

THE DIASPORA BI-WEEKLY



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It's a month of celebrations

Several Indian communities will celebrate their new year this week. The celebration marks the spring harvest festival, which ushers in lots of hope for a prosperous year ahead

It's April, the month when almost every region of India is celebrating its spring harvest festival. As per the Hindu lunar calendar, the month of Chaitra begins on April 13 this year. This day is celebrated as the start of the new year in most parts of the country.

The first day of the waxing phase (Shukla paksha) of Chaitra is celebrated as Gudi Padwa by Maharashtrians and Konkani Hindus. They hoist a pole with a copper or bronze or silver pot at the top, covered with a new sari and adorned with a garland outside their house in such a way that it is visible to all.

For the states of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, it is Ugadi or Yugadi. On this day, gifts are exchanged and donations are made to the poor. Then there is the special food called pachadi.

Kashmiri Pandits celebrate the day as Navreh, meaning the New Year

It is also the new year of Sindhis who celebrate Cheti Chand and Jhulelal Jayanti on this day.

Vishu, the new year of Malayalis, falls on Thursday, April 14. The day begins with the Vishukkani (auspicious sighting at dawn) which is a spread of all items that symbolize prosperity. The same day, Baisakhi will be celebrated in Punjab. It marks the Sikh new year and also commemorates the formation of the Khalsa panth of warriors under Guru Gobind Singh in 1699.



(Above) The spread for Vishu kani. (Left) A decorated pole on Gudi Padwa

Gangaur will be celebrated on April 15 in central and western India, mainly Rajasthan. The festival is celebrated by women who pray to Goddess Parvati for a bountiful spring.

Chaitri Navratri is the second most popular Navratri after Shardiya Navratri (which is celebrated in September or October). The ninth day of the Chaitra month (Shukla Paksha) is celebrated as Ram Navami, the day Shri Ram was born in Ayodhya. The 15th day of Chaitra, which is the full moon day, is celebrated as Hanuman Jayanti, birth of Lord Ram's loyal devotee and follower Hanuman.

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■ 'We can't be silent...'

Biden promises action on hate against Asians

US President announces a string of new steps to deal with violence and xenophobia against Asian Americans

#Washington

The US President Joe Biden recently announced additional actions to respond to the violence and xenophobia perpetrated against Asian Americans. The announcements include reinstating and reinvigorating the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI), with initial focus on anti-Asian bias and violence.

During his primetime address, Biden had denounced anti-Asian violence and announced the setting up of a Covid-19 Equity Task Force committee on addressing and ending xenophobia against Asian Americans and establishment of a Department of Justice cross-agency initiative to address such violence.

In a statement, the White House said, "Across our nation, an outpouring of grief and outrage continues at the horrific violence and xenophobia perpetrated against Asian American communities, especially Asian American women and girls." "We can't be silent in the face of rising violence against Asian Americans," Biden tweeted. "That's why today I'm taking additional steps to respond, including establishing an initiative at the Department of Justice to address anti-Asian crimes. These attacks are wrong, un-



American, and must stop." The announcement also includes allocation of \$49.5 million from the American Rescue Plan to a new grant programme for community-based, culturally specific services and programmes for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault who face additional barriers, such as language access barriers, to services and safety. "A harm against any one of us is a harm against all of us," Vice President Kamala Harris tweeted.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said that in the coming weeks, the administration will meet with AAPI leaders to hear their input on how it can play the most constructive role possible in the community.

Biden will also name a high-level Asian American member of the AAPI community to a position in the White House, she said.

"A big part of our effort has also been on taking actions to address the rise in anti-Asian violence and bias, and

Rutgers Univ Hindu students to host meet on Hinduphobia

The Rutgers Hindu Students Council has announced the Understanding Hinduphobia Conference on April 23. The Rutgers University in Newark has been mired in controversy over the reportedly prejudiced commentary of their associate professor Dr. Audrey Truschke on Hinduism. A group of Hindu students had called for terminating her teaching assignments on Hinduism. However, the university has come out in support of Truschke. According to a statement by the Hindu Students Council at the university, administrators assured them following a meeting that they would be working with the Hindu students to create a safer space for them on the campus.

underscoring the commitment of our entire administration to working in partnership with the AAPI community," she said. "The President announced that DOJ has launched an agency-wide initiative to address anti-Asian hate crimes and acts of violence. DOJ is taking steps to strengthen hate crimes data, reporting on AAPI violence, improve law enforcement training so that local law enforcement agencies can better identify anti-Asian bias," she added.

Agencies

Watch out! All-civilian spaceflight ready for take off

Already, several people have booked tickets and begun training which lasts for two days

#Washington

Sixty years ago, Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first person in space. Fast forward to 2021. The era of space tourism is at the horizon.

Two companies, Virgin Galactic and Blue Origin, are building spacecraft capable of sending private clients on suborbital flights to the edge of space lasting several minutes. Those who can afford it have already booked their tickets and begun training. They might get a few minutes or days in the space while on the private mission.

Glenn King, the director of spaceflight



training at the National Aerospace Training and Research Center, a private company based in Pennsylvania which has already trained nearly 400 future Virgin Galactic passengers for their trips, said, "The oldest person I trained was 88 years old."

The training program lasts two days. This involves putting the trainee in a single-seat cockpit at the end of a 25-foot-long (eight-meter-long) arm and spinning them around to simulate gravitational force, or G force. A

medical team is on hand at all times.

NASA's training for shuttle crew members lasted two years but the duration has been drastically reduced by the commercial space industry because of the "numbers of people that want to get up in space," King added. "We can't take two years to train these people," he said. "We've got to get this down to a matter of days to get these people up."

"These people aren't crews, just strictly passengers," he noted. "For a passenger, there isn't a lot of work for you to do other than just relax, endure the G forces of launch or reentry. "And then once you're orbital, enjoy the view out the window."

The cost ranges from several thousand dollars to as much as \$10,000 if special care or medical monitoring is needed.

Coronavirus tightens grip on India

India reporting highest single-day Covid tally

#New Delhi

India has been the worst affected country in the current wave of Covid-19. On Monday, the country saw the biggest single-day jump of 1,68,912 fresh Covid-19 infections, pushing the cumulative tally to 1,35,27,717, according to Union health ministry data.

In the 24 hours ending Monday evening, 10 states accounted for 83% of the total new cases. These include Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Chhattisgarh, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan. The states have announced curbs like night curfew, restricted weekend movement, etc. But the cases continue to spiral northward.

Until mid-March, the number of new infections in the country was around 12,500 to 25,000 a day. But by the end of the month, there was a sudden spike, with India reaching the point where it reports the highest number of new cases. The impact has been aggravated by lack of adherence to Covid-appropriate safety protocols and the circulation of highly



People have become lax in following Covid-appropriate behavior, said Dr Randeep Guleria

infectious strains of SARS-CoV-2, All India Institute of Medical Sciences' (AIIMS) director Dr Randeep Guleria said on Monday.

Guleria pointed out that the infection rate has surged and the disease outbreak is compounded by the presence of highly infectious strains. "Earlier, if one sick person was able to infect around 30 per cent of their contacts, this time those getting the disease

The current wave of Covid-19 in the country is proving to be deadlier than earlier; On Monday alone, India reported nearly 1.69 lakh new cases of infection

are infecting a larger number of people," he said.

He added, "Around February, when cases started to decrease, people became lax in following Covid-appropriate behavior as they thought the virus had become ineffective... So, the rate of spread of the infection is fast possibly due to the highly infectious and transmissible strains circulating."

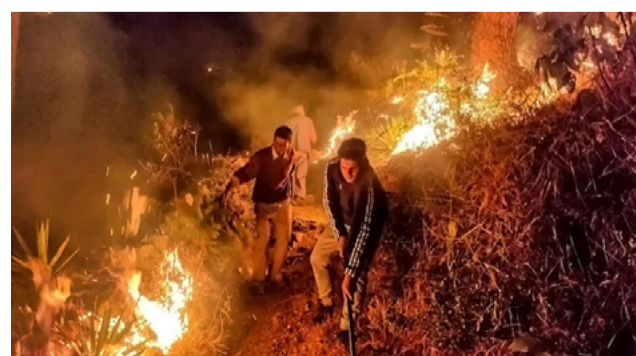
First floods, now forest fires cripple Uttarakhand

The northern state is struggling with strong forest fires that have been ravaging the region for past several weeks; deficient rain and stubble burning in nearby agricultural lands among major reasons

#New Delhi

Uttarakhand has been fighting several forest fires which, even after several weeks, show no signs of relenting. The current disaster follows the floods caused by a glacier burst in the state in February that left many people dead and several injured.

Nainital, Almora, Tehri and Pauri districts of the state are the worst hit by these fires. According to scientists, these fires are the strongest in 15 years. A report quoted European Union's Copernicus Atmospheric



Monitoring Service (CAMS) as saying that Uttarakhand's forest fires emitted 0.2 mega tonnes of carbon in the past one month.

Currently, the fire has spread to at least one hectare of land in new Tehri district. Meanwhile, firefighting operations are underway. Earlier in April, Indian Air Force's helicopter participated in firefighting operations to douse the fire spread in the Koti colony forest area of Tehri Garhwal district. Water collected from Tehri lake was sprinkled with the help of a 5000-litre capacity bucket.

Expressing its displeasure with the state government, the court said that amid the Covid-19 pandemic, people are witnessing difficulty in breathing and the smoke of the forest fire can prove to be more deadly for them.

As many as 414 forest fires have been reported from Uttarakhand in April so far and 645.3 hectares of forests destroyed.

What's happening

According to scientists, the forests have become extremely dry because of deficient rain. Burning of stubble on agricultural lands adjacent to the forests has aggravated the situation. There has been hardly any rain or snow in several months, which has left the ground dry, leaving the trees vulnerable to the fires. However, experts say that the weather and the stubble burning are not the only issues. Even the government needs to make forest fires a priority issue. It is yet to recognize such fires as a natural hazard. Also, it needs to strengthen its fire services. The government has raised budgetary allocation for improvement of fire services, but on the ground that does not seem to be helping.

There is little preparedness on part of the administration to tackle the fires. One argument is that the forests are big and the staff less.

Mrs Sri Lanka's crown taken off on stage

Moments after Pushpika de Silva was crowned winner, title winner of 2020 Caroline Jurie took off her crown citing a rule that she needed to be married, not divorced, to be eligible

#Colombo

Recently, the newly crowned Mrs World Sri Lanka was left aghast after her crown was suddenly removed by the 2020 title winner, triggering a controversy.

Pushpika de Silva was crowned Mrs Sri Lanka World at a pageant in Colombo, Sri Lanka, last weekend when Caroline Jurie, the 2020 Mrs. World winner, took the stage and announced that "there is a rule that you have to be married and not divorced."

"So," she said, "I'm taking my first step saying that the crown goes to the first runner-up." Jurie, 28, then pulled the crown off de



Silva's head, pulling her hair in the process, before placing it on the runner-up. de Silva left the stage as Jurie, the two runners-up and Chula Padmendra, a Sri Lankan model who was also onstage, hugged Padmendra, applauded and raised her fist in the air victoriously.

Jurie was crowned Mrs World at the 2020 pageant in Las Vegas, according to the website of the Mrs World pageant.

In a facebook post after the episode, de Silva said that she was separated and not divorced. She said she had sustained "injuries to my skull" and was pursuing legal action against Jurie "for the injustice and insult". The police arrested Jurie and Padmendra "on charges of simple hurt and criminal cause," it was reported "Even though my crown has been snatched in front of everyone insultfully, I will keep my head straight," de Silva wrote.

Agencies

UAE picks first Arab woman for space program

Nora al-Matrooshi, 27, will join NASA's 2021 Astronaut Candidate Class in the United States

#Dubai

The United Arab Emirates has selected the first Arab woman to train as an astronaut, as the Gulf country rapidly expands into the space sector to diversify its economy.

Emirati national Nora al-Matrooshi, a 27-year-old mechanical engineering graduate currently working at Abu Dhabi's National Petroleum Construction Company, will join NASA's 2021 Astronaut Candidate Class in the United States.

The UAE is using its space programme to develop its scientific and technological capabilities and reduce its reliance on oil.

In February a UAE probe reached the orbit of Mars, the Arab world's first interplanetary expedition. The UAE has plans to launch a moon rover by 2024 and even a vision for a Mars settlement by 2117.

Matrooshi will be joined by another Emirati, Mohammed al-Mulla, making a total of four people under the UAE Astronaut Programme. They include Hazza al-Mansouri who became the first Emirati in space in 2019 when he flew to the International Space Station.

Nora was one of 4,300 applicants assessed on scientific abilities, education and practical experience, and then on physical,

psychological and medical assessments, Dubai's Mohammed Bin Rashid Space Centre (MBRSC) said.

The UAE launched a National Space Programme in 2017 to develop local expertise. Its population of 9.4 million, most of whom are foreign workers, lacks the scientific and industrial base of the big spacefaring nations.

Agencies



5-year-old Indian-American sets a reading record



#Abu Dhabi

Kiara Kaur, a 5-year-old Indian American, currently residing in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), has entered the World Book of Records in London and Asia Book of Records for her reading abilities.

Kiara Kaur could read 36 books non-stop in less than 2 hrs; has entered World Book of Records in London and Asia Book of Records

The Asia Book of Records has stated that Kiara "set a record for reading a maximum number of books nonstop" while the World Book of Records in London certified the 'child prodigy' for "for having specific ability to read non-stop 36 books in 105 minutes at the age of 4 years on 13th February."

Kiara's love and passion for reading were first noted by one of her teachers at a school in Abu Dhabi that she had attended

before it shut down due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Her parents, who are from Chennai, said that she has read over 200 books in the past year and re-reads old ones when she runs out of new books.

According to them, she inherited her reading habit from her grandfather who used to listen to her stories over WhatsApp calls for hours together

Mahabharat actor Satish Kaul succumbs to Covid complications

The 74-year-old actor had been admitted to the hospital after his fever did not subside for a few days

#Ludhiana

Known for his role as Lord Indra in the popular TV show of late 80s, Mahabharat, veteran actor Satish Kaul succumbed to complications related to Covid-19 in Ludhiana on Saturday. He was 74 and is survived by his sister.

Kaul has worked in 300 Punjabi and Hindi films. He also played multiple roles in the much-loved Vikram Betaal series on Doordarshan in 1985. His sister Satya Devi said that Kaul had been admitted to Shri Rama Charitable Hospital after having fever for a few

days. There he tested positive for Covid-19.

In an interview last year, Kaul had spoken about his financial woes which had got worse due to the nationwide lockdown. "I'm struggling for medicines, groceries and basic needs. I appeal to the industry people to help me. I got so much love as an actor, I need some attention now as a human in need," the actor had said.

Kaul started an acting school after moving to Punjab in 2011, he said in his interview to PTI. The project, however, didn't fly. "It came to a halt and whatever work I was



doing later was affected after I fractured my hip bone in 2015. For two and a half years, I was bed-ridden in the hospital. Then I had to check in to an old age home where I stayed for two years," Kaul had said.

The actor began his career in the early '70s, juggling between Hindi and Punjabi films. While his popular Bollywood films include Ram Lakhan, Pyaar Toh Hona Hi Tha and Aunty No 1, his Punjabi career was more flourishing and lasted longer with credits like Maula Jatt, Sassi Punnu, Ishq Nimana, Suhag Chooda and Patola.

BAFTA 2021: Big win for 'Nomadland'

The awards were presented at Royal Albert Hall on Sunday night; Anthony Hopkins and Frances McDormand named Best Actor and Best Actress respectively; Bollywood actors Rishi Kapoor and Irrfan Khan were honored posthumously

#London

The 74th British Academy Film And Television Awards (BAFTA) were presented on Sunday at the Royal Albert Hall in London. Among the presenters were Priyanka Chopra Jonas, Hugh Grant, Tom Hiddleston and Gugu Mbatha-Raw.

Late Bollywood actors Rishi Kapoor and Irrfan Khan were posthumously honored at the event. The In Memoriam segment of the BAFTA Awards began with a tribute to Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, who died on April 9 and went on to include the legendary Bollywood stars. BAFTA also remembered Hollywood stars such as Chadwick Boseman, Sean Connery, Kirk Douglas, Ian Holm, Barbara Windsor, George Segal, Christopher Plummer, among others, who the cinema world lost in the recent past. The morning after the BAFTA Awards, Twitter was flooded with emotional over BAFTA's tribute to Irrfan Khan and Rishi Kapoor.

Priyanka Chopra's Netflix movie The White Tiger was nominated in two categories but didn't score a win. Priyanka Chopra is currently living in London, where she has a home, with Nick Jonas

Rishi Kapoor and Irrfan Khan

succumbed to cancer last year. Black Panther actor Chadwick Boseman, too, died of cancer in August at the young age of 43.

'Nomadland' emerged as the big winner of the night, walking away with four trophies, including the Best Actress award for Frances McDormand. Other categories included Best Film, Best Cinematography and Best Director (Chloe Zhao).

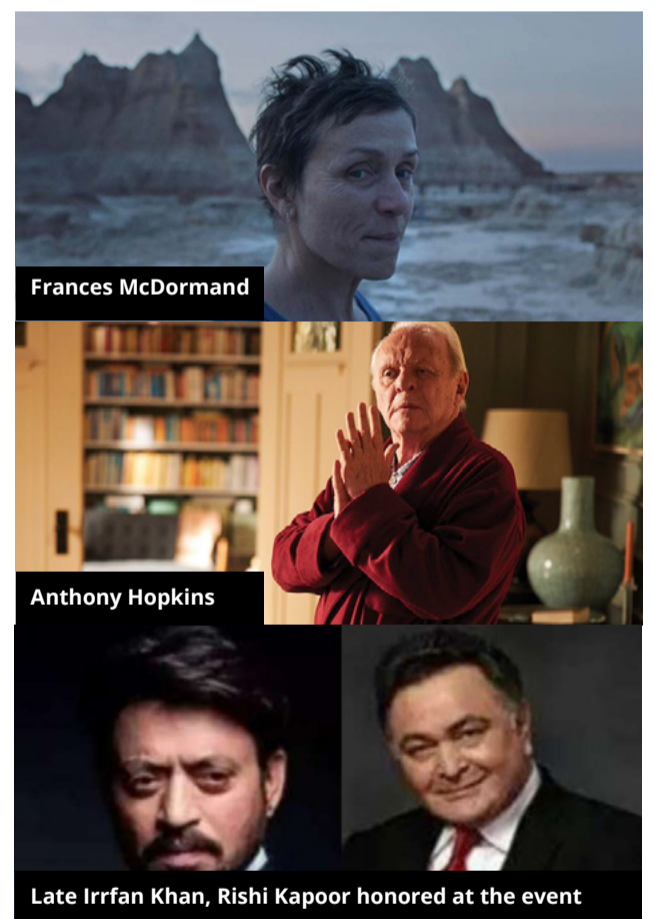
Veteran Hollywood actor Anthony Hopkins won the best actor award for his role in 'The Father'.

'Promising Young Woman' and 'Soul' won two awards each. 'Soul', an animated film, won the award for the Best Animation and the Best Original Score (Jon Batiste, Trent Reznor, Atticus Ross).

'Promising Young Woman', a comedy thrilled by director Emerald Fennell, won in the category of Outstanding British Film and Original Screenplay.

The Best Supporting Actress award went to Korean actress Yuh-Jung Young for her role in 'Minari'.

The Best Supporting Actor award was presented to Daniel Kaluuya for the film 'Judas and the Black Messiah'. The Best Documentary award went to 'My Octopus Teacher'.



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