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SummitTIMES

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ON TOP OF THE NEWS

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**POCSO
accused
nabbed and
brought back
from Goa**

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 20 FEB:**
Sikkim Police has arrested an absconding accused wanted in a POC-
SO Act case in Jorethang from Goa.

SP South, Thakur Thapa, informed that a case was registered on 05 October last year at Jorethang Police Station under section 376 of the IPC and section 4 of the POC-
SO Act.

A 21-year-old from Biring, South District, was accused in the crime and had absconded. The victim is a 14-year-old minor.

A team from Jorethang Police Station arrested the accused in Goa on 14 February and brought him back to Sikkim on 19 February.

**Upsurge in
daily new
COVID-19
cases in Kerala,
Maharashtra,
Punjab,
Chhattisgarh
and MP: Govt**

NEW DELHI, FEB 20 (PTI): Kerala, Maharashtra, Punjab, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh have recorded an "up-
surge" in daily new cases of COVID-19, the Union Health Ministry said on Saturday.

In a statement, the ministry said in the last seven days, Chhattisgarh has also seen a rise in daily active new cases. In the last 24 hours, 259 daily new cases have been reported, it said.

Kerala continues to report a high number of daily new cases and in the past week, Maharashtra has exhibited a spike in the number of daily new cases, accounting for the highest number of daily new cases in the country on Saturday, the ministry said in the statement.

"In the last 24 hours, 6,112 daily new cases have been reported in the state," it said.

Similar to Maharashtra, the ministry said Punjab has also shown a sudden spike in the number of daily new cases reported in the last seven days with 383 fresh cases recorded in the last 24 hours.

"Since February 13, Madhya Pradesh is also witnessing a rise in the number of daily new cases. In the last 24 hours, 297 daily new cases have been registered in the state," the ministry said.

The ministry stressed the importance of adherence to COVID appropriate behaviour for breaking
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BIGGEST BUST!

Prescription drugs of abuse worth Rs 24 lakhs seized, 'kingpin' arrested in Delhi

60,540 CAPSULES OF SPASMO PROXYVON, 10,000 TABLETS OF NITROSUN-10 AND 371 BOTTLES OF COUGH SYRUP

**SAGAR CHHETRI
GANGTOK, 20 FEB:**

Sikkim is neither new to news about the abuse of prescription drugs, nor about drug busts, but over the past fortnight, Sikkim Police unravelled a racket which has even the force shaking its head in disbelief over the scale of operations and patting itself on the back for having made quick work of busting it.

Not only has Sikkim Police intercepted a huge cache of contraband and stopped prescription drugs of abuse valued at between Rs 22-24 lakhs on the streets, but have also nabbed a wanted peddler who they believe is also the kingpin behind this racket.

Addressing a press conference here on Saturday evening, DIG Sikkim Police, Pravin Gurung, congratulated the Jorethang Police Station team led by SHO Neeraj Khatiwada for their thorough follow-up and appreciated SP [South], Thakur Thapa, and his officers for ensuring that a big drug bust was investigated to its logical end by reaching right to the main person behind it.

The case began on 31 January when two IRBn personnel, Rahul Thapa and Bal Kumar Darjee, on patrolling along the interstate border at Jorethang chanced upon a "suspi-



cious" group at Bhari-Khola. When they approached the group, they were attacked by an armed group and immediately called in assistance from Jorethang Police Station.

When a team from the Police Station arrived at the spot, two of the assailants fled the spot while two were nabbed from the spot.

What had triggered the suspicion of the patrolling duo were the sacks the group were arranging in the forested area.

"When the SHO and his team

reached the spot, they were shocked to see such a huge amount of contraband substances," DIG said.

The police recovered 60,540 capsules of Spasmo Proxyvon [14,500 capsules of Winspasmo Forte and 46,040 capsules of Winspasmo Windlas], 10,000 tablets of Nitrosun-10 and 371 bottles of cough syrup from the spot.

This consignment is believed to command a street value of Rs 22 to 24 lakhs.

This seizure broke Sikkim's re-

cord of drug busts made barely a month earlier when, on 17 Dec 2020, "drugs" worth Rs 14 lakhs had been seized near Singtam.

The DIG informed that two Jorethang-residents, were arrested from the spot on 31 January and later, three more, one a resident of Dzongu and two from Zoom in West Sikkim, were taken into custody for their involvement in the events of the day.

"In another great success in the case, a team of Jorethang PS led by

SHO Neeraj Khatiwada arrested Rohit Tamang, the main accused and kingpin of this case, from Delhi with the help of Delhi Police on 17 February and have brought him back to Sikkim," the DIG informed.

As the investigation progressed, cops realised that some other persons arrested in connection with another case at Naya Bazaar PS earlier this year were also connected with the 31 Jan incident.

In the Nayabazaar case, police intercepted a vehicle near Karfector on the Jorethang-Namchi road with six occupants on 18 February and recovered contraband substances hidden under the seats.

He mentioned that the vehicle was being driven by a wanted drug peddler, Shivijan Subba of Chisopani who was travelling with his wife and four other persons at the time. They have all been taken into custody.

On the day, 1,754 loose capsules of Spasmo Proxyvon were recovered and more was seized after a search of his house.

Shivijan Subba, police inform, is allegedly involved in four cases of contraband substances and one case of assault while two others arrested along with him are already facing assault charges.

Chance cross-checking unravels fake govt job appointment letter racket

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 20 FEB:**

Sadar Police here is currently investigating what appears to be a rather convincing scam in which people are showing up at government departments with forged appointment orders. Four such instances have already come to light since the scam was detected on 18 February, and in two of these cases, two of the people had even "joined" duty.

It all began on 18 Feb when Sadar Police received an FIR from Secretary, Food & Civil Supplies

Department, stating that she was in receipt of an appointment order purportedly issued by the Department of Personnel but when she cross-checked with the concerned Under Secretary at DoP, it came to light that no such appointment letter had been issued. The appointment letter was a fake and the officer's signature had been forged.

The Department, alerted by the incident, must have cross-checked more such appointment letters and discovered two more fakes - one for an LDC and another for a

Peon at a food godown, both of whom had even joined duty based on these forged documents.

DIG [Range]], Sikkim Police, Pravin Gurung, informed that the police have arrested three persons, one from Central Pandam, one from Amba-Pakyong and a third from Burtuk, in connection with this case.

He further informed that the police have also received an FIR from Forest Department where too a person had arrived to join duty based on a similarly forged document on 02 Feb.

Only one new infection and 779 new vaccinations in Sikkim

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 20 FEB:**

Sikkim recorded only one new case of novel coronavirus in the last 24 hours, inching the State's tally of confirmed cases of COVID-19 up to 6,128.

The one person to test positive is from Bhanjyang Road, Namchi.

The case was picked up in the testing of 123 samples, of which 123 samples were screened by RT-PCR, 10 by TrueNat and 30 through rapid antigen testing.

In the meanwhile, the figure of recovered Covid cases in Sikkim further improved to 5,843 with the discharge of two more patients from quarantine on Friday. There are now only 53 active cases of novel coronavirus in Sikkim.

About the vaccination drive, Health Department State IEC Officer, Sonam Gyaltsen Bhutia, informs that a total of 779 persons, which includes

118 healthcare workers and 661 frontline workers, were vaccinated in different parts of the State on Saturday.

While two healthcare workers and 198 frontline workers received the CoviShield shots at Urban PHC, Gangtok, one healthcare worker and 32 frontline workers were vaccinated at STNM Hospital.

Likewise, 98 healthcare workers and seven frontline workers received the vaccine at Namchi District Hospital in South District, six healthcare workers and 119 frontline workers at Sombaria PHC, three healthcare workers and 79 frontline workers at Tashiding PHC, eight healthcare workers and 90 frontline workers at Soreng PHC, 74 frontline workers at Dentam PHC and 62 frontline workers at Gyalshing District Hospital in West District were also vaccinated for COVID-19.

CM ATTENDS NITI AAYOG MEETING

Highlights farmer incentives, internet connectivity, "Mountain Ports"

**SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 20 FEB:**

Chief Minister, PS Tamang attended the 6th Meeting of the Governing Council of NITI Aayog, 2021 via video conference today. Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, Union Ministers, Chief Ministers, Lt. Governors, CEO (NITI Aayog) and other officials were also present during the conference, a press release from the Chief Minister's Office informs.

In his address, the Chief Minister urged the centre to consider some form of incentive for Sikkim's farmers in line with the national objective of doubling the income of farmers and prioritizing



sustenance of the environment. Being an organic state, Sikkim's farmers do not enjoy subsidies on fertilizers so a different kind of incentive would benefit farmers here, the CM suggested.

He also brought up

the problem of poor internet connectivity in the state, mentioning that it needs to be enhanced from 10 MBPS to at least 1GBPS. He also requested for the speedy implementation of all the Eight Digital Thrust Areas

identified by the 'Digital North East Vision-2022.'

The Chief Minister suggested the concept of Mountain Ports with knowledge, nature, technology and green industries as the centre of attraction.

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India and China hold 10th round of military talks; focus on further disengagement in eastern Ladakh

NEW DELHI, FEB 20 (PTI): India and China on Saturday held another round of military talks with a focus on taking forward the disengagement process in Hot Springs, Gogra and Depsang in eastern Ladakh and bring down the tensions in the region, official sources said.

The 10th round of Corps Commander-level talks are taking place two days after the Chinese and Indian militaries completed the withdrawal of troops, weapons and other military hardware from the North and South banks of Pangong lake areas as part of an agreement. The meeting started at

10 am at the Moldo border point on the Chinese side of the Line of Actual Control and it was continuing, the sources said.

They said India will insist on a faster disengagement process in remaining areas like Hot Springs, Gogra and Depsang to bring down tension in the region that has witnessed a tense standoff between the two militaries for over nine months.

"The focus of the talks is on carrying forward the disengagement process," said a source.

On February 11, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh announced in Par-

liament that India and China reached an agreement on disengagement in the North and South banks of Pangong lake that mandates both sides to "cease" forward deployment of troops in a "phased, coordinated and verifiable" manner.

Under the agreement, he said China will pull back its troops to east of Finger 8 areas in the northern bank of Pangong lake while the Indian personnel will be based at their permanent base at Dhan Singh Thapa Post near Finger 3 in the region. Similar action would take place on the south bank of the lake as well, he said.

turn to pg02

Highlights farmer...

This can act as an integrating factor across the mountain system and a hub for the management of various issues like climate change impact, act as a global centre of research on bio-diversity and naturopathy, he stated.

He also reiterated that the North East Industrial Development Scheme of 2018 which has been beneficial for the region in numerous ways should be extended for another 10 years.

The CM also mentioned the need to improve road connectivity in the state.

Earlier, the CM conveyed his gratitude towards the Prime Minister, Cabinet members for the efficient handling of the pandemic and also thanked the health professionals and security personnel for their selfless dedication and the scientists who were involved in the process of vaccine development. He applauded the fact that the country was able to develop the vaccine at a record time on such a large scale.

Chief Secretary to the Government of Sikkim, S. C. Gupta, Secretary to CM, SD Dhakal and Secretary Planning and Development, RC Bhutia were also present during the occasion.

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Upsurge in daily...

the chain of transmission and containment of spread of the disease

Only two states, Maharashtra and Kerala, account for 75.87 per cent of total number of active COVID-19 cases, the ministry added

The ministry said 18 states/UTs have not reported any COVID-19 deaths in the last 24 hours. These are Telangana, Haryana, J&K (UT), Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh, Tripura, Assam, Chandigarh, Lakshadweep, Manipur, Meghalaya, Ladakh (UT), Mizoram, Sikkim, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu

The ministry said a total of 1,07,15,204 COVID-19 vaccine doses have been administered through 2,22,313 sessions, as per the provisional report till 8 am today

These include 63,28,479 healthcare workers (first dose), 8,47,161 healthcare workers (second dose) and 35,39,564 frontline workers (first dose), the ministry said

The second dose of COVID-19 vaccination started on February 13 for those beneficiaries who have completed 28 days after receipt of the first dose. Vaccination of the frontline workers started on February 2

The ministry said nine states have administered more than five lakh doses each. These are Uttar Pradesh (11,52,042), Maharashtra (8,60,386), Gujarat (8,56,657), Rajasthan (7,99,719), West Bengal (6,50,976), Karnataka (6,29,420), Madhya Pradesh (6,26,391), Bihar (5,50,433) and Odisha (5,01,713).

India and China...

The sources said troops of both sides have retreated to positions that were agreed upon by both the sides.

The disengagement process began on February 10.

The Indian delegation at Saturday's talks is being led by Lt Gen PGK Menon, the Commander of the Leh-based 14 Corps. The Chinese side was to be headed by Maj Gen Liu Lin, the commander of the South Xinjiang military district of the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

In his statement in Parliament, the defence minister also said that it was agreed to convene the next meeting of senior commanders of both sides within 48 hours of completion of the disengagement in the Pangong lake areas so as to resolve all other remaining issues.

Days later, the Defence Ministry said other outstanding "problems" including in Depsang, Hot Springs and Gogra will be taken up at the upcoming talks between military commanders of the two countries.

The border standoff between the Indian and Chinese militaries erupted on May 5 following a violent clash in the Pangong lake areas and both sides gradually enhanced their deployment by rushing in tens of thousands of soldiers as well as heavy weaponry even as the two sides continued military and diplomatic talks.

Last year, the Chinese military built several bunkers and other structures in the areas between Finger 4 and 8 and had blocked all Indian patrols beyond Finger 4, triggering strong reaction from the Indian Army.

In the nine rounds of military talks, India had specifically insisted on withdrawal of Chinese troops from Finger 4 to Finger 8 on the North bank of Pangong Lake. The mountain spurs in the area are referred to as Fingers.

On its part, the Chinese side was insisting on withdrawal of Indian troops from several strategic peaks on the southern bank of the lake. Around five months back, Indian troops occupied a number of strategic heights in the Mukhpari, Rechin La and Magar hill areas around the southern bank after the Chinese PLA attempted to intimidate them in the area.

Flower Show & Competition by NHPC Teesta-V



SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 20 FEB:

NHPC-Teesta-V Power Station organized a two-day "Flower Show & Competition" at its Administrative Building, Balutar, East Sikkim from 19 to 20 Feb, 2021, a press release informs.

The program was inaugurated by Rural Development Minister, Sonam Lama who was present as the chief guest

on 19 Feb.

Twenty-five participants from North, South, East districts of Sikkim and Darjeeling & Kalimpong of West Bengal participated in the event.

Earlier, Mr Lama visited Teesta-V Power Station, Balutar and handed over musical instruments amounting to Rs 1 lakh to Surya Daya Kalyan Samiti, Ralep, East Sikkim under CSR-SD for the year

of 2020–21.

Power Minister, Mingma Norbu Sherpa, attended the closing ceremony on 20 Feb as the chief guest.

Speaking on the occasion, Head of Teesta-V Power Station & Teesta-IV HE Project, Sahadev Khatua said that the Flower Show had become a regular feature of the power station and attracted participation

from various sections of people from Sikkim.

He also informed that the flower show received an overwhelming response from flower enthusiasts, students, associations, SHG's, individuals, nurseries, and surrounding villages. At the end, chief guest Minister Mingma Sherpa distributed prizes to winners of the Flower Show Competition in Flowering Plants, Ornamental Plants, Orchid and Overall Presentation categories.

Nor Maya Limboo, Ben Simkhara Basti, Sikkim received the First Prize in "Flowering Plant" category, Leela Rai, Simkharka, South Sikkim received First Prize in "Ornamental Plant" category and Kapil Chettri, Upper Namchebong, East Sikkim received First Prize in "Orchid" Category.

ASBHWA urges Govt to stop subletting of trade license



PRITAM LAMA

GYALSHING, 20 FEB:

All Sikkim Business Holders Welfare Association has urged the government to intervene and stop subletting of trade license to non-Sikkimese.

Addressing a press conference at Gyalshing on 17 Feb, president of the Association, LB Rai

said that despite the law, most of the business establishments have been sublet to non-Sikkimese and some are running even without the trade license.

He urged the state government's immediate intervention in the matter in the interest of the local residents.

Mr Rai informed that the association is also organising training and awareness programs to provide exposure to local business owners.

General secretary, Santosh Gautam, stated that subletting of trade license is not allowed as per the Sikkim Trade License Act 1985.

College students' expulsion beginning of autocracy: SDF

SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 20 FEB:

Sikkim Democratic Front party has said that the expulsion of four students from Gyalshing Government College signals the beginning of autocracy and anarchy in Sikkim.

An SDF press release issued by its student's

wing general secretary, Tashi Tshering Bhutia, has condemned the expulsion of the four students as anti-democratic, anti-education, anti-student and anti-youth.

It is the basic right of people to express their thoughts but the SKM government has started

to suppress the democratic rights of the people, the release alleges. It adds that this is a black day for education and democratic history of Sikkim.

SDF has demanded that the State government take back all four students in the college.

1.08 crore COVID-19 vaccine doses administered: Govt

NEW DELHI, FEB 20 (PTI): A total of 1.08 crore COVID-19 vaccine doses have been administered till now with 1.86 lakh jabs given on Saturday, the Union Health Ministry said. Of the 1,08,38,323 doses administered, Joint Secretary in the Union Health ministry Mandeep Bhandari said 72,26,653 vaccination doses were administered to healthcare workers and 36,11,670 to frontline workers whose inoculation started on February 2.

Of the 70,52,845 vaccination doses, 63,52,713 healthcare workers were administered the first dose while 8,73,940 healthcare workers were administered the second dose. On Saturday till 6 pm, 1,86,081 vaccinations were carried out.

He said 43 hospitalisations have been reported till now out of which 26 people have been discharged after treatment while one is under treatment and 16 deaths have been reported.

Bhandari said the hospitalisation percentage against vaccination was recorded at 0.0004 per cent and two cases of hospitalisation have been reported in the past 24 hours. He said a total of 37 deaths have been reported which

accounts for 0.0003 per cent of the vaccinations. Sixteen deaths have been reported in hospitals while 21 deaths have been reported outside hospitals.

He further said three new deaths post immunization have been reported. One is of a 51-year-old female from Kerala who died of intracranial bleeding four days after vaccination.

Another death of a 56-year-old man was recorded from Karnataka of myocardial infarction. He died nine days after vaccination. Another 44-year-old female from Manipur died seven days after vaccination and her post-mortem details are awaited. "No case of serious or severe adverse event following immunisation or death attributable to vaccination till date," he said.

Bhandari said 12 states and UTs, including Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Tripura and Uttarakhand, have vaccination coverage of first dose of healthcare workers at more than 75 per cent while seven states and UTs, including Delhi and Punjab, have less than 50 per cent coverage of first dose among healthcare workers.

15 families from West Pendam join BJP



SUMMIT REPORT

GANGTOK, 20 FEB:

Fifteen families from West Pendam have joined Bharatiya Janata Party in a program organized at the party's office

in Singtam today, a press release informs.

The new members were welcomed by BJP Sikkim general secretary, Bharat Dulal and other office bearers.

Week-long Faculty Development Program by NIT Sikkim

SUMMIT REPORT

Gangtok, 20 Feb:

National Institute of Technology, Sikkim organized week-long online Faculty Development Program on Strategies in Modern Pedagogies from 16–20 Feb, 2021 with financial assistance from AICTE, Ministry of Education.

As per a press release, 800 participants representing 22 states of the country attended the program which had 16 sessions covering all aspects of Modern Pedagogy, starting from basic to advanced stage. Each session was covered by distinguished speakers from academia.

In the inaugural session, Chairperson NBA, Prof KK Aggarwal and Director NIT Jalandhar and NIT Hamirpur, Prof Lalit Kumar Awasthi were present virtually as the chief guest and guest of honour respectively. Both delivered keynote lectures focusing on the insight and research

directions in the field of pedagogy.

Director of the Institute, Prof MC Govil spoke at length regarding several initiatives taken by the Government of India and Institute in this direction. He also delivered a lecture on Open Pedagogy and Open Education Practices.

Other speakers included, Director NITTTR, Prof SS Pattnaik, Chandigarh, Director, Prof KK Shukla, NIT Jamshedpur, Prof R Kishore Kumar of English and Foreign Language University, Hyderabad, Prof SK Sharma of University of Allahabad, Vice-Chancellor JKL University, Prof RL Raina, Jaipur, Prof Supriya Agarwal of Central University of Rajasthan, Prof KR Ni-azi of MNIT Jaipur.

On the last day Prof Chandra Shakher of IIT Delhi gave an enlightening talk on Effective Pedagogy in Technical Institution. The FDP was coordinated by Dr Dhananjay Tripathi and Dr Sangram Ray.

HAVE A STORY TO SHARE?

email us: news@summittimes.com

BEFORE THE LEARNED OATH COMMISSIONER, WEST & NORTH SIKKIM AT GANGTOK AFFIDAVIT

I Jas Kumar Rai ,S/o Late Guman Singh Rai @ Dal Bahadur Rai ,60 years Hindu by faith R/o Makha Singbel 6th mile ,P.O Makha & PS Singtm ,East Sikkim do hereby solemnly affirm and declare on oath as follow .

1. That I am the son of Late Ghuman Singh Rai @ Dal Bahadur Rai and full blooded younger brother of Shri Pancha Kumar Rai of Makha 6th mile .
2. That my Late father's actual name was Guman Singh Rai which is Lying recorded in the Sikkim subject Register vide serial No.137 ,Vol No.I issued by the Land Revenue Department Government of Sikkim .
3. That his commonly calling name was Dal Bahadur Rai and the same name has been recorded in my as well as my elders brother's Khatiyen Parcha issued by the Land Revenue Department under block Singbel .
4. That this affidavit is made bonafide to declare that the name "Guman sing Rai "and Dal Bahadur Rai"denotes and refers to the the same person i.e my Late Father.
5. That this affidavit is made bonafide.

Deponent

KUTSE SHEGU



The 49th days Kutse Shegu (Anthyesti Kriya) of our beloved father Lt Lerap Shandarpa (Sokay Kaila) of Rabongla Yangyang Road who left for his heavenly abode on 04 Jan, 2021 falls at our residence, Rabongla Yangyang Road near Foodgodown South Sikkim on 21 Feb, 2021. We would like to request all relatives, friends and well-wishers to present their prayers and offering to the departed soul.

Family members-
Dechen Doma Bhutia (Eldest daughter)
Karma Tseten Bhutia (Eldest son)
Laki Doma Bhutia (Daughter)
Ugen Bhutia (Son)
Sedenla Bhutia (Daughter)
Contact No: 74329001908,9775476720.

Inter School Junior Olympic Games concludes at Rakdong-Tintek

WANGCHUK BHUTIA
SAMDONG, 20 FEB:

Three-day Block Level 1st Inter School Junior Olympic games under "Sports for peace and development" 2020-2021 under 14 and under 17 boys and girls which had started on 18 Feb, 2021 concluded at Samdong Senior Secondary School ground in East Sikkim today.

The event was organized by Department of Sports & Youth Affair, Government Sikkim, Rakdong Tintek BAC in collaboration with Rural Development Department under GPDP Fund. The event was participated by 17 schools (3 senior secondary, 3 Secondary school, 7 Junior High Schools and 4 private schools) from four Gram Panchayat Units under Rakdong-Tintek Block which includes Samdong-Kambal, Tumin,



Pathuk-Chandey and Rakdong Tintek GPUs.

The competition was organized in different disciplines like athletics, archery, boxing, badminton, football, karate, taekwondo, table tennis, etc.

In under-17 women's football tournament,

Dikchu SSS defeated Makha SSS by 2-0 goals. Likewise, in under 17 boys, Makha SSS defeated Samdong SSS by 3-0 goals and in under 14 boys, Samdong SSS defeated Kambal JHS by 3-0 goals.

The function was attended by Zilla Panchayat,

Tumin GPU, Hemraj Adhikari as chief guest in the presence of BDO Tintek, Tshering Norgyal Theeng, Panchayat President Rakdong Tintek GPU, Tika Maya Pandey, Principal Samdong SSS, ML Koirala, Panchayat President, Samdong Kambal GPU, Kessang

Bhutia, Panchayat President Tumin GPU, Ran Maya Chettri, YN Sapkota, AD Sports, panchayat members from different wards, representatives and head of different schools and officials.

AD Sports, Bhanu Chapagai gave a brief report on the competition.

PM Modi greets people of Arunachal, Mizoram on statehood days

NEW DELHI, FEB 20 (PTI): Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Saturday greeted the people of Arunachal Pradesh and Mizoram on their statehood days and heaped praise on their culture and traditions.

Both states were created on this day in 1987. "Greetings to the wonderful people of

Arunachal Pradesh on the special occasion of their Statehood Day. The people of this state are known for their culture, courage and strong commitment to India's development. May Arunachal Pradesh keep scaling new heights of progress," Modi tweeted.

"Best wishes to my

sisters and brothers of Mizoram on their Statehood Day. The entire nation is proud of the great Mizo culture. The people of Mizoram are known for their kindness and commitment towards living in harmony with nature. Praying for the state's continuous growth," he said in another tweet.

Woman shot during protest against Myanmar coup dies

YANGON, MYANMAR (AP): A young woman who was shot in the head by police last week during a protest against the military coup in Myanmar died Friday, her family said. It was the first confirmed death among thousands of protesters who have faced off against security forces since the junta took power on Feb. 1, detained the country's elected leaders and prevented Parliament from convening.

Mya Thwet Thwet Khine was shot during a demonstration in the capital, Naypyitaw, on Feb. 9, two days before her 20th birthday. Video showed her sheltering from water cannons and suddenly dropping to the ground after a bullet penetrated the motorcycle helmet she was wearing. She had been on life support in a hospital with what doctors said was no chance of recovery.

Her sister, speaking from the hospital's mortuary, urged people not to give up their struggle to restore democracy. "Please participate and continue fighting until we achieve our goal," said Mya Thatoe Nwe. She said the funeral will be held Sunday. Protesters in Mandalay, the country's second biggest city, set up a sidewalk shrine with candles and photos of the dead woman. About 200 people paid their respects at a memorial ceremony at sunset at the site of a police dispersal of demonstrators with water cannons last week.

(asterisk)Please help, whoever can help," cried Khin Wai, who was attending the service. "Please don't hurt other citizens. I am worried, so worried."

Even before her death, Mya Thwet Thwet Khine had already been hailed as a hero in small ceremonies at several demonstrations. News of her passing is likely to inflame passions in the protest movement, which has embraced nonviolent civil disobedience.

U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price offered his government's condolences and reiterated calls on the military to refrain from violence against peaceful protestors.

"As protests continue to grow, Myanmar security forces must cease carrying and using lethal weapons and must respect people's right to peacefully express their grievances," Joanne Mariner, director of crisis response for Amnesty International, said. "It is only a matter of time before the same brutal and abusive policing leads to more death and sorrow." A spokesman for

the ruling military did not deny that Mya Thwet Thwet Khine had been shot by security forces, but said at a news conference this week that she was in a crowd that had thrown rocks at police and the case was under investigation. There were no independent accounts of her taking part in any violence.

Demonstrations continued Friday in Yangon, the country's biggest city, and elsewhere.

Security forces have been relatively restrained so far in confronting protesters in Yangon, but appeared to be toughening their stance in areas where there is less media presence.

Police used force for a second day to arrest protesters in Myitkyina, the capital of the remote northern state of Kachin. The Kachin ethnic minority has long been in conflict with the central government, and there has been intermittent armed struggle against the army there for decades.

On Thursday night in the southeastern city of Dawei, several people were wounded by rubber bullets when police staged nighttime raids to try to arrest activists, local media reported. Large but peaceful protest marches have taken place in the city, with negotiations between the demonstrators and the authorities to avoid confrontations.

Tom Andrews, the independent U.N. human rights expert on Myanmar, told The Associated Press this week that the initial restraint of police in dealing with "robust citizen opposition to the coup" has moved in some instances to use of rubber bullets, real ammunition and water cannons. Speaking from the United States, he also said "hardened" troops were being deployed from border areas to some cities, raising the possibility of bloodshed and "a tragic loss of life."

The junta says it took power — after detaining national leader Aung San Suu Kyi and preventing Parliament from convening — because elections last November were tainted by voting irregularities. The election outcome, in which Suu Kyi's party won by a landslide, was affirmed by an election commission that has since been replaced by the military. The junta says it will hold new elections in a year's time.

The U.S., Britain and Canadian governments have imposed sanctions on the new military leaders, and they and other governments have called for Suu Kyi's administration to be restored.

Lingtam school convenes staff meeting

SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 20 FEB:

Government Secondary School Lingtam convened its first staff meeting for the new academic session today.

A press release informs that various committees were constituted

during the meeting to carry out all academic and non-academic activities in effective manner.

As a result of rigorous enrolment drive by the school staff, it is expected that enrolment in the school will increase this year, the release mentions.

Phil Mickelson returns to seniors with appearance in Arizona

LOS ANGELES, FEB 20 (AP): Now that Phil Mickelson is not eligible for a World Golf Championship, he'll go for a hat trick with the seniors.

The PGA Tour Champions says Mickelson is set to play the Colguard Classic next week in Tucson, Arizona, where 30 years ago he became the last amateur to win on the PGA Tour.

Now, Mickelson has another slice of history in his sights. He will try to become the first player to win his first three tournaments on the PGA Tour Champions.

Mickelson made his debut on the 50-and-older circuit last August when he was eliminated from the PGA Tour post-season and was looking to stay sharp with the U.S. Open approaching.

He won the Charles Schwab Series at Ozarks National in Missouri. Then, he won the Dominion Energy Charity Classic. This will be the second PGA Tour Champions event of the year, and Mickelson will see some familiar faces. The 81-man field includes Steve Stricker, Davis Love III, Fred Couples, Ernie Els and Jim Furyk, along with Champions Tour stalwart Bernhard Langer.

PLAYERS CHAMPIONSHIP

A big discussion at the Players Advisory Council this week led to The Players Championship having a bigger field. The Players Championship was the first tournament canceled last year by the COVID-19 pandemic. The PGA Tour returned three months later with one-time changes to eligibility because of lost time.

Among the changes was qualifying for The Players. Instead of the

criteria including the top 125 from the previous season's FedEx Cup, it was changed to be a cumulative FedEx Cup points list that began at the start of the 2019-20 season.

But there were 10 players who finished in the top 125 last season but who were outside the top 125 on the cumulative points list. That led to a debate, and the PGA Tour board agreed to add to the TPC Sawgrass field anyone who finished in the top 125 last season.

That means the following players are assured of getting into The Players on March 11-14: Scott Harrington, Ryan Moore, Sam Ryder, Adam Schenk, Scott Brown, Keith Mitchell, Zac Blair, Beau Hossler and Brice Garnett.

Qualifying through the cumulative list is to end after the World Golf Championship and Puerto Rico Open next week.

Still to be determined is how much that causes the 144-man to expand in its new March date with less daylight. Scott Stallings and Brandt Snedeker currently are on the bubble for the cumulative list. Now they would be assured of a spot at Sawgrass because they finished in the top 125 last year.

TIGER WAITS Tiger Woods previously announced he would miss Torrey Pines and Riviera because he was recovering from a fifth back surgery that he had just before Christmas. He apparently is not ready to return.

Woods, eligible at No. 48 in the world, was not on the commitment list Friday for the Workday Championship next week at Concessional Golf Club in Florida. That's the World Golf Championship typically held in Mexico City.

SAATHI outreach campaign at Ahley



SUMMIT REPORT
GANGTOK, 20 FEB:

SAATHI organized its community outreach program at Ahley, under Namthang GPU, South Sikkim, today.

A press release informs that the program organized with the support of Titan Company Ltd was attended by 32

local residents.

SAATHI teacher coordinator, Sudeep Sharma, informed the participants about various consequences of substances abuse. He requested the Parents/Guardians to intervene if local shopkeepers are selling alcohol and tobacco products

to minors and also asked people to take help from or contact SAATHI office in case any such incident.

Panchayat, MB Subba appreciated the program and urge everyone to be vigilant and promised to make their community a healthy community for future generation.

PM in Assam, Bengal on Monday to launch several projects



NEW DELHI, FEB 20 (PTI): Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit the poll-bound states of Assam and West Bengal on Monday to launch and lay the foundation stones of several projects.

The PMO said he will dedicate to the nation important projects of the oil and gas sector in an event organised at Silapathar in Assam, and also inaugurate and lay the foundation stones of engineering colleges during the event.

Later in the day, he will inaugurate several railway projects at Hooghly in West Bengal.

In Assam, the PMO said, Modi will inaugurate the INDMAX unit at Indian Oil's Bongaigaon refinery, Oil India Limited's secondary tank farm at Dibrugarh and a gas compressor station at Hebeda village in Tinsukia.

He will also inaugurate the Dhema Engineering College and lay the foundation stone for Sualkuchi Engineering College. These projects will usher in an era of energy security and prosperity, and open bright avenues of opportunity for local youth, the PMO said, asserting that they are in line with Modi's vision of "Purvodaya" to drive eastern India's socio-economic growth.

The INDMAX unit at Bongaigaon leverages the technology developed indigenously to produce a higher LPG and high-octane gasoline yield from heavy feedstocks.

The unit will increase the refinery's crude processing capacity from 2.35

MMTPA (million metric tonnes per annum) to 2.7 MMTPA.

Its commissioning will also significantly enhance LPG production from 50 TMT (thousand metric tonnes) to 257 TMT and motor spirit (Petrol) production from 210 TMT to 533 TMT.

In Bengal, the prime minister will inaugurate the extension of the metro railway from Noapara to Dakshineswar, and flag off the first service on this stretch.

The PMO said this 4.1-km extension has been constructed at a cost of Rs 464 crore and is fully funded by the central government.

This extension will ease up access to the two world famous Kali temples at Kalighat and Dakshineswar for lakhs of tourists and devotees, it noted.

Modi will also inaugurate a third line between Kalaikunda and Jhargram over a stretch of 30 km of the 132-km-long Kharagpur-Adityapur third line project of south eastern railway, which was sanctioned with an estimated cost of Rs 1,312 crore.

The four stations between Kalaikunda and Jhargram have been redeveloped by constructing four new station buildings, six new foot over bridges and eleven new platforms, along with renovation of the existing infrastructure, the PMO said. This will help ensure seamless movement of passenger and freight trains on Howrah-Mumbai trunk route, it added.

RUCHI DIAGNOSTIC CLINIC

Behind telephone Exchange Near Old STNM Hospital. Gangtok

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CONSULTANT ENT SURGEON
DR. ONGDEN GYATSO, MS (AIIMS)

GASTRO CLINIC & O P D

8.00 am to 9.00 am

MEDICAL CLINIC & O P D

9.30 am

ORTHO AND GYNEA

CLINICS & O P D

3.00 pm

PAEDIATRIC CLINIC & O P D

8.00 am And 6.00 pm

VACCINATION CLINIC

To Defeat Insular Designs, Get Communal for Real

It is wrong to confuse belonging to a community with being sectarian

In our country, the word “communal” has too many negative connotations associated with and nothing illustrates the short-sightedness of the society and politicians more than this calumny. The word has been misrepresented from its definition of “belonging to a community” to being understood as “sectarian” and even its larger connotations of being a “shared” experience have been completely lost. Misrepresentation is one thing, but what is worse is that as a people we have become increasingly compartmentalised. At a time when the world talks of a global village, it is sad that what occupies our collective imagination is an obsession with parochial divisions on caste, community, ethnic and geographical lines. And now, even political leanings. While this shortsightedness serves hateful politicians and their politics rather well, it causes too much damage to traditional relationships and co-dependence between communities. It goes without saying that these divisions need to be ended, but since calls for amity and mutual respect seem to be falling on deaf ears, may be the word communal needs to be returned to its original definition and in the resultant confusion then, perhaps, the sectarian bhakts will begin to flounder.

Yes, if the trend is to be reversed, the word needs to be understood afresh. If one were to keep an open mind, then there is nothing wrong with being ‘communal’, sans the paranoia of course. To continue with the argument in support of being communal, it is an urgent necessity if the communities are interested in preserving their distinct identities in the face of modernisation and its growing pressure for homogeneity. Into the mix has now arrived the impositions of majoritarian politics.

What one can’t ignore is that the preservation of cultures [or for that matter, even political rights] need not necessarily involve confrontation. Communalism, as in the collective experience that we concern ourselves with here, and not the lynch mobs and statue-smashing hordes that the word connotes for most, is about sharing and looking inwards and preserving. It is not about mere posturing, and should have never been allowed to grow beyond the bounds of individual communities because then would become a societal concern and not a communal issue. The point being made here it that people should remain communal till the time it concerns only their community, and the moment it attracts liabilities on others, the representation and voices should become societal and more encompassing.

In the Sikkim context, the cries alleging evil designs attempting to divide the Sikkimese society on caste and community lines can be expected to become hoarser as the elections draw closer, but what one forgets is that society has always been segregated on these lines and will remain so for some time to come. While this might be an uncomfortable truth, it cannot be denied. Where Sikkim has delivered well is that it has never allowed these ‘designs’ to actually tear the people apart. Of course, the rhetoric will continue as groups seek to tease the natural differences and traditional prejudices into deeper fault lines. The people have not fallen for these designs yet, but that is thanks to the inherent pragmatism of the people. Unfortunately, in the absence of debates on important issues in the public domain, the field remains open for posturing to slip in a victory some day. Many a leader has managed to incite passions with half-truths, selective amnesia and blinkered projections. These have succeeded essentially among closed groups, but as mentioned, since clear defences have not been erected, the suspicions could spread. The best defences will come from deeper enquiry into issues of identity and history and sharper debates on received wisdoms and ground realities. The young need to approach these issues more keenly because they will be inheriting the load of unresolved issues and little understood legacies.

In the meanwhile, it should be a communal face that Sikkim presents to the Centre – a people communal as Sikkimese and not as Sikkimese BLs and Sikkimese Nepalese or Sikkimese Byaparis. The States hands are already tied given its small size and further segregation will only make the Sikkimese voice even more feeble and incoherent in Delhi. Let’s accept it, a lot that needs to be done in and for Sikkim needs to make its way from Delhi. If anyone is to take Sikkim seriously, everyone here needs to speak in the same voice. This will require Sikkim to not only shed its prejudices and take everyone into confidence, but also compare notes and speak more earnestly for each other.

That digression aside, it is important that people belong to a community with pride – something that come only with security and confidence – instead of being divided by fear. When we become communal on these lines, the hate of sectarian divisiveness will find no takers.

WRITE US:

Readers are invited to comment on, criticise, run down, even appreciate if they like something in this paper. Letters carrying abusive/ indecorous language and personal attacks, except when against people responsible in this newspaper (who are fair game), will have to be ignored. Letters which carry forward a conversation or initiate a dialogue will command immediate attention and receive prominence. Mail us at: news@summittimes.com

Facebook has pulled the trigger on news content — and possibly shot itself in the foot

DIANA BOSSIO
theconversation.com

Facebook today made good on its threat to block Australians from accessing or posting news content. The ban includes blocking links to Australian and overseas news publishers.

Facebook said the ban was a direct response to the federal government’s news media code legislation, which is expected to become law soon and would require digital platforms such as Facebook and Google to pay news media companies whose content they host.

WHY HAS FACEBOOK DONE THIS?

The move is either a last-ditch attempt to gain concessions in the legislation, or a simple cut-and-run by Facebook.

The social media giant claims news publishers derive more value from news sharing than Facebook does. This is plausible, as news content makes up only 4% of sharing on the platform, whereas many news sites gain a large fraction of their traffic from Facebook referrals.

But this is probably more about flexing some muscle. Facebook may be demonstrating to the Federal government that if it doesn’t like the rules, it can damage national interests.

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

Australians will feel some short-term negative impacts of Facebook’s flex.

Certain government Facebook pages, such as those belonging to the Bureau of Meteorology and some health department sites, have been caught up in the ban. Facebook says this is due to the wording of the legislation, stating:

“As the law does not provide clear guidance on the definition of news content, we have taken a broad definition in order to respect the law as drafted.” While Facebook says it will restore non-news pages, the action will put pressure on the government to define more clearly what it means by news content.

In the meantime, the move will affect Australians’ access to vital information related to emergencies and the COVID pandemic. Without a concerted effort to ensure online behaviour change from users, this could be dangerous.

MISINFORMATION RISK

We can also expect to see a short-term proliferation of misinformation as Facebook’s news feed will have a vacuum of professionally sourced and fact-checked news.

A significant number of Australians discuss news on Facebook, both via their newsfeed and in groups. Being able to source factual information from news sites is part of the everyday political and social participation that social media platforms facilitate.

The democratic impact of Facebook’s ban will be felt – and is counter to Facebook’s stated principle of connecting people and its recent pledge to tackle misinformation.

WILL IT HURT FACEBOOK?

The impact of this action against the legislation on Facebook itself is yet to be seen.

The reputational damage from blocking important sites that serve Australia’s public interest overnight – and yet taking years to get on top of user privacy breaches and misinformation – undermines the legitimacy of the platform and its claimed civic intentions.

Facebook’s actions may send a message to the government, but they will also send one to their Australian users.

Readers are likely to find other ways to get their news. If we learn from the experience of Google’s news ban in Spain, we can see that after an initial dip in traffic, most major news organisations in Spain regained much of their web traffic after about a year.

SURFING SOCIAL WAVES

Tools such as Facebook are only useful if people want to use them. And for some existing users, the lack of news might be a dealbreaker.

Facebook already faces a long-term problem of an ageing user demographic, as under-25s turn to Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok for news and information.

Young people may have Facebook profiles, but they are less likely to be active users.

News organisations are already following their lead. For example, The Conversation Australia has 325,735 Facebook followers and will probably feel the impact of the loss of engagement there.

But it also has more than 21,000 Instagram followers and counting. It is increasingly making visual news “tiles” to cater for the younger demographic of users who source news from other platforms. It has also been working to reach readers directly via regular email newsletters, which one in five US readers now say is their primary way of accessing news.

News organisations have already learned how to pivot fast. When Facebook changed its algorithms in 2018 to deprioritise news publishers, many took action to reduce their reliance on Facebook’s traffic, analytics or digital advertising dollars.

WHAT NOW?

Larger news organisations will be OK in the long run. But Australia’s smaller outlets, including local publishers and non-profits that produce public interest journalism, will need protection.

The long-term task for news organisations and journalists is to convince the public – especially young people – that it’s worthwhile to actively seek out professional news and journalism as part of their daily online lives, rather than simply reading whatever comes across their feed.

As for Facebook, going back to its original purpose of facilitating personal connection and social networking, rather than posing as a forum for public information, may not be a bad thing. But the reputational damage and publisher exodus will eventually damage its core business: digital advertising revenue.

[the writer is Lecturer, Media and Communications, Swinburne University of Technology]

How the coronavirus mutates and what this means for the future of COVID-19

STEPHANIE G BURTON
theconversation.com

The recent appearance of new variants of SARS-CoV-2 (the coronavirus causing COVID-19 infections), that may be associated with increased transmission of the virus and disease severity, has raised questions about the nature and rates of mutations in viruses. The answers to these questions will potentially guide public health decisions. However, it is also important for individuals to understand them so as to prevent potential panic.

Here are some of the basics.

MUTATIONS 101

All organisms, including viruses, have genomes: these are their genetic inheritance. All cells have genomes made of strands of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA). Viruses, on the other hand, may have genomes made of strings of DNA or ribonucleic acid (RNA) nucleotides.

Mutations in virus and cell genomes (substitutions, additions or deletions in the cellular DNA and viral DNA or RNA sequences) occur continually. This can happen as a result of replication errors – where copying of the genome by the molecular replication machinery inadvertently introduces changes – or because of the effects of chemicals or radiation.

The rates of mutation (how often one of these changes occurs) vary between the different types of viruses, and between viruses and cells. Viruses in general mutate faster than host genomes, and RNA viruses generally mutate faster than DNA viruses.

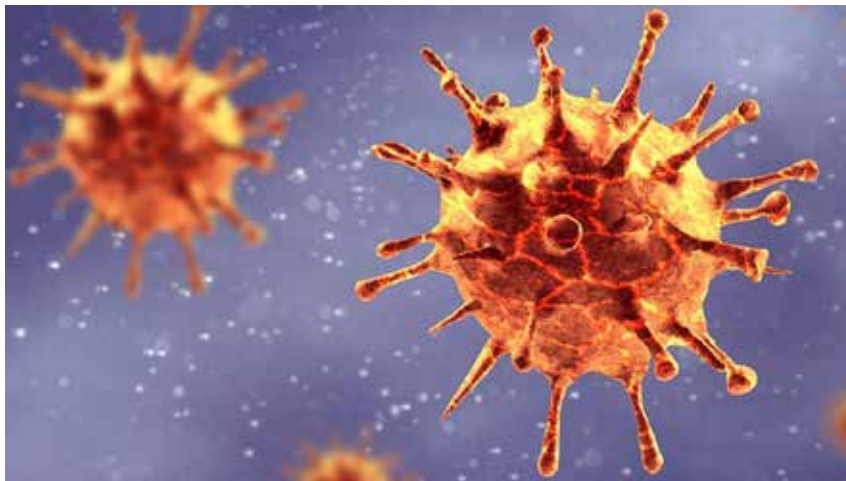
This is largely because RNA virus replication machinery generally does not have an error correction ability, as all other cells and most DNA viruses do. For example, influenza viruses causing seasonal flu have an error rate of 0.5 nucleotide positions per genome per cell infection. This means mutations accumulate rapidly as the virus multiplies in one person.

But SARS-CoV-2 and other coronaviruses are an exception to the rule. They mutate at least 4 times more slowly than influenza.

Many mutations in viral genomes are silent: they do not alter the function of the virus in any way, and they don’t result in changes in disease severity or immune responses. Of those that are not silent, many are damaging to virus functions and result in non-viable viruses, and therefore do not do survive into a new generation

of viruses.

Occasionally, a mutation will give the virus a better chance of surviving and reproducing itself, and will result in a new population (known as a new lineage). It is noteworthy that there were only 4 - 10 mutations accumulated for SARS-CoV-2 viruses that in-



fectured people in the US in mid-2020, compared to the original virus found in Wuhan months earlier: thus, only a small proportion of the 24 possible mutations in this sequence have produced a viable mutant.

An accumulation of mutations that significantly alter the properties of a virus lineage would be a new variant. The SARS-CoV-2 variants found in the UK, South Africa and Brazil – more properly referred to as the B.1.1.7, B.1.135 and P.1 variants – are examples. All are reported to have significantly higher transmission rates than earlier lineages.

THE INFECTION PATHOLOGY OF SARS-COV-2

When the SARS-CoV-2 virus enters the human host, usually in liquid droplets or aerosols from a cough or sneeze, the virus attaches via its surface S protein to the human ACE2 on cell surfaces, like a key fitting into a lock. ACE2 “receptors” are present on virtually all human cell types. But they are especially common on cells of the human nose and throat.

The viral genome then enters the cell and hijacks it to make multiple copies of itself, and then spreads. Mutations causing two amino acid changes in the S protein of the B.1.135 variant (E484K and N501Y), cause the virus to bind significantly more effectively to the human ACE2 receptors. This means that this and similar variants can spread more rapidly and efficiently within the human host population.

Initial infection of humans is in

the upper respiratory tract, and early symptoms are generally of a respiratory infection. However, it is increasingly obvious that SARS-CoV-2 is a systemic virus. This means it can also infect and damage intestinal and urogenital tissues, cells of the central nervous system, and the endothelial cells of minor

blood vessels, leading to clotting complaints and even strokes.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF MUTATIONS

Two issues about the new variants are causing global concern: will they cause more severe disease; will they be more resistant to the anti-COVID-19 vaccines coming on to the market.

The British government and others claim the B.1.1.7 variant “may be more deadly”. The B.1.135 variant found first in South Africa is apparently not more severe.

The question of immunity is complex. Natural infections lead to broad antibody and cellular immune responses that target many parts of the virus. But most SARS-CoV-2 vaccines stimulate responses that target only the S protein: this has led to concern that new variants may escape these “narrow” immune responses.

Apparent proof of this is the revelation that the AstraZeneca vaccine that is the first to reach South Africa, and was scheduled to be used in front-line healthcare workers, has little efficacy in preventing mild or moderate COVID-19 caused by the B.1.135 variant.

Reassuringly there is little evidence that any of the changes so far catalogued in the S protein affect the efficacy of most of the other current vaccines – despite hype generated by in vitro work with laboratory-made monoclonal antibodies.

There is in fact evidence that the efficacy of the Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna mRNA and Johnson & Johnson ad-

enovirus vaccines – are not significantly affected. This is because there are still many epitopes – or binding sites – for antibodies in the S protein or RBD that are not affected by known mutations.

It is also possible to quickly re-engineer the mRNA vaccines to counter any threat. An encouraging recent recommendation was that Johnson & Johnson’s single-shot adenovirus-based vaccine would be good for controlling outbreaks, while Novavax’s protein-based vaccine could give better overall protection.

WHAT ABOUT FUTURE MUTATIONS?

It’s highly likely that there will be new variants of SARS-CoV-2 in the near future. In fact, it is very likely that new variants are already circulating in the human population, but have yet to be detected by genomic surveillance. Surveillance is strong in some countries – such as the UK and South Africa – but is very limited in others, including most countries in Africa.

What is concerning is that we now know that the S proteins of seasonal common cold-causing coronaviruses evolve to avoid host immune responses, just as influenza viruses do, which results in people catching these individual viruses every three years or so. This means that SARS-CoV-2 vaccines may have to be changed regularly, just as flu vaccines are.

Is it likely that other functional mutations will occur; for example, mutations that may increase the pathogenicity of the virus, as they have already increased its transmissibility?

The answer is that we simply don’t know whether new mutations will make the virus more dangerous or easily transmitted. But evidence from the history of some well-known human common cold viruses may be informative. Colds are caused by several different viruses, the most common of which are the numerous rhinoviruses. These have been permanent residents in the human population for many centuries, and re-emerge annually as seasonal epidemics. Despite this, however, there is no evidence for any worsening pathology. In fact, the four coronaviruses that also cause the common cold may originally have caused much more severe disease, before becoming endemic and seasonal.

It is sincerely hoped that COVID-19 follows the same route.

[the writer is Professor in Biochemistry, Genetics and Microbiology, and Professor at Future Africa, University of Pretoria, University of Pretoria]

Assam logs 23 new COVID cases

GUWAHATI, FEB 19 (PTI): Assam's COVID-19 tally went up to 2,17,367 as 23 new cases were detected on Friday, a bulletin issued by the National Health Mission said.

It said that as many as 8,573 beneficiaries received the first dose of coronavirus vaccine while 2,211 were administered the second dose during the day.

The cumulative total number of health and frontline workers who received the first dose so far in the state is 1,47,044 while 10,232 got the second one.

The 23 new positive cases detected during the day included 10 from Kamrup Metropolitan district and six from Tinsukia district.

The state's COVID-19 death toll remained unchanged at 1,092, while 1,347 coronavirus positive patients have died for other reasons, the bulletin said.

Assam currently has 271 active cases.

The number of total COVID-19 tests conducted so far has reached 67,41,534.

Altogether 19 patients recovered from the disease on Friday, taking the number of cured people in the state to 2,14,658. Three other patients have migrated out of Assam.

No new COVID-19 case in Arunachal Pradesh

ITANAGAR, FEB 20 (PTI): Arunachal Pradesh did not report any fresh COVID-19 case in the last 24 hours, a senior health department official said here on Saturday.

The total coronavirus caseload in the state remained at 16,836, State Surveillance Officer Dr Lobsang Jampa said.

Arunachal Pradesh currently has five active COVID-19 cases, while 16,775 people have recovered from the disease, and 56 people have succumbed to the infection so far, he said.

The recovery rate in the state has touched 99.63 per cent, while the positivity ratio stands at 0.02 per cent and the fatality rate at 0.33 per cent, the official said.

Altogether, 4,03,063 samples have been tested for COVID-19, including 446 on Friday, the SSO said. Meanwhile, State Immunization Officer (SIO) Dimong Padung said that 18,697 health and frontline workers have received vaccine shots so far in the state.

The health department has been carrying out the inoculation drive four days a week -- Monday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday.

To reclaim democracy, Nepali citizens hold Tundikhel March

TIKA R PRADHAN KATHMANDU, 20 FEB [KATH-MANDUPOST]: Nepal's civil society members on Friday organised a Tundikhel march to assert that the open space, a symbol of democracy in Nepal, belongs to the people.

People from different walks of life under Brihat Nagarik Andolan, a broad citizen movement, however, were barred from entering Tundikhel. Security was beefed up since early in the day.

After circumambulating Tundikhel starting from Ratna Park, the citizens gathered at the side of its main gate close to Mahankal temple, from where they announced their first declarations ever, vowing to ensure people's supremacy.

"What is the present fate of Nepal Mandal developed by the communities in 2,000 years? The sugarcane field has been turned into an army parade ground, thus making Kathmandu a thirsty town," said writer Narayan Wagle, one of those at the forefront of the Brihat Nagarik Andolan.

"After destroying ancient free water spouts, the rulers are selling the dream of expensive Melamchi. Kathmandu itself was prosperous, your slogan of prosperity was just a conspiracy."

Another writer Khagendra Sangraula said the people's rights are always at risk and autocrats always want to snatch people's rights.

"Today in this gathering the presence of police is more than the participants. What it means is that when an autocrat fears people, he or she sends police, army, tank and fireballs—all that they have," said Sangraula. "So our citizen movement is becoming stronger. This is our victory. I salute all the brothers and sisters of the security forces present to listen to the voice of



the people." Security personnel including those from Nepal Police and Armed Police Force were standing nearby in riot gear to make sure no one entered the parade grounds. Behind the gate were Nepal Army soldiers.

It has been 70 years since the country declared democracy in the presence of Khari-bot here, according to Wagle, but now there is neither the tree and the culture that goes with it nor democracy with people's mandate, but instead the salute has become a culture in the name of democracy now.

The Brihat Nagarik Andolan has concluded that the KP Sharma Oli government over the years has gradually inflicted damage to the constitution and the rule of law. According to them, Oli's December 20 House dissolution dealt a massive blow to democracy, risking that the hard-earned gains of various movements in the past could fast unravel.

"Actually we wanted to tell everyone in a symbolic way by protesting the capture of public space that we are against

autocracy and militarisation," said Bhaskar Gautam, one of the leaders of the citizens' movement. "What we want is people's supremacy."

The major objective of Friday's gathering was to announce what actually the movement is for through the declarations, probably the first of its kind by the civil society.

The citizen's manifesto has imagined a lively democracy that ensures rights, ownership, self-respect of the historically left-out and discriminated communities including Aadibasi, Janajati, women, Dalit, Madhesi and sexual and gender minorities.

In the declaration, the Brihat Nagarik Andolan has said that all citizens need to join hands to ensure that the Nepali society becomes democratic and social justice is established.

"Respecting the spirit of the previous people's movements and struggles and people's aspirations, it's time for a struggle to end the regression that has been going on for a long time," reads the 5-page manifesto.

"Remembering the sacrifices of the people, standing here now we vow that we need a free Tundikhel and a free democracy," said Wagle, addressing the function. "We need such a democracy in which citizens can face the world with heads held high."

According to Wagle, now the civil society will have to vow that they will join hands with the people who struggle for and dream of a better future and continuously raise their finger and create pressure on the rulers.

Seventy years after the country became a democracy, having been released from the clutches of the oligarchic Rana regime, thousands of people from different walks of life marched around the Tundikhel and gathered at the main gate of the open space where the government organised the 'Democracy Day' event hours before the citizens' march.

The organisers of the Brihat Nagrik Andolan deliberately chose Democracy Day to issue their manifesto—and reclaim the historic open space where the declaration

of democracy was made seven decades ago.

As Kewal Binabi, a poet from Bajhang district, delivered his message through the poem 'Aandhi ko Parkhaima' (Waiting for the Storm), the civil society movement that had erupted after the abrupt dissolution of the House of Representatives by Oli, is expecting more people to join after the manifesto is unveiled.

The focus of those participating in the function was not just on reclaiming peoples' right to the open space captured by Nepal Army, but also to oppose Oli's 'regressive' move.

Knowing that the main focus of the protests was reclaiming the Tundikhel through the march—security forces were deployed heavily throughout the rally and the function. There was a four-layer security to make sure that the demonstrators wouldn't enter Tundikhel.

Another activist and poet Rajbhai Jakami said people would sacrifice their lives but they won't let the people's constitution die. With his

paralysed legs, Jileshan Shah, 45, of Rautahat, who teaches English at St Xavier's College, stood at the forefront of the rally on crutches having taken leave from work.

"Sometimes I feel frustrated seeing the situation of our country," Shah told the Post. "Therefore, I have been participating in most of the protests programmes organised by the Brihat Nagarik Andolan."

"The basic aspiration of federalism was to bring drastic changes in the form of governance by transforming the state structure. It was expected that such change would ensure justifiable distribution of resources, political and economic progress of the country, address the cultural and social diversity and establish constitutional culture," the manifesto made public on Friday said. "Let's fight together to end the centralised mentality of the rulers in the name of federalism."

Shah expressed happiness that, though late, the civil society movement is gradually gaining momentum. "Had the civil society been active earlier, I think Oli would not have dared to take the situation to this level," he said. "Since the civil society itself is divided into different political lines it has been difficult to gather people."

Shah said the latest move of Oli to arrest lawmaker of the dissolved Parliament Ram Kumari Jhakri galvanised the people because it became evident that Oli was not going to spare anyone.

"Today we have declared that Tundikhel belongs to people and it will remain with the people," Sangraula said. "Today no door of Tundikhel is open but if it remains closed they will be broken."

The thousands of members of the civil society cheered.

Myanmar's minorities to protest in show of unity against coup



YANGON, 20 FEB [REUTERS]: Members of Myanmar ethnic groups will protest on Saturday in a show of opposition to the coup that ousted the government of Aung San Suu Kyi, despite some misgivings about her commitment to their aspirations for autonomy, organisers said.

Protests against the February 1 coup that overthrew the elected government of the veteran democracy campaigner have taken place across the diverse country, despite a military promise to hold a new election and hand power to the winner. A young woman protester died on Friday after being shot in the head last week as police dispersed a crowd in the capital, Naypyitaw, the first death among opponents of the coup in the demonstrations. The army says one policeman has died of injuries sustained in a protest.

Protesters are demanding the restoration of the elected government, the release of Suu Kyi and others and the scrapping of a 2008 constitution, drawn up under military supervision, that gives the army a decisive role in politics.

Ke Jung, a youth leader from the Naga minority and organiser

of the Saturday protest by the minorities in the main city of Yangon, said the protesters were also demanding a federal system.

"We can't form a federal country under dictatorship. We can't accept the junta," he told Reuters.

The protests have been more peaceful than the bloodily suppressed demonstrations during nearly 50 years of direct military rule up to 2011.

But police have fired rubber bullets several times to break up crowds, as well as water cannon and catapults.

In addition to the protests, a civil disobedience campaign has paralysed much government business. Myanmar has experienced insurgencies by ethnic minority factions since shortly after its independence from Britain in 1948 and the army has long held itself to be the only institution capable of preserving national unity.

Suu Kyi, 75, like the top generals, is a member of the majority Burman community.

'STAND TOGETHER' Ke Jung said some minority parties were not committed to the movement against the coup.

"It's a reflection of how Aung San Suu Kyi failed to build alliances with ethnic political parties," he said. "However, we must win this fight. We stand together with the people. We will fight until the end of dictatorship."

Salai Mon Boi, a youth leader from the Chin minority, said the Saturday protest, which happened to fall on Chin National Day, was focused on four demands: getting rid of the constitution, ending dictatorship, a federal system and the release of all leaders.

"There are some people who don't like NLD but we're not talking about the NLD," he said, referring to Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD).

The army seized back power after alleging fraud in November 8 elections that the NLD swept, detaining her and others. The electoral commission had dismissed the allegations of fraud.

The United States, Britain, Canada and New Zealand have announced limited sanctions, with a focus on military leaders, including banning travel and freezing assets.

Japan and India have joined Western countries in calling for democracy to be restored quickly.

The junta has not reacted to the new sanctions. On Tuesday, an army spokesman told a news conference that sanctions had been expected. There is little history of Myanmar's generals giving in to foreign pressure and they have closer ties to neighbouring China and to Russia, which have taken a softer approach than long critical Western countries.

Junta leader Min Aung Hlaing was already under sanctions from Western countries following the 2017 crackdown on the Muslim Rohingya minority.

No new COVID-19 case in Andamans

PORT BLAIR, FEB 20 (PTI): Andaman and Nicobar Islands did not report any new COVID-19 case in the last two days, an official said on Saturday.

The coronavirus tally in the union territory remained at 5,014, the official said.

The archipelago now has four active COVID-19 cases and all the patients are in South Andaman district, he said.

The other two districts of the union territory - North and Middle Andaman and Nicobar - are COVID-19 free as both don't have any active coronavirus case, the official said.

Four more patients were cured of the disease on Friday, taking the total



number of COVID-19 recoveries to 4,948, while 62 people have succumbed to the infection so far, he said.

The administration has so far tested 2,55,675 samples for COVID-19 and the test positivity rate is 1.96 per cent, he added.

Official sources said any person arriving by flight in the union territory is required to pro-

duce RT-PCR negative report before he or she is allowed entry into the islands.

A total of 4,655 health care and frontline workers have received COVID-19 vaccine in the union territory so far, he said.

At least 895 health care workers have received the second dose of the vaccine, the official added.

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Daniil Medvedev, the ultimate disrupter, is on brink of tennis history



TUMAINI CARAYOL
MELBOURNE, 20 FEB [THEGUARDIAN]: As Daniil Medvedev and Stefanos Tsitsipas prepared to reignite their young, fiery rivalry in the pressure cooker of an Australian Open semi-final, all the usual narratives took hold. Aside from the very enjoyable drama – their mutual dislike stems from their clash after a match in Miami two years ago that ended with Medvedev uttering the line: “Man, you better shut your fuck up, OK?” – it was the clash of styles that seemed to be a particular fascination.

Tsitsipas, with his single-handed backhand and his firm embrace of the net, is often positioned as an heir to the Roger Federer and Pete Sampras lineage of classic single-handed players. The image is accentuated by his good looks and heritage, which leads to an overwhelming number of references to Greek philosophers and

mythology including, of course, “Greek God”. Medvedev, by comparison, often seems to be viewed as the runt of the next gen. He is tall, lanky and he was late to the party anyway, breaking through after other young players had begun to build their fanbases. He is a winner, most admit, but that doesn’t mean it is pretty: “The majority of tennis lovers would hope that someone like Tsitsipas would win, just because of his all-round ability, all-round style of play,” concluded the great Frew McMillan on Eurosport before the match.

The majority of tennis lovers will have to move on. Medvedev outplayed Tsitsipas 6-4, 6-2, 7-5, reaching his second grand slam final on the back of a startling 20-match winning streak which comprises an absurd 12 top-10 wins. He is on the brink of history, a win away from his first grand slam title but also from leapfrogging Ra-

fael Nadal into the No 2 ranking. By doing so, he would end the 791-week run of only Nadal, Novak Djokovic, Andy Murray and Roger Federer occupying the top two ranking spots.

Medvedev’s game has sharp edges and interesting technical decisions. His forehand remains fascinating in the manner that he follows through the motions, wrapping his right arm around his neck at the close. But throughout this run, he has been able to call on so many facets of his game.

Despite standing at 6ft 6in, he has morphed into one of the premier athletes in tennis. He keeps opponents uncomfortable with his flat, low-bouncing groundstrokes and he constantly changes the pace, trajectory, angles and spin of his strokes. In an era when players tend to focus first on themselves and how they can use their weapons to damage the opponent, Medvedev is the

ultimate disrupter. “He tricks you,” said Tsitsipas afterwards. “He plays the game really smart. It’s interesting to see that.”

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Medvedev’s game is how he blends his strategic excellence with random, off-the-cuff decision making, meaning it is difficult to decipher where his plan ends and where he starts making things up as he goes along. His ability to significantly adapt his tactics mid-match, switching from consistent baseline play to endless serve and volleying, has become a trademark.

All those qualities should indicate that Medvedev has a complete and varied game, but tennis remains draped in nostalgia. “Variety” is often code for single-handed backhands and netplay, regardless of the limitations of the person wielding the racket. There are fewer discussions about how baseliners with two-handed backhands can also ex-

cute varied, entertaining tennis in their own specific manner.

On the other side of the court, Tsitsipas is a wonderful player but the match was won by Medvedev exposing the limitations of his game that are far more prominent. The Greek is a below-average returner, whose total return games won of 18.5% ranked him 33rd of 50 players last year. He was unable to live with Medvedev serving and he later described Medvedev’s serve as “close to John Isner’s”.

Medvedev dominated the backhand exchanges and then picked off the inevitable short balls that followed. By the end of the match, Medvedev demonstrated his variety by winning the majority of the short exchanges of one to four shots, driven by his serve, and the longer, bruising exchanges over nine shots.

After a brief third-set wobble, Medvedev closed off his victory with a dream of a return game, finishing it off by retrieving an excellent Tsitsipas sliding wide serve at deuce, before teleporting to the other edge of the court and nailing a backhand down-the-line passing shot winner from a seemingly impossible position.

Medvedev has beaten every top-10 player since November, aside from Roger Federer who has been inactive. When informed of the feat, his response was understandable: “Yeah, it’s great to know this,” he said. “It’s a pity that Roger is not playing. I would love to have played him.” From the press room in Melbourne, laughter rang out.

Naomi Osaka overpowers Jennifer Brady to win second Australian Open



MELBOURNE, 20 FEB [THEGUARDIAN]: In the midst of this unending pandemic and a scattered, disjointed 12 months of tennis, there has been one consistent sight throughout: Naomi Osaka exhibiting her greatness under suffocating pressure. She is already a star whose profile is in the process of transcending her sport but, most important, she has the résumé to back it up and it keeps on growing. In a tight, gripping contest that saw her struggle and then soar, the Japanese became a four-times grand slam champion at 23 by beating Jennifer Brady 6-4, 6-3 to win her second Australian Open.

The achievements she has unlocked in the process are startling. Osaka is now the first woman to win the first four grand slam finals of her career since Monica Seles in 1991. She is the seventh woman in the Open era to save match point en route to the Australian Open title, after her fourth-round final-set comeback against Garbiñe Muguruza from 3-5, 15-40, in which she saved the first match point with a 119mph ace and hit zero unforced errors in the final 22 points.

Who knows if she even remembers what it feels like to lose – that is a sensation she has not experienced in more than a year, across 21 successive wins. Before then, two poor losses, including one to a 15-year-old Coco Gauff at this very tournament, forced her to reevaluate her entire approach to the sport. Consider it a job well done. Osaka is now 33-2 (94%) in hardcourt grand slams since 2018, winning four of the last six titles.

These have already been such career-defining months for Osaka as she consolidated her spot at the top of the sport and learned the power of her voice away from it while speaking out against racism and police brutality. Although she will rise only from No 3 to No 2 thanks to temporary alterations to the rankings during the pandemic, this can now be said with certainty: she is the best player in the world again.

In Osaka’s previous grand slam finals she faced three multiple grand slam champions, so wondered before this match how she would handle the pressure as the clear favourite. In the beginning, well, it was complicated. From 3-1 up, Osaka suddenly looked frail. She began to catch her toss in the wind and her first serves flew beyond the service line. It was actually Brady who dictated more rallies. As the No 22 seed radiated energy and verve, thus began a series of crucial games that she led but could not close.

At 3-3 on Osaka’s serve, the American forced her to 15-30 before Osaka landed two consecutive service winners. Brady then created a break point at 4-4, 30-40 after a wonderful, flicked one-handed backhand lob winner. Osaka saved the break point with a bold crosscourt forehand winner and then she did just enough to hold serve. Brady then led 40-15 at 4-5 on her serve before losing four points in a row to concede the set. And that was it. From haemorrhaging errors, Osaka won five games in a row and never looked back. The sequence reflected a common trait of the greatest champions – the opportunities they offer are limited and any opponent who fails to take advantage of them will pay.

Regardless of the result, reaching the final remains a remarkable achievement for Brady. While most of her rivals spent their quarantine period in Australia training each day as they calmly maintained their form and fitness, she did not see beyond the walls of her hotel room for two weeks. Yet she remained there on the final day, battling for her first slam. “I made my first grand slam final, so maybe if I wasn’t in quarantine I would have won,” she joked later. “Maybe.”

With every new Osaka success, it is so hard not to return to the same thought – she has already achieved so much, yet it feels as if she has not yet scratched the surface of her potential. Osaka still needs time to become more comfortable on grass courts and clay. She has shown such a willingness to confront her weaknesses that she will inevitably embrace more net play and guile shots in time. She now has four grand slam titles but only three WTA titles, which is unprecedented and quite preposterous. She is determined to rectify that with consistency across the year.

As she relaxed after her victory, sipping a lick of champagne and taking in the familiar feeling of ending a major on top, Osaka was asked what more she wants from the sport beyond trophies and success: “I feel like the biggest thing that I want to achieve is – this is going to sound really odd, but hopefully I play long enough to play a girl that said that I was once her favourite player,” she responded. The way she has conducted her career so far, there is an army of them to come.

Former Italy Defender Mauro Bellugi dies after legs amputated following Covid-19

ROME, 20 FEB [AFP]: Former Italy and Inter Milan defender Mauro Bellugi died on Saturday aged 71, months after both his legs were amputated following complications with coronavirus. “Today he leaves us, a great man, a great footballer, a true ‘Interista’. Rest in peace Mauro Bellugi,” Inter Milan wrote on Twitter after Bellugi passed away in Milan.

Doctors were forced to carry out the double amputation in November when a pre-existing condition worsened after the former defender was hospitalised following Covid-19.

“Exactly one year after the first case of Covid in Italy, Mauro Bellugi leaves us,” the president of the Lombardy region Attilio Fontana wrote Saturday on Facebook.

“Scarred by the virus, the national and Inter player tried to react to a complicated health situation with his usual strength and irony. A prayer and a thought for his loved ones.”

Bellugi won the Serie A title with Inter in 1971, and also played for Italy in the World Cups of 1974 and 1978.

“They took off my leg with which I scored against Borussia Mönchengladbach,” said Bellugi at the time of the amputation, speaking about a goal he scored for Inter in the second round of the European Cup in November 1971. “I will wear prostheses like those of (Oscar) Pistorius.”

Bellugi, who also played for Bologna and Napoli during the 1960s and 1970s, went on to become a football pundit.

Delayed trial of Women v US Soccer pushed back to June 15



LOS ANGELES, FEB 20 (AP): The long delayed trial in the case of female players against the U.S. Soccer Federation has been pushed back again.

U.S. District Judge R. Gary Klausner said Friday he was delaying the trial date from March 9 to June 15 due to the unavailability of jurors during the novel coronavirus pandemic.

However, Klausner has a hearing scheduled for April 12 to approve a Dec. 1 settlement of claims of inequitable working conditions compared with the men’s team. That would leave the sides still disputing unequal pay claims that Klausner dismissed, a decision the women intend to appeal.

“We anticipate that the settlement which achieves working conditions for the women players that they have

fought many years to achieve will be approved on April 12, and there will be no trial. This is simply an administrative update from the court,” players’ spokeswoman Molly Levinson said in a statement.

“Following approval of the settlement, we will proceed with an expedited appeal of the court’s decision on pay disparities between women and men in this sport.”

The December deal between the world champion American women and the sport’s U.S. governing body called for charter flights, hotel accommodations, venue selection and professional staff support equitable to that of the men’s national team.

Players sued the USSF in March 2019, claiming they have not been paid equitably under their collective bargaining agree-

ment that runs through December 2021, compared to what the men’s team receives under its agreement that expired in December 2018.

The women asked for more than USD 66 million in damages under the Equal Pay Act and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Klausner dismissed the pay claim last May, ruling the women rejected a pay-to-play structure similar to the one in the men’s agreement and accepted greater base salaries and benefits than the men, who failed to qualify for the 2018 World Cup.

Players will seek to overturn Klausner’s dismissal at the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, but they can’t move forward with their appeal until Klausner gives final approval of the working conditions settlement.

Sachin Tendulkar commends Virat Kohli for sharing "personal experience" of battling depression

PRAKASH RAI
MUMBAI, 20 FEB [NDTV]: After Virat Kohli opened up about his battle with depression and revealed how an advice given by Sachin Tendulkar helped him change his mindset, the batting great took to Twitter to commend the Kohli for sharing such personal experiences with everyone. The former India batsman also said that he was proud of Kohli’s success. “@imVkohli, proud of your success & decision to share such personal experiences. These days youngsters are constantly judged on social media. Thousands speak about them but not to them. We need to be able to listen to them and help them flourish,” Sachin

Tendulkar tweeted.

The Indian skipper, in a conversation with former England player and renowned broadcaster Mark Nicholas on his ‘Not Just Cricket’ podcast, opened up about his battle with depression during India’s 2014 tour of England while he was going through a lean patch.

Kohli, who endured a horror run with the bat in that series, conceded that he went through a tough phase during that tour and felt like he “was the loneliest guy in the world”.

In the podcast, Kohli also revealed how his mindset opened up after having a conversation with Sachin Tendulkar about “mental side of

the things”. Kohli explained that Sachin advised him that if you are going through a strong negative feeling, the best way to deal with it is by letting it past rather than fighting it, which only helps it grow stronger.

“I did have a chat with him about the mental side of things as well and the thing that he told me was, in cricket what he experienced was if you are going through a strong negative feeling and if that is coming into your system regularly, it is best to let it pass. If you start fighting that feeling, it grows stronger. So, that is the advice I took on board and my mindset really opened up from then on,” said the Indian skipper.

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Russia steps in, trying to aid stalled Afghan peace process

ISLAMABAD (AP): With talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban stalled and the new administration in Washington mulling its options, Russia is stepping up efforts to try and find a way forward in the peace process.

Moscow's emissaries have been making the rounds, visiting regional players and meeting officials and senior Taliban figures — even as a NATO ministerial conference this week concluded that there is no easy solution on how to end Afghanistan's protracted war.

Zamir Kabulov, Russian President Vladimir Putin's special envoy for Afghanistan, was in Pakistan on Friday for talks with officials. Islamabad has been a key player with significant influence over the Taliban.

Also in Pakistan separately to meet with the powerful army chief was the U.S. Central Command head Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie. Their agenda too was Afghanistan. While the statement following the meeting was vague, Pakistan is seen as key to getting the Taliban, whose leadership maintains homes and headquarters in Pakistan, to agree to a reduction in violence leading to an eventual cease-fire.

Washington and Kabul have been pressing for a cease-fire while the Taliban say they will negotiate it as part of peace talks with the Afghan government.

Under a February 2020 deal that the Trump administration signed with the Taliban, Washington committed to a May 1 withdrawal of all foreign troops from Afghanistan — which, after 20 years, has become America's longest conflict.

President Joe Biden is now conducting a review of that deal, though the Taliban have warned that there would be no wiggle room on the deadline, threatening to restart the war with the U.S. and NATO if it's not met.

Since the U.S.-Taliban agreement was signed, the Taliban have kept their commitment not to attack NATO and U.S. troops but are relentlessly targeting Afghan forces, which have also been conducting operations against the insurgents. The spike in violence across Afghanistan is undermining any prospects of a tangible cease-fire.

The Taliban today are the strongest they have been since the 2001 U.S.-led invasion toppled their regime for sheltering the mastermind of 9/11 terrorist attacks on the U.S., the al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden.

For its part, Russia has not forgotten its experience in Afghanistan, where at least 15,000 Soviet troops were killed in fighting that began as an effort to prop up a communist ally and soon became a grinding campaign against the U.S.-backed mujahedeen insurgency. During his unannounced visit on Friday to Islamabad, the Russian envoy met with Pakistan's powerful army chief, as well as the foreign minister.

Florida is a for voting. The GOP wants change anyway

TALLAHASSEE (FLORIDA), FEB 20 (AP): Florida was a model citizen when it came to elections in 2020. The state showed off its years of voting reforms. Even as Donald Trump railed against voting systems elsewhere, he praised Florida and urged his supporters to trust its vote-by-mail system. And, indeed, results were reported quickly and accurately. Turnout soared.

It was all overseen by GOP officials. And Trump won, continuing Republicans' growing dominance in the state.

Yet three months later, Florida Republicans have set out to overhaul the state's voting system anyway. GOP Governor Ron DeSantis on Friday proposed an array of voting changes, while state lawmakers have introduced legislation that makes it harder to vote by mail. To explain the efforts, Florida Republicans point not to evidence of problems but to the potential for voter fraud and suspicion about the process.

We want everyone to vote, but we don't want anyone to cheat," DeSantis said Friday.

Florida Republicans' push to change voting laws shows how deep false claims about mass voter fraud spread by Trump have burrowed into Republicans' belief system. The party is now stampeding to solve a problem that most nonpartisan experts and courts say does not exist. Their efforts are threatening to dismantle years of bipartisan moves to boost voting in several states, including places where the GOP has thrived under the current system.



And it would result in making it more difficult to vote. We cannot comprehend where they're coming from, said Anjenys Gonzalez-Eilert of Florida Common Cause, noting the GOP has long been a supporter and beneficiary of mail voting in the state.

Similar efforts are being repeated across the country. State Republican lawmakers in Georgia, Arizona and Pennsylvania have introduced voting bills, many aimed at curbing mail voting.

The legislation reflects Republicans' widespread belief that new rules making it easier to vote by mail during the pandemic largely benefited

Democrats and caused irregularities. Although there were no signs of widespread irregularities, they often point to vote totals tilted in Democrat Joe Biden's favor as mail ballots were counted days after Election Day a pattern that was new to many states but not a sign of fraud.

But that was not an issue in Florida. It has long allowed its election offices to start the laborious process of preparing mail ballots for counting removing them from their envelopes and verifying voters' signatures well before Election Day. While ballot counts in many states new to mail voting dragged on for days,

Florida's count was quick and efficient. There was no evidence of fraud in Florida. Of the roughly 50 legal cases Trump and his allies brought challenging the election, none were filed in Florida. (Even in those states where Trump claimed there was fraud and tried to overturn the election, dozens of courts rejected his legal claims and no significant cases were proved.)

Florida officials take pride in their recent record. Ever since the drama of the 2000 presidential election recount when hanging chads turned the state into a national joke the state has worked to shed its image as the exemplar for

elections gone wrong.

Election officers have worked to shore up trust in the state's election system by changing how ballots are designed, modernizing vote-counting equipment and investing millions of dollars to protect against cyberthreats.

Even DeSantis took credit for November's performance.

We did it right," he said Friday before supporters in West Palm Beach.

Still, he argued for tightening voting laws. His proposal includes restricting the use of drop boxes where voters can deposit mail ballots and preventing other people from dropping off voters'

ballots, a practice many label ballot harvesting. DeSantis also seemed to endorse the Republican bill that would make mail balloting harder by requiring voters to request a mail ballot every year, rather than allow them to make one request that stands for two years' worth of elections. The proposal is notable because for years Republicans dominated vote by mail in Florida, and it was embraced by the state's many older voters. It helped the GOP cement a durable statehouse majority and narrowly win statewide races.

But the Republicans in Florida lost that edge last year. Trump railed against mail voting, and GOP voters' trust in the system sank, according to polls.

In Florida, his complaints alarmed state Republicans, and Trump sent out tweets stating that in Florida, where he voted by mail, the system was Safe and Secure, Tried and True.

In the end, Democrats in the state outvoted Republicans by mail for the first time in years as a record 4.9 million Floridians voted by mail. Democrats cast 680,000 more mail ballots than Republicans did.

The new bill would essentially wipe those new Democratic voters from the rolls ahead of 2022, when DeSantis and Sen. Marco Rubio lead the list of incumbent Republicans up for reelection. "Republicans used to have the advantage, and now it's the Democrats who have the advantage. So now it's time to make a change," said campaign strategist Mac Stanovich, a former Republican.

Myanmar anti-coup protesters honor woman shot dead by police



YANGON, MYANMAR (AP): Anti-coup protesters in Myanmar's two largest cities paid tribute Saturday to a young woman who died a day earlier after being shot by police during a rally against the military takeover.

An impromptu memorial created under an elevated roadway in Yangon attracted around 1,000 protesters. A wreath of bright yellow flowers was hung beneath a photograph of Mya Thwet Thwet Khine, who was shot in the capital, Naypyitaw, on Feb. 9, two days before her 20th birthday.

Her death on Friday, announced by her family, was the first confirmed fatality among thousands of protesters who have faced off against security forces since the military took power in a Feb 1 coup.

Protesters at the memorial chanted and held up signs that read "End the dictatorship in Myanmar" and "You will be remembered Mya Thwet Thwet Khine." The supporters also laid roses and rose petals on images of the woman.

Video from the day she was shot show her sheltering from water cannons and suddenly dropping to the ground after a bullet penetrated the motorcycle helmet she was wearing. She had been on life support in a hospital for more than a week with what doctors said was no chance of recovery.

U.S. State Department spokes-

person Ned Price offered his government's condolences Friday and reiterated calls on the military to refrain from violence against peaceful protesters.

In Mandalay, the country's second-largest city, a protest led by medical university students drew more than 1,000 people, many of whom also carried flowers and images of Mya Thwet Thwet Khine.

Others held signs saying "CDM," referring to the nationwide civil disobedience movement that has encouraged doctors, engineers and others to protest the coup by refusing to work.

Across the country protests showed no signs of slowing down on Saturday despite recent crack-downs by the military government — including a sixth consecutive night in which the internet was cut for many hours.

Demonstrators also gathered elsewhere in Yangon, chanting and holding placards and images of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, whose democratically elected government was overthrown.

Aerial images taken Friday showed streets in Yangon painted with the words "The military dictatorship must fall" in Burmese, and "We want democracy" and "Free our leaders" in English.

Security forces have been relatively restrained so far in confronting protesters in Yangon, but appeared to be toughening their

stance in areas where there is less media presence.

Police used force for a second day Friday to arrest protesters in Myitkyina, the capital of the remote northern state of Kachin. The Kachin ethnic minority has long been in conflict with the central government, and there has been intermittent armed struggle against the army there for decades.

The junta seized power after detaining Suu Kyi and preventing Parliament from convening, saying elections in November were tainted by voting irregularities. The election outcome, in which Suu Kyi's party won by a landslide, was affirmed by an election commission that has since been replaced by the military. The junta says it will hold new elections in a year's time.

The U.S., British and Canadian governments have imposed sanctions on the new military leaders, and they and other nations have called for Suu Kyi's administration to be restored.

The coup was a major setback to Myanmar's transition to democracy after 50 years of army rule. Suu Kyi came to power after her National League for Democracy party won a 2015 election, but the generals retained substantial power under the constitution, which was adopted under a military regime.

Thailand's prime minister survives no-confidence vote

Bangkok, Feb 20 (AP): Thailand's Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha survived a no-confidence vote Saturday in parliament amid allegations that his government mismanaged the economy, bungled the provision of COVID-19 vaccines, abused human rights and fostered corruption.

Nine other ministers also survived the vote.

It marked the second no-confidence test Prayuth's government has faced since taking office in July 2019, following a contested election after Prayuth seized power in a 2014 coup as the army chief. In Febru-

ary last year, Prayuth and five Cabinet ministers easily defeated a no-confidence vote in the lower house.

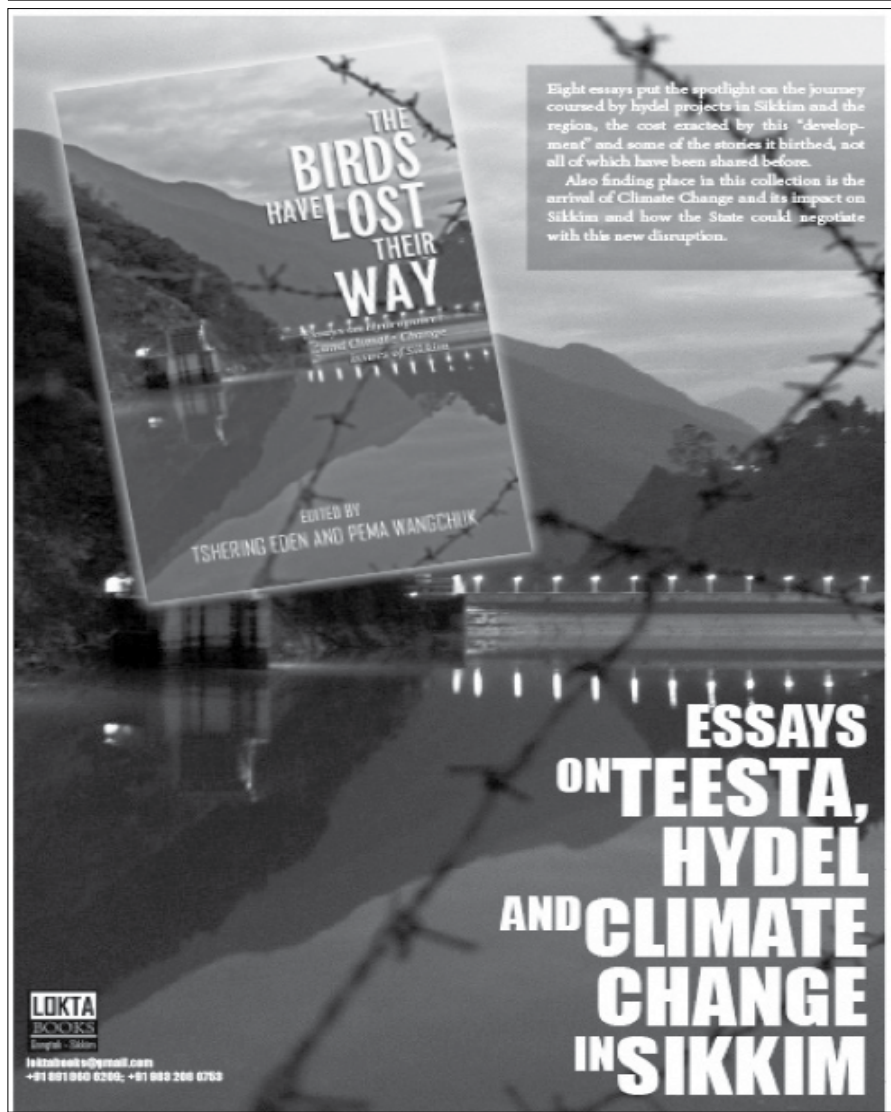
In the latest motion, his government was also criticized for misusing its power to promote police officials and for establishing a cyber unit to attack government critics on social media, among other complaints.

But a more serious allegation was that Prayuth has deepened divisions in society by using the monarchy as a shield against criticism of his government.

A student-led protest movement has cam-

aigned since last year for Prayuth and his government to step down. They want the constitution to be amended to make it more democratic, and for the monarchy to be reformed to make it more accountable. The biggest fault of Prayuth is that he does not understand the principles of the constitutional monarchy, said Pita Limjaroenrat, leader of the opposition Move Forward Party.

He used the monarchy to protect himself whenever he was criticized or opposed. This is an evil action, making him no longer qualified to be prime minister, he said.





MELISSA IN MIAMI! Celeb Melissa Gorga wore a bright blue bikini and played catch with a football on the beach in Miami.

Anna Friel to lead 'The Perfect Girlfriend' adaptation

LOS ANGELES, FEB 20 (PTI): "Marcella" star Anna Friel will be headlining an upcoming series adaptation of the novel "The Perfect Girlfriend".

According to Deadline, the show will be produced by Pulse Films, the banner behind popular drama series "Gangs of London".

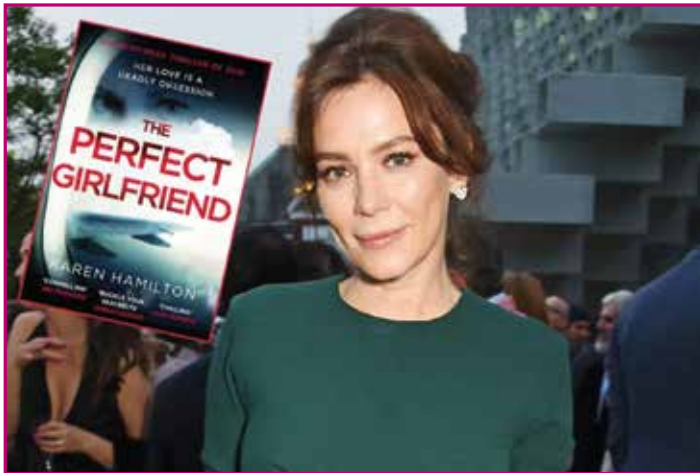
Friel, 44, will star as Juliette, an attractive, confident and driven woman who is training for her new career as a flight attendant.

"The darkness in her past doesn't matter, because she's moved beyond all that, and she's building a great new life for herself one that will impress her ex-boyfriend, Nate, who left her in a foolish moment of commitment-phobia, one that he surely regrets now.

But he'll be so proud of her once he sees how much she's grown.

"And he will see her. After all, he's a pilot at the very same airline where Juliette is training. What kind of man wouldn't appreciate the effort Juliette has taken to win Nate back?

She cleans his apartment when he's not there and makes sure to leave all his favourite foods in the fridge. It's only a matter of time before he leaves his airheaded new girlfriend and realises Juliette is the only one for him," the official plotline reads.



Friel will also produce the movie through her newly-launched production banner Wonder Productions.

Nicola Larder, who produced "Marcella", will serve as executive producer alongside Pulse Films CEO Thomas Benski.

'Kimye' is no more: Kardashian files to divorce West

LOS ANGELES (AP): "Kimye" is kaput. Kim Kardashian West filed for divorce from Kanye West Friday after 6 1/2 years of marriage, court records show. The move brings an impending end to one of the most followed celebrity unions of the 21st century — the marriage of a reality TV superstar and a hip-hop and fashion phenomenon with four kids, a vast fortune to split and even more fame.

Kardashian is seeking joint custody of the children and her filing states the couple have a prenuptial agreement that will determine how their assets will be divided. It cites irreconcilable differences for their breakup and does not list a separation date.

The couple began dating in 2012 and had their first child in 2013. West proposed later that year using the giant screen at the empty waterfront ballpark of the San Francisco Giants, and the two married May 24, 2014, in a ceremony at a Renaissance fortress in Florence, Italy.

The beginning of the end of the marriage comes after the September announcement that the show that made her family's name, "Keeping Up With The Kardashians," was coming to an end in 2021 after 14 years.

It was the first marriage for the West, 43, and the third for Kardashian, 40. While the union wasn't long, it outlasted the predictions of many cynics who thought doom was inevitable given the two oversized personalities, West's well-known volatility and the fact that Kardashian's previous marriage, to former NBA player Kris Humphries, was fleetingly brief.

Kardashian's first marriage at age 19 in 2000 to music producer Damon Thomas lasted until 2004, and in 2011, she married Humphries in a heavily hyped wedding that was televised in a two-part special on "Keeping Up With the Kardashians."

She filed for divorce less than three months later, though was still legally married in 2012 when she and West, a friend for years who had paid tribute to

her in his songs, became a couple, and she became pregnant.

Since the Humphries divorce, Kardashian has retained the services of perhaps the best-known divorce attorney in the country, Laura Wasser, dubbed the "Disso Queen" after representing clients that include Angelina Jolie, Johnny Depp and Britney Spears. Wasser filed the divorce Friday in Los Angeles Superior Court. It was first reported by celebrity website TMZ.

Kardashian is a Los Angeles-area lifer, but West is from Chicago and spends much of his time, including many of the latter months of the marriage, at his ranch in Wyoming, and has said he wants his kids with him there.

Their four children are all 7 or under: North, age 7, Saint, age 5, Chicago, age 3, and Psalm, 21 months old.

Both Kardashian and West have parlayed their initial fame — his for being a sought-after hip-hop producer and the rapper behind "Stronger" and "Gold Digger," hers for becoming a reality TV star on a par with a movie star — into bigger endeavors, and have amassed considerable wealth with it.

West's Yeezy fashion line, with its pricey clothing and coveted Adidas sneakers, has become as much part of his life and persona and his music. Kardashian went from famous socialite to major businesswoman, with mobile apps and games in her name, along with beauty products and clothes.

West has 30 million followers on Twitter, Kardashian has nearly 200 million on Instagram. Both are among the most posted-about people in the history of social media. West was a vocal Donald Trump supporter who became a minor candidate for president last year; he ended up having little effect on the election. Kardashian has taken preliminary steps toward becoming a lawyer after devoting herself increasingly to freeing the unjustly imprisoned, which had led to meetings with Trump.

While their marriage was extremely high profile in some ways as two experts

in self-promotion became a team, the two did not appear together in public all that frequently. And the inner workings of their marriage were usually a well-guarded secret that took years to spill out into public view. On "Keeping Up with the Kardashians," West appeared only occasionally, mostly serving as an oft-discussed off-screen character, and unlike other Kardashian couplings, viewers didn't see even made-for-TV versions of fights or especially tender moments.

They had more than their share of globe-trotting, scene-making and controversy-stirring moments however, from a trip to Jerusalem for North's baptism, to fashion weeks around the world including one in Paris where Kardashian was bound and robbed, to West's years-long feud with Taylor Swift, which Kardashian got sucked into.

But their careers did not have much overlap, and they spent much of their married time far apart. And her carefully curated persona stood in contrast to his erratic public moments that often resulted in wild statements and over-sharing tweet storms.

In one of these, since deleted, in July 2020, West said he had been trying to divorce Kardashian, that her mother Kris Jenner was a tyrant and that the family was trying to force him into psychiatric treatment.

Kardashian responded with a statement on Instagram, urging people to have compassion for West as he struggled with mental illness.

"He is a brilliant but complicated person who on top of the pressures of being an artist and a black man, who experienced the painful loss of his mother, and has to deal with that pressure and isolation that is heightened by his bi-polar disorder," Kardashian said. "Those who are close with Kanye know his heart and understand his words some times do not align with his intentions."

West has not tweeted since election night. Kardashian was silent Friday on social media.

Hugh Jackman's 'Reminiscence' to release in September

LOS ANGELES, FEB 20 (PTI): Hugh Jackman-starrer sci-fi thriller "Reminiscence" will make its debut in US theatres and on streamer HBO Max on September 3 this year.

The movie, which also features Rebecca Ferguson, Thandie Newton and Cliff Curtis, marks the feature directorial debut of "Westworld" co-creator Lisa Joy. Jackman, known for movies such as "X-Men" series, "The Prestige", "The Greatest Showman" and "Prisoners", shared the news in a post on Twitter on Friday.

"You're going on a journey through memory. All you have to do is follow my voice. #Reminiscence, in US theatres and streaming starting 9.3.21. (Internationally in theatres starting 8.25.21). @hbomax @wbpictures" he tweeted.

The story is about Nicolas Bannister (Jackman), a rugged and solitary veteran living in a near-future Miami flooded by rising seas. He is an expert in a dangerous occupation: he offers clients the chance to relive any memory they

desire. "His life changes when he meets Mae. What begins as a simple matter of lost and found becomes a passionate love affair.

"But when a different client's memo-



ries implicate Mae in a series of violent crimes, Bannister must delve through the dark world of the past to uncover the truth about the woman he fell for," the official plotline read.

The movie's cast also include Marina de Tavora, Daniel Wu, Mo'Nique, Brett Cullen, Natalie Martinez, Angela Sarafyan and Nico Parker.

"Reminiscence" has been produced by Jonathan Nolan, Michael De Luca and Aaron Ryder.

Kim Kardashian files for divorce from Kanye West

LOS ANGELES, FEB 20 (PTI): Reality TV star Kim Kardashian has filed for divorce from rapper Kanye West after almost seven years of marriage.

According to People magazine, the duo parted ways on an amicable note.

Kardashian filed the papers at the Los Angeles County Superior Court's Stanley Mosk Courthouse on Friday.

The 40-year-old entrepreneur, and West, 43, have applied for joint custody of their four children -- daughters North (seven) and Chicago (two); and sons Saint (five) and Psalm (one).

The duo started dating in 2012 and had their first child in 2013.

Later that year, West proposed to Kardashian using the giant screen at the empty waterfront ballpark of the San Francisco Giants. They tied the knot on May 24, 2014, in a ceremony at a Renaissance fortress in Florence, Italy.

It was the first marriage for the West and third for Kardashian.

The reality star was previously married to music producer Damon Thomas and to former NBA player Kris Humphries.

Aries:

Not all of us are fortunate enough to have a mentor who provides us with the right guidance and holds space for us to realise our highest potential. Recognise that what you have is truly a gift, Aries. Honour this connection in the way that it is meant to be. Trust that you are on the right track at this point of time in your life. Issues related to finances could be a concern for some of you, though. If you're unhappy with how much you're making, it's a good idea to talk to your boss about how you would like to be compensated.

Tip: Have that conversation about money you have been avoiding.

Taurus:

Strangers would say you're a manifestation maven, but you understand that everything works in accordance with the law of attraction; that the Universe responds to what we say and how we feel by sending you way certain experiences. Look around you, Taurus! Your life is a testimony to your co-creating abilities. So, continue to send them good vibes into the cosmos and watch the miracles unfold. PS: You are deserving of the love and abundance you are calling in right now.

Tip: Good vibes.

Gemini:

We all have an idea of how the people in our lives should and shouldn't be. Ideas that contribute to the burden of our expectations. Today, you're being asked to collect all of these expectations in a metaphorical box and offer them to the sacred fire. Once you have completed your ritual, approach your relationships from a space of love, compassion, and surrender. Be your most authentic self in every moment as you hold space for others to do just the same. Trust that the most challenging relationships will transform in the process.

Tip: Release the burden of expectations.

Cancer:

That life on the earthly realm is synonymous with suffering is not news to you, Cancer. But, how long are you going to hold onto the 'bad things happen to me' narrative? Today the cards are urging you to loosen up a little. To laugh and to be silly. What if tapping into your playful side is the secret to bringing about a magnificent shift?

Tip: Loosen up and be silly.

Leo:

Matters of the heart are taking centre stage, Leo. Your tribe is showing up for you in a whole new way. Allow yourself to feel the love, knowing that you deserve every bit of the goodness you have attracted into your Universe. Life may not be perfect, but it is flawless in

every way and you know that you'll get through this. On a side note, some of you may find yourself in a third party situation in the coming days. What you will realise in the process of dropping your inhibitions: we all need a little bit of salt in our relationships.

Tip: A third party situation could be on the cards.

Virgo:

Self-help author Stephen Richards writes, "No matter how small you start, always dream big." Just the words of wisdom you need to reflect upon. Today is a new day, Virgo. So take this opportunity to get up and show up for your dreams in a way you never have before. Remember, the mysterious forces are supporting this journey, and that everything you need in order to succeed will be provided to you at the right moment.

Tip: It's time to get up and show up, beloved.

Libra:

This is a wonderful time for Librans who are working in the field of publishing. You are experiencing a surge of new ideas, ideas that could change the course of your work for the better. So, curate a distraction-free environment for yourself as you become present to what's coming through from the unseen realms. A certain amount of discipline is required from you at this point.

Tip: Be present to the ideas that are coming through from

the unseen realms.

Scorpio:

What you're feeling right now is a sense of saturation, which isn't allowing you to think clearly. You need to step away from what you have been creating, right this minute. That's the only way to gain perspective. Some of you may be yearning to reconnect with yourselves. Word for the wise: throw that to-do list away for a while and focus on activities that help raise your vibrations.

Tip: Step away from what you are creating in order to gain perspective.

Sagittarius:

So what if you have been broken and bruised? So what if you have failed many times before? Beware of making this failure a part of your narrative, Sagittarius. The cards want you to fix your gaze on the given destination as you vow to move forward and onwards. You have mountains to move on this journey, and the time to start taking action is now.

Tip: Failure doesn't define you. Your will to move forward and onwards does.

Capricorn:

This is a beautiful time in the Capricorn HQ. You are not where you envisioned you would be, but you are on your way there. The destination requires a few sacrifices

from you, and that's okay. What you are focusing on right now is making practical decisions and putting your coins away. There's a big dream that will require financial investment on your part. It's best to be mindful of it at every stage.

Tip: Focus on putting your coins away for the future.

Aquarius:

A painful ending could be on the cards for some of you. Others could be mourning the loss of something or nursing a broken heart. Given the chaos that has unfolded recently, the old you would have lost all hope. But, the new you is embracing the virtues of optimism and realising the higher reason behind the seemingly unrelated events in your life. PS: Your guides are with you and their support will help you get through this.

Tip: Everything does indeed happen for a reason.

Pisces:

They say there are always three sides to every story: yours, theirs and the truth. So, don't get caught up in the illusion created by your ego self. Be receptive to what the others have to say as you actively work towards finding a middle ground. If you're playing mediator, practice deep listening. Make both sides feel seen and heard. As far as your decision is concerned, make sure it comes from a neutral space.

Tip: Focus on finding a middle ground.