

QUOTE OF THE DAY
The pioneer

A large number of pilgrims from Telangana visit TTD, contributing significantly to Andhra Pradesh's revenue. Earlier, funds from TTD were allocated to temples and marriage halls in Telangana. This has now stopped. Andhra Pradesh should revive these contributions to help the development of Telangana's ancient Hindu temples and facilities

- Konda Surekha, Endowments Minister

'Singh's reforms transformed India, unshackled economy'

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'WALKING DOWN THE STREETS OF PARIS FEELS LIKE STEPPING INTO A MOVIE'

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Thammareddy slams Allu Arjun; holds him responsible for industry's APOLOGY TO CM

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DON'T MISS...

Priority to drinking water woes

Hyderabad Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board (HMWSSB) Managing Director Ashok Reddy directed officials to promptly resolve complaints brought to the board's attention, particularly those concerning drinking water. On Friday, Ashok Reddy, along with Executive Director Mayank Mittal, conducted a review meeting with Operations and Maintenance (O&M) officials to discuss complaints ...

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US issued over 1 mn nonimmigrant visas

The US mission in India on Friday said it issued more than one million nonimmigrant visas for the second year in a row, including a record number of visitor visas, underscoring the huge demand of Indians for travel to the US. Washington is also working to formally establish a US-based to renew H-1B visas in that country in 2025 that is expected to benefit a significant number of Indians. In the past four years, visitor ...

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NCLT to proceed against Hero Electric

The National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) has directed initiation of insolvency proceedings against Hero Electric after admitting a plea filed by Metro Tyres, an operational creditor claiming a default of Rs 1.85 crore. As per provisions of the Insolvency & Bankruptcy Code (IBC), NCLT has appointed Bhoopesh Gupta as Interim Resolution Professional to run the board of Hero Electric. The ...

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India whitewash West Indies 3-0

Senior off-spinner Deepti Sharma did the star turn with career-best figures of 6/31 before doing her bit with the bat as India completed a 3-0 whitewash of the West Indies with a five-wicket victory in the final Women's ODI here on Friday. Having bowled out West Indies for 162 after Deepti's superlative performance and pacer Renuka Singh's (4/29) excellent show with the new ball, India recovered after a top-order wobble to reach the target of 163 in 28.2 overs. India were in a spot of bother at 73/4 but ...

-SPORTS



FORMULA-E RACE CASE

TG HC adjourns hearing on KTR's FIR quash plea

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

The Telangana High Court on Friday adjourned to December 31 the hearing on the petition filed by BRS working president Rama Rao seeking to quash the FIR registered against him by the Anti-Corruption Bureau in connection with the Formula-E race issue. The High Court had on December 20 directed the ACB officials not to arrest Rama Rao (also known as KTR) till December 30 in the case, after he approached the court seeking to quash the FIR filed against him.

The ACB, subsequently, filed a petition to vacate the court's previous directive (on not to arrest Rama Rao). The counsel of the BRS leader on Friday filed a reply against the ACB's petition. The court then posted the hearing on the matter to December 31. It also said the earlier direction on protection (from arrest) will continue till December 31. The Telangana ACB on December 19 registered a case against Rama Rao over alleged payments, some of it in foreign currency without approvals, to conduct Formula-E race in Hyderabad during the previous BRS regime. **Continued on Page 2**



TG challenges AP's tactics in Krishna water dispute

NAVEENA GHANATE naveena.ghanate@gmail.com ■ HYDERABAD

In a strongly worded rejoinder submitted to the Krishna Water Disputes Tribunal, Telangana accused Andhra Pradesh of employing deliberate delay tactics to block the equitable distribution of Krishna River waters.

Telangana has called for the consolidation of evidence and simultaneous hearings under the two references currently before the tribunal, emphasizing that its people are suffering grave hardships due to the deadlock in water-sharing agreements. The rejoinder, filed on December 27, was submitted in response to objections raised by Andhra Pradesh over Telangana's plea to combine proceedings under Section 89 of the Andhra Pradesh Reorganization



Telangana said the equitable allocation of Krishna waters remains unresolved after the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh in 2014. Despite filing a formal complaint in July 2014, it took nearly a decade for the matter to be referred to the tribunal under the "Further Terms of Reference," issued in October 2023

Act, 2014 (APRA), and the broader would waste judicial time, lead to duplicate arguments and risk contradictory outcomes. "An equitable allocation of water is not just a procedural matter but a pressing humanitarian issue. The people of Telangana continue to suffer from inadequate water access due to historical inequities," the state argued in its submission. Telangana said the equitable allocation of Krishna waters remains

unresolved after the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh in 2014. Despite filing a formal complaint in July 2014, it took nearly a decade for the matter to be referred to the tribunal under the "Further Terms of Reference," issued in October 2023. Telangana contends that these references cannot be meaningfully adjudicated in isolation, as the issues and evidence overlap significantly. The state stressed that Andhra Pradesh has no objection to using documents and evidence from Section 89 proceedings in hearings under the broader terms. However, AP opposes the reverse approach, which Telangana claims is a clear attempt to delay and derail the resolution process. Moreover, Telangana accused Andhra Pradesh of exploiting the lack of formal water-sharing arrangements to its advantage. It said that Andhra Pradesh diverts over 72 per cent of Krishna waters, including 200 TMCs from the Srisailem reservoir, far more than its share. **Continued on Page 2**

Proposed Rythu Bharosa terms may hit livestock rearing

KOLISHETTY VENKATESHWARLU venkat.k.warlu@gmail.com ■ HYDERABAD

Most farmers have already given up grazing cattle due to various reasons, the main being the mechanization of agriculture. Traditionally, farmers used to conduct farming using bulls. However, later farmers started using tractors, harvesters and drum seed systems which didn't need bulls. Farmers are now not interested in rearing bulls, cows and buffaloes as they need labourers to do that

effectively which is costly. However, the proposed Rythu Bharosa conditions may affect the rearing of cattle, sheep and goats further. The Congress government

has been saying that it will give Rythu Bharosa funds only for cultivated lands and not for lands that are not cultivated. **Continued on Page 2**



DPR of Palamuru-Rangareddy Project returned, says BRS

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

Former Minister V. Srinivas Goud of the BRS stressed the urgent need to complete the Palamuru-Rangareddy Lift Irrigation Project to provide irrigation to the districts of Mahabubnagar, Rangareddy, and Nalgonda. Addressing a press conference at the Telangana Bhavan, he criticised the Centre for withholding clearances and approvals even

accused the Andhra Pradesh Government of filing baseless complaints to delay the project. Srinivas pointed out that Chief Minister Revanth Reddy, who hails from Palamuru, had promised irrigation facilities for 12 lakh acres through this project. However, he noted that the Centre had returned the Detailed Project Report (DPR) and had denied **Continued on Page 2**



Govt to build memorial to Singh in capital

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Union government has decided to make a memorial to former prime minister Manmohan Singh in the national capital, official sources said on Friday, as they accused the Congress of doing politics over the issue. The sources said the decision on the memorial has been conveyed to the Congress, but added that it will take a few days to find an appropriate venue for building a memorial. "The government's decision to build a memorial in honour of Manmohan Singh has been conveyed to the Congress. But they have engaged in politics over the issue," a government source said. Singh, who headed the Congress-led UPA government and is credited with economic reforms, passed away on Thursday at 92. He was India's prime minister for 10 years between 2004 and 2014. The Congress on Friday said that not finding a location for the cremation and memorial for Singh is a deliberate insult to the country's first Sikh prime minister.

THEATRE STAMPEDE CASE

Allu Arjun appears before court virtually, bail plea posted to Dec 30

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

Top Telugu actor Allu Arjun, an accused in the case booked over the death of a woman in a stampede here during the premiere of his latest film 'Pushpa-2', appeared through a video conference before a local court on Friday. The regular bail petition filed by the actor, who was named as accused no 11 in the case, came up for hearing on Friday, and the police sought time on the matter after which the court posted it to December 30. **Continued on Page 2**



LAST RESPECTS



Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy, TPCC chief Mahesh Kumar Goud, AICC incharge general secretary Deepa Das Munshi, Health Minister Damodara Rajanarsimha paid floral tributes to the mortal remains of ex-PM Manmohan Singh at Delhi on Friday

TTD to accept recommendation letters of TG public reps

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

The Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD) conveyed some good news to Telangana Ministers, MPs and MLAs on Friday. The good news is that the TTD will accept their recommendation letters from now onwards. The TTD will consider the letters of Telangana public representatives twice a week. It may be recalled that the YSRCP Government did not accept the recommendation letters of Telangana Ministers, MLAs and MPs and it drew severe criticism. Telangana public representatives openly expressed their unhappiness regarding this at Tirumala itself saying that the TTD is insulting Telangana public representatives by not considering their recommendation letters. However, the new TTD members discussed the issue and a



majority of them said that the TTD should consider the letters of Telangana public representatives twice a week.

Now, Telangana public representatives can give recommendation letters to devotees from TG to have darshan of Lord Sri Venkateshwara.

Restore TTD's aid to Telangana temples: Surekha

Telangana Forest, Environment, and Endowments Minister Konda Surekha has urged the Andhra Pradesh Government to address the difficulties faced by devotees from Telangana visiting the Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams (TTD). She expressed the hope that discussions would ensure a hassle-free experience for pilgrims. "A large number of devotees from Telangana visit TTD, contributing significantly to Andhra Pradesh's revenue. In the past, funds from TTD were allocated for temples and wedding halls in Telangana. This has now stopped. Andhra Pradesh should revive these contributions to help the

development of Telangana's ancient temples and facilities," she said. On Thursday, Minister Surekha, along with her family, visited the Sri Bhramaramba Mallikarjuna Swamy Temple at Srisailem, one of the 12 Jyotirlingas. **Continued on Page 2**

People would suffer losses if RRR alignment is unscientific: Laxman

PNS ■ HYDERABAD

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Rajya Sabha Member Dr K. Laxman said that there is something wrong with reducing the Regional Ring Road's (RRR) distance in some places. He said that construction of the RRR should take place outside the HMDA area and added that unscientific alignments would be a loss for the people. RRR victims met Laxman at the State BJP office here on Friday and told brought their problems to the MP. Speaking on the occasion, Laxman said that farmers had

appealed to the BRS Government to change the RRR alignment. He said that farmers and the poor suffered losses due to the BRS Government's decisions regarding RRR. "Something wrong in reducing the distance of RRR in some places. The RRR construction should take place outside the HMDA area. People would suffer due to the unscientific alignment. Priyanka Gandhi and the Congress had assured that they would deliver justice if the Congress came to power. But the then MP was no minister. This is an example of how they are watering down **Continued on Page 2**





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PAPER WITH PASSION

A silent crusader

Dr Manmohan Singh a reluctant politician yet a resilient leader and a gentleman is no more but his legacy lives on

The man with the vision and selfless dedication to the nation, Dr Manmohan Singh is no more. Dr Singh passed away on December 26, 2024, at the age of 92. Dr Singh, a towering figure in Indian politics and economics, breathed his last at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences. His demise marks the end of an era defined by humility, intellect and steadfast dedication to nation-building. Dr Manmohan Singh's contributions to India's economic and political landscape are unparalleled. Widely regarded as the architect of India's 1991 economic reforms, Singh's tenure as Finance Minister under Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao was transformative. At a time when the Indian economy teetered on the brink of bankruptcy, Singh introduced a series of bold measures that liberalised the economy, dismantled the license raj and opened the doors to foreign investment. These reforms not only rescued India from an economic crisis but also set the stage for decades of robust growth and development. During his tenure,



Singh's policies prioritised the devaluation of the rupee, moderation of taxes, privatisation of public sector enterprises and encouragement of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). These initiatives catalysed India's transition into a globally integrated economy and solidified his reputation as one of the nation's most accomplished economists.

Known as a reluctant politician, Dr Singh's foray into politics was driven by a profound sense of duty rather than ambition. When he assumed the role of Prime Minister in 2004, heading the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, he brought the same commitment and vision that had defined his career as an economist. Serving two consecutive terms until 2014, Singh's leadership was marked by both humility and resolve. One of the most defining moments of his tenure was the Indo-US nuclear deal in 2008, a landmark agreement that underscored his courage and conviction. Despite staunch opposition from the Left Front, which led to their withdrawal of support, Singh's government survived a vote of confidence, thanks to the support of the Samajwadi Party. The deal elevated India's status on the global stage and symbolised his unyielding dedication to the nation's strategic interests. Dr Singh was often described as a 'gentleman leader,' a man of integrity who preferred dialogue over confrontation. His humility was legendary, yet he was resolute when it came to principles. Throughout his career, he commanded respect across party lines, not just for his intellect but for his moral rectitude. His tenure as Prime Minister may have been criticised for perceived passivity, but his calm demeanour and quiet determination left an indelible mark on Indian governance. A seven-day period of mourning is a fitting tribute by the nation to a great visionary. His last rites will be conducted with full state honours. While his absence leaves a void, his contributions to India's progress and his example of selfless service will continue to inspire generations. Om Shanti.

PICTALK



Tourists enjoy paragliding after fresh snowfall, in Solang valley in Manali

Why RSS chief's push for large families is out of step



K S TOMAR

By advocating outdated solutions to demographic trends, Bhagwat's vision risks deepening societal divisions and ignoring the socio-economic realities of today

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat's recent appeal for larger families, framed as a response to perceived demographic challenges, reveals a worldview rooted in traditionalism. This perspective clashes with the progressive social, cultural, and economic ethos of modern India. While presented as a solution to counter declining population trends, Bhagwat's remarks have ignited debates over their communal undertones, potential to deepen gender inequality, and disconnection from contemporary realities. Bhagwat's remarks are part of a larger discourse on demographic imbalances, often aimed at minority communities. This rhetoric fosters fear, undermines social harmony, and contradicts India's pluralistic traditions. Today's youth prioritise quality of life over larger families, influenced by rising living costs, career aspirations, and financial stability. Bhagwat's appeal appears disconnected from these realities, highlighting a gap between traditionalist agendas and contemporary Indian values.



Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu has echoed similar sentiments, advocating for larger families in his state.

However, such approaches seem out of step with modern India's aspirations. India is not experiencing a population decline but rather a slowdown in growth.

According to the National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5), the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has dropped to 2.0, below the replacement level of 2.1. This trend reflects advancements in education, healthcare, and women's autonomy. While policymakers globally view such developments as markers of progress, Bhagwat's remarks frame this demographic shift as a cultural and religious issue, perpetuating communal narratives that risk deepening societal divisions.

Bhagwat's outdated stance ignores this historical context and the progress India has made in population stabilisation through education, healthcare, and women's empowerment. The RSS's vision aligns with traditional family structures, where women are expected to prioritise domestic roles.

By advocating for larger families, Bhagwat inadvertently reinforces these outdated norms, perpetuating cycles of



BHAGWAT'S OUTDATED STANCE IGNORES THIS HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THE PROGRESS INDIA HAS MADE IN POPULATION STABILIZATION THROUGH EDUCATION, HEALTHCARE, AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

dependency and limiting women's agency. Central to Bhagwat's argument is a patriarchal notion that reduces women to their reproductive roles. His call for more children disregards women's aspirations, autonomy, and wellbeing, placing an undue burden on them.

Resource Constraints With a population exceeding 1.4 billion, India faces severe resource constraints, including food insecurity, water scarcity, and unemployment. Increasing family sizes would exacerbate these issues, placing further strain on public services and natural resources.

India's youth population, often hailed as a demographic dividend, grapples with high unemployment rates. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) reports that unemployment among those aged 15-29 exceeds 20 per cent. Without job creation, additional population growth risks turning this dividend into a liability. India is among the countries most vulnerable to climate change. Global policymakers advocate for sustainable development, making Bhagwat's vision seem misaligned with contemporary priorities.

Cultural and Ethical Disconnect India's ethos is rooted in diversity, balance, and individual

choice. Bhagwat's remarks dismiss these values, echoing authoritarian tendencies that clash with Indian democracy. Family planning decisions are deeply personal and should not be influenced by socio-political agendas.

Intervening in such choices undermines personal freedoms and contradicts the principles of modern India. In a country where maternal mortality remains a concern and reproductive healthcare is uneven, urging women to have more children intensifies existing vulnerabilities. Instead of alarmist rhetoric, India's leadership should focus on forward-looking policies to address demographic concerns constructively: Improved access to education, particularly for girls, is key to stabilising population growth. Educated women are more likely to make informed reproductive choices, contributing to sustainable demographics and enhancing Healthcare. Investing in maternal and child healthcare can reduce mortality rates and improve quality of life.

Policies empowering the youth and enhancing employability can transform India's demographic potential into an asset. (Writer is a senior political analyst and strategic affairs columnist; views are personal)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

MANMOHAN SINGH PASSES AWAY

Madam — The sad demise of former PM Dr Manmohan Singh is an irreplaceable loss to the nation. Singh will be remembered as the statesman who saved the Indian economy from going over the edge. When he took over as finance minister in the minority government of Narasimha Rao in 1991, the Indian economy was very close to sovereign default. Foreign exchange reserves were barely enough to cover a month of imports, and the country had to suffer the ignominy of having to ship its gold reserves to England.

All of that would change with the famous 1991 Budget which Manmohan Singh presented, and the industrial deregulation that accompanied the Budget. Hailed as an architect of India's economic liberalisation, he served as Prime Minister from 2004 to 2014. During his tenure, he spearheaded transformative policies that shaped India's modern economic landscape. His leadership saw India achieve its highest GDP growth rates, and his role in the Indo-US nuclear deal significantly enhanced India's global stature. India is on its way to becoming the third-largest economy in the world in a couple of years, and the seeds of India's growth story were sown during the economic reforms. More than three decades later, there is as big a consensus for reforms in India as there was opposition to it when the process started.

N Sadasiva Reddy | Bengaluru

DIPLOMATIC CHALLENGE FOR INDIA

Madam — A formal request by Bangladesh to India to extradite former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who fled to India after she was ousted by mass student-led protests, poses a severe diplomatic challenge for India. Dhaka has chosen her path, and it does not seem to be interested in normalising ties with India; hence this extradition path. The extradition request and the political developments around Hasina's asylum in India have the potential to influence India-Bangladesh relations significantly, and it requires deft diplomatic handling by both nations. Hasina's presence

ICC fines Virat Kohli



Virat Kohli found himself in an awkward situation when he was in the midst of a controversy over an altercation with Australian debutant Sam Konstas. It was a lucky escape for Virat Kohli on day 1 of the fourth test at Melbourne, which otherwise would have ended as a typical 'Boxing' Day episode. The 19-year-old teenager has not spared the Indian bowlers, including Jasprit

Bumrah, in his attacking 60 runs, which was a treat to watch. It was an intentional act captured in-camera when Kohli appeared to be dashed against Konstas in the middle while walking across, which sparked an encounter. Watching this, the Aussie legend Ricky Ponting and England's Michael Vaughan were quick to voice their opinions, calling for ICC action.

Kohli has been slapped with a fine of 20 per cent of his match fee and given one demerit point by the ICC as well. This is not the expected behaviour of a batter who played 121 tests, 295 ODIs, and 125 T20s. If Kohli was baffled by Konstas belligerence, he should have proved his worth as a batter in the middle rather than engaged himself with the intimidating tactics, which can be construed as cheap for all his calibre.

A P Thiruvadi | Chennai

in India and her public statements against the interim government have strained relations between the two countries, which have further been worsened by the persecution of Hindus and other minorities in Bangladesh.

India is examining the request on legal grounds, but India can refuse extradition, citing political nature or justice-related concerns, but ultimately it is going to be for purely political reasons. The ball is firmly in India's court, and if India sends her back, we would seal her fate as she is bound to face the death penalty in Dhaka, and if it rejects this request, then we should be ready for more hostility from our neighbour, and our ties would go from bad to worse. Whatever India chose to do will have long-term ramifications on this whole region.

Bal Govind | Noida

EMPOWERING RURAL ECONOMY

Madam — The government is committed to revitalising the rural economy through cooperation, recently inaugurating 10,000 Multipurpose Primary Agricultural Credit

Societies (PACS). These societies not only generate employment but also ensure optimal resource availability and connect farmers' produce to international markets, aligning with the vision of "Prosperity through Cooperation."

PACS, as the cornerstone of the cooperative three-tier structure, play a pivotal role in rural upliftment by addressing needs like credit, fertilisers, storage, and water management. The government aims to establish 2 lakh PACS in five years, strengthening rural infrastructure and promoting unity, harmony, and self-reliance. To revive dormant PACS and establish new ones, a detailed Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) has been developed, targeting the setup of PACS in 15,000 villages. These societies are evolving into hubs of multifaceted services, including digital amenities like ticket bookings and financial inclusion via RuPay Kisan Credit Cards and micro-ATMs.

R K Jain | Barwani

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

Homeschooling: Affordable and holistic education option



RACHNA LAKHPATRI

Homeschooling is transforming its image from an unconventional option to a widely accepted educational route as many parents opt for this affordable choice

With the rising costs of living, an increasing number of parents are reevaluating the conventional approach to education. An increasing number of families nationwide are viewing homeschooling as a legitimate and empowering option compared to traditional education systems.



The choice is influenced not only by financial considerations but also by a commitment to nurture the child in a manner that aligns with their unique needs and the family's values. For many years, traditional educational institutions have been the cornerstone of childhood learning. However, nowadays, an ever-growing number of parents are questioning whether the significant expenses associated with private education, or even the costs of public schooling, truly justify the investment. The homeschooling movement presents a compelling argument: education can occur beyond the confines of traditional classrooms. The main factor driving this change is the expense involved. Education, particularly in private schools, often

presents a challenging list of costs: tuition, uniforms, transportation, extracurriculars, and supplies. Homeschooling greatly alleviates these financial burdens. Parents now have the opportunity to invest in essential resources such as top-notch educational materials, online courses, or tailored coaching—all designed to cater to their child's unique needs.

Moreover, homeschooling encourages families to tap into their creativity and resourcefulness. Libraries, free online resources, and community programmes provide abundant learning opportunities with minimal or no expense. In a time filled with numerous digital resources, parents have the ability to craft a curriculum that is both cost-effective and thorough. In addition to reducing expenses, there are numerous

other factors contributing to the rising popularity of homeschooling. Parents hold the view that homeschooling can significantly enhance a child's personal and academic development. In contrast to conventional educational institutions, homeschooling offers remarkable flexibility, allowing lessons to align with a child's interests, learning pace, and preferred methods of engagement.

A student passionate about science, for instance, can dedicate additional time to experiments and practical activities, while those with a flair for the arts can unleash their creativity free from the limitations of a rigid schedule. Another key factor is the importance of comprehensive development. Homeschooling transcends traditional textbooks and offers genuine, real-world learning experiences. Cooking transforms into a blend of maths and chemistry; gardening embodies principles of biology and sustainability; a visit to the museum or park imparts lessons in history and ecology. These activities, along with practical knowledge, foster

family connections—something that seems rare in today's world. Certainly, homeschooling comes with its drawbacks. Concerns have been voiced by critics regarding socialisation and the stress it imposes on parents. Nevertheless, families who choose to homeschool have found innovative ways to address these issues, including forming co-op groups, engaging in community sports, and coordinating group field trips. This signifies a movement towards appreciating cost-effectiveness, adaptability, and personal expression in education—a tendency expected to expand as households adjust to financial circumstances. Ultimately, homeschooling transcends being merely an educational option; it embodies a declaration of empowerment. For parents aiming to reshape education in a way that resonates with their values, this journey offers not just information but a profoundly rewarding experience for both themselves and their children.

(The writer is a motivator and a freelance writer; views are personal)



FIRST COLUMN

HUNGER FOR POWER

Lure for power is a universal phenomenon but in the capital, it is at next level



APS MALHOTRA

I have come to seek your support and valuable vote, as I have decided to stand for re-election, declared the bespectacled, heavy-set, middle-aged man—dressed in an off-white safari suit—rather pompously, as he stood with folded hands at the door of my house, surrounded by a bevy of churches and churches, who suitably nodded their head in unison. “Vote for which re-election?” I muttered under my breath, irritated at the uncalled-for intrusion into my privacy on a rather lazy Sunday morning. “I am the President” he replied sheepishly, maybe taken aback at my nonchalant reply. “I had decided not to stand for this year’s election due to increased professional and personal commitments—actually I had desired to give someone younger a chance to bear the responsibility, and take a backseat— but had to relent under the immense pressure from fellow residents, who want my leadership for a further period of three years” he continued, his voice a cocktail of benevolence and beneficence for his ‘supporters’, and the seasoned politician’s chicanery. “But isn’t Mrs. Draupadi Murmu the President?” I retorted, further trying to pull his leg. “Malhotra jee, I am the President of our Resident Welfare Association (RWA) for the past several years,” he said, flabbergasted, a tad angry and certainly deeply offended at my failure to recognize him, and worse, acknowledge his self-perceived exalted status. Although I had recognised him the moment he pressed the doorbell of my house, and I opened the front door to face him,



my innate aversion to people who like to throw their weight around and flaunt uncalled-for appellations came forth with all its bitterness.

Nonetheless, realizing that the man was getting increasingly exasperated at my manoeuvrings, I salvaged the situation by promising to cast my vote in his favour and profusely apologized to him for my failure to identify his ‘Excellency’, with the pretext that my better half is the face of our family for outside interactions, while I busy myself in mundane things, like reading and writing. Not too surprisingly, denizens of my beloved Dilli, sitting on the centre of power since the dawn of history, have a deeply ingrained fascination for posts and titles— which proliferate dime a dozen— and take a macho and perverse pride in flaunting them, with the same exuberance with which a child displays his or her toy, albeit not with the same innocence.

This fact is borne out in the form of roadside boards and car number plates, which often bear vague titles— such as ‘Secretary, Youth Media Cell, ABC party, B-block, Village XYZ’. A carryforward from the era of the Mughals and British imperialists, this is a desperate shot to seek the much-desired VIP status, at least in the circle one operates in. Thus, it is not unknown to find members of RWAs who run virtual fiefdoms in their associations, maybe as recompense for the voluntary service rendered in serving the community. The perks could include a free car wash and laundry facility, use of funds near the residence where the self-styled Maharajas live, et al.

One can only speculate as to what would happen if this maniac lure of titles and appellations invaded the next, and perhaps the last bastion of community living, the home. Then, it would be no surprise to see name boards outside individual residences read like this: 1/103, Beverly Park: APS Malhotra, President; Sonia Malhotra Vice President; Dr. Mehak Malhotra, Secretary (in absentia). In families with matriarchal tendencies, the designations could be reversed. Well, worth a thought!

(The author is a freelance writer; views are personal)

India must stand firm against Sheikh Hasina’s extradition



HIRANMAY KARLEKAR

India faces a pivotal decision as it considers Bangladesh’s request to extradite Sheikh Hasina, former Prime Minister and a steadfast ally



Sheikh Hasina must not be sent back to Bangladesh in response to the note verbale received from that country’s interim government calling for her extradition. Dhaka’s move has followed the issue of an arrest warrant by Bangladesh’s International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) against her and a number of her former ministers, advisers, military and civil officials. The allegation? “Crimes against humanity and genocide”. There are two broad reasons why India should not send her back. As prime minister of Bangladesh, she has been a steadfast friend of India whereas other heads of that country’s government, except her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, have tended to be unfriendly. Second, she will, by no means, receive a fair trial in Bangladesh and perhaps even be lynched, given the intense hostility of the current rulers of Bangladesh harbour towards her.

There will be solid legal basis for India’s stand. Article 8 (1) (a) of the ‘Treaty Between the Republic of India and the People’s Republic of Bangladesh Relating to Extradition’, says that a person may not be extradited if “he satisfies the Requested State that it would, having regard to all the circumstances, be unjust or oppressive to extradite him” because, in the words of Article 8 (1) (A) (iii), the accusations against him “have not been made in good faith in the interests of justice.” Besides Article 8 (2) reads, “A person who has been convicted of an extradition offence may not be extradited therefor unless he was sentenced to imprisonment or other form of detention for a period of four months or more.” Sheikh Hasina has yet to be sentenced to any period of imprisonment or detention. Also, she can very well claim that it would be “unjust or oppressive” to extradite her because the accusation against her had not been made in “good faith in the interest of justice”, and are a result of pure vindictiveness. That she would be justified in saying so becomes clear on considering the diatribes unleashed against her by the advisers of the interim government and the relentless persecution, including involving in hundreds of false cases, of



SHEIKH HASINA HAS YET TO BE SENTENCED TO ANY PERIOD OF IMPRISONMENT OR DETENTION. ALSO, SHE CAN VERY WELL CLAIM THAT IT WOULD BE “UNJUST OR OPPRESSIVE” TO EXTRADITE HER BECAUSE THE ACCUSATION AGAINST HER HAD NOT BEEN MADE IN “GOOD FAITH IN THE INTEREST OF JUSTICE”, AND ARE A RESULT OF PURE VINDICTIVENESS.

Awami League’s leaders and ministers in the party’s government. According to a report in The Daily Star carried under the headline, “No option but to succeed: Yunus” on August 18, 2024, Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus had said during a “Meet and Greet” session with foreign diplomats in Dhaka, “In their efforts to stay in power, the Sheikh Hasina dictatorship destroyed every institution of the country. Judiciary was broken. Democratic rights were suppressed through a brutal decade-and-a-half long crackdown. Elections were rigged blatantly. Generations of young people grew up without exercising their voting rights. Banks were robbed with full political patronisation. And the state coffers were plundered by abusing power.”

Referring to a proposed Awami League rally on November 10, 2024, Muhammad Yunus’ press secretary, Shafiqul Alam, had written in a Facebook post on November 9, “The Awami League in its current form is a fascist party. There is no way this fascist party will be allowed to hold protests in Bangladesh. Anyone who would try to hold rally, gathering and processions by taking orders from the mass murderer and dictator Sheikh Hasina will face full force of the law enforcing agencies.” Leaders of the Anti-Discrimination Students Movement (ADSM), formed on July 1, 2024, to carry the students’ struggle forward, and Jatiya Nagarik Committee (National Citizens Committee), formed on 8 September, 2024, to consolidate the movement’s message and political goals, have spoken in a similar strident and denunciatory vein.

According to a report by Ashibul Islam Rifat in the Dhaka Tribune (23 October, 2024) appearing

under the headline “Nahid: Awami League will never be allowed back into politics in our lifetime,” Md Nahid Islam, an ADSM leader who is now adviser, in charge of information and broadcasting and other ministries, said at a discussion, that the Awami League’s return to politics in the manner and ideology it previously adhered to would be tantamount to “a betrayal to the martyrs of the uprising. And certainly, as long as we are alive, we will not allow this to happen.” Leaders of political parties like the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (Jamaat) have also denounced the Awami League.

One can argue that the ICT, and any other court where Sheikh Hasina and other accused may be tried, will ignore such vituperations and pronounce its judgment on the basis of the evidence and arguments placed before it. A horse would guffaw on hearing this. The judiciary has been brought to heel through forced resignations and dismissals. The process began as early as August 10, 2024, when chief justice Obaidul Hassan of the Supreme Court and five judges of the appellate division, resigned as hundreds of students affiliated to the ADSM gathered on the court premises demanding that they quit, and threatened to besiege their residences if they did not. On October 16, the new chief justice, Syed Rezaat Ahmed, sent 12 High Court judges, appointed during the Sheikh Hasina-led Awami League rule, on leave following a demonstration in the court premises by adherents of the ADSM led by Hasnat Abdullah and Sarjis Alam. According to a report in Bangladesh’s The Business Standard on October 16 itself, announcing the plan, Hasnat

Abdullah, had written in a Facebook post on October 15, “In demand of the resignation of the fascist judges of the Awami League, we will besiege the High Court tomorrow (Wednesday) at 11am.”

The ICT itself was reconstituted on October 15, 2024, with Justice Md Golam Mortuza Majumder from the High Court Division of Bangladesh Supreme Court as its new chairman, and Justice Md Shafiul Alam Mahmud and retired District and Sessions Judge Md Mohitul Haque Enam Chowdhury as members of the panel.

The result is a pliant judiciary and the use of the justice system to persecute not only those associated with the Awami League but civil society activists, writers, journalists and human rights activists. A shocking example is the levelling of a false murder charge against a highly-respected senior advocate of Bangladesh’s Supreme Court, ZI Khan Panna. Referring to the case, The Daily Star wrote in an editorial titled “This weaponisation of legal cases must stop” and published on October 21, 2024, “Over the two months and a half since August 5, we have published multiple reports and editorials on the indiscriminate filing of such murder cases without any evidence, mostly implicating the leaders, activists, and suspected supporters of the Awami League regime. Even journalists and rights activists were not spared. In many cases, fabricated FIRs were filed. There were also instances of the names of accused in cases predating August 5 being replaced. This is nothing but a weaponisation of the legal process for harassment and political vendettas.” Will Sheikh Hasina get justice in such a situation?

(The author is Consulting Editor, The Pioneer. The views expressed are personal)

Unlocking economic potential: Bridging the gender gap in public procurement

In India, strides in gender budgeting and supportive policies are fostering greater opportunities for women entrepreneurs

How much of the goods and services purchased by government departments and public sector enterprises come from women-owned businesses? This crucial question is rarely asked, and it underscores the need for gender-responsive procurement policies in India and across South Asia. With government procurement “accounting for an average of 12 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in OECD countries, and up to 30 per cent of GDP in many developing countries,” the untapped economic potential for women entrepreneurs to contribute as suppliers of solutions to governments is immense. Yet, globally, women-owned enterprises still win only 1 per cent of this significant public

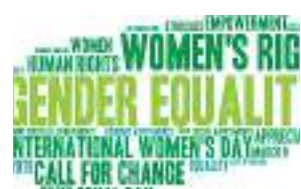
procurement market. WECconnect International is actively working to bridge this gap. Our efforts are making headway, especially in countries such as India, where policy frameworks are beginning to reflect a greater emphasis on gender inclusivity. The central government has increasingly prioritised women-centric policies, evident from the substantial rise in gender budget allocations, which is another way to support women and girls in addition to buying their products and services. For example, in 2013-14, Rs 97,134 crore was earmarked for women’s welfare and empowerment. By 2024-25, this figure had reached Rs 3.27 lakh crore, marking a 19 per cent increase over the actual gender budget expendi-



ELIZABETH A VAZQUEZ

ture of 2023-24 and a 218.8 per cent increase since 2013-14. For 2024, the Gender Budget accounts for 6.5 per cent of the Union Budget, the highest since the Gender Budget Statement was introduced in 2005-06. The Statement serves as a vital tool for ministries reviewing programmes from a gender perspective to ensure that more resources are being allo-

cated to benefit women and girls. In the last year (2023-24), the actual expenditure on gender budgeting was 16 per cent higher (Rs 2.75 lakh crore) than the total budgeted amount (Rs 2.38 lakh crore). The Indian government’s Public Procurement Policy for Micro and Small Enterprises (MSEs) Order, 2018, exemplifies this progress. The policy mandates that every central ministry, department, and PSU must procure at least 25 per cent of their needs from MSEs, with 3 per cent specifically reserved for women-owned micro and small enterprises. There has been progress since the mandated 3 per cent procurement target for women-owned MSEs was introduced in 2018. Public procurement from these enter-



prises has risen from almost zero in 2017-18 to 1.8 per cent in 2023-24. The number of women-owned (owned and controlled by women having the minimum financial interest of 51 per cent of the capital and with women constituting at least 51 per cent of generated employment) MSEs benefiting from public procurement grew from 1,410 (accounting for Rs 232.56 crore) to 21,128 (Rs 3056.4 crore) in six years. While the evidence is encouraging, there are still gaps and

challenges that, if addressed, could help India achieve a more gender-inclusive public procurement ecosystem. For example, there is currently no independent body to resolve complaints in the procurement system, leaving unhappy bidders with only two options: filing complaints directly with the purchasing entity or taking them to arbitration or court as outlined in the General Financial Rules (GFR) 2017. Generally, there is a pressing need for transparency, well-defined processes, and a robust mechanism for addressing grievances in tender and procurement procedures so that women-owned businesses receive constructive feedback if their bids are unsuccessful. This would enable them to

refine their future proposals and compete more effectively. Such measures would help mitigate biases in tendering and procurement processes that disproportionately disadvantage women-owned enterprises. The government could also pass procurement legislation to standardise bidding processes using a central law that sets national standards and state laws that fit specific needs, with the central government providing comprehensive oversight. Public authorities could also sensitise officials on the need to counteract gender biases that may influence the design of procurement processes. A strong starting point would be to appoint more women to oversee public procurement in government departments.

Public procurement from women-owned enterprises in India over the past six years has grown at an average annual growth rate of 70.5 per cent, while the number of beneficiary women entrepreneurs has increased at an average annual rate of 77 per cent because the baseline was close to zero. In 2023-24, total public procurement in India reached Rs 1.70 lakh crore, highlighting a growing opportunity for women to engage with the expanding public procurement market in the world’s fastest-growing economy. (The writer is CEO and Co-Founder of WECconnect International. With inputs from Eroschan Alagaretnam, Regional Director for South Asia, WECconnect International. Views are personal)



'THE CITY SUPPORTS CREATIVITY LIKE NO OTHER'

IN AN EXCLUSIVE CHAT WITH THE PIONEER, AWARD-WINNING INTERNATIONAL STORYTELLER AND EDUCATIONALIST DEEPA KIRAN OPENS UP ABOUT HER ENDURING BOND WITH HYDERABAD—A CITY THAT HAS NOT ONLY SHAPED HER CRAFT BUT ALSO HOLDS A SPECIAL PLACE IN HER HEART



TEJAL SINHA
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Hyderabad is more than just a city; it's a feeling, a warm embrace of cultures, flavours and stories that leave an indelible mark on everyone who walks its streets. Known for its rich heritage, delectable cuisine and the iconic blend of tradition and modernity, Hyderabad is a city where diversity thrives. It's a place where Irani chai fuels endless conversations, where ancient rocks whisper timeless tales and where the warmth of its people makes you feel at home instantly.

For Deepa Kiran, Hyderabad is more than a city; it's an endless source of inspiration that fuels her storytelling. The vibrant mix of cultures, the comforting aroma of Irani chai and the shared warmth of its people have all found their way into her tales. From intimate gatherings atop ancient rocks to lively workshops filled with eager listeners, the city's charm and openness have shaped her journey. "Hyderabad has a way of making you feel seen, supported, and celebrated," Deepa says. With its rich history and modern vibrancy, Hyderabad continues to be the perfect backdrop for the stories she crafts and the memories she cherishes.

"I'm not a big fan of biryani," she confesses with a laugh. "I can't include it on my list. But I loved waiting for boorelu—an Indian sweet made of rice flour stuffed with jaggery—and pulihora, offered by my neighbour aunty while I was in Hyderabad. She introduced me to some amazing local dishes."

Her exploration didn't stop there. "I absolutely loved sipping Irani chai in those cozy Hyderabad cafes. And all the dosas, idlies, chutneys, and podis here are just

mouth-watering. The city's food has a unique way of staying with you."

Kiran's path to becoming a storyteller was anything but conventional. "Back then, courses weren't as accessible as they are today," she recalls. "I completed my B.Sc. in Nutrition and applied for M.Sc., only to be told that I couldn't be admitted without an MBBS degree. It was a turning point—I had to decide on the go."

This unexpected hurdle led her to literature. "A neighbour encouraged me to study literature. I applied to the University of Hyderabad and topped the entrance test," she shares with pride.

Storytelling came later, but it was a natural fit for her. "I wanted to bring something unique to my storytelling. I started incorporating jingles, shank, ektara, duff and even a little bit of dance. My idea was simple: if I enjoy what I do, the audience will too."

She recalls a memorable moment when a senior storyteller praised her style. "They told me I had a unique way of telling stories, and the way I added dance made it all the more interesting. That encouraged me to keep evolving my craft."

One of her fondest memories is a storytelling session organised by Hyderabad's rock conservation team at Lotus Park in Banjara Hills. "The audience sat on the rocks and I stood below them, sharing my story. A month later, a parent approached me at another event. He told me his son, usually restless, had sat still for 45 minutes during my session. The child even developed a newfound love for rocks and started participating in conservation programs," she recalls with a smile.

Her love for Hyderabad extends beyond its food and events. "This city is one of the friendliest in India," she says. "People here are so open to experiences. In a profession like

storytelling, I've found immense support from the theatre community."

She's also received exciting projects in the city. "People have asked me to perform stories about *Dashavatara*, *Ithihasas* and *Puranas* for children of NRIs. Workshops and commissioned projects keep coming my way here," she shares.

Hyderabad's central location, rich cultural mix and pleasant weather add to its appeal. "You find people here mingling easily, regardless of language or food preferences. It's such a beautiful intermingling of cultures," she remarks.

For Deepa, Hyderabad's safety is another standout feature. "This city allows me to return home safely, even at 2 a.m.," she says. However, like every Hyderabadi, she admits to being frustrated by the traffic. "The roads can get really busy, but that's a small price to pay for living in such an incredible city."

Deepa Kiran's journey from a nutritionist to a storyteller is a testament to embracing change and finding joy in one's passion. Hyderabad, with its warmth and vibrancy, continues to inspire her as she weaves stories that leave a lasting impact.

B'wood's fresh faces who stole the show



ABHAY VARMA

Abhay Varma, who previously impressed audiences with his performances in web series, made a striking Bollywood debut this year. His lead role in the horror-comedy *Munjya* truly catapulted him into the limelight. Released in June 2024, *Munjya* became a commercial success, emerging as one of the highest-grossing Hindi films of the year. Varma's portrayal of the titular character was lauded for its charm and comedic timing, solidifying his status as a rising star in Bollywood.



JUNAID KHAN

Aamir Khan's son, Junaid Khan, took his first step into Bollywood with a compelling role that highlighted his dedication to the craft in *Maharaj*. Steering away from the glitz of being a star kid, Junaid opted for a project that allowed him to prove his acting chops. His subtle yet impactful performance resonated with audiences and critics alike, establishing him as an actor to watch.

2024 HAS BEEN A LANDMARK YEAR FOR BOLLYWOOD, WITH FRESH FACES BRINGING A WAVE OF TALENT, CHARISMA, AND PROMISE TO THE BIG SCREEN. THESE DEBUTANTS HAVE MADE A SIGNIFICANT IMPRESSION AND THEIR PERFORMANCES HINT AT A BRIGHT FUTURE IN THE FILM INDUSTRY. HERE'S A LOOK AT SOME OF THE MOST NOTABLE BOLLYWOOD DEBUTS OF THE YEAR.



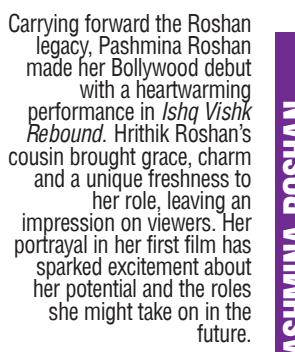
PRATIBHA RANTA

Pratibha Ranta made a remarkable breakthrough debut in 2024 with the film *Laapataa Ladies*, where she played the role of Jaya. This film, directed by Kiran Rao, has gained significant attention for its unique storytelling and Pratibha's portrayal has received praise for its depth and nuance. Her debut performance showcases her immense talent and sets the stage for a promising career in the industry.



ANJINI DHAWAN

Anjini Dhawan, niece of Bollywood actor Varun Dhawan, made her acting debut with the film *Binny and Family* in 2024. The film, which also stars Pankaj Kapur, Himani Shivpuri, Rajesh Kumar and Charu Shankar, had its theatrical release in September 2024. Following her debut, Anjini secured a role in Salman Khan's upcoming film *Sikandar*, set to release in 2025.



PASHMINA ROSHAN

Carrying forward the Roshan legacy, Pashmina Roshan made her Bollywood debut with a heartwarming performance in *Ishq Vishk Rebound*. Hrithik Roshan's cousin brought grace, charm and a unique freshness to her role, leaving an impression on viewers. Her portrayal in her first film has sparked excitement about her potential and the roles she might take on in the future.



LAKSHYA

In 2024, Lakshya made his Bollywood debut with the film *Kill*, directed by Nikhil Nagesh Bhat. The film is a high-octane action thriller that has been described as one of the most intense Indian movies to date. Lakshya's performance in *Kill* has been lauded for its depth and intensity, marking a significant milestone in his acting career.



NITANSHI GOEL

Nitanshi Goel, a 17-year-old Indian actress, made a remarkable Bollywood debut in 2024 with the film *Laapataa Ladies*, produced by Aamir Khan Productions. In the film, she portrayed the lead character, Phool Kumari, delivering a heartwarming performance that earned her critical acclaim. Her portrayal was so impactful that she received the IMDb Breakout Star Starmeter Award, becoming the youngest recipient of this award globally.

Platinum ring styles to wear now and for always

A shift in preferences: Why platinum?

The demand for platinum love bands has surged in recent years, driven by a new generation of buyers who value individuality and permanence. According to industry insights, platinum is increasingly favoured during not just weddings, but also to celebrate relationship milestones.

The reason for this is two-fold

Platinum is widely regarded as the ultimate symbol of love, celebrated for its rarity, purity and remarkable resilience. These qualities make it an exceptionally precious metal, often chosen to commemorate life's most significant milestones. Its natural white luster endures over time, maintaining its brilliance. This timeless appeal, coupled with the metal's intrinsic purity, makes platinum an ideal choice for rings that are worn daily, offering both luxury and practicality, while being gentle on the skin.

Further, its understated brilliance aligns perfectly with modern aesthetics

For weddings, platinum's strength and durability resonate deeply with the values of commitment and partnership. Many couples are choosing matching platinum wedding bands to symbolize their unity, while engagement rings set in platinum continue to be a popular choice for their ability to enhance the brilliance of diamonds and gemstones.

Marking milestones with platinum

Platinum love bands are not just for weddings. They are increasingly chosen to celebrate significant milestones such as anniversaries, promotions, and personal achievements. The versatility of platinum allows for a variety of styles, from minimalist designs to intricate motifs, catering to every individual's taste. One of the key reasons behind this trend is the emotional value associated with platinum. Its rarity—30 times rarer than gold—makes it a unique and meaningful gift. Platinum also stands out for its purity, with most jewellery crafted from 95% pure platinum, a higher standard than other precious metals.

Styles that endure

Platinum love band designs seamlessly blend contemporary trends with timeless appeal. Sleek bands with brushed or polished finishes are perfect for those who prefer minimalist styles, while intricate designs featuring

WHEN IT COMES TO CHOOSING JEWELLERY THAT IS AS ENDURING AS THE MEMORIES IT REPRESENTS, PLATINUM HAS BECOME THE PREFERRED CHOICE FOR MANY. FROM WEDDINGS AND FESTIVE OCCASIONS TO EVERYDAY WEAR, PLATINUM LOVE BANDS OFFER UNMATCHED VERSATILITY AND TIMELESS ELEGANCE. THE GROWING DEMAND FOR PLATINUM IS A TESTAMENT TO ITS APPEAL AS A SYMBOL OF STRENGTH, RARITY AND AUTHENTICITY





Gehis Immigration and International Legal Services announced the grand opening of its new office at Workafella Western Aqua in HITECCity – Coworking Space in Hyderabad. The opening ceremony took place at Hotel Taj Krishna in Banjara Hills, where the event marked the presence of Addanki Dayakar, TPCC General Secretary.



Puji Reddy



Samira



Dr. Laaksha



Sudha Jain



Megha

PARTY

Photos by - SV Chary



Eugenix Hair Sciences hosted an exclusive event, where Bollywood stalwart Boney Kapoor shared his remarkable hair restoration journey. The event, attended by its co-founders Dr. Pradeep Sethi and Dr. Arika Bansal, highlighted the transformative power of advanced hair transplant techniques.



Meridian School, Madhapur, hosted a prestigious two-day Training of Trainers (ToT) Certification Course, organised by CBSE in collaboration with ISTM, DoPT, Government of India. The program aimed to empower nominated resource persons with advanced training skills, fostering alignment with the NEP 2020 mandate of 50 hours of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for teachers and head teachers.

Urban Sketchers Hyderabad, comprising 400+ artists, is set to take place this weekend at T-Works, Raidurg. This exhibition marks a significant milestone—the 300th meetup of the group since its inception in 2017 by its founder M. Ishak Ziaee.



Muzigal launched its state-of-the-art music academy in JP Nagar, Miyapur (Hyderabad). The new academy was inaugurated by Indian Idol Violinist Kamakshi Ambatipudi.

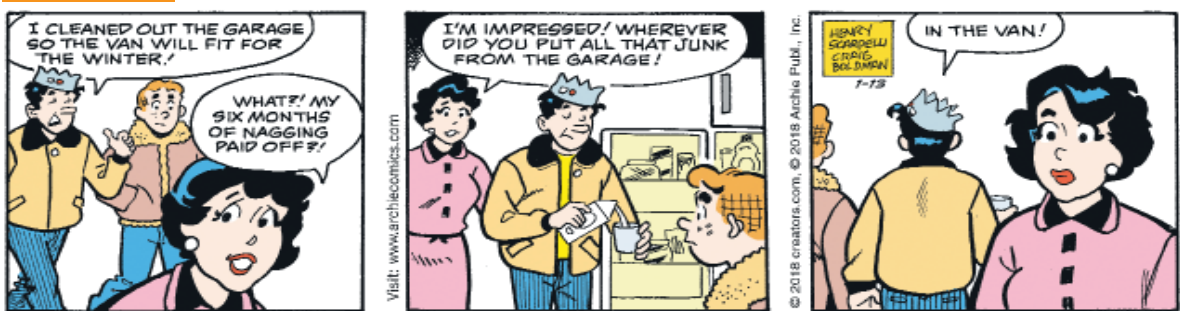
Tansen, an exquisite fine dining restaurant that highlights the rich culinary heritage of the North-Western Frontier has unveiled its handcrafted Winter Limited Edition Cocktail – "Tasneem Hayat", adding a sparkling touch to New Year's Eve celebrations. This winter, Tansen invites guests to savour the artistry of this exclusive cocktail, paired with the mesmerising strains of classical music. Combining exquisite flavours, soulful melodies, and the charm of a pink winter evening, Tasneem



Hayat promises a sensory journey that embodies the warmth and vibrance of the season.

FUN

ARCHIE



CALVIN AND HOBBS



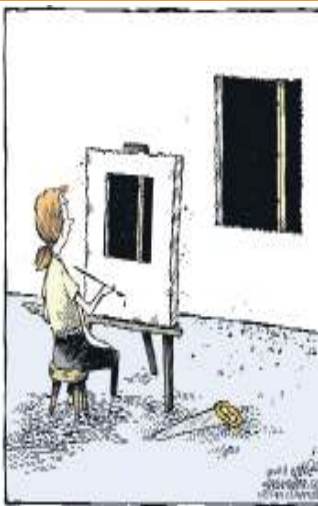
GARFIELD



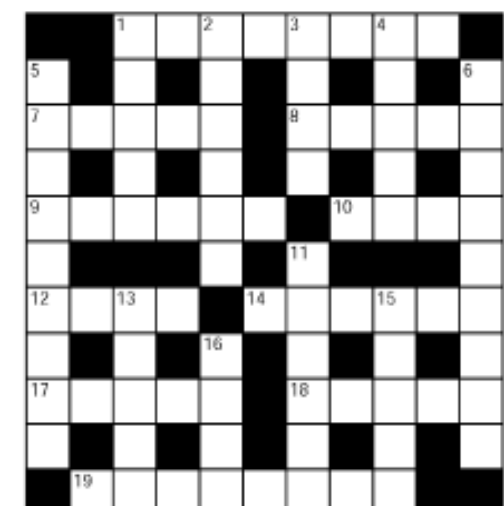
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SPEED BUMP



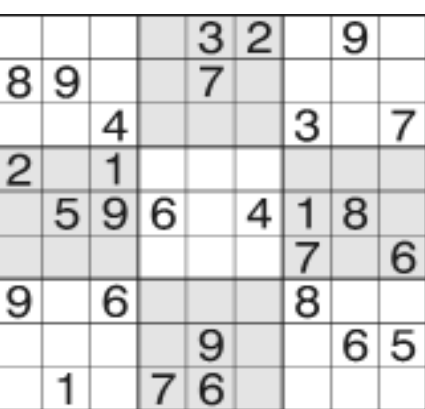
CROSSWORD



NANCY



SUDOKU



Yesterday's solution
3 8 2 4 9 5 1 6 7
4 6 7 3 1 2 5 9 8
5 1 9 8 7 6 2 4 3
8 7 6 9 5 3 4 2 1
9 4 1 6 2 8 3 7 5
2 3 5 7 4 1 9 8 6
6 5 4 2 3 7 8 1 9
7 2 3 1 8 9 6 5 4
1 9 8 5 6 4 7 3 2

Rules
• Each row and column can contain each number (1 to 9) exactly once.
• The sum of all numbers in any row or column must equal 45.

ACROSS

- 1 Replied
 - 2 Similar
 - 3 Jealousy
 - 4 One of the planets
 - 5 Exactly the same
 - 6 A small creature with many legs
 - 7 Part of a poem or song
 - 8 Required
 - 9 Closed
 - 10 Iranians live here
 - 11 Carry your money in this
 - 12 Higher than
 - 13 A body organ
 - 14 The number nothing
- DOWN**
- 1 Similar
 - 2 Worked out the solution to
 - 3 Jealousy
- SOLUTION**
- | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| F | L | A | T | T | E | N | S | |
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GINGER MEGGS



Thammareddy slams Allu Arjun; holds him responsible for industry's apology to CM

Producer and director, Thammareddy Bharadwaj, criticised Allu Arjun for the manner in which he went to watch *Pushpa 2*, accompanied by a huge convoy and waving to the public. He stated that because of this mistake, the entire industry is now bowing down before the Chief Minister with folded hands. He attributed the situation to one man's ego and error.

PNS|HYDERABAD

Producer and director Thammareddy Bharadwaj, known for his straightforward approach to addressing issues, has now spoken about the incident involving Allu Arjun and its repercussions on the film industry. He heavily criticised the actor's actions and how they have allegedly led the entire industry to bow down before the Chief Minister.

"Who is responsible and what circumstances have led to the industry now bowing down to a Chief Minister?" questioned Thammareddy Bharadwaj. He specifically criticised Allu Arjun for the way he went to watch *Pushpa 2*. Thammareddy expressed disapproval of the actor's decision to visit the theater with a massive convoy of cars and to wave to the crowds, calling it unnecessary.

"Earlier, many stars like Chiranjeevi, Nagarjuna and Balakrishna watched films quietly in multiplexes and returned home without any fanfare. But now, I don't know who advised Allu Arjun to watch a film in such a manner, especially at Sandhya Theatre, which is very congested. He didn't go silently. Messages were circulated on social media about his visit, and he created a huge commotion there," said Thammareddy on his YouTube channel.

The producer and director also criticised the people advising Allu Arjun, stating, "Even if they advised him, he should have

thought for himself before making such a decision. If he wanted to watch the film, he could have gone quietly before the screening started and left silently. Such incidents could have been avoided."

Allu Arjun mentioned in a media briefing, not long ago that he aims to take Telugu cinema to an international level but lamented that some people are not supporting him. Thammareddy criticised these remarks, saying, "Don't claim you made this film for the country. You made it for yourself. Many great films, like *Dangal*, have achieved massive success because they were genuinely good films. If you look at the story of *Pushpa 2*, the police officer, who is actually a good person in the film, is projected as the villain. His role is to catch the thief (Pushpa), but the narrative turns him into a villain."

Thammareddy also criticised the people surrounding the actor, stating, "They are giving him wrong advice. Today, the entire industry is standing before the Chief Minister with folded hands and this is all because of Allu Arjun's mistake. He didn't commit a crime like murder, but knowingly or unknowingly, he made a mistake during his roadshow."

"Fans show their love for you. They spend a lot of money on your films despite their financial struggles and are willing to do anything for you. Yet, you end up making mistakes that harm them. Whether this mistake was made on his own or due to someone's influence, I don't know, but it was a mistake. To cover up this mistake, he lied and now, because of his ego, the entire industry is facing problems in front of the Chief Minister," said Thammareddy. "For a single person's mistake, the entire industry is now suffering," he added.

Thammareddy further criticised the mentality of seeking publicity. "You earn money and if you want to help others, you can. If not, that's your choice. But you cannot harm people. When you feel the need to prove you are not a normal person through publicity stunts, these incidents occur. If you consider yourself a normal person, these situations can be avoided," he stated. He also raised concerns about bouncers and their handling of the public.

"I don't know how many of these bouncers are genuine or who certified them," questioned Thammareddy.

MEGA STAR' NO-SHOW AT INDUSTRY MEETING

On Thursday, Telangana Film Development Corporation Chairman Dil Raju led a delegation of the Telugu film industry to meet Chief Minister Revanth Reddy. Prominent film personalities such as K. Raghavendra Rao, Suresh Babu, Murali Mohan, K.L. Narayana, Shyam Prasad Reddy, Nagarjuna, Venkatesh and many others attended this meeting. However, the absence of Mega Star Chiranjeevi and any actor from the Mega family raised many eyebrows.

Reports suggest that Chiranjeevi was in Chennai on Thursday and therefore couldn't attend the meeting. There are also speculations that his absence was deliberate, as he chose not to be in Hyderabad to avoid attending the meeting. Adding to this, some reports claim that Chiranjeevi, rumoured to be leaning closer to the BJP, may have intentionally distanced himself from the Congress-affiliated Chief Minister of Telangana.

Interestingly, it wasn't just Chiranjeevi who was missing; no actor from the Mega family attended the meeting either. Sai Dharam Tej, known to have a good rapport with Chief Minister Revanth Reddy, was notably absent. Similarly, Ram Charan, Varun Tej, Vaishnav Tej and Nagababu were also missing, leaving the Mega family entirely unrepresented.

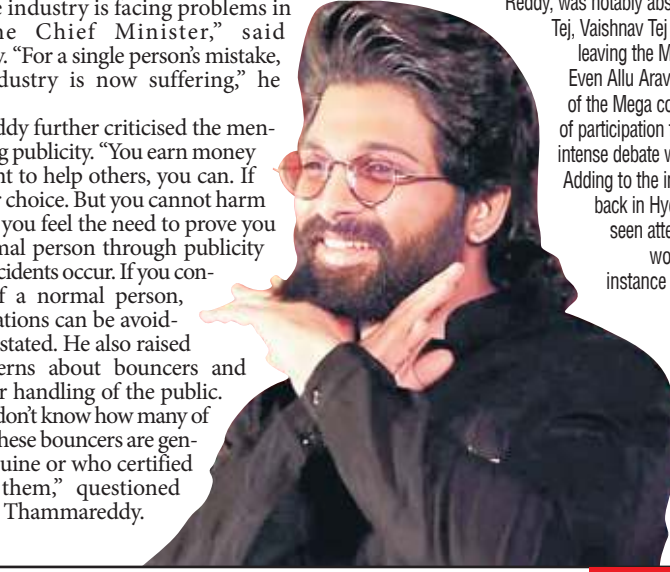
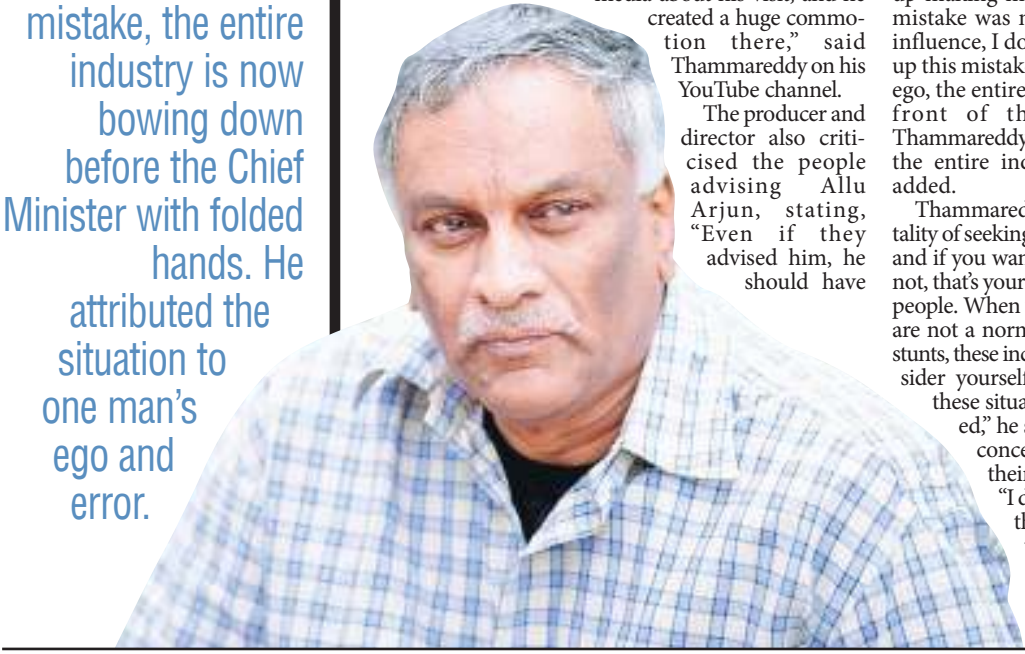
Even Allu Arjun, who is no longer seen as part of the Mega compound, did not attend. This lack of participation from the Mega family has sparked intense debate within the industry since Thursday. Adding to the intrigue, Chiranjeevi was reportedly back in Hyderabad on the same day and was seen attending a wedding that evening. It's worth noting that this is not the first instance where the Mega family's absence has raised questions. When Allu Arjun was released from Chanchalguda Jail and returned home, many industry members visited him to show their support. However, none of the Mega actors were among them, further highlighting the ongoing distance within the family.



ALLU ARJUN'S SUDDEN VISIT LEAVES CHIRU STUNNED

After his release from Chanchalguda Jail, Allu Arjun reportedly visited Chiranjeevi and Nagababu. "Chiranjeevi had no prior knowledge of Allu Arjun's visit. Arjun went directly to Chiranjeevi's house, leaving him with no option but to welcome him since he is his nephew," revealed a source close to Chiranjeevi. Interestingly, Allu Arjun arrived at Chiranjeevi's residence with media personnel and his PR team. He even drove himself and deliberately rolled down the car window to ensure everyone could see him at Chiranjeevi's house. "This act put Chiranjeevi in an embarrassing situation," the source added.

The same scenario unfolded at Nagababu's house. "Neither of the brothers had any clue about Allu Arjun's visit," said the source. However, the visits were strategically planned, as Allu Arjun aimed to convey the message that any differences between him and the Mega family has been resolved. "Chiranjeevi was genuinely shocked when Arjun showed up unannounced," the source further revealed. These developments have added to the ongoing speculations and discussions about the strained dynamics within the Mega family.



REVIEW

'Dream Catcher is a psychological thriller'

Another thriller is on the way to hit the screens on January 3. *Dream Catcher* is the title and it is directed and produced by Sandeep Kakula with Prashanth Krishna and Anesha Dama as the lead pair. It is a psychological thriller and the director says it gives something new to the audience.

"My dream was to make a film and this *Dream Catcher* started with the idea of creating a film about dreams. Hollywood films like *Inception* were my inspiration," said the director Sandeep Kakula. He wanted to attempt something at a Hollywood level with this one and he shot this film entirely in Hyderabad. "After seeing the trailer, people are asking where the film was shot. I can confidently say that no film based on dreams has been released in Telugu until now," said the director. He added in this film he didn't put any song or action scenes, as he focused only on the story. The director feels that he never wanted to release it on OTT. "I believe if we made a good film, it would be appreciated anywhere," he said.

Lead actor Prashanth Krishna said that director Sandeep called him for an audition for this film four years back. "He made this film with passion, involving everyone in the team. This film will give you a fresh experience as a psychological thriller," said Prashanth. After the trailer, he received compliments that he resembles Adivi Sesh and Rana. "They are both incredible actors and self-made stars. I'm happy to be compared to such talented and passionate actors," said Prashanth.



Jr NTR champions road safety in Andhra Pradesh

If you've watched Jr NTR's recent films, you might have noticed a heartfelt video about road safety and accident prevention that plays before the main feature begins. This message holds deep personal significance for the actor, as he lost both his elder brother, Janaki Ram and his father, Hari Krishna, in road accidents. Jr NTR frequently emphasises road safety, often requesting his fans at public events to drive safely and return home to their families.

Now, his impactful message has transcended cinema screens and reached the streets of Andhra Pradesh. In a pioneering initiative, the Andhra Pradesh government has adopted Jr NTR's iconic road safety message, incorporating it into traffic signals across the state. This poignant message, which plays at major intersections, serves as a vital reminder:

"Drive safe and don't speed, risking your life because your family is waiting for you. There have been a couple of tragedies in my family that claimed my father's and brother's lives. Such things should not happen to anyone. Be careful." This unprecedented move highlights the government's recognition of Jr NTR's influence and their trust in his ability to inspire change. The actor's sincere words now echo at major traffic signals, underscoring his role as not just a cinematic icon but also a voice of care and responsibility.



Drinker Sai feels like watching the Mukesh ad on repeat for two hours

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The year 2024 concluded with the release of a small film titled *Drinker Sai* on December 27. This film features upcoming actor Dharma Kakani in the lead role, while Aishwarya Sharma makes her debut as the female lead. Despite being a small-budget film, the makers promoted it well. Directed by debutant Kiran Tirumalasetti, the film attempts to deliver a message but falls short in execution. Here's a breakdown of the story and its performance.

Story:

Sai, also known as Drinker Sai (played by Dharma Kakani), is a wealthy young man who becomes alcoholic after the death of his parents. His days revolve around drinking incessantly, picking fights, and relying on his uncle (Srikanth Iyengar) to bail him out of trouble. One day, Sai is hit by the bike of a medical student, Bhagi (Aishwarya Sharma), who leaves the scene without much ado. Seeking revenge, Sai confronts her the next day, only to fall in love with her. However, Bhagi, disapproving of Sai's drinking habits, pretends to reciprocate his love. When Sai discovers that Bhagi doesn't actually love him, he is devastated. The rest of the story explores Sai's attempts to win Bhagi's love, the challenges he faces, and the lessons he learns.

Analyses:

Director Kiran Tirumalasetti presents a story that, while based on a real incident, offers nothing new or engaging. The narrative feels like an

extended version of the mandatory two-minute anti-smoking and anti-alcohol message that precedes every film. Unfortunately, the same message is stretched into a two-and-a-half-hour movie, with little innovation or depth. Rather than spending resources on this film, the makers could have opted for a social awareness campaign on the ill effects of smoking and drinking.

The first half of the film revolves around Sai's drinking habits and his growing infatuation with Bhagi. The plot is interspersed with songs and lackluster scenes, making it a tedious watch. The second half introduces the "Vanthena" episode, which is a spoof of Manthena Satyanarayana and his Nature Cure Hospital. These sequences are immature, uninspired and fail to generate any interest.

As anticipated, the film concludes with the predictable message: "Smoking and alcohol are injurious to health." While the intention is commendable, the execution is unimaginative, making the film an ordinary watch with a foregone conclusion.

Performances:

Dharma Kakani, in his second film, delivers a decent performance and looks handsome on screen. He exudes confidence and ease in his acting, indicating potential for a bright future. However, without a compelling story, his efforts feel underutilized. Aishwarya Sharma, as the female lead, performs well for a debutante but has significant room for improvement.

Srikanth Iyengar and Posani Krishna Murali offer notable performances, but their roles don't leave a lasting impact. Bhadrām's comedy

falls flat and adds nothing to the film, while the rest of the cast, including Rithu Chowdhary, have minimal roles.

Technical Aspects:

The film's music is subpar and fails to elevate the narrative. The cinematography is average, and the dialogues are unimpressive. Despite the efforts of the cast and crew, the overall technical execution lacks finesse.

Verdict:

Drinker Sai could easily have been a two-minute short film akin to "The Mukesh Story," but instead, it drags its message into a tedious two-and-a-half-hour runtime. The second half, particularly the "Vanthena" episode, is unnecessarily prolonged and monotonous. While the film aims to deliver a social message, it does so in an uninspired and predictable manner. The year 2024 ends on a dull note with this routine and forgettable film.

Cast: Kakani Dharma, Aishwarya Sharma, Posani Krishna Murali, SS Kanchi, Srikanth Iyengar, Bhadrām and others
Music director: Sri Vasanth
Cinematographer: Prashanth Anikreddy
Producers: Basavaraju Srinivas, Ismail Shaik and Basavaraju laharidhar
Director: Kiran Tirumalasetti
Rating: 1.5/5



India collapse after Jaiswal's terrible run-out on day two of the fourth Test

PTI MELBOURNE

A familiar collapse unfolded after Yashviji Jaiswal's inexplicable run-out as India stared down the barrel at 164/5 against a menacing Australia on day two of the fourth Test here on Friday. Jaiswal, who was quite fluent during his 118-ball stay that yielded 82 runs, was way short of his crease after a mix-up with Virat Kohli (36) while attempting a quick single, handing Australia the breakthrough that could prove decisive.

cricket showed its fickle nature as Jaiswal pushed towards mid-on and called for a quick single with an assured Kohli (36) at the other end. Kohli took a step and half before retreating. Pat Cummins swooped the ball and threw at the striker's end with a frustrated Jaiswal seen telling his idol "my call". This moment will be one for posterity as Kohli looked down and perhaps felt that he could have at least said a loud "No" to allow Jaiswal to sprint back. The run-out broke his concentration and for the first time after 85 balls, he poked a delivery bowled in the corridor of uncertainty and it was the end. Scott Boland repeated the dismissal that has been a norm for quite a while now. Akash Deep didn't have the technique to survive and the day ended in Australia's favour just like it started. The Jaiswal-Kohli pair had added 102 runs and looked comfortable just like they did in the Perth second innings. The ball hardly did anything after Rohit Sharma (3) played a poor shot and KL



Rahul got a ripper from Pat Cummins. Australian bowlers stamping his authority as the next megastar of Indian batting. Kohli, at the other end, endured boos for Thursday's run-in with debutant Sam Konstas and battled his demons. This was after Steve Smith's 34th

Test hundred ensured a very good total for hosts. Starting the day at 311 for 6, Smith added 112 and 44 runs with Cummins (49) and Mitchell Starc (15) respectively, leaving the visitors searching for back-up plans. Jasprit Bumrah (4/99 in 28.4 overs) was once again brilliant despite the first spell thrashing from Konstas but Mohammed Siraj's ordinary showing (0/122 in 23 overs) was the primary reason for batters not being under any pressure. Smith, who was unbeaten overnight on 68 off 111 balls, took another 56 deliveries in the second morning to complete a Test ton which placed him on even keel with the legendary Sunil Gavaskar (34). The century came with a push drive through the vacant cover region and celebrations were pretty muted with a just vigorous head nod for his teammates in the dug-out. Smith, who had a torrid run till the second Test of this series, played both days in contrasting styles. On Thursday, he was ready

to be patient and waited for deliveries at the expense of looking ugly. On Friday, the same batter was walking down the track to force the bowlers to alter their length. He was ready to pull and hook, getting two sixes off Bumrah and Siraj respectively. Despite a significant drop in temperature and some nip in the air, Indians failed to make use of the semi-new Kookaburra, with lines going all awry and length being short enough to be punished. Cummins was allowed to settle down and hit seven boundaries. The Indian ploy of playing two spinners backfired with Ravindra Jadeja (3/78 in 22 overs) and Washington Sundar (1/49 in 15 overs) never looking penetrative. For a change, Siraj didn't try and sledge an in-form batter, something that he did in Adelaide with some disastrous results. But that didn't soften the Australian supporters, who constantly booed him and Kohli as and when the ball went to them.



India whitewash West Indies 3-0

PTI VADODARA

Senior off-spinner Deepti Sharma did the star turn with career-best figures of 6/31 before doing her bit with the bat as India completed a 3-0 whitewash of the West Indies with a five-wicket victory in the final Women's ODI here on Friday. Having bowled out West Indies for 162 after Deepti's superlative performance and pacer Renuka Singh's (4/29) excellent show with the new ball, India recovered after a top-order wobble to reach the target of 163 in 28.2 overs. India were in a spot of bother at 73/4 but Deepti (39 not out in 48 balls) used all her experience to see the team through with plenty of overs remaining. S w a s h b u c k l i n g wicketkeeper-batter Richa Ghosh was unbeaten on an 11-ball 23 when the winning runs were scored. Skipper Harmanpreet Kaur, who eased nerves with two boundaries after last match century Harleen Deol's (1) dismissal left India at 23/2, blazed away to a 22-ball 32 before getting bowled by Afy Fletcher. During her breezy knock, Kaur smashed seven boundaries and looked good for a big one before getting dismissed. In-form opener Smriti Mandhana (4) departed early as Ashmini Munisar

completed a strange one-handed catch after appearing to have misjudged what should actually have been a straightforward catch off the bowling of Aaliyah Alleyne. Enjoying a good run of form in recent times, vice-captain Mandhana did not get to the pitch of the ball on the day and paid the price. One-down batter Deol followed suit, nicking for a Deandra Dottin delivery way outside off-stump and got a faint edge that was taken by wicketkeeper Shemaine Campbell. Middle-order batter Jemimah Rodrigues chipped in with 29 off 45 balls. Earlier, Renuka Thakur tormented West Indies with a fiery opening spell before Deepti got into the act to bowl out the visitors cheaply. Thakur and Deepti were relentless with the ball, taking all 10 wickets between them. Thakur's accurate line and length dismantled the top order, while Deepti deceived the West Indies batters with flight and guile, recording her third ODI five-wicket haul and second six-wicket performance. West Indies fought back with a 97-run partnership between Chinelle Henry (61) and Shemaine Campbell (46), helping them to cross 160. Without this stand, the visitors might have been bowled out for less than 100. Both batted really well and were aggressive against the spinners.

Tendulkar, Sindhu among sporting stars to pay tributes to Manmohan Singh

PTI NEW DELHI

Stalwarts of Indian sports paid rich tributes to former Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, who died on Thursday, describing him as a visionary, who had quiet strength and humility. Singh died here after losing consciousness at his home due to age-related ailments. He was 92. "Rest in peace, Dr. Manmohan Singhji. His quiet strength, wisdom, and humility were truly inspiring. I had a brief interaction with him in 2013 — he was kind, gracious, and left a lasting impression. My heartfelt condolences to his family," wrote India's ace shuttler Sindhu on X. Cricket great Sachin Tendulkar termed Singh's demise as a huge loss for the country. "Dr Manmohan Singh ji's demise is a profound loss for India. His contributions to our nation shall always be remembered. My prayers are with his family and loved ones as we mourn his passing away," Legendary golfer Jeev Milkha Singh recalled Singh's



simplicity and humility, saying he was committed to national duty all his life. "Dr Manmohan Singh was probably one of the most humble men I had met in my life - a simple and extremely intelligent man. His sense of duty and responsibility shone through. The world has lost a visionary," wrote Jeev. On Friday, both the men's and women's cricket teams wore black armbands during their respective national assignments to pay homage to the former PM. Earlier, World Cup-winning former cricketer Yuvraj Singh called Singh a "true statesman". A visionary leader and a true statesman who worked tirelessly for India's progress. His wisdom and humility will always be remembered. My heartfelt condolences to his loved ones," Yuvraj Singh posted on X. Similar sentiments were expressed by his former teammate and Aam Aadmi Party's Rajya Sabha member Harbhajan Singh, who described Singh as a thorough gentleman and visionary leader. "What truly set him apart was his calm and steady leadership in times of crisis, his ability to navigate complex political

landscapes, and his unwavering belief in India's potential," he wrote. It was during Singh's second term that India hosted the 2010 Commonwealth Games in the national capital. It was the first international multi-sport extravaganza to be held in the country after the 1982 Asian Games, also hosted by Delhi. He had also inaugurated the National Football League's 11th edition in Kolkata back in 2005 when late Congress leader Priya Ranjan Dasgupta was heading the All India Football Federation. Former wrestler Vinesh Phogat, who is now a Congress MLA in Haryana, called Singh a man of "extraordinary wisdom, simplicity and vision." "Dr. Manmohan Singh was not just a Prime Minister, but he was a thinker, economist and a true patriot. His calm leadership style and economic vision gave the country a new direction, from the 1991 economic reforms to establishing India's reputation on the global stage.



There's difference between being out of runs and out of form: Smith

PTI MELBOURNE

Australian batting mainstay Steve Smith always knew that he was "out of runs" but never "out of form" as he got back-to-back Test hundreds against India within a week of each other after 18 months of lull. Having scored his 33rd ton in Brisbane, Smith equalled Sunil Gavaskar's then world record of 34 hundreds on the second day of the fourth Test at the MCG on Friday. Asked how did he chug along all these days when big runs were not coming that easily, Smith dived deep into his inner core. "Sometimes you can be hitting the ball really nicely, which I think I said to all you guys when I wasn't scoring the runs. I actually felt like I was batting pretty well. And there's a difference, I think, between being out of form and out of runs. So, yeah, I thought I was hitting the ball nicely," Smith said at the day-end press conference here. "I mean, you've got to have faith. You've got to have a bit of trust in what you're trying to do. I've played the game for long enough now to know that you can have your ups and downs. Having some

faith and confidence," said the man, who is expected to get to 10,000 Test runs before the five-match series concludes. "I think you need a lot of luck on these wickets to get big runs as well, the ones we're playing at the moment. And last week I had my fair share. I think I got an umpire's call and got beaten on numerous occasions as to on other days, I would nick it. "So, yeah, you need a bit of luck. But you've just got to have faith that you're going to turn it around." Australia's batting was a lot more aggressive on the second day after resuming on overnight 311 for six but Smith said that while batting with Pat Cummins, there was no "general plan" as such. "There wasn't really a general plan. It was just go out there and play. Yeah, there wasn't a real plan. It was just go out and play and see what's going on. I thought Patty (Cummins) played really nicely. Really good, positive intent. "We were able to get a nice partnership together and take a bit of the momentum of the game from that point, I suppose."

Chennaiyin FC aim to return to winning ways

PTI CHENNAI

Chennaiyin FC will be aiming to rebound to winning form and finish the year on a positive note when they face Bengaluru FC in the Indian Super league here on Saturday. In the day's other game, Hyderabad FC will host East Bengal FC with an aim to turn things around and halt the visitors' momentum. Chennaiyin and Bengaluru have played each other 15 times in the ISL, with the former winning four matches. This corresponding fixture last year produced a 2-0 win for the Marina Machans and head coach Owen Coyle will be eyeing the same this time. However, the tactician will be without captain Ryan Edwards, who is suspended for the match, and is expected to field an all-Indian backline. Bengaluru come into the match as the



second-placed side in the league, and Coyle is wary of the threat they carry, especially with the team missing key personnel. On the availability front, Coyle confirmed that he will take late calls on Wilmar Jordan Gil and Ankit Mukherjee, both of whom are back in training after receiving knocks. The head coach also revealed that Elsinho, who left the pitch under medical care in the previous home match, is recovering in his native Brazil and will be rejoining the squad in the new year. Task cut out for HFC in Hyderabad This will be the ninth ISL meeting between the two sides, with East Bengal FC aiming to continue their recent dominance over Hyderabad FC. East Bengal FC have won their last two ISL matches against Hyderabad FC, including a league double in the 2023-24 season. Meanwhile, Hyderabad FC will look to bounce back after a disappointing run that has seen them lose their last five matches in the league on a trot. The Red & Gold brigade has managed a turnaround in the previous five matches, winning four of those clashes.

Arjun Erigaisi tied fifth after first day of World Rapid Chess Championship in New York

PTI NEW YORK

Indian Grandmaster Arjun Erigaisi opened his campaign with four wins and a solitary loss in the World Rapid Chess Championship to be tied fifth even as defending champion Magnus Carlsen endured a frustrating day, managing to log just one victory here. Carlsen of Norway could not find his mojo drew three games and a late loss against Russian Denis Lazavik. Another Indian to impress was 13-year-old Raunak Sadhwani, who provided glimpse of his promise by taking down one of pre-event favourites Alireza Firouzja of France on Thursday. With the first five rounds done and eight more still to come in USD 550,000 championship, Murzin Volodar of Russia, Shant Sargsyan of Armenia and the American duo of Daniel Naroditsky and Lenier Dominguez Perez share the lead on 4.5 points apiece. Arjun and Sadhwani are in the next group of 11 players who

share the fifth spot on four points each. It is an impressive list that includes the likes of Hikaru Nakamura of United States, Nodirbek Abdusattorov of Uzbekistan and Anish Giri of Holland. In the Women's section being played simultaneously, local star Alice Lee stole the opening day thunder with four straight victories in as many games. The American is challenged by world champion Wenjun Ju of China, her compatriot Zhongyi Tan, Gunay Mammadzada of Azerbaijan, Nino Batsiashvili of Georgia and India's D Harika who all have 3.5 points to their credit. With seven rounds to come in the women's event, R Vaishali could also among the ones to watch out for from an Indian perspective as the Chennai-based is on three points. Highest rated and former winner Koneru Humpy could manage only 2.5 points and has a lot of catching up to do in the remainder of the event. Arjun, if he wins this



championship, will be the first player to go through to the Candidates, a cycle that started early this year and will continue till December 2025. Currently the Indian stands

second behind Fabiano Caruana of United States who is on 3.5 points. He got things pretty much right except the sole defeat he suffered against Samuel Sevian of United States in the third round.

With four victories under his belt, Arjun can be a real threat. The day, however, belonged to Sadhwani who found his magical touch as early as in round two when he tackled Firouzja with the

black pieces. The position seemed headed to equal when Sadhwani punched his way back keeping an eye on a weak white pawn with his centralised knight. The knight darted through the board creating another hole on the king side that forced a resignation. Harika was the pick of the Indian women as she came up with a crushing victory against Nataliya Zhukova of Ukraine with the white pieces in her fourth-round game. Harika picked up pawns at will in a Queen and opposite coloured Bishops endgame and registered a smooth victory in a game that lasted 70 moves. The rapid event has a time control of 15 minutes for the entire game with 10 seconds added after each move is played. This will be followed by the blitz championship that will have three minutes for both players with just two seconds increment. The women's event is spread over 11 rounds while in the open section, 13 rounds will be played. In blitz, the top eight will qualify

and determine the medallists through a knockout stage. Standings after round 5 open: 1-4: Shant Sargsyan (Arm); Lenier Dominguez Perez (USA); Daniel Naroditsky (USA), Murzin Volodar (FID); 5-15: Arju Erigaisi, Raunak Sadhwani (both Ind); Javokhir Sindarov, Nodirbek Abdusattorov (both Uzb); Duda Jan-Krzysztof (Pol) Anish Giri (Ned); Levon Aronian, Hikaru Nakamura, Ray Robson, Samuel Sevian (ALL USA); NOgerbek Kazhybek (Kaz) 3.5 each Indians: V Pranav (3.5); R Praggnanandhaa (3); Aravinth Chithambaram (2); Kartik Venkatraman, Sandipan Chanda (1.5) each; Standings after round 4 Women: 1. 2-5 Alice Lee (USA, 4); 2-6: D Harika, (Ind); Nino Batsiashvili (Geo); Gunay Mammadzada (Aze); Wenjun Ju (Chn); Zhongyi Tan (Chn) 3.5 each; Indians: R Vaishali (3); Vantika Agarwal, Koneru Humpy (2.5 each); Sahiti Varshini, Divya Dushmukh (2 each); Padmini Routh (1.5).