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NEARBY



Unpaid bill lands Navjot Sidhu in controversy
Former Punjab Cabinet Minister Navjot Singh Sidhu landed in the thick of a controversy over an unpaid electricity bill of over ₹8 lakh for his Amritsar residence. The Congress MLA invited criticism from several quarters over the power dues.

BJP claims sweep in U.P. panchayat chief polls
The BJP on Saturday claimed to have swept the elections to the posts of district panchayat chief even as the Samajwadi Party alleged that the ruling party used "force" to stop people from voting.

Police find 4th body in Tripura lynching case
The death toll in the mob lynching incident in Kharsai district on June 20 has risen to four with the recovery of the body of a missing youth. The police said the body of Salim Hussain was found buried in a wooded area in North Mahantpur on Saturday afternoon.

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'Covaxin demonstrated 77.8% efficacy against symptomatic COVID-19'

Two-dose vaccine is 93.4% effective against severe disease, and also offers 65% protection against the Delta variant, says Bharat Biotech

JAIKIR KUMAR
NEW DELHI
Hyderabad-based Bharat Biotech India Ltd. on Saturday published the long-awaited results of the Phase-3 trial of Covaxin that involved nearly 25,800 volunteers spanning 25 hospitals across the country. Along with partner scientists at the Indian Council of Medical Research, the company said the vaccine had an overall efficacy of 77.8% against symptomatic COVID-19.

This is higher than the overall 70.4% efficacy reported from the Phase-3 trial results of the AstraZeneca (Covishield) vaccine published in Lancet in January. The two-dose Covaxin was also 93.4% effective against severe disease and 65% protective against asymptomatic COVID-19. Moreover, it was 65% protective against the Delta variant of the coronavirus, the most widespread in India and linked to a rising number of cases in Europe as well as the United States. The pre-trial revealed that in those 60 years and older, the vaccine was 67.8%

effective and 79.4% effective in younger people. "Safety analysis demonstrates adverse events reported were similar to placebo (for those who got a dummy dose), with 12% of subjects experiencing commonly known side-effects and less than 0.5% of subjects feeling serious adverse events," the company said in a statement. Medical professionals welcomed the results. "These results give all of us a lot of reassurance that Covaxin is an excellent option to prevent COVID-19 in India," tweeted Vincent Rajkumar, Professor, Mayo Clinic. S.P. Kalantri, Director and Professor of Medicine, Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences, Wardha, said the pre-trial was rich in detail and, on preliminary reading, revealed a trial that was "well-conducted" and presented people with an informed choice on the vaccine's efficacy.

Report card | Covaxin had an overall efficacy of 77.8% against symptomatic COVID-19 in the Phase-3 trial, according to a study by Bharat Biotech and the ICMR. The study is yet to be peer-reviewed.

Criteria	Vaccine efficacy
Symptomatic COVID-19	77.8%
Severe symptomatic COVID-19	93.4%
Symptomatic in participants 18-59 years	79.4%
Symptomatic in participants ≥ 60 years	63.8%
Symptomatic COVID-19 in participants with a pre-existing medical condition	66.2%
Asymptomatic COVID-19	63.6%
Symptomatic and asymptomatic COVID-19	66.8%

French judge to probe Rafale deal

Suspicion of 'corruption' raised in the €7.8 bn sale

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE
PARIS
A French judge has been tasked with investigating the controversial 2016 multi-billion-dollar sale of Rafale fighter jets to India on "corruption" suspicions, the national financial prosecutors' office (PNF) said on Friday. The decision once again puts the spotlight on the role of the Audit Amisani-headed Reliance Group which is an offset partner to Dassault Aviation, manufacturer of the Rafale, in the €7.8-billion deal. According to French in-

vestigative website Mediapart, the judicial investigation was formally opened into the Inter-Governmental Agreement on June 14 following a decision by the financial crimes branch of PNF. The deal has faced several questions in the past pertaining to allegations of corruption, favouritism and de-

cheques, and it needed to be thoroughly investigated in national interest. He added that former party president Rahul Gandhi who had flagged corruption in the aircraft deal stood vindicated. **BY IANS**

Pushkar Dhama to be next Uttarakhand CM

Two-time MLA from Khatima elected by BJP legislators

NISHTHA HERBANI
NEW DELHI
Pushkar Singh Dhama, a two-term MLA from Khatima, will be the new Chief Minister of Uttarakhand. He was elected by the BJP Legislature Party as its leader on Saturday, following the resignation of Tirath Singh Rawat late on Friday. Mr. Rawat quit citing constitutional reasons, of not seeing his way clear to getting elected as a member of the Assembly in Uttarakhand within the stipulated six-month period. He continues to be a Lok Sabha member from the State.



New CM Pushkar Dhama, centre, with former CM T.S. Rawat, left, and State BJP chief Madan Kaushik. **PHOTO: ANANDKANT**

Chock-a-block



After the mayhem: Tourists visiting Mall Road in Manali on Saturday after the Himachal Pradesh government relaxed COVID-19 restrictions in the State. **PHOTO: ANANDKANT**

After 26 years, Kerala bus driver gets relief from SC

REKSHA NIKHIL
NEW DELHI
A bus driver who fought a six-month prison term for rash driving for 26 years was let off by the Supreme Court with a ₹2,000 fine. A Bench, led by Justice Ashok Bhushan, agreed with Sundaran, a native of Kozhikode district of Kerala, that sending him to jail now would only leave his wife and four children in penury. "Looking to the facts and circumstances of the present case specially the fact that 26 years have elapsed from the incident, we are inclined to substitute the sentence of six months imprisonment," Justice Bhushan held in a recent judgment. The court directed Sundaran, represented by advocate P.A. Noor Mohamed, to pay the fine within a month. Trouble began for Sundaran when his bus hit a car, injuring its driver, in February 1995. Four years later, in 1999, the local magistrate sentenced him to six months of imprisonment and a fine of ₹500. The sessions court dismissed Sundaran's appeal in 2003. The High Court too did not find any reason to interfere with the verdict in 2015. He appealed to the top court, which issued notice in August 2016.

'Constitutional crisis'

"Given the constitutional crisis, I felt it was right for me to resign. Bypolls could not be held because of COVID-19," Mr. Rawat said in a brief statement on Friday. Union Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar and BJP general secretary D. Purandashwari were the central observers who supervised the election of the new leader at a meeting at the Bijnor guest house in Dehradun on Saturday afternoon. Mr. Dhama, 45, has been associated with the BJP since he entered student politics and has twice been head of Uttarakhand's Bharatiya Janata Yuva Manch (BJYM), the youth wing of the BJP. Working his way up the party hierarchy in the State, he has been State general secretary and party vice-president. A practising advocate, Mr. Dhama also holds a post-graduate degree in management and public administration from Lucknow University. He has been closely associated with former Chief Minister and current Maha-

Yediyurappa writes to Stalin on Mokedatu

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
BANGALORE
Karnataka Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa has written to his Tamil Nadu counterpart, M.K. Stalin, urging him not to oppose the Mokedatu project in Ramnagar district and suggested a bilateral meeting to discuss each other's apprehensions. In an effort to resolve differences over the long-pending balancing reservoir-cum-drinking water project, Mr. Yediyurappa said the project would "immensely benefit both States," and not adversely affect farmers in Tamil Nadu.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

Rajasthan 'excess deaths' 5 times official toll

Undercount factor in the State is lower than MP's 23.8
SHINYASANI RAMANI
CHENNAI
The number of "excess deaths" registered by the Civil Registration System (CRS) in Rajasthan over since the COVID-19 pandemic hit (from April 2020 to May 2021) was 45,088, which is 5.4 times the official reported figure of 8,385 deaths for the same period. This high number was largely due to the deaths registered in April 2021 (26,251) and May 2021 (19,046). In this period, which coincided with the second COVID-19 wave, the excess deaths were around 39,438, compared with the registered COVID-19 tally of 5,567, leading to an undercount factor of 7.1. The overall COVID-19 tally in Rajasthan so

Moderate undercount
Rajasthan's estimated undercount factor for COVID-19 deaths was comparable to that of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka and lower than MP, and A.P.

State	Excess deaths*	COVID-19 deaths	Multiple†
Rajasthan	45,088	8,385	5.4
Tamil Nadu**	1,54,965	35,087	4.4
Tamil Nadu*	1,54,965	26,232	6.4
Karnataka	1,25,732	29,090	4.3
Goa††	4,179	9,954	0.4
A.P.‡	1,95,422	10,000	19.5
M.P.‡‡	1,92,054	8,068	23.8

* Baseline mortality: Average of 2018 and 2019 figures
† Reported COVID-19 death toll released by State
** Reconfirmed COVID-19 death toll mentioned by State CRS
‡ Based on State's official COVID-19 toll
‡‡ Data accessed by Scroll
‡‡‡ Statistics using other methods are available in the online article

far, as of July 2, is 8,970. Excess deaths in Rajasthan were calculated based on the month-wise number of deaths registered in the Rajasthan Civil Registration System (Gehchan portal) from January 2018 to May 2021, which was accessed by The Hindu. It was ensured that the data analysed did not include duplicate records (-1,100) names out of 7.92 lakh deaths from 2018 to 2020). Not all "excess deaths" would be related to COVID-19 but a bulk of them are, during the pandemic. The undercount factor (5.4) and excess deaths for Rajasthan (45,088) were lower than those for Madhya Pradesh (23.8 and 1,92,044) in the same period and for which complete data have been made available so far. Excess deaths have also been estimated for Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Gujarat but these figures are only partial, either for some districts (UP) or for a limited period (Bihar and Gujarat). According to the CRS report for 2019, Rajasthan registered an estimated 98.6% of all deaths in the State, and thanks to the Gehchan system, they are registered online as well.

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PPAs already under review: Amarinder

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT CHANDIGARH

Amid the ongoing power crisis in Punjab, Chief Minister Amarinder Singh on Saturday said the power purchase agreements signed by the previous SAD-BJP government were already under review and his government would soon announce its legal strategy to counter the PPAs.

The Chief Minister, who chaired a meeting to review the power situation, said a carefully charted legal course of action was being formulated to save the State from further financial losses. Of the 139 PPAs signed during the SAD-BJP government, 17 were enough to cater to the State's full power demand, he said. He added the remaining were inexplicably signed.

Water cannons used at AAP rally

The protesters were planning to gherao Punjab CM's residence over power crisis

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT CHANDIGARH

The Punjab Police on Saturday resorted to use of water cannons to disperse the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) leaders and workers as they marched to 'gherao' the residence of Chief Minister Amarinder Singh at Sivan in Mohali over the ongoing power crisis in the State.

'Resolve crisis' The protest, led by State AAP chief Bhagwant Mann, were staging the protest against the long and unresolvable power crisis and want to meet the Chief Minister and submit a memorandum, demanding resolution of the crisis.

As they marched towards the CM's residence, they were stopped at the barricades by the police using



Police using water cannons on AAP protesters on the outskirts of Chandigarh on Saturday.

water cannons. The police said the protesters attempted to jump over the barricades.

Mr. Mann, addressing a gathering, said AAP volunteers have come to wake up the Congress government from its slumber. "The people of Punjab are paying the most expensive electricity in the country at ₹10 per unit, but they are not getting it. Instead, they have to leave their homes in the heat and paddy sowing in the fields and hold strikes," he said.

Mr. Mann said the power purchase agreements signed by the previous SAD-BJP government with private thermal plants and their non-compliance by the Congress government is the key reason behind the power crisis.

Cong., SAD blamed AAP senior leader and Leader of the Opposition in the Assembly Harpal Singh Cheema said due to the faulty PPAs, the State exchequer was being looted by the private power companies and the Congress and the Shiromani Akali Dal are both to be blamed for this. Mr. Cheema said the Congress has failed to keep its election promises of 2017. "Even today, the people of Punjab are suffering due to expensive sand, gravel, electricity, petrol and diesel," he said.

6 injured in custody in Assam in two months

Many have gunshot wounds in the leg

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT DISPUR

At least six alleged criminals received gunshot wounds since May 10 while "trying to flee" from police custody in Assam.

This period also saw 11 others, including nine claimed to be extremists, killed in encounters with the armed forces across the State.

The injured - most were shot in the leg - were two cattle smugglers, a policeman allegedly involved in case of abduction, a 62-year-old arrested for rape and murder of a minor girl, a doctor and a drug peddler. A seventh wanted in the rape and murder of two sisters in western Assam's Kokrajhar district was shot in the leg when he tried to "resist arrest and flee".

On Friday night, the police shot and injured an alleged cattle smuggler in Kokrajhar district. "He tried to flee after snatching the pistol of a police officer," the district's Superintendent of Police Thibe Prateek Vijaykumar said.

Drive against crime The encounters and custodial injuries are believed to be the outcome of a drive against organised crime - drug trafficking, smuggling of cattle and forest resources - and extortion after the Himanta Biswa Sarma took charge as the Chief Minister on May 10.

Barring the incident on Friday night, Assam's Special Director General of Police, G.P. Singh, outlined the failed attempts of the five accused to flee.

Police find 4th body in Tripura lynching case

BYED SAJJAD ALI AGARTTA

The death toll in the mob lynching incident in Khowai district on June 20 morning has risen to four with the recovery of the body of a missing youth. The police said the body of Sufim Hussain was found buried in a wooded area in North Maharanipur on Saturday afternoon.

"We have exhumed the body and sent it to for post-mortem," a Khowai district police officer said.

The body was found on basis of the confession of the accused persons, he said. The police has arrested three men as the investigation progressed. Sources said the police swung into action after the State government asked the police to act tough against the accused.

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FROM PAGE ONE

'Covaxin demonstrated 77.8% efficacy'

"The true test of a vaccine is whether it protects from hospitalisation and death. The reported 93.3% is very good, and protection in those over 60 as well as against the Delta variant, too, are encouraging," Dr Kalanti stated. He, however, cautioned that it would be unwise to speculate if Covishield or Covaxin was superior to the other as these were variations in the conduct of the trial.

Prityo Abhinav, Director, ICMR/National Institute of Virology, said in a statement, "The overall efficacy is wonderful news. ICMR-NIV and DRIL have had very

fruitful interactions during this exhilarating journey. Sera [from blood samples] have also been evaluated against viral variants detected in India i.e., the Alpha, Beta, Zeta, Kappa and Delta. The making of this vaccine entirely on Indian soil is a matter of great pride to every Indian."

NIV was among the partner labs involved in the manufacture of Covishield and cultured the strain of the virus that was used to design the vaccine.

Bharat Biotech began recruiting volunteers in November 2020 and completed the exercise in January.

French judge to probe Rafale deal

In April, Mediapart claimed that "millions of euros of hidden commissions" were given to a go-between who helped Dassault conclude the sale, of which "some... could have been given as bribes" to Indian officials.

Dassault refuted that no wrong-doing was flagged in the group's audits.

After the reports, France's Sherpa NGO, which specialises in financial crime, filed an official complaint for "corruption" and "influence peddling" among other accusations, prompting an investigating magistrate to be designated to probe the deal.

Documents seen by Mediapart show that Dassault and Reliance had in fact signed their first MoU - a document setting out broad outlines of an agreement - on March 26, 2015. That was 15 days before Mr. Modi's announcement of the turn-around, and the exclusion of Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL), and begs the question as to whether the two companies had been informed of it in advance," the report states. The MoU which was signed at a time when Dassault was still in talks with HAL under the earlier deal, was for a possible joint venture between the two companies.

Following the deal, Dassault and Reliance created a joint venture (JV) in 2017 Dassault Reliance Aerospace Limited (DRAL) for discharging the offsets. Revealing the details of the partnership, the report, citing documents accessed, states that Dassault provided Reliance "with remarkably generous financial terms for the establishment of their JV."

Stating that ordinarily partners in a jointly owned subsidiary would provide equal funds for its capital. But that was not the case with DRAL. "The two partners agreed a maximum investment in the subsidiary of 169 million euros. Of that sum, Dassault, which held a 40% stake in DRAL, pledged to provide up to 150 million euros, representing 94% of the total, while Reliance would provide just the remaining 20 million."

While Reliance brought neither funds nor knowledge of any significance to the joint venture, it did bring its capacity for political influence.

In an extract from one of the documents obtained by Mediapart detailing the agreements between Reliance and Dassault, Anil Ambani's group was lauded the mission of "marketing for programs and services with the GDP - the acronym for 'government of India', the report added.

Sherpa had already asked for an investigation into the deal in 2008, but the IMF took no action. In this first complaint, the NGO had denounced the fact that Dassault chose Reliance Group as its Indian partner, a conglomerate headed by billionaire Anil Ambani, who is close to Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Pushkar Dhama to be next Uttarakhand CM

"Pushkar Dhama is a second term MLA from Khatima, in Uthman Singh Nagar, and he is from Pithoragarh. He has been at the helm of several agitations by farmers against then Congress-led governments and is considered to be very close to former Chief Minister Bhagat Singh Koshtiyari," said a senior party leader. Mr. Tomar, after the conclusion of the Legislature Party meet, said no other name had

been proposed and Mr. Dhama's election was unanimous. Former Chief Minister Tirath Singh Rawat was also present at the meeting.

"My party has appointed a common worker, son of an ex-serviceman, who was born in Pithoragarh to serve the State. We will work together for people's welfare. We accept the challenge of serving people with everyone's help, in a short time span," Mr. Dhama said.

Yediyurappa writes to Stalin on Mekedatu

"It would be in the interest of all concerned and to have a better relationship between the State of Karnataka and State of Tamil Nadu, if the Tamil Nadu government in the right spirit would not oppose implementation of the project," he said in the letter dated July 2.

He further said, "In order to address issues, if any, it is suggested that a bilateral meeting could also be held in the presence of officials concerned to clear all apprehensions."

On the status of the project, Mr. Yediyurappa said while Tamil Nadu has filed a

Miscellaneous Application in the Supreme Court against the project, Karnataka has sought approval from the Centre for Terms of Reference to conduct an Environmental Impact Assessment. He pointed to several projects planned by Tamil Nadu, including two hydro-power projects and some in the main river below Mettur, and said, "The government of Tamil Nadu has neither entered into any kind of negotiations nor secured consent from the Government of Karnataka for the above projects in the Cauvery basin."

After Tirath, Mamata faces tight deadline

She needs to get elected to the Assembly and has repeatedly urged the EC to hold bypolls to 7 seats

SREY SAHAY SINGH
BAMINI NATH
NEW DELHI

The resignation of Uttarakhand Chief Minister Tirath Singh Rawat as he could not get elected to the State Assembly within the six-month deadline has put the spotlight on West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and the pending byelection to certain Assembly seats in the State.



In a fix: Mamata Banerjee was hoping to get elected from the Bhowanipur Assembly seat, her home constituency.

Ms. Banerjee faces a similar situation, with her party winning the 2020 West Bengal Assembly election with a massive mandate for the third time, though she lost the Nandigram seat by a narrow margin of 1,996 votes.

Ms. Banerjee was sworn in as the Chief Minister for the third consecutive time on May 5. She was hoping to get elected from the Bhowanipur Assembly seat, her home constituency. To facilitate the byelection, Minister

Sobhandeb Chattopadhyay resigned from the seat on May 21.

Byelection to seven Assembly seats - Bhowanipur, Shamoharjan and Sui in Murshidabad, where contesting candidates died before the polls could be held, Santipur and Disha, where the elected BJP MPs (Jaganath Sarkar and Ninth Pr-

manik) did not take the oath as MLAs, and Khurdah and Gouda where successful candidates died after the polls were held - is due in the State.

Ms. Banerjee, on several occasions in the past few days, demanded that the Election Commission (EC) announce the dates for the bypolls to these seats. She al-

so took a swipe at the EC, saying that constitutional body might be waiting for the Prime Minister's nod. "I will appeal to the Prime Minister to allow the bypolls to be held in West Bengal," she had said.

Sources in the EC, however, said the matter of holding bypolls to the vacant Assembly seats across the country had not been decided yet and that the COVID-19 situation would be assessed first.

The Chief Minister has argued that the COVID-19 situation had improved since the eight-phase Assembly election and there was no hindrance for holding the bypolls to these seats.

That the events in Uttarakhand would have a ripple effect in West Bengal became evident when hours after Mr. Rawat resigned, Trinamool Congress leader Sukhendu Sekhar Roy cited an instance

on how it was not necessary for a Chief Minister to contest and win the Assembly election. Mr. Roy told presspersons that in 1972, West Bengal Chief Minister Siddhaiah Shankar Ray did not contest the election and was elected within six months of the polls from a constituency in Malda.

On the other hand, the Chief Minister had ruled out holding the civic polls in the State, which have been pending for over a year.

Top officials of the West Bengal government said the EC wanted to hold elections to the two Rajya Sabha seats vacated by Dinanath Treivedi and Manas Ranjan Bhunia, and had written to the officials in this regard. Elections to the Rajya Sabha require only MLAs to cast their vote. The State government, however, was insisting that the Assembly bypolls be the priority.

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
CHENNAI

Former Punjab Cabinet Minister and Congress MLA Navjot Singh Sidhu landed himself in the thick of a controversy over an unpaid electricity bill of over 18 lakh for his Amritsar residence.

Mr. Sidhu found himself on the back foot on Friday when, in a series of tweets, he advised Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh to resolve the ongoing "power crises" in the State. However, he invited criticism from several quarters after it came to light that he himself was one of the State's biggest individual defaulters in electricity dues.

A day after the controversy erupted, Mr. Sidhu's wife, Navjot Kaur, on Saturday came out to close the lid.

Asserting that there was nothing wrong, Ms. Kaur, in a video message, said an unnecessary controversy was being raked up, adding that an appeal surrounding the "higher" amount of the electricity bill was being taken up with the Punjab State Power Corporation Limited (PSPCL), and whatever the billed amount, it would surely be paid.

"The point is not about not paying the electricity bill. The issue was why the power bill was of a near similar amount in both the summer and the winter as air conditioners were not used in the winter, but the bill was on the higher side. So, an appeal was submitted with the Department to look into the issue... Also, the Department has accepted the appeal, and whatever the amount that is unpaid, it will be paid," Ms. Kaur said.

Mr. Sidhu has an outstanding electricity bill of INR 18,74,784 for his residence in Amritsar till July 2, which was the last date for paying the bill. An PSPCL official said Mr. Sidhu had owed INR 62,742 to PSPCL in March 2021 and later, when a special recovery drive was started, Mr. Sidhu had paid INR 10 lakh. However, an amount of INR 18,74,784 was still pending against his account.

BJP has given Uttarakhand a long list of ex-CMs: Cong.

BJP has not delivered on promises made to voters, it alleges

ROBHANA K. SAIB
NEW DELHI

The BJP, instead of delivering on its tall promises made to the Uttarakhand voters, has given the State a long list of former Chief Ministers, the Congress said on Saturday, a day after Chief Minister Tirath Singh Rawat resigned, cutting short his four-month-long tenure. The State now awaits the third BJP Chief Minister since the 2017 election.

The Congress also questioned if the BJP was sacrificing Uttarakhand in an attempt to fix Trinamool Congress leader and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee.

Ms. Banerjee also faces a similar predicament as Mr. Rawat's. She lost the Nandigram seat to Trinamool rebel Savendra Adhikari in the poll and, to retain the Chief Minister's post, she has to get a berth in the Assembly within six months.



Harish Rawat

the people of Devbhoomi (holy land) of Uttarakhand, Mr. Harish Rawat said.

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi promised a double-engine government to the State, with the BJP in power in Dehradun and Delhi. But instead, what we got was a long list of former Chief Ministers," he said.

The BJP had ruled the State for two terms now. There have been eight Chief Ministers in those two terms, he pointed out.

Congress general secretary (communications) Randeep Surjewalia asked how the BJP, if it could not even pick its chief ministerial candidate, could administer the State or the nation.

Mr. Mahra said the target was not Mr. Tirath Singh Rawat. "The target here is Mamata Banerjee. Prime Minister Narendra Modi could not tolerate the way she challenged him and won the West Bengal poll," he said.

Why did Tirath Singh Rawat have to resign?

No bypoll possible at this juncture

BAMINI NATH
NEW DELHI

With the six-month window for him to get elected to the Assembly closing, Uttarakhand Chief Minister Tirath Singh Rawat put in his papers on July 2.

Also, the Election Commission (EC) is yet to take a call on holding bypolls to vacant Assembly seats, which would have given Mr. Rawat a way to carry on as Chief Minister.

EXPLAINER

Mr. Rawat took over as Chief Minister on March 10, after being chosen by the BJP. As per the Constitution, he had six months, till September 10, to become a member of the Uttarakhand Assembly in order to continue in the post.

According to top EC officials, the Commission had not yet decided on holding the bypolls to various Rajya Sabha and Assembly seats that are vacant across the country. The EC had to ex-

amine the COVID-19 situation in the States before taking a call, a source said.

After the West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Assam and Puducherry elections were concluded in May, the EC decided to defer the bypolls for Parliamentary and Assembly seats due to the pandemic.

The source added that the matter of the pending Rajya Sabha bypolls would be decided first, with the EC reaching out to the States to assess the situation.

At the same time, the representation of the People Act, 1951, mandates that a bypoll for any vacancy should be held within six months of that vacancy arising, provided the remainder of the term is not less than one year or the EC and the Centre do not certify that holding the bypoll in that time frame is difficult.

With the Uttarakhand Assembly term till March 23, 2022, the Assembly election in the State is less than a year away.

Rising prices



In protest: Youth Congress members staging a protest in New Delhi on Saturday against the rising prices of LPG, petrol and diesel.

Stan Swamy challenges validity of UAPA Section

Jesuit priest says provision creates a hurdle for an accused to be granted bail

SONAM SAIGAL
MUMBAI

Father Stan Swamy, an accused in the Bhima Koregaon caste violence, has filed a fresh criminal petition before the Bombay High Court challenging the constitutional validity of Section 43(2)(b) of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). It created a hurdle for an accused to get bail, he said.

Fr. Swamy, 84, is currently

being treated in a private hospital.

Section 43(2)(b) says, "No person accused of an offence punishable under Chapters IV [punishment for terrorist activities] and VI [forfeiture of proceeds of terrorism or any property intended to be used for terrorism] of this Act shall, if in custody, be released on bail or on his own bond."

The petition stated, "The

section creates an insurmountable hurdle for any accused to be granted bail under the provisions of UAPA."

"Violating rights" Fr. Swamy, through his lawyer, had also challenged the use of "frontal organisations" by the authorities to oppose the bail application "arbitrarily and also violating the fundamental rights under Article 14

[Equality under the law] and 21 [Right to Life] under the Constitution".

The Jesuit priest was shifted to the private hospital from the Taloja Central Jail on May 29 after being decreed by the Bombay High Court. He was arrested from Ranchi on October 9 last year and charged under several Sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and the UAPA.

ED conducts searches in mass conversion case

Searches conducted at six locations

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) on Saturday conducted searches at six locations in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh in connection with an alleged mass conversion case against Mohammad Umar Gaam and others.

The searches were carried out at Badli House in Delhi and Sant Kabir Nagar and Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA).

The premises included the office of Mr. Umar Gaam's organisation, Islamic Dawah Centre, and his house and the residence of his associate, Mufti Qazi Jahanqar Qasbi, in Delhi.

The offices of the Al-Husain Education and Welfare Foundation and the Guidance Education and Welfare Society in Lucknow and Sant Kabir Nagar were also searched.



The searches were carried out in Delhi and U.P. under the PMLA.

"Several incriminating documents have been seized during the searches. They reveal large-scale conversions carried out by accused Umar Gaam and his organisations all over India. The documents also reveal the receipt of foreign funding running into several crores by these organisations for the purpose of illegal conversions," the ED said.

Its probe is based on one of the two cases registered by the Uttar Pradesh Police's Anti-Terror Squad (ATS), involving Mr. Umar Gaam, the Islamic Dawah Centre, Mr. Qasbi and others, under various provisions of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance, 2020.

Last month, in the first case, the ATS arrested Mr. Umar Gaam and Mr. Qasbi from Delhi. The police alleged that about 1,000 persons were converted and many of them were married to Muslims.

Mr. Umar Gaam was tied to the mass conversion of non-Muslims, especially annually challenged students, women, children and persons from weaker and vulnerable sections, they added. It was also alleged that Mr. Qasbi illegally issued conversion and marriage certificates for those converted.

The second police case alleges conversion of a Hindu woman in Shahjahanpur, Uttar Pradesh, before her marriage to a Muslim man.

NEEVA

Challenging the Google way in search

A new search engine is offering 'a private, ad-free experience with only real results', but for a price

ILLUSTRATION BY RAJIV

In Focus

- Neeva was founded by two ex-Googleans, Sridhar Ramaswamy and Vivek Raghunathan. They are both IT alumni
- In March, Neeva, which had earlier raised \$40 million, raised a further \$40 million in funding from Sequoia Capital, Greylock Partners and Inovia
- A few days ago, Neeva made its search engine available for users in the U.S. Those who sign up get three months of free access, after which they have to pay \$4.95 every month

SERILAN KRISHNAMAN

Twenty-three years ago, Sergey Brin and Lawrence Page presented the idea of Google in their research paper, 'The Anatomy of a Large-Scale Hypertextual Web Search Engine', optimistically concluding that "there is a bright future for search". They couldn't have been more prophetic. Google has, over the years, built its massive empire, thanks to the continuing success of its search engine.

It has been so successful that its brand name is synonymous with the word "search", worryingly so for the company. Its rivals have been few and far. And don't forget the commercial success — last year, Google made revenues of over \$100 billion just from its search operation. It is in this Google-dominated universe that new-comer Neeva sees an opportunity. Just a few days ago, Neeva made its search engine available for users in the United States, promising them "a private, ad-free search experience with only real results". Users who sign up get three months of free access, after which they have to pay \$4.95 every month.

There has also been a buzz around Neeva for it being the story of two ex-Googleans, Sridhar Ramaswamy and Vivek Raghunathan, challenging Google in its core business. Mr. Ramaswamy, a former senior vice-president of ads at Google, was part of the team that built Google Search in the early years. Mr. Raghunathan is a former vice-president of monetisation at YouTube. They are both IT alumni.

So, what opportunity did they sense in a marketplace where Google is near-ubiquitous? Mr. Ramaswamy made this clear in his very first blog for Neeva about a year ago.

He wrote: "As the leader of Google's advertising products until 2018, I truly believed in the benefits of an ad-supported search experience... However, I have come to believe that ads detract from a good search experience and have also had many unintended side-effects that have large social consequences." The post was titled, "A new way to search that works just for you."

Neeva's goal to fix the search experience is, therefore, not closely to its ability to build a non-advertising-based business model. This explains its subscription model, a rarity in the business of search engines.

Not the free model

Around the time Google first came into the picture, the question of how best to navigate this mammoth, ever-growing resource called the internet was yet to be resolved. It was still the early years of the internet, and not surprisingly a number of players opted for a course that best mimicked offline offerings, something they were familiar with. These like Yahoo, therefore, chose to build themselves up as portals, where information was organised so as to help users surf the Web. And there were others such as Inktomi and Alta Vista, who focused on helping users search the Web.

Google "entered with a new approach to searching — namely, by ranking web pages on the basis of the number of links to those pages and, eventually, by supporting itself with advertising," says author Shane Greenstein in the book, *How the Internet Became Commercial*. Like many other internet services, search has almost always been free for users. In 2008, it was in explaining this business strategy that Chris Anderson wrote the book *Free*.



Instead of adopting the Google model, which has built an empire, Neeva promises to fix the search experience and seeks to build a subscription model

The Future of a Radical Price.

Neeva isn't going that way. It has come into being at a time when subscription models are much more in vogue in the broad digital world. In an interview to business magazine *Fast Company*, Mr. Ramaswamy says, "I tell people that Neeva is as much a social experiment as it is a technological experiment." He adds, "If there was a high-quality product that clearly benefits you in multiple ways, would you pay for it as

opposed to having it be free, supported by ads?"

Last year, in one of his blog posts, he weighed in on the question of price. He wrote: "We will start at a reasonable price, say the cost of two black coffees a month. We hope that over time, we will be able to reduce the price as we become more efficient. Everything that we take for granted (our computers and phones, even ice cream) started out at a higher price point before scale and innovation made them available to everyone."

New challengers

Neeva isn't alone in seeing an opportunity in search. Just a few days before Neeva's announcement, Brave Browser announced the beta version of its Search tool — "offering users the first independent privacy search/browser alternative to big tech". In recent years, DuckDuckGo has been an alternative that has

emphasised privacy over other things.

Last month, it said, "Spurred by the increase in DuckDuckGo app usage, over the last 12 months, our monthly search traffic increased 55% and we grew to become the #2 search engine on mobile in many countries, including in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and the Netherlands". It further said: "We don't track our users so we can't say for sure how many we have, but based on market share estimates, download numbers, and national surveys, we believe there are between 70-100 million DuckDuckGo users." Tech Crunch reported DuckDuckGo picking up another \$100 million in investment, saying, "Privacy tech continues cooking on gas."

In March this year, Neeva raised a further \$40 million in funding from Sequoia Capital, Greylock Partners and Inovia Capital. They had

raised a similar amount in an earlier round.

This is a very different world compared to the initial years of Google, when it was important to not only improve the search results but also build new features. These years saw new features such as news, shopping, videos, and maps coming in. Privacy has emerged as an important competitive element across many digital product categories.

The world has changed in another way. As David Doty wrote in a *Forbes* article, "People aren't just typing in a search term on whichever main search engine they prefer — they're searching and consuming in context, on YouTube, Netflix, Amazon or Pinterest and increasingly on any of a zillion specialised apps." The point being, the search market is more fragmented than ever. And yet, as a study last year by the Competition and

Markets Authority of the U.K. pointed out, "There is a long history of search providers other than Google and Bing choosing to outsource some or all of their search engine activities." The reference is to them maintaining web indexes. It said, "The main way that they acquire information for their index is through their automated web-crawling bots. These bots follow the links between webpages and bring data about those pages back to the search engine's servers."

The *Fast Company* story says Neeva "has indexed several billion web pages on its own but also credits Apple, Bing, and Yelp at the bottom of search results, other information providers include In-tribe, Weather.com, and Xignite. Even Google is an ingredient, with Google Maps embedded in search results".

The important question now is: will users pay for search?

BILL COSBY

Free from prison

The star comedian's conviction has been overturned over a legal loophole

SERILAN KRISHNAMAN

Bill Cosby (83), the man known as "America's Dad" and famed mega-star of "The Cosby Show", of the 1980s, who then fell spectacularly from grace after being convicted on sexual assault charges after more than 50 women accused him of sexual misconduct, walked free this week after the Pennsylvania Supreme Court overturned his 2018 conviction, owing to a technicality in the trial. His release prompted an outpouring of shock and despair among his accusers and within the #MeToo movement and broader campaigns for justice for victims of sexual assault and harassment, with some describing his overturned conviction as the story of "a rich entitled man who beat the odds through good lawyering".

Cosby was born William Henry Cosby Junior, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on July 12, 1937, one of three children to Navy mess steward William Senior and domestic worker Anne. Although his father abandoned their family while Cosby was still a young child, he went on to have a four-year stint as a Navy medical corpsman, during which time he completed high school and secured an athletic scholarship at Temple University in Philadelphia.

Cosby performed well in sports, yet dropped out of university when his comedy career began its meteoric



uptake. Nevertheless he returned to academia a few years later to finish his BA and then acquire both an MA and a PhD in Education. Cosby started television producer Camille Banks in 1964 and they had six children, of whom one, Ennis, died tragically after being shot in 1997.

While Cosby's career as a comedian began soaring in the late 1950s and early 1960s, including his debut as a stand-up at Philadelphia's The Underground Club and bookings at New York City's prestigious Comedian's Club, he struck gold with his first comedy album, "Bill Cosby Is A Very Funny Fellow, Right?", which received a 1963 Grammy nomination. He went on to win six consecutive Grammys through the decade.

Many allegations

It was from the mid-1960s, spanning 1968 to 2008, and across 10 U.S. States and one Canadian province, that

highly publicised allegations began to surface against him, including of rape, sexual assault facilitated by drugging victims, sexual battery, and other crimes related to sexual misconduct.

Despite the many allegations and accusers that Cosby faced, his conviction ultimately came in the case brought by one accuser, Andrea Constand, director of Operations for the Temple University women's basketball team. Ms. Constand alleged that when she met Cosby at his home in January 2004, he gave her pills on the pretext of reducing her stress, but following that he sexually assaulted her.

Subsequently Ms. Constand filed civil charges against him, yet that case was settled out of court for an unspecified amount in 2006. Nevertheless, in December 2015, Cosby was arraigned on one charge of aggravated indecent assault regarding Ms. Constand's allegations. In April 2018, Cos-

by was found guilty on three counts of felony aggravated indecent assault against Ms. Constand, and then in September of that year, he was sentenced to three to 10 years in State prison.

Cosby managed to get his conviction overturned on June 30, 2021, because of a legal loophole, the fact that in his civil case in 2008, erstwhile District Attorney for Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, Bruce Castor, made a promise that Cosby would not be charged in a criminal case because he had deposed in the civil case brought by Ms. Constand. The Supreme Court last week said the prosecution in 2008 violated Cosby's right against self-incrimination by using statements he made in the civil litigation.

This decision has resulted in a setback for the gains achieved through the #MeToo movement of recent years. Since #MeToo kicked off, Cosby's was the first major criminal conviction, following allegations of sexual assault made against disgraced Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein.

While most TV producers have indicated that they would continue to stand by their decisions to shun the idea of ever signing Cosby on for any new programming after his release, it remains to be seen whether a man once regarded as an icon of wholesome family values then revealed to be a sexual predator will succeed in rehabilitating his public image.

AKHIL GOGOI

Always in opposition

The activist MLA says he will continue to fight the BJP's 'communal agenda'

RAHEL KARMANAR

Akhill Gogoi has had run-ins with the Assam government since he took the Right to Information (RTI) route to expose alleged wrongdoings in 2005. But it took a turn for the worse in December 2019 when he took to the streets against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA). He had been jailed for 18 months for allegedly fomenting violence during the anti-CAA protests and maintaining links with Marxists. On July 1, he was cleared of all charges under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act.

In 2004-05, Mr. Gogoi led the Doyang-Tengani Sangram Samiti that concentrated on the Doyang-Tengani area of eastern Assam's Golaghat district where the locals, some of them alleged encroachers on forest land, were experiencing ecological transitions due to the government's development agenda. He formed the Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) around that time to take up issues on a larger scale. The organisation worked on a diverse range of issues affecting farmers and daily wagers — from public distribution system thefts and non-implementation of the rural job scheme, to land rights and fighting big dam projects. About 100 cases were filed against him over the years.

Ironically, the 45-year-old Mr. Gogoi's political journey began by rejecting the poli-



tical turn the India Against Corruption campaign, led by Anna Hazare, had taken in 2011. His KMSS dissociated from the movement after Arvind Kejriwal, now the Delhi Chief Minister, and his associates decided to form the Aam Aadmi Party. But the KMSS took the political plunge by forming the Gau Mukti Sangram Aom in March 2015 for "changing the capitalist system of India". Later, the KMSS mobilised support for fighting the Sarbananda Sonowal-led government over its "Hindutva" and "anti-people" agenda, specifically the bid to implement the CAA.

The anti-CAA protests saw the BJP-led government slap sedition charges on Mr. Gogoi and put him in jail in December 2019. The undercurrent of anger encouraged the KMSS and some 70 associate organisations to launch the Rajar Dal in October 2020 with Mr. Gogoi

being its president. The party contested the 2021 Assembly polls in alliance with the Assam Jatiya Parishad, also borne out of the anti-CAA protests, and Mr. Gogoi emerged the front's only victor, from the Sibesar constituency. He became the second leader after George Fernandes to win an election from jail.

Assam-based academic Udayon Mitra said Mr. Gogoi added a new dimension to the politics of protest in the State. This virtually made him a one-man opposition during the Tarun Gogoi-led Congress government and the BJP-led alliance later. He was arrested in June 2012 for instigating violence during a siege of the Assam Secretariat to protest against alleged evictions of locals from the hills around Guwahati. In September 2016, he was arrested again after an election drive in Kartranga National Park turned violent. A decade ago, he said his Marxist belief made him fight

for social transformation. He joined the United Revolutionary Movement Council of Assam, a mass organisation of the CPI-Marxist Leninist in the late 1990s but left a couple of years later to join Nanaa Podarik, an Assamese Marxist journal.

The Congress government charged him for having links with Maoists in 2003, based on a photograph he had allegedly posed in with CPI-Maoist leaders in the Saranda forest of Jharkhand in 2009. The special court of the National Investigation Agency, which acquitted him on July 1, said the photographic evidence was inconclusive. "I may believe in Marxism, but I am definitely not a Maoist; the government is desperate to brand me as," Mr. Gogoi said.

He wants to focus on the development of his Assembly constituency besides spending quality time with college teacher wife Gitashree Taundy, son and 84-year-old mother Phiyada Gogoi, who had campaigned for him during the election.

Mr. Gogoi has also vowed to revive the anti-CAA fight and continue to protest the "pro-dam" and the "communal" agenda of the BJP-led government. Among his goals is ensuring a "BJP-free" Assam by 2026. But Mr. Gogoi insists that he targets political parties based on issues concerning the peasants and marginalised classes, pointing to his call to vote out the Congress from Assam in 2011.

