



The Assam Rising

Projecting the best of Northeast India everyday

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'It was a struggle': Disappointed Murray avoided watching ...



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NEWS IN BRIEF

Drugs Seized

Imphal, February 23: Acting on a tip-off, Manipur police seized illicit party drugs worth Rs 14 crore in Imphal district and arrested three persons in connection to it. As per reports, two trucks carrying 1.4 lakhs WY tablets were intercepted by a team of police near the Kangleitongbi-Shantipur area and were held after discovering the drugs which were concealed in the bonnets of the trucks. During interrogation, it was revealed that the arrested persons were smuggling the drugs to Guwahati to supply to an agent residing in the city.

Miss Grand International 2021

GUWAHATI, February 23: Simran Sharma is India's official entry for Miss Grand International 2021. Simran is born and brought-up in Guwahati, Assam and currently staying in Jaipur, Rajasthan. Earlier, Simran represented India at Miss Multinational and now Glamour and Supermodel India had selected her for Miss Grand International 2020 event to be held in Thailand on 21 March 2021.

Containment zone

Dibrugarh, February 23: Dibrugarh University's Dr. Bhupen Hazarika Centre for Studies in Performing Arts has been declared a containment zone after two female students of the department tested positive for Covid-19. In a notification, Dibrugarh University registrar in-charge Jiten Hazarika stated that the department will remain a containment zone with effect from Monday for a period of 7 days. All students, teachers and employees of the department have been advised to keep themselves in home isolation for 7 days and go for the standard RT-PCR test within three days. Meanwhile, the total number of Covid positive cases in the Dibrugarh district has touched 14,989 till Feb 21. The total number of deaths in the district stands at 125.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah is likely to visit Assam once again



Guwahati, February 23: Union Home Minister Amit Shah is likely to visit Assam once again on February 25. The Union Minister will visit Batadraba Than in Nagaon, the birthplace of

Sonowal lays foundation for Industrial Park at Jamugurihat Inaugurates construction of a permanent campus of ITI, Sootea

CM hails contributions of women SHGs towards making Assam self-reliant



In Assam, over 1.55 lakh healthcare vaccinated till today

GUWAHATI, February 23: The third phase of Covid vaccination is going to be the most challenging, with over 90 lakh people, aged 50 years and above, estimated to be inoculated in Assam. The drive is likely to start from March 1, said principal secretary of the state health department,

Samir K Sinha, on Monday. Even octogenarians will have to come to the healthcare centres for vaccination. Sinha said house-to-house vaccination will not be possible because of the elaborate system and manpower to be engaged in dealing with possible adverse im-

pact in some cases. "The number of citizens above 50 is a substantial number. That's why the entire exercise for healthcare and frontline workers needs to be completed in a defined time frame. We need to concentrate on other target groups as well from early March,"

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Assam artistes who led CAA protests joining BJP shows there is 'false narrative', party says



New Delhi, February 23: With over 25 actors and singers, who were in the forefront of the agitation against Citizenship

(Amendment) Act (CAA) in Assam last year, now with the BJP, it only exposes the "false narrative" spread about the law, Silchar BJP MP Dr

Rajdeep Roy said. In an interview to ThePrint, he said the protests in Assam died a natural death, and the law seems to have become

West Bengal-centric now. The artistes who have joined the BJP include actor Jatin Bora, singers Zubin Garg, Simanta Shekhar and Vidyasagar, Kallol

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China Is Back As India's Top Trade Partner Despite Border Conflict

New Delhi, February 23: Two-way trade between the longstanding economic and strategic rivals stood at \$77.7 billion last year, according to provisional data from India's commerce ministry. China regained its position as India's top trade partner in 2020, as New Delhi's reliance on imported machines outweighed its efforts to curb commerce with Beijing after a bloody border conflict. Two-way trade between the longstanding economic and strategic rivals stood at \$77.7 billion last year, according to provisional

data from India's commerce ministry. Although that was lower than the previous year's \$85.5 billion total, it was enough to make China the largest commercial partner displacing the U.S. -- bilateral trade with whom came in at \$75.9 billion amid muted demand for goods

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Azim Premji has an idea to vaccinate 50 crore people in 60 days

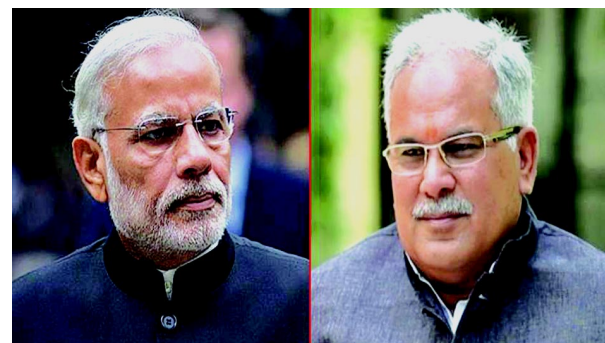
New Delhi, February 23: Wipro founder and philanthropist Azim Premji has urged Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman to engage the private sector and speed up the country's Covid-19 vaccination effort. He said involving the

private sector may help the country cover 50 crore vaccinations against Covid in just two months. "I think if the government was to engage the private industry quickly, we can rest assured that we can achieve a coverage of 500 million

people within 60 days," Premji said. "That's a practicality," he told the finance minister while participating in an interaction at the Bangalore chamber of industry and commerce. He added that the vaccination rate will get a

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Guwahati, February 23: Chhattisgarh chief minister Bhupesh Baghel has sought Prime Minister Narendra Modi's response on allegations of an active



cow syndicate in Assam. Baghel, who was recently appointed as an observer by the Congress party for Assam ahead of the assembly elections,

further alleged that many other syndicates in Assam are being provided protection by the state government. "PM Sir, Assam is keenly waiting for you to respond to @Manekagandhibjp ji's remark regarding the Cow Syndicate being run by @sarbanandsonwal govt," he tweeted. "BTW, there are many other syndicates

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GUWAHATI, February 23: With Covid-19 cases rising again across the country, the Assam government may soon review its decision of discontinuing mandatory tests at airports and railway stations from March 1. "At no point of time have we put our guards down. Based on various demands and seeing a declining trend in Covid cases, the decision was taken to withdraw mandatory testing at airports and railway stations. However, with cases rising

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Clear stand on Assam's cattle syndicate: Chhattisgarh CM to Modi



in other states, Assam may review the decision," principal secretary of the state

India Allows Imran Khan's Aircraft To Use Airspace For Lanka Trip



New Delhi, February 23: In 2019, Pakistan had denied opening its airspace for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's flights to the US and Saudi Arabia citing alleged human rights violations in Kashmir. India has allowed Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's aircraft to use Indian Air Space, sources told ANI. mran Khan will be travelling to Sri Lanka on

his maiden visit to February 23. In 2019, Pakistan had denied opening its airspace for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's flights to the US and Saudi Arabia citing alleged human rights violations in Kashmir. Under normal circumstances, VVIP aircrafts are granted permission by countries. However, Pakistan's denial of permission to VVIP aircraft was an aberration.

With Covid cases rising in other states, Assam may review the decision tests for travellers

health department, Samir K Sinha, told reporters here on Monday. The decision, if reviewed, may put a curb on the movement of political personalities who have

been travelling to Assam a lot in view of the assembly elections. The impact, however, maybe the worst on the tourism sector which is aiming for some profits in the coming Rongali Bihu season in April. "If covid cases increase, screening has to be tightened. Though we don't have any other alternative, testing has to return to filter tourists," Arijit Purkayastha, chapter chairman of north-east at Association of Domestic Tour Operators of India, said. Despite a steady rise in Covid cases every day over the past eight days in

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Sheena Bora murder case: Jail report placed in HC says Indrani Mukerjea stable

MUMBAI, February 23: The Bombay High Court was on Monday informed by the Byculla women's prison authorities that the medical condition of Indrani Mukerjea, accused of killing her daughter Sheena Bora, is stable and that she does not suffer

from any severe ailments. A report was submitted by prison authorities following directions earlier this month from HC, which is hearing a plea filed by Mukerjea seeking bail on medical grounds. She is lodged in Byculla women's prison since her

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1040 Karbi militants surrender arms Those coming back to mainstream must contribute to the nation building process: CM

Guwahati, February 23: In a major boost to realizing state government's goal of making an insurgency-free Assam and ushering in lasting peace in the State, 1040 militants of five Karbiethnic militant groups laid down arms and joined the mainstream in front of Chief



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Navy's Surface-To-Air Missile Test-Fired, Can Hit Sea-Skimming Targets

Balalore, February 23: The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) today conducted two successful launches of vertical launch short range surface-to-air missile (VL-SRSAM) off the Odisha coast in Balalore. The launches were carried out from a static vertical



launcher from Integrated Test Range (ITR), Chandipur. Indigenously designed and developed by DRDO for the Indian Navy, VL-SRSAM is meant for neutralising various aerial threats at close ranges, including sea-skimming targets, a DRDO statement said. The current launches were car-

ried out for demonstration of vertical launch capability as part of its maiden launch campaign. On both the occasions, the missiles intercepted the simulated targets with pinpoint accuracy. The missiles were tested for minimum and maximum range. VL-SRSAM with weapon control system (WCS) was de-

ployed during the trials, the statement said. The launches were monitored by senior scientists from various DRDO labs involved in the design and development of the system such as DRDL, RCI, Hyderabad and R&D Engineers, Pune. During the test launches, flight path and

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PPMYM 15th State Convention 'Darohar 2021' starts from 26 Feb



Guwahati, February 23 : Purbottar Pradesiya Marwari Yuva Manch (PPMYM), is a state unit of All India Marwari Yuva Manch, representing 7 sister states of North East India, namely Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. It is worthwhile to state here that it is a representative organization of Marwari Youths of the Nation, dedicated to the all round growth of youths belonging to the community. It gives us immense pleasure to inform you that the 15th State Convention with the theme of 'Darohar 2021' - Nayi Chunaoti,

Naya Sankalp of Purbottar radesiya Marwari Yuva Manch is scheduled to be held at Mahavir Sthal, Fancy Bazar, Guwahati (Assam) on 26th, 27th & 28th February 2021. Members of the Manch from all over the North-Eastern region will witness this three day Mahakumbh. Apart from that, many luminaries of the region such as political / corporate / Intellectual / Social leaders have been invited and all of them are going to be a part of this event. Altogether more than 1000 delegates are expected to attend the Convention. Provincial President Mohit Nahata, Provincial Secretary

Rahul Agarwal, Mandal-E Vice-President Rajeev Chhoraria, Mandal-E Asst. Sec. Mahendra Nahar, Reception Committee PRO Vivek Sanganeria along with other members were present during media briefing at Guwahati Press Club on Tuesday. PURBOTTAR PRADESIYA MARWARI YUVA MANCH 15th STATE CONVENTION DHAROHAR - Nayi Chunaoti, Naya Sankalp 26, 27 & 28 Feb 2021, Host: Guwahati Branch, Venue: Mahavir Sthal, Guwahati 1st day will witness the Executive & General meeting of the members and then followed by Election process for the new team of 2021-23. Then Inauguration ceremony will take place in the evening in which Honorable CM of Assam Sri Sarbanand Sonowal will be the Chief Guest. During inauguration 3 awards in the field of Literature, Social Service and Media would be given. Then a night cyclethon is planned with social message. Convention 2nd Day on 27

February a youth fest in the form of treasure hunt game is planned for members and then various sessions are planned throughout the day. Sessions on Marwari Samaj, Societal Issues and Business Opportunities etc are planned. Awards named Manch Gaurav & Samaj Ratna would be given to people for their contribution to society. Cultural program is planned for the evening where Sri Samujjal Bhattacharya would be Chief Guest. Convention 3rd Day 28th February a Rally by all the branches in different traditional themes would be organized in and around the Fancy Bazar area, which will be flagged off by honourable GDD Minister Sri Siddharth Bhattacharya. After which an open session with society is kept to take and give views. Finally the convention will close with closing ceremony and prize distribution to best performing branches, leaders and other members. Also the oath taking of new team would be done.

LinkedIn Local Guwahati to host its next event at Tezpur



Guwahati, Feb 23 : LinkedIn Local Guwahati is all set to organise the season 4 on 10th of April at Tezpur. This event is organised to boost face-to-face professional networking in the state of Assam and the surrounding states. The event intends to connect & foster connection amongst LinkedIn professionals of the entire North East India further rolling to South-east Asia. The topics that would be taken up during the event in the 4th season is "Problems and Prospects of Business and Startups in Northeast" City host Syed Mosin Raja on the occasion said, "We are happy to host the event in a different location rather than Guwahati, I am quite sure that people will come and take part in the event." Co-host Rajshree Goswami added, "I have taken part in previous two events at Guwahati and it has really helped me to make a network which in return gave me benefits to develop my business and I am sure this will help the people of Tezpur as well, we are also happy that Tezpur Buzz and Tezpur Online has joined us to support the event." Subhankar

Banerjee, Public Relations Partner of LinkedIn Local Guwahati said, "My agency Seven Sense Communication has been associated with LinkedIn Local Guwahati since 2019, I am really excited that we have a new venue this year, and Tezpur will be witnessing the first ever corporate event in the city and that is really going to help people grow their business." It's a professional face-to-face networking event beyond social media profiles. The mission is to strengthen the online professional community's offline presence through meaningful interactions. It is a professional networking event free of any sales pitch and is aimed at fostering the connection offline. It is a global community by the users of LinkedIn, designed to take online relationships offline. LinkedIn Local started as a grassroots movement, grew into a curated community and is now an open source community. LinkedIn Local events are organic meet ups that provide an opportunity to network, build community, share best practices, and discuss the latest industry trends.

Ministry of Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises PIB discusses on 'Celebrating 'Ek Bharat Shrestha Bharat' and 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan' with potential of Khadi and Silk Industries of NE'

Guwahati, Feb 23 : Entrepreneurial and Business Development potential in Khadi and Silk Industries are Competitive Advantage of NE, experts opined in a Webinar organised by Press Information Bureau, Guwahati on the topic 'Celebrating 'Ek Bharat Shrestha Bharat' and 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan' with potential of Khadi and Silk Industries of NE' here today. Experts from Industry, entrepreneurial fraternity, Government sector along with academicians deliberated and discussed about the potential of North East from cultural, socio-economic growth, development and policy perspective. Padma Shri Naresh Chander Lal, Ambassador Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan, Andaman and Nicobar Islands said that Khadi and Silk is environment friendly in their growth journey as an Industry with tremendous potential. He said that entrepreneurial potential is also evolving in this industry. Shri Lal said that Khadi industry is providing employment as well as building the consumption capacity of the region. Talking about Mahatma Gandhi and Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan, he said that eco-friendly growth and development of the industry is providing socio-economic impetus to the rural development. Dr. Sukumal Deb, Deputy CEO, NEZ, KVIC, Guwahati said that nature friendly growth of the industry with raw materials from bio-diverse environment of North East optimises the resource management of the region.

Talking about Khadi and Silk raw materials, he said that the market of Khadi utilises the Human Resources potential of people and entrepreneurs of the region and thereby, they are encouraged in various business development endeavours. Prof. (Dr.) Naseem Ahmad Khan, Chairperson, Dept. of Social Work, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh said that Market connectivity, Infrastructure development, Strategic inventory management, supply and demand analysis and business development are adding vistas of opportunities in Silk and Khadi Industries. Prof. (Dr.) Mohd Arif Khan, Senior Assistant Professor, Dept. of Social Work, Aligarh Muslim University said that employment of women are adding to the potential of Cottage and Village Industries. He said that its huge varieties are encouraging popularity among youth in various occasions, adding to its seasonal demand during ceremonies including festivals. Beauty Pageant Winner Mrs. India East IAB (2019), Ms Swagata Paul said that Khadi and Silk provide the Culture exuberance in festivities. She said that the value-system of the nation, society and family is demonstrated as Khadi is being preferred by youth of the country. She said that Khadi is employing youths and building entrepreneurial capacity in villages. Ms Anupoma Das, former senior official, Regional Outreach Bureau, Guwahati said Muga and Eri Silk has an encouraging market with youth

preferring it because of its durability. She said that market and business development of Khadi and Silk Industry has the competitive advantage of strategic trade and commerce potential with other states of the country. She said that infrastructure and fast movement of goods add to its marketability. Ms Sayantani Sinha, Psychologist and Clinical Hypnotherapist said that the Industrial development has to be a Human Resources Development Endeavour. She said that these industries have to provide labour and employment friendly environment for its growth. She said that training and technology for better work management would provide competitiveness and ability to compete in foreign markets. Talking about Rajasthan and Assam which are grouped in Government awareness about 'Ek Bharat Shrestha Bharat', Ms Sucharita Sahoo, Field Publicity Officer, Field Outreach Bureau, Barpeta said that Silk and Khadi add to the vivacity and exuberance of festivities such as Bihu in Assam and Ghoomar in Rajasthan. The webinar was managed and coordinated by Shri Samrat Bandyopadhyay, Joint Director, PIB, Guwahati. The interactive Webinar had enthusiastic participation of students, academicians and Industry fraternity of Assam and North East. Ms Hiranmani Das, Field Exhibition Officer, Regional Outreach Bureau, Guwahati welcomed all as the

discussion delved into details on the various aspects of the topic such as Textile, Silk and Khadi Industry of NE and its entrepreneurial potential, Culture, Infrastructure and socio-economic development of North Eastern region, among others.

Space offered to separatist militant at press club, FIR lodged against GPC president, secretary

Guwahati, February 23 : Alleging that the city based press club had 'designed to give space to a separatist leader of a banned armed outfit which emerged as a terrorist outfit to threaten the sovereignty and integrity' of India, an FIR has been lodged against the president and general secretary of Gauhati Press Club (GPC). Senior journalist Biswajit Nath, who is a former general member of GPC, lodged the complaint at Latashil police station in the city on 23 February 2021, arguing that the press club authority 'organized formal audio interview with Pares Barua (self-styled military chief of United Liberation Front of Assam, Independent) at its auditorium' by 6.30 pm on 21 February last. GPC president Manoj Nath and general secretary Sanjay Ray were seen (through various news channels' live visuals) on dais of the club auditorium waiting for the call from Barua with an aim to transfer it to the sound system so that all reporters, who were present on the occasion, could listen and interact subsequently.

"However, because of the interventions of the city police the program could not be organised and it came to an abrupt end. But it is beyond doubts that the present committee of Gauhati Press Club organized the program and announced about it in advance. Notably, Ulfa (I) leader Pares Barua called them on time accordingly," said in the FIR. Mentionable is that the dreaded militant leader is in the media as he threatened to take unitive actions against two abducted Quippo Oil and Gas Infrastructure Limited employees namely Pranab Kumar Gogoi (hails from Sivasagar, Assam) and Ram Kumar (hails from Khagaria, Bihar). By then, the negotiations with the company management on ransom were failed. Kidnapped from Dayun Khumsai drilling area in Changlang district of Arunachal Pradesh on 21 December, both of them are still under the custody of Ulfa (I). "Now why necessary actions should not be taken under the unlawful activities prevention act (1967) against Manoj Nath (c/

o Niyomiya Barta, Pride East Entertainment Private Limited, Christianbasti, Guwahati, Assam, m-94350 89498) and Sanjay Ray (c/o The Assam Tribune, Maniram Dewan Road, Chandmari, Guwahati, Assam, m-80117 45999)," questioned in the FIR. Petitioner Nath, who prefers to introduce himself as a nationalist scribe, did not forget to mention that since 1998, a group of brave journalists and patriotic citizens hoisted National tri-colour in the same press club premises defying the diktat of separatist militant groups (including Ulfa). They all took tremendous risk two decades back while paying tributes to the martyrs of Freedom Movement as the militants threatened to punish the participants in Independence Day and Republic Day celebrations, asserted Nath finally urging the police to take appropriate actions against the litigants "so that anti-national mentality can be discouraged in this part of the country".

Youth injured in mysterious firing at Nagaon Polasani area

NAGAON, Feb 24 : In a mysterious firing by a motorcycle borne miscreants, a youth businessman was injured in broad daylight near at Nagaon Polasani area when he was on the way back to his home from Rupahihat bazaar on Monday last. The incident came into light only after when the victim himself arrived at Nagaon Itachali town Outpost and intimated to police. The victim was immediately admitted to Nagaon BP Civil Hospital later at night. According to sources, the victim has been identified as Pranab Nath of Dhing. Significantly, the victim youth claimed it as an incident of firing, but the evidence gathered by police during investigation witnessed it as just an attack with sharp knife or other weapons rather than with arms

and ammunitions for which the entire episode was under doubt till filing of this report, sources claimed. Speaking to this correspondent here OC, Nagaon Sadar PS, Inspector Ashok Kr Dutta said that during the police investigation, police rushed to the spot and nobody had confirmed about the sound of firing on the spot as the victim youth ascertained as well as informed to police. Besides, no cartridge has been found on the spot. So we are investigating the entire incident in further detail, OC Dutta said.



SIPAJHAR, Feb 23 : Rabindranath Kalita, retired Joint secretary (Border), Government of Assam passed away at Namecare Hospital, Guwahati. He was 92 and was left behind two son, one daughter and host of relatives and admirers. He was belongs from Hazarikapara in Darrang

district and later settled in Guwahati. He was one of the leading founder of Doulguri Jnanudoy Puthibharal and Swata Madar Chatra Sangha in 1947. In a bid to encourage the brilliant students of the greater Hazarikapara area he has established Mihi Ram Kalita Memorial Education Trust. He had a linking for English ever since he was admitted to the Mangaldai High School in 1943, which induced him to author a book of folk tales in English titled 'Discovery of Hidden Tales' in 1949 when he was in Class IX. After retiring from Assam Civil Service in 1993 he authored a many anecdotal memoirs which were mainly published in the English daily The Sentinel. He has written and published all together 8 books in both Assamese and English. His death is widely mourned. Doulguri Jnanudoy Puthibharal, Hazarikapara branch of Assam Sahitya Sabha, Doulguri Bishnu Mandir management Samitee, Mihi Ram Kalita Memorial Trust, Ata Ram Kalita and Purnima Kalita Memorial Education Trust have expressed their sorrow on the demise of Kalita and send their condolences to the bereaved family.

district and later settled in Guwahati. He was one of the leading founder of Doulguri Jnanudoy Puthibharal and Swata Madar Chatra Sangha in 1947. In a bid to encourage the brilliant students of the greater Hazarikapara area he has established Mihi Ram Kalita Memorial Education Trust. He had a linking for English ever since he was admitted to the Mangaldai High School in 1943, which induced him to author a book of folk tales in English titled 'Discovery of Hidden Tales' in 1949 when he was in Class IX. After retiring from Assam Civil Service in 1993 he authored a many anecdotal memoirs which were mainly published in the English daily The Sentinel. He has written and published all together 8 books in both Assamese and English. His death is widely mourned. Doulguri Jnanudoy Puthibharal, Hazarikapara branch of Assam Sahitya Sabha, Doulguri Bishnu Mandir management Samitee, Mihi Ram Kalita Memorial Trust, Ata Ram Kalita and Purnima Kalita Memorial Education Trust have expressed their sorrow on the demise of Kalita and send their condolences to the bereaved family.

Inspection of vegetable, fish markets at Herbertganj by DC Hailakandi

Hailakandi, Feb. 23: Hailakandi Deputy Commissioner, Megh Nidhi Dahal made a visit to the Herbertganj bazar of Hailakandi town and inspected the ongoing infrastructure development work of vegetable and fish markets taken up under schemes of 14th and 15th Finance Commissions Award grant. Accompanied by Executive Officer, Municipal Board, Hailakandi, Deepmala

Goala, Deputy Commissioner, Dahal on Sunday interacted with the local shopkeepers and other vegetable sellers of the market area and tried to know first hand the burning issues related to the fish market as well as vegetable market. During the Deputy Commissioner's short visit, the senior officials and engineers of the Municipal Board were present at the spot.

Foundation stone of the Office of Pachim Darrang Press Club laid down by MLA, Sipajhar

SIPAJHAR, Feb 23 : The foundation stone of the construction of the Office building of the Pachim Darrang Press Club was laid down by MLA, Sipajhar LAC, Binanda Kumar Saikia at Dipila amidst cheers. The function organised on the occasion was attended by Haren Deka, President, Patharighat Mandal Committee of Bharatiya Janata Party, Chandrama Mahanta, President, Dipila Gaon Panchayat, Monoranjan Sarma and Sishir Kumar Sarma, Founder

President and Founder secretary of Pachim Darrang Press Club as guest of honour. The programme of the function was moderated by Lakhyadhar Saikia, secretary, Pachim Darrang Press Club and vote of thanks was offered by Kumar Bharat Kalita, Chief Advisor of the Club at the end. The members of the Club have expressed their gratitude to MLA, Sipajhar LAC for sanctioning the amount of Rs Lakh for the construction of the Office building.



Biswanath Chariali: Feb 23 : An awareness meeting on the topic 'Superstition and We' was carried out by Sakomotha Arjya Bhatta Science Centre held at Diring Pothar High School today. Ripunjoy Bordoloi, assistant teacher of Chengamari HS graced

the occasion as a resource person and highlighted his lecture on the topic concerned. Coordinator Ridul Kumar Das carried out the proceedings while Jiten Ranghang, headmaster of Diring Pathar HS presided over the meeting.

গান্ধী শিল্প বজাৰ GANDHI SHILP BAZAR

Venue
Joymoti Pathar, Tezpur, Assam

Period
From 18/02/2021 to 27/02/2021

প্ৰৱেশ
বিনামূলীয়া

Entry Free

Organized by
Jankalyan Morigaon
Dist.- Morigaon, Assam

Sponsored by



Development Commissioner (Handicrafts)
Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India, New Delhi

Emma Coronel, wife of El Chapo, arrested on drug trafficking charges



London, February 23 : In a statement released on Monday, the US justice department said that Coronel, 31 - who is a joint US-Mexican citizen - was arrested at Dulles international airport and was scheduled to make her initial appearance in federal court on Tuesday via video conference. According to court documents, Coronel is charged with conspiring to distribute cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin and marijuana for importation into the US. She has also been charged with allegedly conspiring to help arrange Guzmán's spectacular escape through a 1.5-km-long tunnel from the high-security Altiplano prison in Mexico in July 2015. Court papers allege that Coronel worked with Guzmán's sons to organize the escape plot, which included buying a plot of land near the prison, firearms and an armored truck and smuggling the imprisoned cartel chief a GPS watch to

ensure the escape tunnel reached his cell. "After Guzmán was re-arrested in Mexico in January 2016, Coronel Aispuro is alleged to have engaged in planning yet another prison escape with others prior to Guzmán's extradition to the US in January 2017," the statement said. Guzmán was sentenced to life plus 30 years at his trial in New York in 2019. Throughout the trial, Coronel attended court every day, even when evidence included text messages between her husband and one of his mistresses. Before her husband's sentencing, she told a sympathetic TV interviewer that Guzmán was a "humble" man and complained that the media had made El Chapo "too famous". Her arrest is likely to further complicate relations between the administrations of Joe Biden and his Mexican counterpart Andrés Manuel López Obrador, and comes as security cooperation between Mexico and the United States appears to have cooled. Mexican prosecutors recently declined to pursue charges against the former defence secretary Gen Salvador Cienfuegos, who was arrested upon landing in Los Angeles last October and accused of protecting a drug cartel. López Obrador's government successfully

petitioned for his return, having accused the United States of acting without their knowledge and failing to act like an ally. The country's congress also approved laws limiting the actions of the DEA in Mexico - a move US officials warned would cripple cross-border cooperation on security issues. "The timing of this arrest is interesting," said Falko Ernst, senior Mexico analyst at the International Crisis Group. "In part, this appears to send a message from the US, which says that their traditional tools of arresting high level actors and trying them in the US is not yet a thing of the past yet - even after Cienfuegos." US anti-drug agents worked closely on El Chapo's arrests in Mexico, where he long evaded the law and became a sort of antihero in his home state of Sinaloa and beyond. Emma Coronel was born in Santa Clara, California and is the daughter of Ines Coronel Barreras, a medium-ranking lieutenant in the Sinaloa cartel. She grew up in the "Golden Triangle" of Mexico's Sierra Madre, and reportedly met Guzmán at a local festival. She was 17 at the time, and Guzmán was 51. The couple have nine-year-old twin daughters. While - like many older narco bosses - El Chapo kept a low profile despite his fame, his wife sought the spotlight. She launched a line of clothing - with some of the items emblazoned with El Chapo's familiar moustachioed face - and attempted to establish herself up as a social media influencer with a carefully curated Instagram feed. She even briefly appeared on a US reality TV show. "Bragging can be dangerous and time and again those exposing themselves too much and too publicly make themselves targets," Ernst said. "If you want to stay out of prison, standing out isn't the way to go. It's something many old school traffickers used to live by, but more recent generations appear to have mostly forgotten all about." Despite his incarceration, Guzmán still casts a long shadow in Mexico, and the Sinaloa cartel, now partly led by his sons, remains a formidable force. When Guzmán's son Ovidio was arrested in October 2019, cartel gunmen overran the city of Culiacán and forced state security forces to release him. López Obrador defended the move, saying that releasing the younger Guzmán had prevented further bloodshed. Mexico's president has always avoided speaking ill of El Chapo, and in late March 2020, he briefly met Guzmán's elderly mother, Maria Consuelo Loera, while on a tour of the Sierra Madre. López Obrador described the kingpin's mother as "a pensioner who deserves my full respect - whoever her son might be" and confirmed that she had petitioned him for help to obtain a US visa so she could visit her son at the "Supermax" prison in Florence, Colorado.

Time for Jeep to stop using Cherokee as a vehicle name, tribe's chief says



London, February 23 : It is time for Jeep to stop using the Cherokee Nation's name on its Cherokee and Grand Cherokee SUVs, the chief of the Oklahoma-based tribe has said. Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr said in a statement, which was first reported by Car & Driver magazine, that he believes corporations and sports teams should stop using Native American names, images and mascots as nicknames or on their products. "I'm sure this comes from a place that is well-intended, but it does not honor us by having our name plastered on the side of a car," Hoskin said. The statement marked the first time that the Cherokee Nation had called for the change since Jeep first began using "Cherokee" on its vehicles in the 1970s, according to Car & Driver. Kristin Starnes, a spokesperson for Jeep's parent company, the Amsterdam-based Stellantis, said in a statement that the vehicle name was carefully selected "and nurtured over the years to honor and celebrate Native American people for their nobility, prowess and pride". She did not say whether the company was considering renaming the vehicles and did not immediately reply to an email requesting that information. Hoskin says the best way

to honor the Tahlequah, Oklahoma-based tribe is to learn more about its history. "The best way to honor us is to learn about our sovereign government, our role in this country, our history, culture and language and have meaningful dialogue with federally recognized tribes on cultural appropriateness," Hoskin said. The controversy comes amid a national reckoning over the use of Native American names and images, particularly in sports. After years of resistance and under pressure from corporate sponsors, the NFL's Washington DC franchise announced last year that it was dropping its "Redskins" nickname and Indian head logo and would go by the name Washington Football Team until a permanent replacement was chosen. Major League Baseball's Cleveland Indians also announced last year that it would change its name. Hoskin made reference to such changes in his statement to Car & Driver. "I think we're in a day and age in this country where it's time for both corporations and team sports to retire the use of Native American names, images and mascots from their products, team jerseys and sports in general," he said.

Investigation pending in 407 of 755 cases a year after northeast Delhi riots

New Delhi, February 23 : A year after the northeast Delhi riots, in which 53 people were killed and there was widespread damage to property, police investigation is still pending in 407 of the 755 cases registered, ThePrint has learnt. Charge sheets have been filed in the rest of the 348 cases, against 1,569 people for alleged involvement in the communal riots. Police sources said among those named in the charge sheets are 802 Hindus and 767 Muslims. According to the police data, accessed by ThePrint, while a total of 1,818 people - 956 Muslims and 868 Hindus - were arrested in connection with the cases, 1,165 are still in jail, and 652 (almost 36 per cent) are out on bail. The 407 cases, in which investigation is still ongoing, include some in which no arrest has not been made yet, said the police. Out of the total 755 cases, as many as 62 are being investigated by three special investigation teams (SITs) constituted by the Delhi Police Crime Branch. One case that alleged the riots were "meticulously planned by key conspirators" is with the Special Cell. Out of the 62 cases with the SITs, data shows, charge sheets have been filed in 46 cases and bail granted to 86 accused - 35 Hindus and 51 Muslims. Talking about the pending investigation, a senior police officer said: "Keeping in mind the sensitivity of the cases and the Covid times, the investigation has moved very swiftly. We have been able to make arrests in over 400 cases and have charge-sheeted 348 cases out of the 755 cases, which is good progress." He added: "We have also filed supplementary charge sheets in 120 cases. Investigation of other cases is ongoing." The riots started on 23 February last year and went on for three days till 25 February, with men armed with sticks and rods roaming around the lanes of northeast Delhi setting vehicles and

shops on fire, vandalising property including places of worship. The worst-hit areas were that of Jafraabad, Welcome, Seelampur, Bhajanpura, Jyoti Nagar, Karawal Nagar, Khajoori Khas, Gokal Puri, Dayalpur and New Usmanpur. Also read: A year on, Delhi riot victims struggle to cope with depression, nightmares & livelihood loss. "The investigation of northeast riots was taken up in right earnest and 755 cases were meticulously investigated. The equal number of arrests from both communities show that no single community was favoured or targeted," said the officer quoted above. "The numbers speak for themselves - it has been absolutely fair and impartial investigation, relying upon credible, material and scientific evidence," he added. The officer added that extensive use of technology in identification and arrest was the "hallmark of investigation". "Video Analytics and Facial Recognition System used for analysis of CCTV footage and video recordings from smart phones. 945 CCTV footage and video recordings were obtained from multiple sources, including CCTV Cameras installed on the roads, video recordings from smart phones, video footage obtained from media houses and other sources were analysed with the help of video analytic tools and facial recognition system," he said. "The photographs therein were matched for multiple databases, which included Delhi Police criminal dossier photographs and other databases maintained with the government. This helped identifying persons involved in riots, which proved helpful in taking legal action after corroboration with other supporting evidence," he added. The police also claimed to have used artificial intelligence (AI) for the enhancement of CCTV images for better identification of rioters.

Cambodian child sexual abuse victim seeks compensation in Australian legal first



London, February 23 : A Cambodian victim of an Australian child sex offender has launched a claim for compensation through South Australian District Court in the first case of its kind in the country. A Cambodian victim of an Australian child sexual abuse offender has launched a claim for compensation through South Australian district court in the first case of its kind in the country.

Cambodian victim of an Australian child sexual abuse offender has launched a claim for compensation through the Australian courts, in the first case of its kind. In January, 47-year-old Australian Geoffrey William Moyle pleaded guilty to 11 offences, eight of which related to the sexual abuse of children overseas aged between 10 and 12. The eight offences occurred in Cambodia between 2002 and

2005. Moyle is awaiting sentencing in the South Australian district court. He is next expected to appear in court in March. While commonwealth law includes a provision for a victim of child sexual abuse outside Australia to claim compensation, it has never been used. In January, commonwealth prosecutor Edward Stratton-Smith told an Adelaide court the decision whether to award compensation would be "of national significance". Practical and legal challenges make it extremely difficult for victims overseas to claim compensation from abusers. It is rare for police to be able to identify and locate victims, often many years after physical contact occurred. For abuse victims to apply for reparations, the offender must have been convicted and compensation must be sought from the offender, who in many cases has few assets. In Moyle's case, investigators working with "international law enforcement

partners", according to a spokesperson for the South Australia police, were able to identify and locate the victims, one of whom is being represented free of charge by Jonathan Wells QC. Moyle has pleaded guilty, and has assets including a house in Adelaide, the ABC reported. Dr Michael Salter, the Scientia associate professor of criminology at the University of New South Wales and chair of a national child sexual abuse material working group, said the decision was a "unique and important" one. A not-for-profit put in "a tremendous amount of work" locally so that the victim was able to provide a victim impact statement in order for reparations to be possible, he said. "I think we need to be realistic about just how difficult it is for victims overseas. And there are many, many victims," he said. Salter hopes that a successful application in this case will mean prosecutors make use of the reparations provision more often. Dr Melissa Curley, a political science and international relations lecturer at the University of Queensland who has been researching the sexual exploitation of children in south-east Asia for a decade, said it would be "very significant" if the victim was granted compensation. As well as setting a precedent, she said, it would "send a message that there is a recognition of the suffering and the harm done to victims by this type of offending". Figures for the extent of child sexual abuse by travellers in Cambodia are difficult to establish, but the Cambodian organisation Action Pour Les Enfants found that Australians made up 8% of 142 arrests of foreigners in cases of child sexual abuse offences by foreigners, the BBC reported. In 2017, Australia introduced legislation requiring registered child sexual abuse offenders to apply for permission to travel overseas. In 2019, a Swedish court ordered Ulf Christian Goransson, who was convicted of child sexual abuse and exploitation, to pay SEK 214,400 (US\$25,778) to six Cambodian victims. Both Curley and Salter stressed that compensation can be used by victims to pay for medical and psychological treatment, including trauma-informed counselling in countries where this is rarely available through the public health system.

Private sector can be govt's useful ally in Covid vaccination, not an adversary

New Delhi, February 23 : Despite being the second-fastest country to vaccinate over 10 million people and currently having the third-highest number of people vaccinated against Covid-19, it is fair to say that India's vaccination programme has gotten off to a slow start. At around 300,000 per day, the current vaccination rate is only a quarter of the 1.3 million per day that was estimated by the government in January. As Naushad Forbes, co-chairman of Forbes Marshall, pointed out in Business Standard a few days ago, at this rate it could take up to 17

years to administer two doses to 800 million adults. In other words, the current pace of India's vaccination programme is, paradoxically, both impressive and inadequate. To be effective, it must be ramped up 10-20 times, so that 80 per cent of the population can be protected by the end of the year. Speed is important for many reasons: the faster the population is immunised, the quicker the economic recovery, the smaller the risk of new strains, and lower the human cost. Not only is a rapid vaccination programme necessary, India can also do it if we run it in

mission-mode, sharply focusing state machinery and national resources onto achieving a single task. A country that can routinely carry off the gargantuan tasks of organising national elections or events like the Kumbh Mela can pull off a rapid, universal vaccination programme. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has said as much. The Union Health Secretary, Rajesh Bhushan, has written to state governments recommending that Covid-19 vaccination be conducted at least four days a week, and at more sites. A key member of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) vaccination task force expects to bring online 50,000 to 100,000 immunisation centres over time, and achieve 5 to 7 million vaccinations per day. It is unclear if these are official targets, but to the extent that they are an indication of the government's ambition, this is good news. The important point is that targets of this magnitude are achievable. But it can't be pulled off by the government alone. Other than elections, no public service in India - education, healthcare, transport, water, power, banking, telecommunications - has ever been delivered by the government alone. The rapid rollout of Aadhaar to over a billion people in a few short years, for instance, was made possible by leveraging private sector capabilities. It was only after India permitted private laboratories to carry out Covid-19 tests that our testing rates improved to levels that were meaningful in managing the pandemic. It is no different with the vaccination programme. As the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) and several industry leaders have argued in recent days, India's vaccination programme needs a shot in the arm from the private sector. In his Cut the Clutter video, Shekhar

Gupta was overly harsh on the administrators when he blamed bureaucratic conservatism for the slow rate of vaccination. There are a few good reasons to be cautious, for many things are new, untested, and risky. The safety and efficacy of the vaccines have not yet been completely established in the Indian context. The adequacy and reliability of the supply schedule cannot be taken for granted. The digital infrastructure is new and bound to have teething problems. There has not been a lot of time to test and train the logistics and administrative processes. Too little is known about the various issues at the point of delivery. So a cautious Phase 1 deployment targeting the relatively more educated, aware, and traceable healthcare worker segment is prudent, before expanding it to millions of people a day, across as diverse a country as India. What is fairer and more important is to ask how much the Union and state governments have learnt so far, and how well they will use this knowledge to quickly scale up the pace. First, there is clearly a case for the government's facilities to work all days of the week and vaccinate thousands every day. Second, there is also an urgent case to enable India's vast private healthcare industry to plug into the national digital infrastructure. Third, the drug regulatory authorities must create a fair, transparent and credible route for the world's vaccine makers to bring their products to India.



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The teaching of pandemic

Many people have experienced the Covid-19 pandemic as an event of pure novelty: a sudden and unexpected break from the past. In some ways this is true, but as a historian of science who's been teaching a course about pandemics for the past year, I've had a different perspective: one that has impressed upon me and my students the surprising parallels between the current moment and previous outbreaks of disease. The module is called Fear of a Pandemic, and it's about the way the anxieties that surface during pandemics don't spring out of nowhere, but are coloured by social, historical and cultural factors - notably prejudice. Connected via platforms such as Zoom and WebEx, my students and I have discussed lesser known epidemics and the ways that rumours about ethnic minorities nearly cost them their lives. The yellow fever epidemic of 1793, which killed 10% of the population in Philadelphia, caused havoc in the city. White Philadelphia residents went so far as to blame the spread of the disease on African migrants coming from Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti) or on Black people poisoning the wells. In response, Black Philadelphians such as Richard Allen, Absalom Jones and Sarah Bass Allen not only dispelled these beliefs but acted as frontline workers, providing healthcare for the Black community. The most well-known pandemic in living memory, before Covid, is probably that of HIV/Aids. When we read History is a Weapon (the Queer Nation manifesto), a rallying cry by Act Up, some found the text provocative: the line "straight people are your enemy" sits uneasily with ideas of making alliances between marginalised groups, while others were deeply affected by the way death was a perennial presence in the lives of queer men at the time. The sluggardly public health response by the US government in the 1980s was indicative of the homophobia in American society, a fear of queer life that existed then and today. Yet, few of them knew about the ways that African diasporic communities were affected. As a person with Haitian parents, I am very much aware of how, when HIV/Aids emerged as a modern-day epidemic in major cities in the US, Haitian immigrants were erroneously deemed responsible. On 4 March 1983, the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention listed four supposed groups as a "high risk" for contracting or transmitting HIV/Aids: homosexuals, heroin users, haemophiliacs and Haitians. Being part of this "4 H club" - the only group to be included on the basis of nationality - meant that Haitians and their descendants were denied housing, employment and admission to school, leading to the formation of segregated communities like the one I grew up in, Little Haiti in Miami - which was deemed a no-go zone for non-Haitians. During this lesson, we unpacked how these fears destroyed lives. Teaching this during "normal" times would have certainly been interesting, but the privilege of probing these issues during a global pandemic is that my students have been able to quickly draw parallels with the present day, to see how these forces mutate and persist. One student recounted how during the initial phases of the pandemic when Black Americans were disproportionately getting Covid-19, the initial response was to criticise them for having comorbidities such as obesity, as opposed to recognising the reality that Black people were more likely to be essential workers, unable to exercise social distancing. Another student, of south Asian descent, described how in India a popular misbelief was that Muslim communities were responsible for spreading Covid-19, creating a situation in which some hospitals refused to treat Muslim patients. I hope that my students have learned the central lesson: epidemics aren't just about the bacteria and viruses that coexist with us, but they reflect the social divisions that push some people to the margins of society. Whether it is the opioid epidemic in rural America or the high incidence of maternal mortality for Black people, we have to reckon with how histories and legacies of inequality create the phenomenon of premature death. What we are finding again and again in the course is that the containment of epidemics pathologises non-white people, who are often perceived as the source of contagion, even as, through interment by the majority, they are made more susceptible to infection. Covid-19 has laid bare how history can be a dark mirror of the present. It has been devastating, to say the least, to witness the inequalities in the healthcare system and the emergence of science "sceptics". Putting aside the more obvious xenophobia of the former US president referring to Covid-19 as the "China virus", the outright downplaying of the consequences of coronavirus is itself a racially coded act, given the disproportionate mortality rate for non-white people in countries like the US and UK.

When Mahua Moitra speaks in Parliament, Lok Sabha TV goes from low definition to Ultra HD

Mahua Moitra speaks the language of today's youth, which is why videos of her speeches are watched by perhaps the most apolitical people of India. Who wouldn't want to see a spark of brilliance sitting among half-asleep politicians in our Parliament? Lok Sabha TV seems to go from low definition TV to Ultra HD with her energy bursting onto our screens, demanding people to think about the true meaning of democracy, about the voices being muzzled through arrests, cowardice of false bravados and authority, the making of propaganda into a 'cottage industry' and the brazen audacity of celebrating an economy where only the rich are getting richer. The Trinamool Congress (TMC) MP from Krishnanagar Mahua Moitra boldly spoke the truth to power last week in a House full of masked men. Only someone like her could have the guts to bring up the topic of sexual harassment in Parliament, causing outrage among some of her male colleagues who moved a breach of privilege motion against her days later. Moitra is back in the news for yet another scathing speech in Parliament in which she spoke about the case of alleged sexual harassment by an ex-Chief Justice of India and now Rajya Sabha member from 2019 (without naming him in her speech). Her remarks were later expunged. Back then, one of the CJI's employees had written to the Supreme Court about her ordeal and alleged sexual ha-

arrassment. The special hearing of the case was amusingly heard by the CJI himself, which broke the cardinal rule of natural justice - something that Moitra categorically pointed out in her speech. Eventually, after much uproar, the case was dismissed by another Supreme Court panel and no one bothered to speak of it again. But Moitra did. And her speech has gone viral. Mahua Moitra always ends up hitting the right chords through her speeches because she ends up saying things so many of us would perhaps not have the guts to say, or things that have been buried under the churn of constant news and the many ridiculous things there are to outrage over these days. But Moitra remembered what's truly significant. Seen in the context of journalist Priya Ramani winning the defamation case against her by former Union Minister MJ Akbar, Moitra's speech about the unnamed woman's case of alleged sexual harassment by the former CJI seems to continue the befitting theme of "speaking truth to power". But then that's what Moitra has always been like since she arrived in politics. An investment banker in JP Morgan, she came from London to Delhi and started her journey into politics with the Indian National Congress, which, true to its nature, did not see her brilliance or potential. During her speech last week, the entire house sat in pin-drop silence, captivated by Moitra's every word, with alert eyes seen on faces plastered with masks.

Is England's Covid roadmap the right way out of lockdown? The experts' view

Boris Johnson appears to have finally learned a lesson about the dangers of overpromising and underdelivering. The government's roadmap for easing the lockdown allows for flexibility and is guided by the data rather than the dates. But there are still difficult problems to overcome. Until 80% to 90% of the population has been vaccinated, a large percentage of people will still be susceptible to infection and hospitalisation, giving the virus plenty of opportunities to spread and strain the NHS. If England is to break the cycle of continuous lockdowns, it should learn a lesson from Israel: vaccines can be an effective way to suppress the virus, but only when they are also rolled out to younger age groups. Prominent voices - including that of the health secretary - have told us that Covid-19 will become a seasonal infection, much like flu. But our public health approach should be more akin to measles. The UK should be aiming to suppress and eliminate Covid-19 through vaccines, mass testing and supported isolation. After we've achieved this, the UK should then help poorer countries in their vaccination efforts. Unlike the early days of the pandemic, you will now find very few people advocating for the uncontrolled spread of Covid-19 (the so-called "herd immunity" approach). The real shame is that such voices ever had any influence over the government's pandemic response. Over the past 12 months, Britain has lost almost 130,000 lives to Covid-19. Had the government pursued a zero-Covid approach from the start, following the example of countries like Australia, far fewer people would have died. In the end, England seems to be on its way out of this pandemic, saved by vaccines and seasonal change. Outdoor transmission is a minimal risk, so it makes sense for the government to lift restrictions on outdoor socialising first. In fact, Scotland has allowed under-12s to play in small groups outdoors since July. This would be an easy win for England and other countries, too. The imminent risk now is the full return of schools on 8 March leading to uncontrolled transmission. Scotland has taken a different approach, allowing younger primary students to go back on 22 February, followed by other students over the coming weeks in a phased process, as the impact on transmission is monitored and analysed. Again, England's roadmap must be driven by data and science, and not by the loudest voices in the room. Many parents in England will have heaved a sigh of relief that schools are due to reopen on 8



March. But aside from many Covid-19 cases testing pupils on a twice-weekly basis, Boris Johnson has offered no further detail on how transmission in schools will be prevented as part of the government's roadmap for easing lockdown. As with many aspects of our pandemic response, England's approach to Covid-19 in schools seems one of dangerous exceptionalism. While there have been many spirited debates about the precise role that schools play in helping Covid-19 spread, two things are indisputable. First, schools bring people into prolonged physical contact with one another, talking and breathing indoors. Second, Covid-19 is spread primarily through aerosols that spread better in unventilated environments. Pretending that the rules of physics and biology somehow don't apply in classrooms risks undoing the difficult sacrifices of lockdown. To ensure the reopening of schools doesn't bring the R number back above 1, England must put basic mitigation measures in place. Masks should be mandated in classrooms, and schools should be better ventilated. Opening doors and windows can have a significant impact on reducing the accumulation of aerosols. Where that's not possible, portable high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters can make a big difference at a relatively low cost. Kids of all ages around the world are wearing masks in school this year. The same should be the case in England. Arguing that masks inhibit classroom learning when the alternative is sending students home to self-isolate, or closing schools altogether, defies common sense. Alone, each of these measures is imperfect. But taken together, they can have a significant effect on the rate of transmission. Mask-wearing in schools need not be perfect, and individual exceptions can be made. Unfortunately, we will never know how

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could have been avoided if these basic school mitigation measures had been put in place last September. To ensure this lockdown really is the last one, we should not make the same mistake twice. During an epidemic there are only two directions a virus can take: up or down. If the R number is above 1, the virus is going to spread, and if it is below 1, the virus will decrease. At the moment, the UK's epidemic is decreasing but we know it could double in size in a couple of weeks if transmission picks up again. Despite the progress made in driving down cases during the lockdown, we're only a month away from being back in the same position as we were in December. This is why a careful, measured approach to easing restrictions is sensible. The government's roadmap proposes a gradual timeline for easing restrictions that will occur in four separate phases, with the final constraints lifted by no earlier than 21 June. Of course, things are not the same as they were in 2020. We now have a vaccine, which we are deploying at a remarkable rate. There are two things that control the rate of transmission of a virus - the amount of contact between people, and the proportion of those people who are susceptible to infection. When these two things are at their highest levels, the R number for this virus is about 3. A year ago we were all susceptible to the virus, as there were no vaccines available and nobody had been exposed to Covid-19 before, so reducing contact was the only way to make R smaller. Now, with more than one-third of the population estimated to be immune to the virus, the maximum R can get to is 2, and fewer restrictions will be needed to keep R below 1. But timing is everything. If the amount of social contact increases faster than susceptibility decreases,

then transmission could dramatically increase. If susceptibility goes down faster, and lockdown measures are prolonged, then we will be unnecessarily restricting people's lives and livelihoods. Balancing the amount of social contact with the speed of the vaccine rollout will allow us to exit the epidemic with minimal damage from now on. This will not be the end of Covid-19, and there will be more twists in the tale. But the next few months will be a key step in learning how to live with it. After a year during which the government responded to rising infections too slowly and lifted restrictions too quickly, Boris Johnson has promised that, this time, the easing of lockdown will be "cautious but irreversible". In some ways, the government's new roadmap for lifting England's third lockdown looks very different to previous attempts. There will be no sudden reopening of the economy, and people will only be allowed to mix indoors in the third phase of the roadmap, which will be introduced no earlier than 17 May. But in other respects, this roadmap throws caution to the wind. Opening schools in one go hardly seems like a prudent decision. On this issue, the government could have learned from countries such as Norway, which has adopted a "traffic light" system: in areas with higher levels of infection, children return to school for some of the time to allow for social distancing, and multiple safeguards are still in place. As infections fall, these restrictions are lifted. The answer to whether this roadmap will ensure an "irreversible" lifting of restrictions is again found in the detail. The best way to reversibly lift restrictions is to enforce other measures that can drive down infections when the lockdown is lifted. Vaccinations are clearly one of those measures, but for now at least, they are insufficient on their own. England still urgently needs an improved test-and-trace system in order to identify new cases and variants. The government needs to provide adequate resources to people who are self-isolating, rather than simply instructing them to do so. England must find ways to make schools, workplaces and restaurants safer, with a common set of standards for what makes a place Covid-safe. And we need to properly control our borders, with robust isolation policies in place for people arriving from countries where variants are unknown. In short, we need a coherent and sustainable long-term strategy to suppress Covid-19. That has always been missing. It still is.

Between Vajpayee and Modi era, RSS has learnt many political lessons

Let me start this column with a teaser. Here is the itinerary of a prominent personality for the past 11 weeks, and you have to guess who he is: Guwahati (2-5 December): A series of meetings, including with Assam chief minister Sarbananda Sonowal, during his four-day stay in a secluded ashram in Adimgiri Hills, Kolkata (12-13 December): Meets intellectuals and young achievers excelling in space science, microbiol-

ogy, medical sciences, etc. It was his fifth visit to West Bengal since August 2019. Kozhikode and Thiruvananthapuram (29-30 December): Releases a book; meets Kerala governor. Chennai (13-14 January): Celebrates Pongal; performs 'gau puja'; recites a couplet from Tamil classic Tirukkural by celebrated poet Thiruvalluvar to a girl. Rings a bell? All these places are in poll-bound states. You must be wondering if it's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah, or Bharatiya Janata Party chief J.P. Nadda. Given that

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there is so much travel in such a short span of time and that too, within the country, I guess you may have ruled out Congress leader Rahul Gandhi. All right, here is a big clue: Before leaving for Coimbatore, he visited actor and former Trinamool Congress MP Mithun Chakraborty in Mumbai. Yes, we are talking about Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) Sarsangchalak Mohan Bhagwat. If you thought the itinerary looked like that of a busy, much sought-after politician in election time, you weren't wrong. The RSS chief has been visiting poll-bound states as frequently as, if not more than, any politician. It's nobody's case that the RSS has started indulging in politics. Because it always did and does - both directly and indirectly - notwithstanding Bhagwat's repeated assertions that the Sangh has nothing to do with politics. There is no point starting the same RSS-and-politics debate for the millionth time. What Bhagwat's itinerary tells us is that the Sangh has developed a better appreciation of the dynamics of political power and ideological agenda now than ever before. Not that the RSS was ever detached from the BJP's electoral politics. Its cadres at the grassroots have always lent a supporting hand to the BJP during elections, even if they have had strong grouses against some leaders - say, Vasundhara Raje in

Rajasthan. But it's also no secret that the RSS has been uneasy about Modi's personality cult, which runs counter to its conviction that too much focus on an individual undermines the ideology in the long run. The RSS wasn't very happy about the way it lost its veto in a government-run by its pracharak, Narendra Modi, on substantive issues. But the way Bhagwat has thrown himself in the coming elections indicates a nuanced shift in its strategy - a subtle acknowledgment of the need for political power for its larger ideological mission. In the current com-

text, West Bengal and Kerala are constant reminders of RSS' unfinished ideological agenda. MS Golwalkar, one of the principal architects of Hindutva and the second RSS chief, saw Communists, along with Muslims and Christians, as 'internal threats' to India and his idea of a Hindu nation. The BJP might have decimated the Left in Tripura, but its mission remains incomplete in Kerala, where the Left is still a dominant force, and in West Bengal where the Communists, though marginalised politically, remain a force ideologically. It goes without saying that West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee, even without a hammer and sickle in her hands and Marx on her lips, is barely different from a Leftist. A BJP victory in West Bengal, if at all, may sound the death knell for Communists - a result that the Sangh and the BJP would treat as their homage to Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the Jana Sangh founder. The Sangh's biggest peeve has to be Kerala where it has been fighting with the Communists since the 1940s. Way back in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Golwalkar's meetings in Kerala used to witness 'violent disruptions' by Communists, including one in Kozhikode where Bhagwat released a book on the RSS' struggle in the state where hundreds of RSS-BJP workers have been killed. Assam, of course, has a special place in the RSS' scheme of

things. The Sangh had established its base in the Northeast even before Independence. In a conversation with me last week, Silchar MP Rajdeep Roy recalled how an RSS pracharak, Ram Singh, had landed in Assam way back in 1948 but it took 68 years for the BJP (previously Jana Sangh) to come to power in the state. Incidentally, the MP's father was one of the Jana Sangh corporators, who went on to become a two-term BJP MLA. Roy was instrumental in making the Citizenship (Amendment) Act a reality as he had initiated the legal battle against illegal immigrants in the Supreme Court and the political battle by bringing delegations of BJP leaders from Barak Valley to impress upon the central leadership the need for such a law. As for Tamil Nadu, the RSS had its first footprints in the state way back in 1939. It couldn't, however, gain ground in a state where Periyar's Self-Respect Movement, with anti-Brahminism at its core, guided the political philosophy and discourse. The Sangh never gave it up though. It had the Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha in Coimbatore, the first in its 92-year history, in 2017. While these details explain the background for the RSS push in poll-bound states, there is also a larger narrative here. With all its reservations against personality-based politics, the Sangh is gradually realising the long-term benefits of it. If the BJP is seeking to break its image of a cow-belt party - an unfair description today given its dominance pan-India except southern states - why shouldn't the Sangh synchronise its expansion plans in the south with the BJP? Bhagwat is doing exactly this. The RSS has come to understand the power dynamics. If its first brush with power during Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government showed its desperation to control its ideological protégé, the BJP, it's now seeking to build on the political capital of another pracharak, Modi, for its expansion.

Reliance Industries, Bharti Airtel, HDFC Bank, Future Retail, Punjab National Bank



Mumbai, February 23 : According to a technical analyst, the short term trend of Nifty continues to be negative. "The pickup of downside momentum could signal more weakness in the next few sessions. Nifty futures were trading 95 points or 0.65 per cent higher at 14,770 on

Singaporean Exchange, indicating a positive opening for BSE Sensex and Nifty 50 on Tuesday. The headline indices have been in a bear grip for last four days with investors taking risk off the table on worries of surging commodity prices, rising bond yields and a fresh spike in Covid-19

Maruti Suzuki Jimny India launch being evaluated: 5-door version of this rugged SUV likely here

Mumbai, February 23 : It may be recalled that MSIL currently manufactures the Jimny in India for left-hand drive markets. The required tools as well as dyes are there in place. Maruti Suzuki showcased the Jimny SUV at the Auto Expo 2021. Ever since the SUV has been the talk of the town and while Maruti Suzuki hasn't yet confirmed if the SUV will indeed be sold here, now is a ray of hope. On an investor call (yes, the new normal you see), Shashank Shrivastava the executive director for marketing as well as sales at MSIL said that "We are currently evaluating the feasibility of it being launched in the domestic market. As you may recall, we had shown this Jimny at the Auto Expo in February 2020, and we got some really nice response. And we are currently studying the various aspects of the marketing as to when, if at all, we can launch that vehicle in India." It may be recalled that MSIL currently manufactures the Jimny in India for left-hand drive markets. The required tools as well as dyes are there in place. However, for the Indian car market, a 5-door version makes more sense. The Jimny can then practically be a full-fledged family car. At present, we have the Mahindra Thar that is bringing in some crazy numbers as far as sales are concerned.

Fiscal marksmanship: A look at budgets of states over 15 years shows they consistently overestimate revenues

New Delhi, February 23 : The fiscal marksmanship is poor due to the 'Grants from Centre' component of their revenue budgets. States either raise their own revenue through taxes or receive money from central transfers as the state's share of central taxes and grants. States either raise their own revenue through taxes or receive money from central transfers as the state's share of central taxes and grants. The first Union Budget of the Covid-19 crisis has garnered a great deal of speculation and attention, understandably so. Now, that attention should move to states that have experienced a massive revenue shock. Many states, from Maharashtra to Tamil Nadu, will present their budgets in the coming weeks. The states' difficulty in craft-

manship is particularly poor due to the 'Grants from Centre' component of their revenue budgets. The average overestimation of total revenues across all states and all 15 years was 10.79%. Some states clearly perform worse than the rest-Kerala overestimated its revenue in all 15 years by 7.14%, but Assam overestimated its revenues in 14 out of 15 years by an average of a massive 18.18%. The overestimation of revenues, despite different political economy contexts, points to a common structural problem. States either raise their own revenue through taxes or receive money from central transfers as the state's share of central taxes and grants. Data shows that the states do a much better job of estimating their own revenues as opposed to the trans-

fers they receive from the Centre. The mean overestimation of the grants component (11.02%) is more than double the mean overestimation of state's own revenues (4.47%). Grants are also much more volatile as measured by the standard deviation, which is 24.67% compared to the states' own revenues at 7.9%. There are multiple reasons why marksmanship is especially poor for grants. First, the grant-making process involves multiple institutions, which leads to problems such as poor computations and misaligned incentives. States project their revenue gap and basis that the Finance Commission recommends grants. Revenue gap estimation is a supremely complex task given the number of budget heads and sub-components under various departments and schemes. This naturally leads to errors. Additionally, there is also a problem of incentives. Given the importance of the revenue gap in grant allocations by the Finance Commission, states undertake fiscal dentistry-tinkering with the numbers so as to garner maximum revenues, moving numbers away from their true estimates. Second, the Centre adds to the missed marksmanship in two ways. First, it simply cuts back on its grants when facing a higher deficit-creating a wedge between the estimates and actuals for the states. Admittedly, the latest Union Budget has been different, where the Centre has devolved more funds despite a massive tax revenue shortfall. But these are extraordinary circumstances. In the normal course of things, the marksmanship of central government budgets has quite consistently been off the mark. Second, the centralised design of grants, especially those of centrally sponsored schemes, are such that they impose numerous exacting conditions on the states. When states are unable to adhere to these conditions, which are often unrealistic, the subsequent transfers of grants are held back by the Centre. Finally, the states bear responsibility here as well. Beyond their poor estimation methods, budgeting is also held hostage to arbitrary expenditure policies by the government in an election year in order to woo votes. States also struggle to implement their own schemes well and adhere to timelines, contributing to variation in their own spending from the budget estimates. There are cyclical reasons, too, due to exogenous random shocks. The current crisis is a case in point, but governments can't possibly control these. Poor fiscal marksmanship contributes to various issues beyond just budgeting. While estimation can never be accurate, there is enough scope to minimise these issues to a great deal.



ing effective responses to Covid-19 has underscored the mess state finances are in and just how important state budgets are. Given the lack of financing options, the states are looking to the Centre to finance their revenue gap, but poor fiscal marksmanship could severely hamper these efforts. insolvency law Getting prepacks to work well: The framework must refrain from stipulating a Swiss Challenge method of electrification, railways Indian Railways: On the right track A look at the budgets of 28 states over 15 years shows that states consistently overestimate their total revenues. The fiscal marks-

manship is particularly poor due to the 'Grants from Centre' component of their revenue budgets. The average overestimation of total revenues across all states and all 15 years was 10.79%. Some states clearly perform worse than the rest-Kerala overestimated its revenue in all 15 years by 7.14%, but Assam overestimated its revenues in 14 out of 15 years by an average of a massive 18.18%. The overestimation of revenues, despite different political economy contexts, points to a common structural problem. States either raise their own revenue through taxes or receive money from central transfers as the state's share of central taxes and grants. Data shows that the states do a much better job of estimating their own revenues as opposed to the trans-

cases. According to a technical analyst, the short term trend of Nifty continues to be negative. "The pickup of downside momentum could signal more weakness in the next few sessions. The lower levels to be watched around 14350-14300, which could be achieved by this or by next week. Immediate resistance is placed at 14800-14850," said Nagaraj Shetti, Technical Research Analyst, HDFC Securities. Mukesh Ambani, RIL, O2C Mukesh Ambani's RIL initiates O2C biz spin-off, expects NCLT approval by second quarter of FY22 NCLT can issue directions to hold shareholders meet over RIL deal: Future Retail NCLT can issue directions to hold shareholders meet over RIL deal: Future Retail RIL: Mukesh Ambani's RIL has announced to reorganise its O2C business into an independent subsidiary by the second quarter of FY22. Reliance Industries Ltd will transfer all refining, marketing and petchem assets to O2C. RIL standalone entity will have all existing segments other than O2C business. Bharti Airtel: The telecom giant Bharti Airtel on Monday said it will meet global fixed income investors on or after February 23, post which the company will take a final deci-

sion on the issuance of foreign currency bonds, subject to market conditions. Future Retail Ltd: The Supreme Court on Monday prevented the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) from taking a final call on the Rs 24,713-crore deal between Kishore Biyani-led Future Retail (FRL) and Reliance Retail, even as it allowed the tribunal to go ahead with the proceedings for merger of Future group and Mukesh Ambani's Reliance group firms. Punjab National Bank: PNB has started the process to exit Asset Reconstruction Company (India), also known as Arcil. Punjab National Bank's investment arm on Monday sought expressions of interest from potential buyers in a public notice. HDFC Bank: The Securities Appellate Tribunal (SAT) has stayed a Sebi order which imposed a fine of Rs 1 crore on HDFC Bank for invoking securities pledged by stock broker BRH Wealth Kreators, till further orders, according to a PTI report. Sebi had imposed the fine and also directed the bank on January 21 to transfer Rs 158.68 crore along with 7 per cent interest per annum into an escrow account till the issue of settlement of clients' securities is reconciled.

Amazon India's second edition of the 'Smbhav' summit on April 15-18, 2021

Delhi, Feb 23 : Amazon India today announced that it will host the second edition of 'Amazon Smbhav' from April 15-18th, 2021. Smbhav 2021 will bring together important industry and thought leaders for invigorating discussions on way ahead towards creating an Aatma Nirbhar Bharat by unlocking possibilities for businesses and entrepreneurs through a partnership with Amazon. Amazon Smbhav will be a four-day virtual summit hosted around the theme of 'Unlocking Infinite Possibilities for India' across sectors like manufacturing, retail, logistics, IT/ITeS, content creators, start-ups, brands and entrepreneurs across India. Over 30,000 participants are expected to participate at Amazon Smbhav, learning about best practices and industry trends from over 70 speakers. 'Smbhav' - Amazon's annual flagship summit is a virtual mega summit to share how Amazon and its partners leverage digital technologies

to innovate for Indian customers, entrepreneurs and small businesses. At Smbhav 2020, Amazon pledged to invest an additional \$1 billion to digitise 10 million MSMEs, generate \$10 billion in cumulated exports from India and create an additional 1 million jobs in India by 2025. "Smbhav 2021 is a step to showcase Amazon's commitment to being a strong partner in making the 21st century the Indian century. As we continue to work with a gamut of Indian businesses and entrepreneurs, we are committed to bringing to them tools, tech and innovation that empower the Indian economy, help create jobs at scale and unleash entrepreneurial agility in companies of all kinds and sizes. Smbhav 2021 will therefore be a unique platform offering opportunities to unlock these possibilities towards an Aatma Nirbhar Bharat", says Manish Tiwary, VP, Amazon India on the event. The thought leaders will virtually con-

nect with the Smbhav 2021 audience for keynote addresses, panel discussions, and workshops. The summit will primarily focus on four key pillars - Innovation, Skilling & Job Creation, Digitization, Exports & Startup Enablement. The summit will bring together diverse perspectives from eminent business leaders, policymakers, solution providers and Amazon leadership on areas that are most relevant for India's growth. A key highlight of the summit will be the annual "Amazon Smbhav Awards" that recognize businesses, innovators and individuals who have made significant progress in their respective areas and have contributed towards building an Aatma Nirbhar Bharat. Amazon will also host the 'Amazon Smbhav Startup Pitch Competition' that will offer rewards like cash prize, AWS credits, VC mentorship opportunities among many more to the winners.

Over 250 sellers under Lifestyle category achieve business transactions worth INR 10 million on udaan



Bengaluru, February 22 : Despite the pandemic and its impact on businesses, Udaan, India's largest business-to-business (b2b) eCommerce platform, enabled over 250 sellers under the Lifestyle category achieve sales worth INR 10 million on the platform in 2020. Udaan's Lifestyle business - comprising of Clothing, Accessories, and Footwear - shipped over 230 million products to 20% of the total Lifestyle retailers present in India while catering to more than 26 lakh orders in 2020. The sellers on the Udaan platform were able to benefit from the ease-of-business and scale of eCommerce which resulted in the Lifestyle business achieving sales of 10 million comfort wear products and 10 million pairs of slippers across 900 cities during the year. Key states such as Bihar, Jharkhand and the North East witnessed large transaction volumes in the Lifestyle category, followed by Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Karnataka and West Bengal. With Work-From-Home (WFM) becoming a norm due to the pandemic, the sale of daily wearables like T-shirts, jeans, kurtis, comfort wear and slippers witnessed a major spike making them the highest selling products on the platform. Around 9 million

for men while 30% were for women. The Lifestyle category also added 1,00,000 new users on the platform during 2020. The pandemic resulted in protective masks becoming the largest product category sold on the platform. Over 25 million masks were shipped to more than 20,000 retailers across India during the year. Over 3 million pieces of masks were shipped to Guwahati, Patna, and Kolkata each, while Visakhapatnam, Bangalore, Lucknow, and Chennai saw a cumulative sale of around 4.5 million masks. Speaking on the performance of the Lifestyle business, Kumar Saurabh, Head-Lifestyle Business, Udaan, said, "We are glad that, despite the global pandemic and its adverse impact, Udaan kept the wheels of small businesses across Bharat moving by leveraging the power and scale of eCommerce. The volume growth achieved in the Lifestyle business was primarily driven by a vast range of quality products available at very affordable prices to our business partners, who in turn cater to the real Bharat. In addition, massive digital adoption triggered among retailers and manufacturers during the pandemic also resulted in the demand going up as the unlock hap-

pened. This clearly highlights the huge potential in the Lifestyle business, and we are uniquely positioned to leverage this opportunity by offering the benefits of eCommerce and internet-scale to our business partners. This is completely in line with our vision of transforming the trade ecosystem in the country leveraging technology." The pandemic has accelerated tech adoption among small and medium businesses, retailers, manufacturers, and brands. Even large manufacturers and brands such as Jockey, Arvind, Shoppers Stop, BIBA Rangriti, Lifestyle, Adidas, Reebok, Puma, Hummel, Relaxo and Aqualite have partnered Udaan to leverage its strong distribution network and access newer markets while enjoying cost efficiencies. Udaan has operations across categories including lifestyle, electronics, home & kitchen, staples, fruits and vegetables, FMCG, pharma, toys and general merchandise. It enables shopkeepers, kirana, restaurants, street vendors, chemists, offices, small factories, contractors etc. to source from a large selection of high-quality products at the best prices with the convenience of eCommerce. The platform provides brands, and manufacturers access to new markets and regions with greater cost-efficiency and better price control. Udaan connects millions of MSMEs throughout India and help them grow their business through the adoption of technology. Udaan is a one stop solution for all business requirements in the b2b space. It has built inclusive tech tools for Bharat, specially catering to the needs of brands, retailers & manufacturers providing them a level playing field to conduct and grow their business.

About Udaan:

Founded in 2016 with a vision to transform the trade ecosystem and empower small businesses by leveraging technology, Udaan is India's largest b2b eCommerce platform. It has operations across categories including lifestyle, electronics, home & kitchen, staples, fruits & vegetables, FMCG, pharma, toys and general merchandise. Udaan has over 3 million users, 1.7 million retailers and 30,000 sellers on the platform across the country.

Maintain 'buy' on GAIL with increased TP of Rs 173



Mumbai, February 23 : Commissioning of customer projects, completion of pipelines, and rising oil prices all bode well for gas demand and GAIL. We expect gas trading and LPG production to also show improved profitability. Gas demand finally set to rise: Long-awaited commissioning of HURL fertiliser plants in Gorakhpur, Barauni, Sindhri, and Matix has started and this is set to drive gas demand for GAIL. GAIL, LPG production, CGD networks, Urja Ganga pipeline, natural gas trading Commissioning of customer projects, completion of pipelines, and rising oil prices all bode well for gas demand and GAIL. We expect gas trading and LPG production to also show improved profitability. Increase target price to Rs 173 (from Rs 156) and maintain 'buy' rating as stock still trades 15% below its 10-year mean core PE. Heranba IPO, Heranba Industries IPO, Heranba gmp Heranba Industries IPO opens for subscription today; raises Rs 187 crore from 18 Anchor investors stocks in focus, RIL, Airtel, PNB, hdfc bank Stocks in focus: Reliance Industries, Bharti Airtel, HDFC Bank, Future Retail, Punjab National Bank Gas demand finally set to rise: Long-awaited commissioning of HURL fertiliser plants in Gorakhpur, Barauni, Sindhri, and Matix has started and this is set to drive gas demand for GAIL. Further return to normalcy and start of public transport will further increase demand by city gas distribution (CGD) networks. In this backdrop, as sections of GAIL's Urja Ganga pipeline are commissioned, new sources of demand are expected to emerge. Elimination of natural gas trading losses and improvement in LPG/petchem look likely: In 9MFY21, GAIL incurred Rs 8.9 billion of losses on natural gas trading as demand in India waned and it had to sell a significant amount of LNG cargoes outside of India. As demand recovers and LNG prices remain at moderate levels, we expect profitability of the segment to return. In FY20, this segment was responsible for c23% of EBITDA. Similarly, the LPG segment benefits from increasing crude oil prices and petchem benefits from improved naphtha spreads. Set for longer-term growth path: GAIL's current pipelines are currently 54% utilised. As demand rises, increased utilisation should flow directly to the bottom line. In addition, a significant proportion (c20% of gross fixed assets) remains under construction. As sections of these pipelines are commissioned (c7500km under construction on an existing 12,500km pipeline), it should spur demand and improve ROE for the company.

Contd. From Page 1

Inaugurates construction

energy said that the BJP led state government in the state through its commitment to the empowerment of women has been taking a series of steps to make women an important stakeholder in the process for economic development of the state. He said that during last several months the women Self Help Groups by selling the products produced by them across the country and outside earned several hundred crores. Chief Minister Sonowal while hailing this effort of the women SHGs said that this has helped the state to expedite its economic growth. Chief Minister Sonowal also said that true to the spirit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's call for Aatmanirbhar Bharat this achievement of the women SHGs would definitely help the state towards achieving Aatmanirbhar Assam. Chief Minister Sonowal also said that to strengthen the edifice of self-reliant Assam the people will have to work diligently with self-confidence. He said that the BJP led state government immediately after coming to power took several steps for qualitative and quantitative development of the state. As a result of this for the last four and a half years the state witnessed unprecedented growth stories with no incidence of any violence from any part of the state, he said. Citing a stark contrast between the erstwhile congress government and the present BJP led state government, Chief Minister Sonowal said that because of the good governance, peace and tranquillity and harmonious coexistence of the state were founded on a strong pedestal. Chief Minister Sonowal also said that the Congress during its last 55 year rule kept the north bank of the Brahmaputra in complete darkness with no significant development initiatives for the people. However, contrary to the congress rule the present BJP government has unleashed never before development initiatives for the entire state. Highlighting the development initiatives undertaken by the state government specially for the north bank of the Brahmaputra, Sonowal said that the Jonai campus of Tezpur University, Indian Agriculture Research Institute at Gogamukh, Engineering College at Dhemaji, Medical College at Lakhimpur, Sri Sri Madhab Dev University at Narayanpur, Nursing Training College at Gahpur, Engineering College at Bihali, Medical Colleges at Biswanath, Nalbari, Dhubri and Kokrajhar were some of the institutions established by the state government to develop the human resources of the state. He also said that during the present state government dwelling houses under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana were built to enable the poor and underprivileged of the society to live with dignity. Deputy Commissioner Sonitpur Manabendra Pratap Singh gave the welcome address in the programme which was also addressed among others by MP Pallab Lochan Das and MLA Padma Hazarika. MLAs Brindaban Goswami, Pramod Borthakur, Ganesh Limbu, Chairperson Sonitpur Zila Parishad Dolly Suren, Mission Director ASRLM Krishna Baruah, Director Labour and Craftmanship Rubi Sarma and a host of other dignitaries were present on the occasion. Earlier Chief Minister Sonowal visited milk pasteurization centre of Kanyaka and had a look at different equipments installed for giving value addition to the milk products. He also interacted with the entrepreneurs and members of women SHGs and hailed their contributions towards achieving Aatmanirbhar Assam.

Assam artistes who led CAA

Borthakur, Nayan Nirban (from Congress) and Baikuntha Prince, among others. "They have openly come and joined the BJP. It's a loss of face for the people who are opposing us. How long will you carry on a false narrative?" Roy said. The first-time MP from Silchar also said the BJP has not put the CAA on the backburner but will take it to its logical conclusion, by giving safety, security and citizenship under Indian laws to the persecuted class of citizens coming from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, as desired by the party and its founders. Roy's assertion comes at a time when the BJP is perceived to have gone silent on the CAA, ahead of Assam assembly elections likely to be held in April. "BJP is committed to its ideological position of giving protection in the form of citizenship to persecuted people from the three countries," he said. Though the NDA government passed the CAA in December 2019, the rules to operationalise the law are yet to be framed. During his recent visit to Assam, Roy said, Prime Minister Narendra Modi had reiterated that his government is committed to protecting the rights of the people who stay in the state. Unknown to many, the Barak Valley MP is the one who had filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court way back in 2012 seeking grant of citizenship to the persecuted class coming from Bangladesh. "CAA was not an issue back then. I petitioned the SC when the government in Delhi and Dispur were run by the Congress and I was not sure when we would come to power," said Roy, who comes from a family of BJP leaders. His father, Bimalangshu Roy, was a Jana Sangh corporator. He had been a BJP MLA for 10 years - from 1996 to 2006 - and started talking about the need for citizenship from 2003 onwards. It was a year after his father's death in 2009 that Roy entered active politics and joined the BJP. "I did a lot of research on CAA, spoke to people on the ground and party leaders in the state before filing the petition. Between 2012 and 2015, we had around 50 hearings," he said. Roy's petition did not involve the persecuted class coming from Pakistan and Afghanistan, though. "Receiving my petition, the court observed that this class of people don't exist in Assam alone. If you have to make a law, the law has to be made for the entire country," he said. Following this, the apex court directed the chief secretaries of 18 states to give a deposition in writing within the timeframe of four months. Roy said, adding that no other state other than Uttarakhand, Assam, Tripura, West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Arunachal Pradesh responded. Roy decided to push the case further after that. "In 2014, after Modi ji's government came to power, I made several trips to Delhi to meet Rajnath Singh ji, who was the home minister. Then we got a delegation of Barak Valley BJP leaders. We had talks with various senior leaders," he said. The first breakthrough came in September 2015, he said, when the Centre issued two gazette notifications exempting Bangladeshi and Pakistani nationals belonging to minority communities who entered India on or before 31 December 2014 from the provisions of rules under the Passport (Entry into India) Act, 1920 and the Foreigners Act, 1946. The notification said they won't be treated as foreign nationals or infiltrators if they don't possess these documents or after their expiry. Things started moving after this, Roy said. In 2016, the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill was introduced in Parliament. The Lok Sabha passed it in January 2019. It was pending in the Rajya Sabha when the 16th Lok Sabha was dissolved, and the Bill lapsed. The Bill was reintroduced when the 17th Lok Sabha was constituted. It was finally passed by both Houses of Parliament in December 2019. However, rules to operationalise the CAA are yet to be framed by the home ministry. Roy insisted the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which was published in August 2019 to identify illegal immigrants from resident Indians, has not "backfired". In fact, it's the first time after the BJP came to power in 2014 that funds were granted for NRC work, the MP said, adding that the only thing the party is upset about is the list that came out. "If you analyse the list, you will see that in border districts more people have got into NRC, very few people are outside the list. Whereas in central districts of Assam, majority of people are not in the list. Percentage is considerably more than the border districts." Roy said they suspect some amount of foul play has gone in the list that has been prepared. "That is why they have asked for a 20% review of the list in the border areas and 10% review in the central districts. The Supreme Court has given us time to file our reply. The state government is in the process of preparing that," he said. "If the review can prove that (any foul play), we will probably have to redo the list," Roy added. When the updated NRC list was announced in August 2019, at least 19 lakh out of the over 3.29 crore applicants were excluded. Many of those who could not find their name in the list are Hindus. "BJP will come to power based on the development work (in Assam) that has been done by the Modi government at the Centre for the last six years and the Sarbananda Sonowal government for the last four years," said the MP, who is also one of the state BJP general secretaries. He said the BJP is targeting to win 100-plus seats with allies in the 126-seat assembly. "The opposition does not have any issue in the state. Their only issue is 'come, let's block BJP'. Their slogan is Assam Bachao (Save Assam). Now tell me, from whom do they want to save Assam?" Roy asked.

In Assam, over 1.55 lakh healthcare

Sinha said. The final date of completion of inoculation of health workers is February 28. He said people with co-morbidities and below 50 years will come in the fourth phase. Despite a steady rise in Covid cases every day over the past eight days in Maharashtra, the number of deaths have not risen in the same proportion during the same period. While daily infections went up by over 50% - from 4,092 cases on February 14 to 6,971 on February 21 - fatalities actually went down: As many as 35 deaths were reported on February 21 against 40 a week ago. Trinamool Congress on Monday showcased eight central awards that Bengal had won from the BJP-ruled Centre to rebut Prime Minister Narendra Modi's bad governance charge and called his "teleprompter performance... a bag of lies." "There are about 1.9 lakh healthcare workers and 1.8 lakh estimated frontline workers but this figure is much less than the 50 plus age group population, scattered even in the most difficult terrains." "Health and frontline workers can be easily registered for vaccination. They can be tracked in hospitals, Anganwadi centres and police stations. But the drive for the normal citizens is not going to be easy," he said. In Assam, over 1.55 lakh healthcare and frontline workers have already been inoculated. Of these, 1.40 lakh are healthcare workers and about 16,000 are frontline workers, including police and armed forces personnel. Vaccination for the frontline workers started on February 17. "It's voluntary immunisation, not compulsory," he said. He informed that latest reports stated that 85 minor AEFI (66 in Covishield and 19 in Covaxin) have been reported in the state till date, which is only about 0.05% of the total Covid vaccination that has taken place. "Not even a single case of severe or serious AEFI was reported in Assam. There should not be any hesitancy in taking the vaccine," Sinha confirmed. In Guwahati, awareness among health workers ensured there was cent per cent registration for inoculation at GMCH. But turnout was low initially in small towns and district hospitals. Vaccination in Assam started on January 16 but initial hesitancy and glitches on the Co-WIN portal led to a poor turnout. After the drive started on Day 1 (January 16) and 54% of the targeted beneficiaries got the jab, the turnout reached 63.48% by Monday afternoon.

With Covid cases rising in other

Maharashtra, the number of deaths have not risen in the same proportion during the same period. While daily infections went up by over 50% - from 4,092 cases on February 14 to 6,971 on February 21 - fatalities actually went down: As many as 35 deaths were reported on February 21 against 40 a week ago. Trinamool Congress on Monday showcased eight central awards that Bengal had won from the BJP-ruled Centre to rebut Prime Minister Narendra Modi's bad governance charge and called his "teleprompter performance... a bag of lies." "Since December, tourist flow has improved marginally as lockdown norms were eased. We have received a lot of queries for March and April as they are the festive seasons. The hope was that relaxations at airports and railway stations will encourage more tourists to come," he added. Assam reported 14 new coronavirus-related cases on Monday, while 18 have been discharged. Out of the 14 cases, eight of them were reported in Kamrup (M), 3 in Dibrugarh and 2 in Jorhat district. The new cases were detected out of 15,536 tests conducted. Today's positivity rate of the state stood at 0.09 per cent with an active caseload of 256. Earlier today, one person identified as Amir Hussain from Mancachar has been reported Coronavirus positive. 2,14,712 recoveries have been recorded till today with a recovery rate of 98.76 per cent.

Sheena Bora murder case

arrest in August 2015. As per the jail report submitted before a single bench of Justice P D Naik on Monday, Mukerjea does not suffer from any severe ailments that cannot be treated at the prison. It said Mukerjea was taken to JJ Hospital two times and her reports were normal. The court, after perusing the report, directed CBI, the prosecuting agency, to file its affidavit in response to the bail plea within two weeks, and posted the matter for further hearing on March 8. The prosecution's case is that Mukerjea and former husbands Sanjeev Khanna and Peter Mukerjea killed her daughter Sheena Bora in 2012. Peter Mukerjea was granted bail in February 2020, while Khanna is still behind bars.

Clear stand on Assam's cattle

protected by @BJP4Assam govt. against your slogan of 'Na Khaunga Na Khane Dunga'," Baghel added. Baghel had on February 17 told reporters in Guwahati that besides cattle smuggling, strong syndicates are also engaged in the supply of coal, stones, bamboo, betel leaves, nuts and even fish. He further said that BJP MP Maneka Gandhi had reportedly written to the Assam government over its treatment to cows. Hours before Prime Minister Narendra Modi arrived in Assam, Chhattisgarh Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel on Monday sought his response on allegations of an active cow syndicate in the state. The Chhattisgarh CM had on February 17 told reporters here that besides cattle smuggling, strong syndicates are also engaged in supply of coal, stones, bamboo, betel leaves, nuts and even fish. Baghel also said that BJP MP Maneka Gandhi had reportedly written to the Assam government over its treatment to cows. PM Modi arrived in Assam on Monday to dedicate some projects of the oil and gas sector to the nation. Elections to the 126-member assembly are due in March-April.

China Is Back As India's Top

in the middle of a pandemic. While Prime Minister Narendra Modi banned hundreds of Chinese apps, slowed approvals for investments from the neighbor and called for self-reliance after a deadly clash along their disputed Himalayan border, India continues to rely heavily on Chinese-made heavy machinery, telecom equipment and home appliances. As a result, the bilateral trade gap with China was at almost \$40 billion in 2020, making it India's largest. Total imports from China at \$58.7 billion were more than India's combined purchases from the U.S. and the U.A.E, which are its second- and third-largest trade partners, respectively. That said, India did manage to lower imports from its Asian neighbor amid demand disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The South Asian nation also managed to increase its exports to China by about 11% from a year ago to \$19 billion last year, which makes any further worsening of ties with Beijing a threat to New Delhi's export revenue. The tense relations are already weighing on India's ambitions to bolster its manufacturing capabilities. New Delhi has been slow to issue visas to Chinese engineers needed to help Taiwanese companies set up factories under a so-called production-linked incentive program, or PLI, to promote local manufacturing. "Still a very long way to go" is how Amitendu Palit, an economist specializing in international trade and investment at the National University of Singapore, described New Delhi's efforts to wean itself away from Beijing. "The PLI schemes will take at least four-five years to create fresh capacities in specific sectors. Till then reliance on China would continue."

Navy's Surface-To-Air Missile

vehicle performance parameters were monitored using flight data, captured by various range instruments such as Radar, EOTS and telemetry systems deployed by ITR, Chandipur. The present trials have proved the effectiveness of the weapon system and few more trials will be conducted shortly before deployment on Indian Naval ships. Once deployed, the VL-SRSAM system will prove to be a force multiplier for the Indian Navy. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh congratulated DRDO on the successful trials. Dr G Satheesh Reddy, Secretary, Department of Defence R&D and Chairman, Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) congratulated the teams involved in the successful flight test of VL-SRSAM Missile System. Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik tweeted: "Congratulate @DRDO_India on the successful launch of indigenously developed vertical launch short range surface-to-air-missile (VL SRSAM) @indiannavy, off the coast of Odisha." As a safety measure, Balasore district administration in consultation with ITR authority at Chandipur temporarily evacuated 6,322 people residing in five hamlets within 2.5 km radius of the launch pad.

Those coming back to mainstream

Minister Sarbananda Sonowal at a function held at Srimanta Sankardeva Kalakshetra in the city today. On the occasion, total 1040 cadres of Karbi People's Liberation Tiger (KPLT), People's Democratic Council of Karbi Longri (PDCK), Karbi Longri NC Hills Liberation Front (KLNLF), Kuki Liberation Front (KLF) and United People's Liberation Army (UPLA) including self-styled Chief of PDCK Ingti Kathar Songbijit laid down their arms. 338 arms of different kinds along with 11203 bullets were surrendered by the militants. Speaking on the occasion, Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal welcomed those members of Karbi militant groups back to mainstream society and congratulated them for deciding to give up arms while reposing faith in the constitution of the country. He also commented that Karbi Anglong is one of the most beautiful districts in the state and he urged the surrendered militants to contribute in the mission of making Aatmanirbhar Assam through Aatmanirbhar Karbi Hills Region. Karbi youths have lots of potential and they must utilise it to make Karbi Anglong a developed region in the state by harnessing its tourism potential, he said. Saying that due to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's endeavour of equal development in every corner of the country Assam is making rapid strides towards prosperity, Sonowal congratulated the surrendered militants for coming back to mainstream society and urged them to contribute in the journey of state's progress. The government's role is not limited to only bringing back the militants but also it is committed to ensure a life of dignity and respect for those who have surrendered arms by facilitating opportunities for livelihood and employment, he added. The Chief Minister also appreciated Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council led by CEM Tuliram Ronghang for ushering in a period of peace and prosperity in the Karbi Hills and he also commended the Unified Command structure comprising Assam police, Indian Army, Paramilitary and Intelligence Agencies for their success in bringing peace to the state. Sonowal also thanked noted litterateur and former president of Asom Sahitya Sabha Rong Bong Terang for his presence at the programme along with representatives of Karbi Sahitya Sabha and members of Karbi Cultural Society. While Additional DGP (Special Branch) Hiren Nath gave the welcome address, Chief Executive Member of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council Tuliram Ronghang, Chief Secretary Jishnu Baruah and DGP Bhaskar Jyoti Mahanta also spoke on the occasion. Chief Minister's Media Advisor Hrishikesh Goswami, Diphu MPHaren Singh Bey, Additional Chief Secretary to Chief Minister Paban Kumar Borthakur, Principal Secretary Home & Political Department Niraj Verma, Additional DGP (Law & Order) GP Singh, GoC 21 Mountain Division Indian Army Major General SP Singh, Joint Director, SIB Rashmi Sinha and other senior officers were present at the programme. Besides, former President of Asom Sahitya Sabha Padmasree Rong Bong Terang, Gaon Burahs and other leading citizens of Karbi Anglong district were present.

Azim Premji has an idea

big boost if private participation is allowed. Premji went on to say that the vaccines against Covid-19 have been developed in record time and the task now is to administer them in large proportions. While Azim Premji agreed that the government is doing the best it can, he suggested that private participation will help improve the rate of vaccinations in the country. "There is a possibility that we can get the Serum Institute to supply vaccine at about Rs 300 per shot, and hospitals, private nursing homes can administer this at a cost of Rs 100 per shot. So with 400 rupees a shot, it is possible to do mass vaccination of the population," Premji said. "I think it is very important that the government does consider this as a major supplementation to the effort," he added. Premji, who has donated generously to help battle Covid-19, highlighted how the pandemic had proved to be a "wake up call" to fix public healthcare systems in the country. As of today, over 1.11 crore frontline and health workers have been vaccinated against the novel coronavirus.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah

Batadrava Than in memory of Srimanta Sankardev will be initiated as part of a plan to build it as a field of religious and spiritual research. Expressing happiness over the arrival of Home Minister Amit Shah in Batadrava, the Batadrava Than Management Committee termed it as a historic event. Earlier on February 11 and January 23, Union Home Minister Amit Shah paid visits to Assam. Earlier on January 23, Union Home Minister Amit Shah paid a 2-day visit to Assam. Amit Shah held a crucial meeting with BJP party workers on January 24 evening. Later on January 24, Amit Shah also held two public meetings - Kokrajhar and Nalbari. Hectic politicking has begun in Assam ahead of the Assembly elections in the State. The term of the 126-member Assam Assembly is ending on May 31, 2021. Elections to the Assam Legislative Assembly is likely to be held in April-May this year.

NDRF Participated In A Joint Off-Site Exercise With Iocl Bottling Plant Betkuchi, Assam

Guwahati, Feb 23 :

Team of 1st BN NDRF Guwahati participated in an Off-site drill on Industrial Disaster and response at Bottling Plant Betkuchi, Guwahati to ensure effective response of



disaster management agencies and employees of the organizations. On this occasion Sh R S gill Commandant 1st Battalion told, "there is little or no warning of fire & industrial chemical accidents and the loss incurred is very high, the areas close to an industrial setup are highly vulnerable for immediate threat. The local community has to be informed about the response steps to be taken in case of chemical accidents & importance of monitoring the pollution levels of the industry and participate in mock Exercise for evacuation." Approx 250 employee from plant, media press witnessed the joint mock Exercise. After the exercise a de-briefing session was done in which role of participant agencies was highly appreciated by huge gathering of local public, and civil administration. After completion of exercise, NDRF team conducted tree plantation program and planted around 100 saplings of different varieties were planted in and around the terminal. The exercise concluded with a note to organize more such exercise in future so that the effective response operations during industrial disaster could be carried out to save precious human lives.

Women work for the society with dedication and honesty - Chandramohan Patwari

Barpeta, Feb 23: "Women work for the society with dedication and honesty. All women are very loyal and honest" - stated by Chandramohan Patwari, Minister of State for Transport in his address at the inauguration ceremony of Scooty Distribution Program among all the Jeebika Sokhies under the Rural Livelihood Mission in Barpeta District on Tuesday. He added that We want to see laughter in the mouths of women in all parts of Assam - open laughter of the heart. Gunindra Nath Das, MLA, Barpeta Assembly constituency, addressed the gathering as the chief guest. In his inaugural address at the inaugural function, District Information and Public Relations Officer Bikash Sharma said that 189 Jibika Sokhies have been recruited in Barpeta district. As many as 13,064 SHGs have been formed in the district so far under the Assam State Rural Livelihoods Campaign, with 1.44 lakh families directly involved, he said. He also mentioned that 8,108 of these groups have already been provided with the benefits of the Kanaklata Women Empowerment Scheme and another 1891 groups have been provided with assistance. At the end of the meeting Manoj Kumar Sikariya, CEO of Barpeta Zila Parishad, addressed the gathering. Sharmistha Das presided over the meeting where many distinguished guests were present.

'There's nothing holding me back from a fifth Tour win'

London, February 23 : It is almost 11pm when Chris Froome leans closer to the screen in his hotel room in Abu Dhabi. We have been talking for 40 minutes and while he has sometimes looked tired and vulnerable Froome has been cheerful and friendly. Of course there has been some difficulty when addressing doping in cycling and sobering memories of the accident that left him with fractured vertebrae and sternum, a shattered elbow, a collapsed lung and a double break of his femur that nearly ended his career. Froome has also told me how much happier he is in the role of an underdog, as the new leader of a developing team in Israel Start-Up Nation (ISN), than riding at the front of a monster organisation such as Team Sky, which became Team Ineos, while winning his seven grand tours. There is less pressure and less tension. But, as he moves nearer to the camera, Froome insists the intensity of his sporting desire remains. "It certainly does," he says when asked if the old hunger runs as deep as ever and helps him believe he might win another unlikely Tour de France. "It is going to be a huge ask but, with four titles, I've come so close to the record of five. There's nothing holding me back any more so I'd love to give it my best shot and win a fifth. A lot of it is mind over matter so I hope the body will follow." Froome is 35 but he talks seriously about competing at the highest level for another five years. "I'd like to, if possible. We are seeing more and more examples in professional sport with the most recent being Tom Brady, which was a pretty incredible story." This month Brady, aged 43, won his seventh Super Bowl. His first six had been with the remorseless New England Patriots but, just over two weeks ago, Brady achieved something more remarkable when, in his first season with a new team, he fired the Tampa Bay Buccaneers to a shock victory against the champions, the Kansas City Chiefs. "I love drawing parallels with other sports," Froome says, "and seeing athletes going later and later into their careers. That's due to a host of reasons but mainly because of nutrition and physiology. Everything is evolving. We're learning more and more about our bodies and I certainly believe it's more to do with mindset in your late 30s." Yet in his last race for Team Ineos three months ago, at the Vuelta a España, Froome finished three-and-a-half hours behind the winner, Primoz Roglic. Did he not feel humiliated - especially after a crushing first stage when he was 11 minutes adrift of Roglic? "I wouldn't say humiliated. It was clear from the training data I wasn't where I'd normally be if I was fighting for the win. It was frustrating and disappointing - but I could have a bit of perspective and remember that, if we rewind a year, I could barely walk." In June 2019, before the Critérium du Dauphiné, Froome crashed into a wall at 37mph. Apart from the multiple fractures, he lost four pints of blood and was in intensive care for weeks. "I had quite a laundry list of injuries," he says wryly, "but I didn't want to finish my career like that. As soon as I knew there weren't any physical limitations I approached the rehab process like I was preparing to win a Tour - with the same dedication and commitment." Froome nods when I say it must still have been a frightening experience. "There were definitely a few moments. When I had more difficulty breathing it was explained that I had internal injuries, some fractured vertebrae, a fractured sternum, collapsed lung. It felt serious then. I was completely in the hands of the first responders, almost as if I was a spectator watching from afar. So that was quite scary and helpless feeling, knowing my life depended on the people working around me." Was there a psychological aftermath? "I found that side quite easy as I was so eager to get back on the bike. If I'd overshoot a corner I'd probably have more doubt over my abilities. But this happened on a perfectly

straight road. A big gust of wind took my front wheel when I had one hand on the handlebars and directed me into somebody's driveway wall. It's one of those freak things. I have huge respect for Dave Brailsford and what he's created with Ineos. We still keep in touch "I was lucky my wife and kids were fantastic throughout the ordeal. Kids at that age - Kellan is five and Katie is two - don't see the bad stuff. I spent a couple of months bed-ridden and then I progressed to a wheelchair for a few months. I managed to get on to crutches eventually and be up walking six months later. But they thought it was quite cool I had this wheelchair to cruise around the house." When he resumed training last year Froome's damaged right quad generated 20% less power than the left - while scans showed



a surgical screw had penetrated a bone. Last week, Froome flew to Abu Dhabi from California, and an extensive rehab programme that has completed his recovery, and on Sunday he started the UAE Tour with his new team. "I am in no real pain now," he says. "I get a little discomfort when I sleep on my right side and some burning from where I had a plate inserted but it doesn't affect me on the bike. All the gym and rehab work is translating to power on the bike. That left/right ratio is equal again." Froome highlights how he has been helped by ISN's partnership with Hammerhead, which provides daily software and hardware updates based around the team's needs with specific attention paid to Froome's power ratio. "I'm on the new head units we've got so I can see exactly what the left leg is doing versus the right leg. After speaking to Hammerhead they introduced it and that's been a big focus for me and very handy. I've had great support from the Hammerhead guys." His objectives in the Tour of the UAE are understandably modest. "I don't expect to be challenging for victory, but it would be nice to feel more comfortable in the peloton." ISN are owned by a billionaire in Sylvan Adams but what else, beyond their financial muscle, persuaded

Froome to join them? "Their proposal for a grand tour programme resonated. They've been around for a few years but focused on the Classics. They've not competed to win an event like the Tour de France. They presented their ambitions to me last spring, and showed their desire for me to spearhead that project. It almost felt as if I was starting with a blank piece of paper to build a group to fight in the grand tours. Froome with his son Kellan after winning the 2017 Tour de France. "Ineos have been winning grand tours for years. This is something new, something fresh and just what I needed. I've never been part of a process of recruiting riders and staff, of planning. At Ineos all these things were done for us. Now I'm part of that process and it's as if I've got more ownership of it as

well." ISN includes some of Froome's old friends such as Darryl Impey, Dan Martin and Michael Woods. "It's an older team with lots of experience. We've got guys who by no means match up to Ineos's roster but it's a great group with fantastic intentions. I'd much rather be in this position than going in as a clear race favourite like I've been previously." Froome won so much with Team Sky/Ineos but it always looked like a cold-blooded marriage of convenience. There seemed to be no deep affection between Froome and Dave Brailsford. "I wouldn't say that's necessarily accurate," Froome counters. "We've always had our ups and downs but we got on over the years and I have a huge respect for him as a manager and what he's created with Team Sky and Ineos. We still exchange messages every now and then." He was much closer to Nicolas Portal, his sporting director at Sky/Ineos. Did Portal's tragic death, aged 40, influence Froome's decision to leave? "That was part of it. Nico had been part of every single grand tour bar one for me so not having him around changed the prospect of continuing with Ineos. Chris Froome in a hospital bed after his serious crash while training in 2019. "It was such a huge loss for the team and everyone who knew Nico. He was an

incredible guy in a very understated way. When it seemed as if the odds were overwhelming Nico would always be the voice of calm. He would be that extra rider in my ear even when I didn't have teammates around me." Has Froome followed the case of Richard Freeman - the doctor who has been charged on two anti-doping counts relating to his work with Sky? "I see the headlines but not really, no. I'm not that interested in it." Froome might have had limited dealings with Freeman but surely the case leaves a heavy cloud over Sky's past achievements? "I don't know enough about the specifics of the case to comment. Are these questions in connection to Team Sky or British Cycling? I don't know the answer so I don't think it's fair for me to comment on his case specifically. I don't know the particulars." When I first interviewed Froome in 2013 he suggested cycling's omertà had been broken and the sport was cleaner than it had been for decades. Eight years later and, with the Freeman case rumbling on, does he still believe this? "Very much so. I feel the sport has continued to lead the way in policing anti-doping. Lots of sports are implementing similar measures." Many people don't understand the intricacies and how tight the policing is now in cycling. We needed to get credibility back and I feel we've turned the corner in that respect." Froome admits he was hurt badly by allegations against him after he tested positive for salbutamol at the Vuelta in September 2017. It took nine months for him to be cleared by cycling's governing body, the UCI, and by the World Anti-Doping Agency, which accepted Froome and Team Sky had proved the finding fell within the expected range of variation consistent with him taking salbutamol for his longstanding asthma. "It certainly was one of the most testing times of my career - having my credibility questioned like that when I hadn't done anything wrong and my whole career I've been a huge advocate of clean cycling. That was an extremely tough period but I'm glad we finally got the truth out... I know what I'm doing. If other people believe otherwise, that's up to them." Has Froome changed much as a person with all the success and scrutiny, the glory and adversity? "The last decade has given me more perspective on life. I've grown a thicker skin going through the ordeals of the last few years. I hope I'm coming to an end of it now because it feels like an exciting time. It's a new start with new motivations for me."

'It was a struggle': Disappointed Murray avoided watching Australian Open



London, February 23 : Andy Murray in action at the ATP Challenger in Biella, Italy last week. He was prevented from competing at the Australian Open after testing positive for Covid-19. Andy Murray has said he avoided watching the Australian Open, even unfollowing his fellow players on social media to cope with his disappointment at not taking part. Murray had been due to compete in Melbourne until a positive coronavirus test sidelined him days before he was due to travel to Australia. "I watched very little of the Australian Open. I didn't watch because I wanted to be there myself. It was a struggle," he said. "I stopped following all the tennis players I follow on social media because I just didn't really want to see it. I saw little bits and pieces of highlights." Instead of Australia, Murray travelled to the ATP Challenger in Biella after recovering from the virus, where he lost in the final a week ago. This week, he will return to ATP tour competition for the first time since October at the Open Sud de France in Montpellier. He faces Egor Gerasimov of Belarus in the first round on Tuesday. Murray's travels have shown him the challenge of competing in a worldwide tour during the pandemic. He believed that having Covid-19 antibodies would at least be a silver lining, allowing him to travel in Europe with greater freedom. Instead, the risk of testing positive due to viral shedding

has made life more difficult. "When I arrived in Italy I tested positive on arrival and then you're in the hands of the government and it's not under the ATP jurisdiction," he said. "I had to go through more testing and had to quarantine when I arrived to get tests, wait in my hotel and get a local nurse to come and test me. I then tested negative a couple of days later and I was allowed out." Murray will travel next to the Rotterdam ATP 500 tournament - which will require a negative test - meaning he will face a nervous wait to be cleared to travel there. On the court, he believes he is capable of competing with the top players after a pre-season he previously described as his best training block in years. He says that there was "no question" he was ready to compete with the best in Australia. Contracting coronavirus has diminished some of his off-season gains, but his confidence remains. "I play in practice with lots of top players and I know how I get on against them," he said. "If I was getting smoked when I was practising and playing with guys, I wouldn't keep going through it. But I know the level I am playing at. I have not competed with the top 10 players in the world but I have been playing and practising with players between 20 and 70 in the world and doing absolutely fine." "Provided I can stay fit for a period of time and get good practice and matches in, I don't see why I shouldn't be able to compete with the best players."

Beach volleyball stars boycott Qatar tournament over bikini ban

London, February 23 : German beach volleyball stars Karla Borger and Julia Sude have said they will boycott a tournament in Qatar because it is "the only country" where players are forbidden from wearing bikinis on court. "We are there to do our job, but are being prevented from wearing our work clothes," Borger told radio station Deutschlandfunk on Sunday. "This is really the only country and the only tournament where a government tells us how to do our job - we are criticising that." Qatar is hosting the upcoming FIVB World Tour event but strict rules about on-court clothing have led the world championships silver medalist Borger and her doubles partner Sude to shun the event. The event in March is the first time that Doha has hosted a women's beach

volleyball event, after seven years hosting a men's competition. Yet female players have been asked to wear shirts and long trousers rather than the usual bikinis, a rule which the world beach volleyball federation, FIVB, claims is "out of respect for the culture and traditions of the host country". Borger and Sude told Spiegel magazine during the weekend they "would not go along with" the rules imposed by the Qatari authorities. Borger said that they would normally be happy to "adapt to any country", but that the extreme heat in Doha meant that bikinis were necessary. Her team mate Sude pointed out that Qatar had previously made exceptions for female track and field athletes competing at the World Athletics Championships in Doha in 2019.

Willie Mullins happy with Festival team but Saint Roi out

London, February 23 : Saint Roi has been ruled out of the Cheltenham Festival by Willie Mullins, who had hoped last year's County Hurdle winner would make up into a championship contender this spring. However, the dominant jumps trainer of recent years was delighted to report no other issues affecting a remarkably strong team of high-profile horses in his County Carlow stable being aimed at next month's event, for which he has almost half the favourites. "Unfortunately, he's out of Cheltenham," Mullins said of Saint Roi. "I don't think he's scratched yet but chatting to JP [McManus, the owner] the other day, we came to the conclusion that we're not happy with him and he won't run at Cheltenham. He just hasn't gone forward. He's had one or two little niggles and I think JP was happy to just let him get over those entirely. Maybe they're the reason, maybe they're not. We'll see." Saint Roi's only success this season came on his October reappearance at Tipperary. He appeared an unlucky loser in the Morgiana the following month but was disappointing at Leopardstown's Christmas meeting and trailed Honeysuckle by 21 lengths in the recent Irish Champion Hurdle. He was a 20-1 shot for Cheltenham's Champion Hurdle on Monday morning, having been a quarter of those odds in the autumn. Mullins was otherwise sanguine as he surveyed his Festival raiding party in an online press conference organised by Jockey Club



Racecourses. "We're happy with the whole team, as far as I can see. We've had no last-minute problems, apart from Saint Roi, that's the only one." The trainer recalled feeling worried about his stable's ability to compete after losing some big-name horses last summer. "I was as astounded as anyone else when I read in the paper that we had 13 or 14 favourites for Cheltenham. For this to come out of where I thought we were in the autumn... If half of it comes off, it'll be a brilliant Cheltenham." Asked the key to his continued dominance of jump racing, Mullins said: "To tell you the truth, I'm wondering myself. I think recruitment. I'm always searching and looking." At the moment, I'm looking for horses that are going to be racing for me in two years' time. We're always on the lookout for young horses and that's instrumental in building a base. Of

course, you need the people to give you the money to invest in nice bloodstock. We're very lucky to have that and it doesn't happen overnight. It's hard for younger trainers to come in and expect to compete." Mullins has every reason to hope Al Boum Photo can emulate Arkle and Best Mate in winning the Cheltenham Gold Cup for a third time. "We think he's in a good position. I've been happy with what I'm seeing. We don't have any negatives at this point." It would be extraordinary if it happened. We were dreaming for years of winning a Gold Cup and two years ago, I'd given up the dream. I didn't think I was gonna win one and now here we are on the brink of having a horse win three, having another Best Mate, another Arkle. It's unbelievable, that's what it is. Al Boum Photo may be the yard's only runner in the Gold Cup, as Mullins is mulling

alternative targets for Kemboy, who could try the Stayers Hurdle, and Melon, who could join Allaho and Min in the Ryanair. Despite the absence of Saint Roi, Mullins could still have strong representation in the Champion Hurdle, through Sharjah, Saldier and an interesting dark horse from France, James Du Berlais. Bought as a novice chaser for next season, he could turn up in the two-mile championship "for something to do". "We've been watching him in France for the last 18 months and trying to buy him. He jumps, he stays, he's got everything you'd want. He can be a tough ride, from what I can remember. We'll be asking him questions over the next fortnight that we haven't asked him before, so we'll learn a lot more about him. It's not the end of the world if he disappoints because he wasn't bought with this in mind." "He owes me," was the first thing Mullins had to say about Appreciate It, widely fancied for the Festival's opening race, the Supreme Novice Hurdle. The horse was found at the weekend to have pulled his rug over his head with all its buckles still done up, "a bit of a Houdini act". While the trainer restored the rug, Appreciate It "made a meal" of the sheepskin gloves he had just taken off. "I think it's a sign of his wellbeing," the trainer sighed. "But, new gloves needed." Other Festival favourites in the Mullins yard are Concertista (Mares Hurdle), Gaillard Du Mesnil (Ballymore), Monkfish (Brown Advisory), Chacun Pour Soi (Champion Chase), Kilcruit (Bumper), Hook Up

(Dawn Run), Statler (Albert Bartlett), Billaway (Hunter Chase) and Elimay (Mares Chase). Regular readers of my work will know that I am a huge advocate of backing novices or lightly raced horses in handicaps. Unexposed sorts are coming to the fore more regularly than ever in the Festival handicaps and 17 of the past 20 winners of the Coral Cup had raced nine times or fewer over hurdles. Ten of the 12 winners of the Martin Pipe had run no more than eight times over hurdles, so in both events you should focus your attention on those with scope to improve. The Weatherbys Cheltenham Festival Betting Guide 2021, written by Paul Ferguson, is published on 26 February, priced £15.95. Talking Horses readers can obtain a £4 discount by using the promotion code 'GDN21' when placing an order. Taunton's staying handicap chase is full of unconvincing types but there's something to be said for Putdecashonthedash (3.05), 10-1 after opening at twice those odds. His win last season came at around this time of year and, although it was at Wincanton, he put up three decent efforts at this track, including when beaten just a head. He was pulled up in both starts before Christmas but this is a step down in class and he has since had a wind operation. Triple Chief (2.00) has gone the other way, out to 20-1, but the handicapper has given him a right chance, dropping him 8lb for two runs this term, and Bryony Frost is back aboard for the first time since March.

Jofra Archer may return for third Test as England consider seam-heavy attack

London, February 23: Jofra Archer looks set to return for Wednesday's day-night third Test against India in Ahmedabad as England ponder up to five changes to their XI and a potentially seam-heavy attack in order to cash in on the pink ball. Joe Root and Chris Silverwood face the toughest selection of a series that stands at 1-1 with two to play. Reports from the new 110,000-capacity Motera Stadium are that India want another dry pitch that spins early, although England's captain and head coach could yet be swayed by lively performance of the pink SG ball in the nets. "Stuart Broad, Jimmy Anderson and Jofra Archer have been licking their lips, I can tell you," said Ben Stokes in an interview with TalkSport. "In training yesterday, when the lights came on, the nets got really dangerous. The bowlers had to stop bowling in the nets because we were worried that some of the batters were going to get injured." The ball started jumping off a length and a few guys got hit. We had to take the bowlers out into the middle to finish their spells. "Archer, who missed last week's 317-run defeat in Chennai due to an elbow niggle, is available after a cortisone injection and could replace his impressive stand-in, Olly Stone, while Anderson should be fresh again after the 38-year-old was rested with this third Test in



mind. "Jofra brings something unique," said Root. "He can do things others can't and he is a very exciting prospect in that manner. If he is fully fit, able to operate at 100%, it would absolutely be great seeing him back out there playing." Root's endorsement was couched by the need to balance England's attack for the conditions, while the tail is another factor. This appears likely to be settled by a straight choice between the spin of Dom Bess or the seam of Chris Woakes at No 8, after Moeen Ali returned home for a pre-agreed break. At the conclusion of the last Test, the England captain said Moeen had "chosen to go home". But he admitted on Monday it was wrong to describe it in different terms to the other multi-format players who have been afforded down time during a three-month tour. Root said: "I made a complete mistake. That was my bad, I got that

completely wrong. It wasn't a true reflection of what had happened and it left it open to interpretation, which was unfair on Moeen and I was very quick to apologise to him. He shouldn't have been put in that position, so that's completely my fault." India's only previous day-night Test at home in 2019 ended with all 20 Bangladesh wickets taken by seamers and if Woakes is selected it would be another one-off appearance like Moeen's. Woakes flies home after the day-nighter and is not expected to feature in next month's ODIs. No Bess would leave Jack Leach as the sole spinner and Root needing to bowl more himself, while Anderson's return could yet come at the expense of Broad. If so, Broad would be hugely frustrated to miss the chance to bowl under lights after last week's wicketless outing in unhelpful conditions. From the outside it appears England's record-breaking pairing will team up for the first time on the two tours only if the tail is lengthened or if Archer is given another week to recover and the management decide the extra 90mph pace offered by either Stone or the newly returned Mark Wood is not required. "The [pink] ball seems to be very different. It seems to stay harder for longer," said Root. "I don't know if it's the conditions at this ground but it seems to seam around

a little bit more and it does seem to swing conventionally for a little bit longer. Depending on the surface we get, that could play a bit more of a factor." Then there is the question of the best top three, with Zak Crawley fit again after recovering from a sprained wrist suffered at the start of the tour, and Jonny Bairstow back from his break having looked confident against the spinning ball at No 3 during the 2-0 win in Sri Lanka. Dan Lawrence, who profited from that pair being absent during the first two Tests, is expected to make way, while a top score of 33 in his past eight innings - and two ducks this series - means the position of Rory Burns at opener is under scrutiny. Dropping both batsmen would probably mean five changes overall. Root said: "It's not ideal but these times are not ideal. If you look at the white-ball squad and what Eoin Morgan and Trevor Bayliss created over that four-year period [before the 2019 World Cup], it's strength in depth. That's something we're trying to do with the Test team." Scheduled to start each day at 9am UK time, the third Test is likely to draw the biggest audience of the series for Channel 4. The five Twenty20s and three ODIs that follow will be shown on Sky Sports, however, after they announced on Monday a year-long exclusive deal for India's home matches.

'She's so unselfish': history beckons for Jill Scott with 150th England cap



London, February 23: Jill Scott is a little anxious talking about likely winning her 150th England cap on Tuesday against Northern Ireland. The Lionesses have not played since March last year and Scott had two false starts when games against Germany and Norway were cancelled. "Good things come to those who wait and if you're going to go on to achieve something that only one person in England has achieved then it's not going to be easy," she says. "So I'm just trying to keep focused on the next day as much as possible - and make sure I don't fall into any potholes when I'm out for a walk." The 33-year-old Sunderland-born midfielder is behind only Fara Williams, who made 172 appearances for the Lionesses, having made her debut in August 2006. It might have been a very different story, though, with the former long-distance runner crediting Mo Marley with taking a chance on her as under-19 coach, saying she "would never have gone on to get one England cap, never mind over 100 without her". Scott did not progress through the England ranks in the usual manner. It was Marley bringing the 18-year-old, who was playing for Sunderland, into the squad Scott went on to captain that kickstarted her England career. "There's so many players that could have gone either way and I'd probably count myself in that bracket," says the Manchester City midfielder, who is on loan at Everton. "I was never the best technically, but she

could see that I brought a lot physically and she really made that my super strength." The 2007 World Cup in China cemented Scott's place in the side. Having, as her England teammate Carly Telford puts it, travelled "not really expecting to play", Scott was a substitute in England's opening game against Japan. "I remember I was coming on to replace the greatest footballer that's graced our game in Kelly Smith and then here is Jill Scott, 19, skinny, someone's probably thinking: 'What's she going to do when she comes on this pitch?'" she says with a laugh. Jill Scott makes a tackle against Cameroon at the 2019 World Cup. She says she was "never the best technically" but brings "a lot physically". "Hope Powell has turned around to me and she says: 'Have you got your studs on?' And I'm thinking, 'I've got moulds on', so I kind of ignored that question. She joked: 'If you slip on this pitch, you'll probably never play for England again.' I went on dead nervous just walking around the pitch." Despite the nervousness there was something there and she started each of the remaining fixtures. "From that moment she just made a name for herself," says Telford. A seemingly never-ending athleticism and physicality on the pitch contrasts with a big kid personality off it. The former England manager Phil Neville called her "happy-go-lucky" and said she brought "a bit of cheekiness to the squad". That cheek has got her into some interesting situations.

Lockdown exit plan raises prospect of British & Irish Lions 'home tour'

London, February 23: Paul O'Connell in action on the 2009 tour, the last time the British & Irish Lions visited South Africa. The prospect of relocating the British & Irish Lions tour of South Africa to the UK and Ireland moved a step closer on Monday after the government's announcement that bumper crowds may return to sporting events in June. A final decision is still not expected until next month but it is understood a "home tour" has become a more enticing proposition for the Lions following the announcement. Other options include pressing ahead with the tour in South Africa in July and August, almost certainly behind closed doors, relocating the tour to Australia or postponing it, but the financial benefits that would come with home fixtures staged

in front of significant crowds are obvious. Officially, the Lions remain committed to a tour of South Africa, but that is fraught with difficulties given concerns over the South African Covid-19 variant and the prospect of empty stadiums. If the home option is to materialise, however, there remain a number of significant obstacles to overcome - not least that the government's announcement on Monday applies only to England. The Lions would hope to stage the three Tests against the Springboks in London, Cardiff and Dublin after the warm-up match against Japan in Edinburgh. An announcement by the Scottish government over lifting restrictions is due on Tuesday while strict measures are in place in Ireland until at least the end of April.

Where does pandemic-era Australian Open leave the tennis landscape?



London, February 23: The longest grand slam tournament in tennis history is finally at an end. The Australian Open, which truly began more than five weeks ago when the first players strode on to their airplanes to Australia before their quarantine period, ended on Sunday with the familiar sight of Naomi Osaka and Novak Djokovic on top of the world. On Monday Djokovic gave further details about what it took to win his 18th grand slam title. After previously confirming a tear in his right oblique abdominal muscle, he said his post-tournament MRI indicated the tear grew from 17mm to 25mm. Djokovic may have offered himself up for criticism numerous times over the past six months, but this is not one of them. He was cruising at two sets up in his third-round match against Taylor Fritz when he clearly slipped and immediately took a medical timeout before he escaped in a fifth set. The idea that he would deliberately

complicate an easy match and then skip practice for an entire week for dramatic effect is nonsensical. What Djokovic demonstrated on the court is a lesson learned from all of the great players of this time. You do not win 18 grand slam titles only in perfect conditions. The greats have all dramatically won through injuries, illness and personal problems. It is deeply impressive and he deserves credit for his success. The two weeks provided further nuggets of interest for the season ahead. With all of his trickery and athleticism, Daniil Medvedev is a clear contender for years to come and he now stands just 115 points in the rankings from the world No 2 Rafael Nadal. For Nadal his nerve, and his conditioning because of a back injury, cost him as he lost against Stefanos Tsitsipas in the quarter-finals from two sets up. His level remains extremely high on hard courts, but the eternal

question is whether he can stay healthy. Tsitsipas, meanwhile, continues his steady progress. The semi-final run from the 27-year-old Russian qualifier Aslan Karatsev further underlines the amount of depth in both tours - many players are simply yet to find the right environment to thrive. Conversely, it is clear that Nick Kyrgios can perform on the big stage regardless of circumstance. On this rollercoaster ride, 11 months after his last matches, he recovered from match point down against Ugo Humbert and then lost against the third seed Dominic Thiem after leading by two sets. He will not resurface for some time, but it will be hard to miss him when he does. In the women's game, Osaka has already established an all-time great hard-court grand slam resume but now her focus turns to increased consistency and the other surfaces. It will take time and those expecting her to tear through both Roland Garros and Wimbledon are likely to be disappointed. Her opponent in the semi-final, Serena Williams, ousted the top-eight seeds Aryna Sabalenka and Simona Halep. At 39 years old her level of play is still wonderful but in order to win again she will have to relearn how to rise for the biggest matches when it counts. The Roland Garros champion Iga Swiatek, exactly 20 years younger than Williams, spoke of her doubts before the tournament but she performed extremely well,

losing in the fourth round against a resolute Simona Halep. Earlier that day, Garbiñe Muguruza played a brilliant match against Osaka. Although unable to close it out, she is thriving with Conchita Martínez as her coach and she will be a nuisance this year. With the returns of Bianca Andreescu and Ashleigh Barty, it is clear that women's tennis is flourishing and the hope is they will, too. In the end the Tennis Australia chief executive, Craig Tiley, and his team impressively navigated an endless series of complications to ensure the safe production of the event. In an interview with AAP, Tiley detailed the personal impact, which ranged from sleep deprivation to the "significant" abuse he received from players during their virtual meetings each day. The event wiped out A\$80m from their reserves. What they produced was a gripping sporting event that played out in the final days to the warm, familiar sound of booming crowds. Tiley had suggested that not hosting the event this year could have eventually led to it moving to China or elsewhere in Asia, despite the fact that Asian events had already been cancelled, and on Sunday he said that the "global message" the tournament sent was valuable enough. Neither reason convinced, particularly now that global message includes the boos from fans after the TA chair, Jayne Hrdlicka, simply mentioned vaccinations during her speech.

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