and wealth creation, the exchange said in a statement. Further, it will enable both parties to instill collaboration with meaningful outcomes. Financial Inclusion plays a crucial role to



increase awareness about the concept of mutual funds in urban, semi-urban, and rural areas, the exchange noted. Established in 2013, Godavari Urban Multi State Credit Co-Op Society Ltd, Nanded is an autonomous association of people united voluntarily to meet their mutually social, economical, cultural, professional, and personal aspirations. Initially, a venture of the middle class; presently GUMCCSL covers a lion's share in almost Maharashtra, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and a modest of Gujarat fulfilling the dreams of the extensive public. "We are confident that via this MoU, Godavari Urban Multi State Credit Co-Op Society Ltd would strive to leverage its reach and capacity for delivery of a wider range of financial products such as mutual funds and so on," Sameer Patil, CBO of BSE, said. According to him, the partnership with BSE StAR MF will ensure that customers will be onboarded through an easy and hassle-free digital process and the efforts are aligned towards a less-paper ecosystem.

## Change of Taste : From alternate milks to delicious diet plans, a pick of places to order for healthy indulgence

**Mumbai, June 6:** We don't spend the same amount of time preparing or consuming any repeat as our ancestors used to. Monsoon Harvest gets it right in the sweet spot-all the right nutrients and ingredients yet flavourful, sweet, not heady, and very affordable. In India, meals are an entire ritual unto themselves, ones that have over the years sadly been hastened along or shortened for convenience. We don't spend the same amount of time preparing or consuming any repeat as our ancestors used to. And it certainly doesn't

vest: For long, I have hunted for the perfect breakfast cereal that wasn't too sugary nor too austere. So far, the market seemed full of stuff that was either intended to give even an adult a sugar high before 10 am or else so strict, dry and chewy that it felt like one was masticating on some expensive hipster cardboard dust. Monsoon Harvest gets it right in the sweet spot-all the right nutrients and ingredients yet flavourful, sweet, not heady, and very affordable. Finally, I don't need to beg my foreign-returning friends to bring me a packet or

vegan! Now, I would never buy anything vegan, but their hazelnut was definitely worth a second serving. The other flavours Mocha Brownie and Ferotella were as amazing as their names suggest. Well-priced and delivered right, it gets my green tick! Nucros diet plans: I like the idea of someone else deciding what I should eat as long as it's tasty. Recently, I went with Nucros, a brand that does various types of meal plans. I went with their Keto plan, a first for me. Keto is basically about eliminating carbs from the diet (fats, proteins and essential nutrients stay). This teaches the body to subsist by burning fat instead of relying on calories, eventually leading to loss in weight/inches. Well, three days of keto eating made me realise that I can eat a lot richer and royally, but remain carb-free. I had a nutritionist on call who even advised how to go back to a regular meal cycle once I stop in order to retain the good effects. And unlike what one thinks, you can enjoy a drink as well-just stick to spirits and avoid wine and beer. I did this for three days and did feel less bloated. Or more precisely, on the fourth day, when I switched back to regular meals, I felt a lot of bloot almost immediately. I would highly recommend trying a subscription meal plan with Nucros, especially if you are looking to jumpstart your fitness regime. Shunya: I am always sceptical of new brands making cola because I feel our palates are too tainted by the few big brands out there.



help that we eat more often while binge-watching some series online on our laptops/tablets rather than conversing around a table with family. Well, not here to judge, but merely share some recommendations of good comestibles that I have tried recently, all as part of my stay-at-home adventures. Only Earth alternate milk: I have to admit that the idea of alt milk is more obtuse to me than the taste. While some do have almost half the carbon footprint of regular milk, others like almond milk need 14.5 litre of water just to produce one almond! And all are too darned expensive for average folk to make the switch for daily consumption. Nevertheless, for the more privileged and concerned, I tried two alternate milks-oat and coconut origin-from Only Earth in my cereals, coffees and even milkshakes, and found them to be quite yummy. The inherent flavours constantly remind that it isn't milk, but the consistency and taste were appreciable. Oat milk is sustainable and absolutely delicious, and even if I can't have it all the time, will definitely add it to my cart now and then. Tripathi's rise is indicative of a big change that's taking place in the Indian entertainment industry. An Actor Less Ordinary: How the stereotypical image of the onscreen 'hero' and 'heroine' is changing. Avoid walking barefoot at home as it can cause strain in plantar fascia, a ligament that connects the heel to the front of the foot, advise experts. Best Foot Forward: As footwear preferences change in pandemic era, take care of foot health. Monsoon Har-

vest: For long, I have hunted for the perfect breakfast cereal that wasn't too sugary nor too austere. So far, the market seemed full of stuff that was either intended to give even an adult a sugar high before 10 am or else so strict, dry and chewy that it felt like one was masticating on some expensive hipster cardboard dust. Monsoon Harvest gets it right in the sweet spot-all the right nutrients and ingredients yet flavourful, sweet, not heady, and very affordable. Finally, I don't need to beg my foreign-returning friends to bring me a packet or

## Jaypee Infratech acquisition: Suraksha Realty seeks week for new bid; NBCC submits plan

**Mumbai, June 6:** It was not immediately clear whether Suraksha will get more time. "It will depend on the CoC. Let's see what decision CoC takes on Monday," a source said. State-run NBCC on Friday submitted the revised bid for acquiring the bankrupt Jaypee Infratech (JIL), even as its rival, the consortium led by Suraksha Realty sought a weeks time to submit its revised plan. People in know of the development said NBCC's revised bid was received on June 4. Suraksha group has written a letter to creditors seeking seven more days to further sweeten its last bid, which was submitted on May 18. The committee of creditors (CoC) will meet on Monday (June 7) to discuss the revised bids by both the resolution applicants. Jaypee Infratech NBCC, Suraksha get time till June 4 to submit revised Jaypee Infratech bids. Jaypee Infratech NBCC says its offer for Jaypee Infratech 'legally

compliant'. It was not immediately clear whether Suraksha will get more time. "It will depend on the CoC. Let's see what decision CoC takes on Monday," a source said. This is the fourth round of the bidding process in the matter of JIL's bankruptcy case. The company went into the insolvency process in August 2017 after the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) admitted an application by an IDBI Bank-led consortium. In the first round of insolvency proceeding, the Rs 7,350-crore bid of Lakshadweep, part of Suraksha Group, was rejected by lenders. The CoC had rejected the bids of Suraksha Realty and NBCC in the second round held in May-June 2019. The matter reached the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal (NCLAT) and then the Supreme Court. In November 2019, the Supreme Court directed the completion of JIL insolvency process within 90 days and ordered that the revised

bids to be invited only from NBCC and Suraksha group. In December 2019, the CoC, approved the resolution plan of NBCC with a 97.36%

year. However, the order was challenged before the NCLAT and later in the Supreme Court, which in March this year ordered



vote in favour during the third round of the bidding process. Later in March 2020, NBCC had got an approval from the NCLT to acquire JIL. Homebuyers' claim amounting to Rs 13,364 crore and lenders' claims worth Rs 9,783 crore were admitted last

that fresh bids should be invited only from NBCC and Suraksha. The apex court had also directed that resolution process be completed in 45 days, which lapsed on May 8 and an application has been filed to extend the timeline for finding a buyer for JIL.

## Workers to see reduction in take-home pay, companies' Provident Fund liability to go up

**Mumbai, June 6:** labour codes, new wage codes, new wage codes affecting PF, Provident Fund, changes in PF and Basic pay, wage codes coming into effect, central government. Once the wages code comes into force, there will be significant changes in the way basic pay and provident fund of employees are calculated. The four labour codes are likely to see the light of day in a couple of months as the Centre is now keen to go ahead with the implementation of these laws, which among others will result in reduction in take-home pay of employees and higher provident fund liability of companies. Once the wages code comes into force, there will be significant changes in the way basic pay and provident fund of employees are calculated. The labour ministry had envisaged implementing the four codes on industrial relations, wages, social security and occupational health safety & working conditions from April 1, 2021. These four labour codes will rationalise 44 central labour laws. Faster claim settlements have assumed greater significance in recent months, given the ferocity of the pandemic that has claimed 3.44 lakh lives in the country. Review Meet: Finance minister asks states, insurance companies to expedite settlements of claims under key schemes. New online tax payment system, mobile app to be launched later: CBDT on upcoming e-filing portal. New online tax payment system, mobile app to be launched later: CBDT on upcoming e-filing portal. The ministry had even finalised the rules under the four codes. But these could not be implemented because many states were not in a position to notify rules under these codes in their jurisdiction. Labour is a concurrent subject under the Constitution of India and therefore both the Centre and states have to notify rules under these four codes to make them the laws of the land in their respective jurisdictions. "Many major states have not finalised the rules under four codes. Some states are in the process of finalising rules for the implementation of these laws. Central government cannot wait forever for states to firm up rules under these codes. Therefore it is planning to implement these codes in a couple of months as some time would have to be given to establishments or firms to align with new laws," a



source told. According to the source, some states had already circulated the draft rules. These states are Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Odisha, Punjab, Gujarat, Karnataka and Uttarakhand. Under the new wages code, allowances are capped at 50 per cent. This means half of the gross pay of an employee would be basic wages. Provident fund contribution is calculated as a percentage of basic wage, which includes basic pay and dearness allowance. The employers have been splitting wages into numerous allowances to keep basic wages low to reduce provident fund and income tax outgo. The new wages code provides for provident fund contribution as a prescribed proportion of 50 per cent of gross pay. After the implementation of new codes, the take-home pay of employees would reduce while provident fund liability of employers would increase in many cases. Once implemented, employers would have to restructure salaries of their employees as per the new code on wages. Besides, the new industrial relation code would also improve ease of doing business by allowing firms with up to 300 workers to go ahead for layoffs, retrenchment and closure without government permission. At present all firms with up to 100 employees are exempted from government permission for lay-off, retrenchment and closure.



Contd. From Page 1

## Congress urges PM Modi to stop

prior to its sale to a third party in the same way the Kerala government took over Hindustan Newsprint Limited, a subsidiary of the HPC," he said. There is every possibility that the state government can protect these two public sector undertakings to "honour their commitments to the people of Assam and the Centre may please assist the state government in this regard", he added. "Considering the present economic condition and pandemic situation, you are requested to release all the outstanding salaries, allowances and other dues to the employees and officers of the two paper mills without further delay," said the Assam Congress chief.

## Chief Minister Sarma reviews

commercial use of the lands lying vacant with the Industries and Commerce Department at the present time. With regard to 'Ease of Doing Business' initiative, Sarma advocated for streamlining the existing regulations and processes to lend vibrancy and competitiveness to the industrial landscape of the state. Chief Minister Sarma also reiterated on the need for a broad roadmap to expedite the commercial cultivation of several trees like Agar Wood, Sandal Wood etc. Taking in to consideration of the vast stretch of cultivable land available in the districts like Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao, steps should be undertaken for massive plantation of commercially viable plants in the districts. This would give a fillip to start up business ventures in the state. Sarma during the meeting also asked the department to create an industrial ecosystem which is demand driven in the state. Industries and Commerce Minister Chandra Mohan Patowary, Principal Secretary to the Chief Minister Samir Kumar Sinha, Principal Secretary to Industries and Commerce Department Dr. K.K. Dwivedi and other senior officers of the department were present during the meeting.

## Education Minister Pegu Shares

them to be self-sufficient. Also Read - Massive plantation drive organized on the occasion of World Environment Day in Lakhimpur district We have started pending distribution of scooters to meritorious girl students from today observing Covid protocol. pic.twitter.com/jx9fwHhRe1 - Ranajo Pegu (@ranajopegu) June 3, 2021 Last year, Himanta Biswa Sarma while speaking on the occasion said that the State government launched Dr Banikanta Kakaty Merit Award in 2017-18 and presented scooters to 1000 girl students who secured first division. In 2018-19 and 2019-20, the award could not be presented due to several reasons, he said adding that the State government has now decided to give away the scooters to the meritorious girl students of that period in February next year which would benefit 5000 and 10000 girl students who secured first division. He further said that the State government while presenting more than 22 thousand scooters to girl students would be able to cover all together 40 thousand girl students by this award since its launch in 2017-18. Also Read - NEEPCO releases excess water from RHEP, water level of Ranganadi rises CM Sarma earlier mentioned that the government has planned to give two-wheelers to meritorious male students as well. The first phase of scooter distribution ceremony was held on December 20 last year at Amingaon, Guwahati. The government has also provided Laptops and cash award in lieu of Laptops to the meritorious students securing 1st division in the HSLC and High Madrasa Examination of SEBA and 10th standard examination held under State Madrasa Education Board, Assam and Sanskrit Board Assam under 'Anundoram Barooah Cash-cum Laptop Award Scheme.' This scheme was planned for motivating and inspiring the students for better performance and to have first-hand experience with Information and Communication Technology. Also Read - Obituary: Jiban Chandra Das On June 3, Pegu said that they have started pending distribution of scooters to meritorious girl students. He tweeted, "We have started pending distribution of scooters to meritorious girl students from today observing Covid protocol." A total of 2,49,812 candidates are registered for the HS final examination-2021. Of them, a total of 1,91,860 candidates are in the Arts stream; 38,431 in the Science stream; 18,440 in the Commerce stream; and 1,081 candidates have been registered in the Vocational stream.

## High alert sounded in Lakhimpur

release of dam water by NEEPCO has caused the rise of water level of Ranganadi in Lakhimpur district in the evening. The DEOC has already sounded alert in the riverine areas of Lakhimpur. It may be recalled that waters from NEEPCO's RHEP dam devastated Lakhimpur with deluge in 2008 and again in 2017. Incessant rain in the district in the last 72 hours has already caused inundation in many areas of Lakhimpur. On Saturday, the rising waters of Ranganadi swept away a bridge at Gobarisali. Lakhimpur MP Pradan Baruah has expressed concern over the release of water from the dam of Ranganadi Hydro Electric Project. Baruah has requested Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has raised the issue with the Union power ministry. Huge water discharge by @NEEPCOLimited post heavy rains endangers Lakhimpur/catchment area of flooding. Ranganadi, tributaries flowing to brim. Proactive action by NEEPCO, armed with weather forecast, was needed. Requested Hon @himantabiswa for asap resolution with @MinOPower.

## BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari and

Soumendu Adhikari of Kanthi Municipality, Government tripal whose estimated value is around lakhs of rupees, was taken away from municipality office godown by forcefully and illegally opening locks," the complaint read. The FIR also mentioned that the BJP leaders used armed central forces in the alleged theft. Earlier on Saturday, Suvendu Adhikari's close aide - Rakhal Bera was arrested for allegedly duping people with fake promise. Bera was arrested by Manicktala police station based on a complaint of Sujit Dey. According to Kolkata Police, Bera was part of a criminal conspiracy with Chanchal Nandi and a few others and allegedly organised a fake job racket sometime between July and September 2019. "The duo reportedly promised Dey with a job in Irrigation and Waterways Ministry. The accused persons allegedly took Rs 2 lakh in exchange of the job. However, the complainant claims that the accused persons misappropriated the entire amount and did not provide a job in return," he said.

## Students celebrate 209 years of

banyan tree has in the past attracted many tourists including, scholars from Korea and Japan. Ananda Khataniyar, brand ambassador of the forest and environment department of Assam, said, "The world is facing a dearth of oxygen supply for Covid-19 patients during the ongoing pandemic. So, we should plant more trees to increase the oxygen level in the environment." Nature lover, Smita Parashar said, "Today we planted more than 50 saplings across the Pathsala town. Everyone should work together towards restoring the degrading ecosystem." Tags: AssamBajaliPathsalaWorld Environment Day.

## Two more arrested in Assam doctor

after taking cognizance of the case. The NHRC has demanded a report within 4 weeks. Besides an enquiry into the allegations, the report is expected to include the needful preventive and punitive action taken in the matter. The commission has also sent a copy of the complaint to the secretary, Union Health & Family Welfare Ministry, to initiate necessary measures to ensure the safety and security of the frontline health workers in the country. A young doctor was brutally beaten by a mob and relatives of a Covid-19 patient after the patient died had at Odali Covid-19 care centre in the Hojai district of Assam. According to reports, after a Covid-19 patient died at the centre, the relatives of the deceased patient brutally beaten the doctor identified as Dr Seuj Kumar Senapati. A video of the incident also went viral on social media where some people were seen attacking the young doctor and kicking him. According to reports, Dr Seuj Kumar Senapati had reached Odali Model Hospital for his Covid-19 duty around 1:30 pm on Tuesday. "The relatives of the patient complained that the patient's condition was serious. When I saw the patient, I found that he had already died. The relatives then immediately vandalised the furniture at the hospital and attacked me," Dr Seuj Kumar Senapati said. According to the complaint, having attached media reports, the incident happened after the Covid patient had died. Allegedly, some of the frontline medical workers, doctors, nurses and ward boys managed to escape but also got hurt. All of them are deeply traumatized by the incident.

## India sees lowest single-day rise

the daily positivity rate stands at 5.62%. India's active caseload decreased by 77,449 in the last 24 hours and has now dropped to 14,77,799. There were 2,677 coronavirus-related deaths in the last 24 hours and the death count has now mounted to 3,46,759. 1,89,232 people were discharged between Saturday and Sunday morning. So far, more than 2.69 crore persons have recovered from the COVID-19 infection. The national recovery rate has now increased to 93.67%. On the other hand, India crossed the landmark of 23 crores COVID-19 vaccination coverage on Saturday with the country administering 33,53,539 vaccine doses in the last 24 hours. According to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, a total of 23,13,22,417 vaccine doses have been administered through 32,42,503 sessions across India.

## Assam imposes new COVID-19

etc attached to these warehouses or cold storages have been asked to shut after noon. - The government/ semi-government officers in the rank of deputy secretary and above and senior executives in non-government sector along with their key support staff allowed to attend office only for emergency and essential works. Meanwhile, Assam on Saturday reported over 3,781 new COVID-19 cases and 44 deaths, taking the total caseload to 4,32,714 and death toll stood at 3,621, as per health department's bulletin.

## World Environment Day celebrated in Borobada forest range



Gossaigaon, June 6: Like other parts of the state and to balance the natural equilibrium the World Environment Day was observed here at Failaguri in Gossaigaon under Parbhathjhora Forest Range. A tree saplings distribution and plantation drive was also organised in the same programme. Around 500 tree saplings were distributed among the locals in Failaguri. The range a new forest camp was also set up in the area of Failaguri today. Sahanur Alom, Ranger, Barobada Forest appealed the locals to plant more saplings and protect the natural resources. Local social activist Shyam Sundar Marandi, TCLC president Nur Hasan Ansari, Fengfor Narzary, Ward Commissioner of 2 No. Ward Gossaigaon also took part in the programme to make it successful.

## 'Super infectious' Delta variant cause of COVID-19 second wave : Study

New Delhi, June 6: The Delta variant first found in India is being claimed to be the reason behind the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country as per a study carried out by scientists of Indian SARS-CoV-2 Genomic Consortia (INSACOG) and National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). The B.1.617.2 strain also called the Delta variant is reported to be "more infectious" than the Alpha variant which was first detected in Kent, UK the study claimed. "It has been found that Delta variant is in fact, 50 per cent more contagious than the Alpha strain," the study said. According to the study "The B.1.617 lineage of SARS CoV-2 was first reported from Maharashtra but is now detected in other states like West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Delhi, Gujarat, Telangana." INSACOG, a consortium of labs which undertook the genome sequencing in India, recommended stringent measures to be taken by the Health Ministry and NCDC that is to be further, communicated to all states and union territories and not just states with more cases of infections. "Frequent written communications by Union Health Ministry and NCDC to all States/UTs (Not just to the high burden states) stressing the need for more stringent measures, have been sent at regular intervals," the study stated. Further, the study urges that authorities keep a strict vigilance where new variants of concern are reported and take stringent public health measures. "States/UTs are advised to keep strict surveillance in the districts reporting new variants of concern and take up stringent public health measures including contact tracing, genome sequencing of positive samples of persons having a history of international travel." The Delta variant has infected people mostly in Delhi, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Odisha, and Telangana, which are the worst-hit states in the second surge. However, the study could not prove the role of the Delta variant in the severity of the COVID-19 infection which could have resulted in more fatalities.

## NEET UG 2021: Cancel all national-level entrance exams, Tamil Nadu CM MK Stalin urges PM Narendra Modi

New Delhi, June 6: Tamil Nadu CM MK Stalin urged Prime Minister to cancel all national-level entrance exams including NEET UG 2021. New Delhi: Tamil Nadu Chief Minister MK Stalin on Saturday (June 5, 2021) urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to cancel all national-level entrance examinations including NEET UG 2021. "Dear Prime Minister Vanakkam. I wish to draw your attention to an urgent issue concerning the future of Class XII students in the state," Stalin wrote in a letter to PM Modi. He stated that in line with the CBSE's decision to cancel the Class 12th board exams, the Tamil Nadu government has also taken the same call due to the current COVID-19 situation. "Given these circumstances, I am of the strong view that conducting national level entrance examinations for any professional course would be immensely detrimental to the health and well-being of students," Stalin wrote. The Tamil Nadu CM added, "I, therefore, urge you to cancel the conduct of all national level entrance examinations like NEET, as the same reasons adduced for cancelling the class XII Board Examinations are equally applicable to entrance examinations as well. In the letter, Stalin also informed that a committee is constituted to decide on the evaluation and compilation of the marks of the Class 12th students. This is to be noted that the National Testing Agency (NTA) is slated to conduct NEET (UG) - 2021 in 11 languages, including Hindi and English through Pen & Paper mode on August 1.

## Results of Prize Money Online Quiz Competition 'Gyanmanthan 2.0' Declared

Golaghat, June 6: Equinox a popular quiz club from Golaghat had organised a Prize Money Online Quiz Competition on May 30. The results of the quiz competition named 'Gyanmanthan 2.0' was declared. The top ten winners of the competition are Sayan Mazumdar of Guwahati Medical College and Hospital, Guwahati, Shriya Gupta of Rabinranath Tagore University, Rajibul Awal of Tezpur University, Yojana Das of Daulat Ram College, Sangeet Swargam Kakoti of Xi'an Jiatong University, China, Anubhuti Tamuli of Don Bosco High School, Dergaon, Abhilash Das of Tezpur University, Saptarshi

## Delhi lockdown to continue with relaxations, CM Kejriwal announces odd-even rule for markets



New Delhi, June 6: Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal on Saturday said the coronavirus-induced lockdown will continue in the national capital but with ease in restrictions. The lockdown has been extended in the city till 5 am on June 14. Addressing the press, CM Kejriwal said markets and malls will be opened on odd-even basis. He also said the Delhi Metro will resume its operation with 50 per cent capacity from Monday. Private offices will be allowed to function with 50 per cent staff. For government offices, Group A staff will be allowed to function with 100 per cent capacity while Group B will resume work with 50 per cent staff, the CM said. CM Kejriwal said the administration is ready to combat the third wave of Covid-19. A pediatric task force has been set up considering the risk to children. He also announced the setting up of genome testing labs at the Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Hospital and the Institute of Liver and Biliary Sciences (ILBS). "With an expected third wave of Covid-19, 420 tonnes of oxygen storage capacity is being prepared. We have also spoken to Indraprastha Gas Limited to produce 150 tonnes of oxygen," ANI quoted him as saying. Here are the lockdown relaxations announced in Delhi Essential services such as healthcare, police, fire stations, etc, will continue to work with full strength. Private offices to resume operations with 50 per cent staff. The offices will open between 9 am and 5 pm. Employees need to produce a valid authority letter and valid ID card issued by their employer to travel to the office. For government offices, Group A staff will be allowed to function with 100 per cent capacity while Group B will resume work with 50 per cent staff. All malls, markets and market complexes (except weekly markets) shall open between 10 am to 8 pm on odd-even basis. Shops selling essential goods including educational books and stationery shops, fan shops in malls, markets and market complexes, are permitted to open on all days without the restriction of timing. All standalone (single) shops and all neighbourhood (colony) shops and shops in residential complexes, shall be permitted to open on all days without any distinction of essential and non-essential goods/services. However, the timings of such shops dealing with non-essential goods/services will be between 10 am to 8 pm. Delivery of all type of goods through e-commerce shall be allowed on production of valid I card issued by the employer.

## India needs 26 crore Covid vaccine doses to inoculate children in 12-17 age group: Dr VK Paul



New Delhi, June 6: Two major points of discussion for India currently are whether children should be vaccinated and how soon should they get the jabs? As the deal with Pfizer is still being worked out, India will need 26 crore doses for vaccinating children in the 12-17 age group, Niti Aayog member Dr VK Paul, who is also the chairman of NEGVAC, recently said, citing government estimates. "Child cohort is not a small cohort. Children between 12-17 age group are somewhat 3-14 crore. We need 26 crore doses for them," said Dr VK Paul. Vaccine trials for children are still underway. "Not only Covaxin is conducting child trials, but Zydus Cadila vaccine is also already being tested on children. Zydus will hopefully receive licensure in the next two weeks. Maybe, we have enough data to take a view on whether that vaccine can be given to children or not. Once a decision is taken, we should keep in mind who we are covering. This will be one of the decisions based on which other decisions will be taken. Pathways to such decisions are continuously being examined daily," Dr VK Paul told India Today TV. Meanwhile, doctors and health experts are examining vaccines for children since India continues to witness multi-system inflammatory syndrome cases in children (MIS-C). Northern India has registered over 100 cases of MIS-C cases, according to the Indian academy of paediatric and intensive care data. "We think that children are less infected with Covid-19 as they remain asymptomatic. However, cases of MIS-C, happening post-coronavirus, have been increasing in children. Alarming, 80 per cent of these cases have been critical and affected children were hospitalised in paediatric ICUs," said Dr Dhiren Gupta. "Children have been locked inside homes. They are restless and depressed, and have developed mental issues. It's time to think about opening schools properly that have been shut for a long time now. All this is possible only if we vaccinate children," he said.

Chowdhury of St. Xavier's College, Kolkata, Dipjyoti Dutta, Shoolin Woods Operation Manager and Shayan Debnath of The Bhawanipur Education Society College. Sayed Nekib, Biswajit Pujari and Bedanta Kalita from Team Equinox stated that answers were received from total 78 contestants and contestants were judged on the basis of points scored, number of Star questions answered and time taken for submission. They congratulated all the winners and participants. The top three rank holders will be given cash prizes and E Certificates while the others in the top ten category will get E Certificates.



# Euro 2020 draw puts England's hopes for a festival of relief at risk of falling flat

**Jonathan Wilson, June 6 :** International tournaments are only tangentially about the football - which is probably just as well given how unsophisticated it often is beside the very best of the club game, how sluggish it can appear. They are about the stories and the mood, about the scandal and the drama and, most of all, the sense of shared experience. Russia 2018 was a very good World Cup and an enjoyable tournament to cover, but watching England's victory over Colombia alone in a drab flat in Samara, surrounded by another journalist's

Brazil and the possibly spiked water-bottles... The spectacle may have been so bad that Fifa immediately set about changing the laws to prevent anything so cynical ever happening again, but it didn't matter. The narratives were compelling enough they swept a global audience along with them. That's also why the chuntering that the general standard of football at Euro 96 was poor is largely irrelevant. That summer now stands, at least if you happened to be at an English university at the time, as a glorious time of freedom and hope: an unpopular government

has complicated the logistics - perhaps to an unforgivable degree during the pandemic - but there is at least the (possibly over-romantic) hope that all points of Europe, from Seville to Baku, St Petersburg to Rome, will be able to come together in celebrating human resilience and the beginning of the end of the crisis. This year's FA Cup final had, barring last season when nobody was admitted at all, the lowest attendance since 1890, yet the fans who were there had never felt more present. Even if Wembley is only half or a quarter full, it will feel like a huge step back towards some sort of normality. After months of restrictions, there is a sense of pent-up energy waiting to be released. Whether you're gathered around a communal screen in a park or beer garden, desperate to toss your plastic glass of lager in the air, or watching quietly at home, the Euros have the potential to be a great unifying experience as the crisis (hopefully) wanes. And that's when reality kicks in. For one thing, as the Delta variant surges, the figures are looking increasingly worrying. For another, there's the fact that humanity is rarely good at finding common cause, as the boeing of the taking of the knee at recent Premier League games and England's friendly against Austria has demonstrated. Then there is the actual football. Because of the delayed start, this has been an unusually exhausting season. Injuries have robbed both the Netherlands and Hungary of their most important player. Kevin De Bruyne may miss out for Belgium. England have doubts over the fitness of a key central defender and a key midfielder. There is a danger this becomes a tournament like the 2002 World Cup, which began at the end of May because of the Japanese rainy season and was characterised by fatigue as a result, a handful of storylines - Senegal's progress, France's implosion, Roy Keane v Mick McCarthy in Saipan,

Ronaldo's redemption - ultimately not enough to compensate for the raggedness of much of the football. And finally, from a parochial point of view, there's England. Many of the signs are positive. They have the experience of reaching the World Cup semi-finals in Russia three years ago. They have home advantage for, potentially, six of the seven games they would play were they to reach the final. They have a hugely talented young squad and, while there are reasonable doubts in goal, at centre-back and in central midfield, this still appears the deepest and best-balanced squad England have taken to a major tournament for a long, long time. The problem is the draw. If England top a far from straightforward group, they will probably play Portugal or Germany in the last 16, two sides who immediately conjure memories of tournament exits. This may be a (relatively) vulnerable Germany, but England have won only two knockout games against World Cup or Euros-winning countries since 1966 (and one of those was on penalties). Come second in the group and the last 16 is notionally easier, a likely meeting with Sweden or Poland in Copenhagen, but that route leads to a probable quarter-final in St Petersburg against France, the overwhelming favourites. Of course to win tournaments, you have to beat good sides, but there is a serious danger that England's involvement ends before there has been any chance to build the sort of euphoric momentum seen in 1996 and 2018. And while any semi or final played at Wembley before a crowd should be something to celebrate, if England aren't there, if there aren't home fans, it may not feel that way. Euro 2020 could be one of the great shared sporting experiences, a symbolic festival of relief; but there is a risk it becomes an anticlimactic addendum to what has already been a slog of a season.



drying laundry, and seeing the scenes of jubilation from back home, there was a distinct sense of being bypassed by something significant. As the Irish columnist Con Houlihan observed of Italia 90: "I missed it... I was in Italy at the time." It's also why Italia 90, despite the poverty of much of the football, stands as one of the defining World Cups. There was the progress of England and Ireland, but also of Cameroon. There was Argentina's bloody-minded path to the final, culminating in their operatic semi-final victory over the hosts in Naples. There were last appearances for West Germany, Yugoslavia, the USSR and Czechoslovakia, the USA's first appearance at a World Cup since 1950, Costa Rica stunning Scotland, Frank Rijkaard spitting at Rudi Völler,

was in its death throes. Britain felt culturally important and the atmosphere at Wembley seemed to suggest a joyful, inclusive patriotism was possible. (And that despite an IRA bomb destroying the Arndale Centre in Manchester on the morning of England v Scotland and the violence after the semi-final defeat, in which a Russian student was stabbed in Brighton.) Kings Cross station in London is reflected in the European Championship trophy during the buildup for the continent-wide tournament. From a narrative standpoint, Euro 2020 has the potential to be one of the most memorable tournaments there has ever been. Every game played represents some sort of symbolic victory over Covid. The pancontinental nature of the tournament

# Mo Farah's Tokyo Olympic hopes hang by thread after shock 10,000m defeat



**London, June 6 :** Mo Farah is facing a desperate struggle to make the Olympics after failing to post the qualifying time for Tokyo and finishing a shock eighth at the European Athletics 10,000m Cup in Birmingham. Despite it being his first 10,000m race for nearly four years, Farah was expecting to run easily the 27m 28sec needed to make it on the plane to Japan. Instead the 38-year-old was toiling and grimacing by halfway - the result, he said, of a niggle to his left ankle sustained 10 days ago. Incredibly it was Farah's first defeat over the distance for nearly 10 years, since coming second at the world championships in Daegu in 2011. His finishing time, 27:50.54, was also his slowest since 2014. To add insult to injury he was also beaten by his fellow Briton Marc Scott. Mo Farah trails in behind his British compatriot Marc Scott and others, with the multiple Olympic champion showing the strain. "I am obviously disappointed with the result but it is what it is," said Farah. "Without making any excuses, the last 10 days haven't been great as I've been carrying a niggle since I got back from training." Farah was one of 12 British athletes competing at the European 10,000m Cup, which doubled up as the British trials for the Tokyo Olympics. The word from Farah's camp was that he was in excellent shape after a training camp

in Flagstaff, Arizona, and he made an early point to his rivals by taking the lead on the opening lap, which was run in a fast 62 seconds. From then on, though, he slipped back, and was struggling long before he began to grit his teeth over the closing laps. "With 15 laps to go you know my face but I was hurting hard," he added. "I just had to keep fighting, keep digging. Keep digging in and finish within the top two. I honestly thought with five laps to go I had the time." Farah will have another three weeks to run the qualifying standard but the chances of him making it to Tokyo, let alone defending his 10,000m title, now look slim. "This is the first bit I have done of track in the last two weeks," he added. "It is not ideal. But it is what it is, it is part of sport." However Scott, who was seventh in 27:49:83 in a race won by France's Morhad Amdouni in 27:23:27, will be there. "The race wasn't perfect by any means," he said. "But I won the British race and that's the main thing - to get on the plane." Inevitably all the focus is on Farah, who came into this race still believing he could win a third Olympic 10,000m title. The last time he had raced the distance he won gold in front of adoring 54,000 home fans at the 2017 London world championships. This time, because of Covid, there were barely a few hundred people - mostly volunteers and officials - watching. It soon became apparent that much changed in the last four years. Earlier in the evening, Britain's Eilish McColgan produced a thrilling last lap to chase down the Israeli athlete Selamawit Teferi to win the European Cup and also qualify for Tokyo. McColgan, the daughter of the 1991 10,000m world champion, Liz, came through in 31:19:21. Not far behind in third was Britain's Jess Judd, who ran a personal best of 31:20:84 to also book her place at the Olympics. Meanwhile in Jamaica, Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce ran 10.63sec for 100m - to become the second-fastest woman in history. Fraser-Pryce, who won 100m gold at the 2008 and 2012 Olympics and at the 2019 world championships, was well beaten by Britain's Dina Asher-Smith a fortnight ago on a cold, wet night in Gateshead a fortnight ago. But she found racing in perfect conditions at the National Stadium in Kingston much more to her liking. She blasted out the blocks and was well clear by halfway before coming home to beat her own national record of 10.70, which she shared with Elaine Thompson-Herah. Only the American Florence Griffith Joyner, who ran 10.49 in 1988 but died a decade later, has ever gone faster. "Honestly I never expected I would run 10.6 and think it's a good thing because there was no pressure," Fraser-Pryce told reporters as she screamed with excitement. "I'm lost for words because 10.6 has been a dream, a goal, I've been working so hard, being so patient to see it finally unfold. I'm so ecstatic."

# Eddie Jones planning to use summer fixtures to look to England's future

**London, June 6 :** Summer has arrived at last and, after England's winter of discontent, Eddie Jones will attempt to put a dismal Six Nations campaign and a review by his Twickenham employers behind him and lay the foundations for the next World Cup. On Thursday, England's head coach announces a squad to face Scotland in an A team fixture at Leicester on 27 July and for two internationals against the United States and Canada at Twickenham in early July. The accent will be on youth. With 11 of his frontline players going to South Africa on the Lions tour, Jones has the chance to cast an eye over some of the emerging talent in a Premiership season that because of the pandemic seems never-ending. The sunny weather has given us some cricket scores in the Premiership although the high-scoring games are not always to the liking of England's head coach, as he explained during the week. "When the sun is shining the ball has got quicker and defences have struggled to get set. Some of these games don't have the rigour and intensity that you need to see

players perform under. You do see great games, though. The Sale-Bristol game, for instance, was a terrific game of rugby." The sunshine and harder grounds and the anticipated absence from his squad of George Ford make it certain Marcus Smith will at last get the chance to swap his multi-coloured Harlequins shirt for the white of England in the coming weeks. The 22-year-old fly-half has been in blistering form this season and is one of the reasons his club have qualified for the Premiership play-offs. There has been a clamour for Smith to step up. "Marcus Smith has benefited from that quicker ball," Jones said. "From seeing him at Brighton College back in 2015 I've watched him a lot. He's got a nice balance to his game." With England's other leading fly-half Owen Farrell off to South Africa, Jones will be on the lookout for another captain. One candidate could be the Bath flanker Sam Underhill, who missed the Six Nations through an injury that cost him a place on the Lions tour. Four years ago, Jones took a squad to play two Tests in Argentina without the players selected for the Lions



in New Zealand and Underhill, then playing outside England with the Ospreys, and a then-18-year-old Tom Curry emerged as fixtures in England's back row. "Two years from the World Cup these games open up some opportunities for young players. In 2017, it was Underhill and Curry and if we can get two or three more this time that would be a bonus," said Jones. "There will be a clean sheet for the next couple of games. I've been travelling the country looking for the right talent and I think perhaps I have found a few

players." Jones has been impressed with some of the younger players at Sale who, despite an overreliance of their South African contingent, have some of the most promising English talent about. Tom Curry's twin, Ben, is one player expected to make his own breakthrough before long. "In Argentina we picked Ben ahead of Tom. He's had a bad time through injuries. It can be difficult for twins. Historically one tends to step up quicker. But in that game against Bristol I saw that he has the fight in him. There are a lot of good young

players at Sale like the scrum-half [Raphael] Quirke and the loose-head [Bevan] Rodd." Sale's head coach, Alex Sanderson, had also spoken enthusiastically of his fit-again centre Manu Tuilagi who Jones would love to pair up again with Henry Slade, another player surprisingly left out of Warren Gatland's Lions squad. Waiting for Tuilagi to put together a long run of internationals has been English rugby's equivalent of Waiting for Godot over the years and his withdrawal from Friday's Premiership fixture after it emerged he had been in close contact with a Sale member of staff who tested positive for Covid-19 will have set him back further. Jones is understandably cautious. "It's a bit premature at this stage. We'll have to see how he goes for the rest of the season before we make a judgment on him. I'll go up there and have a chat with him and see where he's at." Jones repeated his mantra during the week that he wants to make England "the best team in the world". For now, England's disgruntled supporters will be happy to see them entertain Twickenham next month with a cricket score or two against the US and Canada.

# Bristol secure home semi-final with controversial win over Leicester

**London, June 6 :** What a way to claim your first home play-off. Bristol were forced into all manner of antics to survive this with maximum points, having played themselves into a winning position with the sort of swagger with which we more readily associate them. Leicester, their home stadium reverberating with a passion it has not seen for months - some might say years - seemed to have Bristol on their knees, forcing them into penalty after penalty as the clock ticked down. Ellis Genge had the number of Nahuel Tetaz Chaparro, Bristol's replacement tighthead, as the two sides engaged at repeated scrums on the Bristol five-metre line. The Tigers were trailing by only three and seemed set to force their way over somehow. Clinch the win and they would be assured of a place in Europe next season. Eventually, Tetaz

Chaparro was sent to the sin-bin for the umpteenth penalty against Bristol, and the action shifted, with time up on the clock, to the touchline. An incensed Steve Borthwick could be heard accusing Pat Lam of lying, when the Bristol director of rugby tried to claim that his starting tighthead, John Afoa, whom Tetaz Chaparro had replaced at half-time, had come off injured. The official match cards had registered the replacement as tactical. If Afoa had been injured, he would not be allowed to return for the final scrum. Subsequent scrums would be uncontested but Bristol would have to go down to 13 men. If his replacement at half-time had been tactical, he could come back. While Lam was insisting he was injured, Afoa returned to the field of his own accord. At that final scrum Afoa ripped into

Genge, the ball popped out, and Bristol kicked it into touch. The brawl that broke out seemed almost incidental. Borthwick would not be drawn afterwards, while Lam tried to set his seemingly inconsistent approach in some sort of context. Afoa had been injured and was not due back for another week, but Bristol were short of props. The decision was taken to start Afoa, who is 37, for fear that he might have to come on early if he began on the bench. When he was duly withdrawn at half-time, the registration of the replacement as tactical was described by Lam as an administrative error. But this is the point of contention. Was it an error or were Bristol keeping their options open? The welfare concerns surrounding Afoa, who had also driven up on the day, are understandable,

especially after he had spent an hour or so sitting on the bench. But this is a professional sport. Afoa was either replaced tactically or he was not. Had Tetaz Chaparro been injured on the hour, say, would Afoa have come back on then? These questions will no doubt be examined in a review. It is hoped any insults thrown in the heat of the moment will be treated as no more than that - passions running high under duress. What this says about Bristol as potential champions is another intriguing question. When they click they are fabulous - as their four tries testify, two by Semi Radradra and one each by Harry Randall and Max Malins. But Exeter in particular will note how Leicester found give up front, albeit in the second half, by which time Afoa had left. The Tigers replied through

Hanro Liebenberg and Julián Montoya, the latter's score hauling the home team back from a 26-16 deficit after Radradra's second on the hour. One might consider what followed the ultimate example of a team finding a way to win; or one might see it as a lucky escape for would-be champions with a vulnerability. The next few weeks will reveal.





# Essential Quality wins Belmont Stakes as banned Baffert stays in background



London, June 6 : Brad Cox picked up his first Triple Crown victory with Essential Quality's romp to victory in the Belmont Stakes on Saturday while waiting to see if he'll be awarded another from the Kentucky Derby. Cox could be a Derby winner

with Mandaloun if Bob Baffert-trained Medina Spirit is disqualified. But Cox was able to enjoy this one with Essential Quality beating Hot Rod Charlie by one-and-a-quarter lengths. Essential Quality, who went off as the 6-5 favorite, passed early

leader Hot Rod Charlie around the final turn and held on to win the \$1m race. "That was a long way around there a mile-a-half but it was exciting," Cox said. "It looked like the horse on the inside, he still had run left. I knew it was going to be a battle down the lane." Essential Quality, a striking gray colt, finished fourth as a beaten favorite in the Kentucky Derby because of a rough trip. Essential Quality showed in the Belmont why he has long been considered one of the top three-year-olds in the country. "In the Kentucky Derby we were so confident that we're gonna win that race," said jockey Luis Saez, who won a Triple Crown race for the first time. "He was ready for the race. But we have a little unlucky start ... Today the main thing was try to break clean and the rest I know he's gonna do it." Backdoor his way to becoming the first Louisville-born trainer

to win the Kentucky Derby wouldn't allow Cox the same joy of victory as the Belmont, which the up-and-coming star will likely remember as his first true Triple Crown triumph. And Cox saw this coming. He predicted last summer that Essential Quality would be his horse for the Belmont, and that proved true in beating a tough field of seven other horses. The race was run without a horse trained by Baffert, who was banned by the New York Racing Association after Medina Spirit failed a post-Derby drug test for the presence of a steroid. Churchill Downs suspended Baffert for two years after a second sample from the Derby came back positive for betamethasone, which is prohibited at any level on race day in Kentucky, Maryland and New York. Normalcy returned to the Belmont after a topsy-turvy 2020 that featured the race leading off the Triple Crown at an empty racetrack.

# St Helens outclass York to take Women's Challenge Cup with Woosey double

washington, June 6 : St Helens' class and experience led them to a first Women's Challenge Cup triumph as they comfortably saw off a valiant challenge from York City Knights. The Saints, littered with England internationals and mainstays of the women's game such as Emily Rudge, Jodie Cunningham and Amy Hardcastle, were too strong for the Knights throughout. Leading 20-0 at half-time thanks to four outstanding tries worthy of gracing any game, the Saints controlled proceedings for the majority of the final against a York side still very much in their embryonic stages as a squad. In contrast, the experience of their opponents here was arguably one of the main differences, with their key players linking up to devastating effect to guide them to the title on an afternoon when the women's sport was showcased live on the BBC for the first time. After quelling some

early York pressure, St Helens went ahead when Faye Gaskin's pass sent Danni Bush across in the corner. Gaskin was injured in the act of celebrating that try but Cunningham replaced her at half-back in seamless

fashion. She was involved in the move which sent Rachael Woosey over for the Saints' second try. Beth Stott failed to convert either try, but it mattered little as by half-time the Saints had added another two tries

to underline their dominance. Rudge scored a magnificent solo try to make it 14-0, before a superb Cunningham pass sent Hardcastle through a gap in a tiring York defence, with Stott converting to make it 20-0 at the break. York's hopes were briefly raised when Sinead Peach crossed shortly after half-time, but within two minutes St Helens extended their lead again when Cunningham sent Woosey over the line for her second of the afternoon. It was one of several occasions when Cunningham, one of the most experienced players in the women's game, tore York's defence apart. There was time for one more St Helens try, too. With the result long secured, Carrie Roberts forced her way across the line in menacing fashion, swatting off three York defenders to emphatically underline how St Helens are very much the benchmark side in the Women's Super League at present.



# St Helens hold off thrilling Hull fightback to reach Challenge Cup final

London, June 6 : The wait is almost over for St Helens. Anyone who has followed one of rugby league's most successful clubs in the 13 years since their last Challenge Cup triumph in 2008 would argue the most difficult hurdle is still to be cleared on 17 July when they walk out at Wembley against Castleford, winners of the second semi-final here, for the final of the sport's most prestigious competition

from the St Helens winger Regan Grace decided this enthralling semi-final. There is no doubting that a huge moment threatened to overshadow this contest, though. With St Helens ahead by six and half-time approaching, a routine carry from his own line by Josh Griffin ended disastrously, when the centre appeared to suffer a serious achilles injury. He immediately fell to the ground and was clearly in



for the 23rd time in their history. But afternoons like these, where the opposition are resilient, the conditions are energy-sapping and the stakes are high, are the ones where you really find out what a team is made of. Yes, St Helens still have to win next month to complete the job and end their remarkable drought, but the way they acquitted themselves for large parts of this semi-final victory - as well as throughout 2021 in general - stands them in very good stead for the final. How they were made to dig deep here, though. Seemingly sauntering their way through with a three-score lead going into the final 15 minutes, tries from Danny Houghton and Cameron Scott reduced St Helens' lead to three points in the blink of an eye. Hull were then in prime position to strike again and secure a remarkable victory, but an incredible 90-metre interception try

excruciating pain, but in doing so, he threw the ball out of his grasp. Should Griffin have held on to enable play to stop? Perhaps. Should the referee, Liam Moore, have called a halt with the whistle? Perhaps. But neither of those things materialised and instead, with play still live, Theo Fages swooped on the loose ball to race in under the posts and make the score 14-2 in St Helens' favour. Whether it swung the contest decisively is unclear, but it undoubtedly put them in control in terms of the scoreline. Before that, Hull had started well but only had a Marc Sneyd penalty to show for their early dominance. When St Helens settled, you always felt they would make their opponents pay, which they duly did when the Welshman Grace finished in the corner, before two goals from the boot of Lachlan Coote made it 8-2. That all led up to Griffin's injury and Fages's decision to play on and score, which certainly irked the 700 Hull fans who were fortunate enough to be in attendance. When Jack Welsby reached out to extend St Helens' lead to 18 points shortly after half-time, it felt something of a procession for the reigning Super League champions. But credit must go to Hull for how they threatened an almighty comeback, which began when Mahe Fonua replied with a well-worked finish to claw his side back into contention. A drop-goal from Fages re-established Saints' three-score lead, but when Houghton scooted over, and Scott then did the same three minutes later, suddenly, there were three points between the sides. However, in a game of fine margins, when Jake Connor's loose pass was picked off by Grace, it finally put Hull's challenge to bed. Castleford, fresh from losing 60-6 to Leeds last week, recovered in fine style, beating Warrington 35-20 to reach their first Challenge Cup final since 2014. They were 19-0 up at half-time and even scored two tries when Jacques O'Neill was in the sin-bin.

# Sloane Stephens sees off Muchová to reach French Open fourth round

London, June 6 : There are few players who possess the skill and athleticism that Sloane Stephens imbues her matches with at the height of her powers. She is arguably the best mover on tour, particularly on clay, with one of the heaviest forehands and a vast toolbox of shots. But Stephens is also maddeningly streaky, so one of the great sights of the French Open so far has been her long-awaited resurgence. Stephens continued her rise by outplaying the 18th seed, Karolina Muchova, 6-3, 7-5 to reach the fourth round for the seventh time. As she headed into the clay season, Stephens' game was in peril. She had compiled an appalling 4-16 record dating back to October 2019 and far

too often her feet were rooted to the spot, her body language vacant. However, she remained positive, she has worked herself into possibly the physical form of her life and she has been slowly trending upwards on her favourite surface. Against Muchova, Stephens built a fortress from the baseline with her defence and she cut through the numerous long, physical rallies with the force of her forehand. The Czech is one of the in-form players this year and in the second set she disrupted Stephens' game effectively with drop shots, heavily spun forehands and her own imposing athleticism. It was not enough. She was felled by the fundamental challenge of facing Stephens on clay: it is just so diffi-



cult to consistently hit the ball past her. While Stephens, the 2017 US Open champion and 2018 French Open finalist, has emerged as a clear contender in the top half of the draw, the defending champion, Iga Swiatek, remains the favourite. The Pole burnished her credentials in a different manner than usual. After blitzing through the first sets of her opening two matches, here Swiatek was forced to recover from a break down against a spirited Anett Kontaveit, the Estonian 30th seed, winning 7-6 (4), 6-0 after an opening set of the highest quality first-strike tennis. Last year's defeated finalist, Sofia Kenin, also reached the fourth round by defeating the 28th seed, Jessica Pegula, 4-6, 6-1, 6-4.

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