

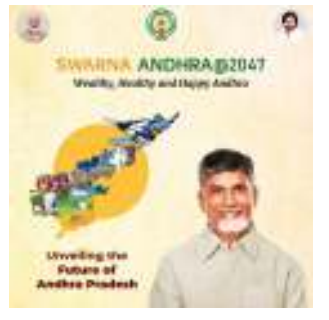


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VIJAYAWADA, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2024; PAGES 12 ₹4

RNI No.APENG/2018/76468
*LATE CITY VOL. 7 ISSUE 41
Established 1864

Published From:
VIJAYAWADA
HYDERABAD
DELHI LUCKNOW
BHOPL RAIPUR
CHANDIGARH
BHUBANESWAR
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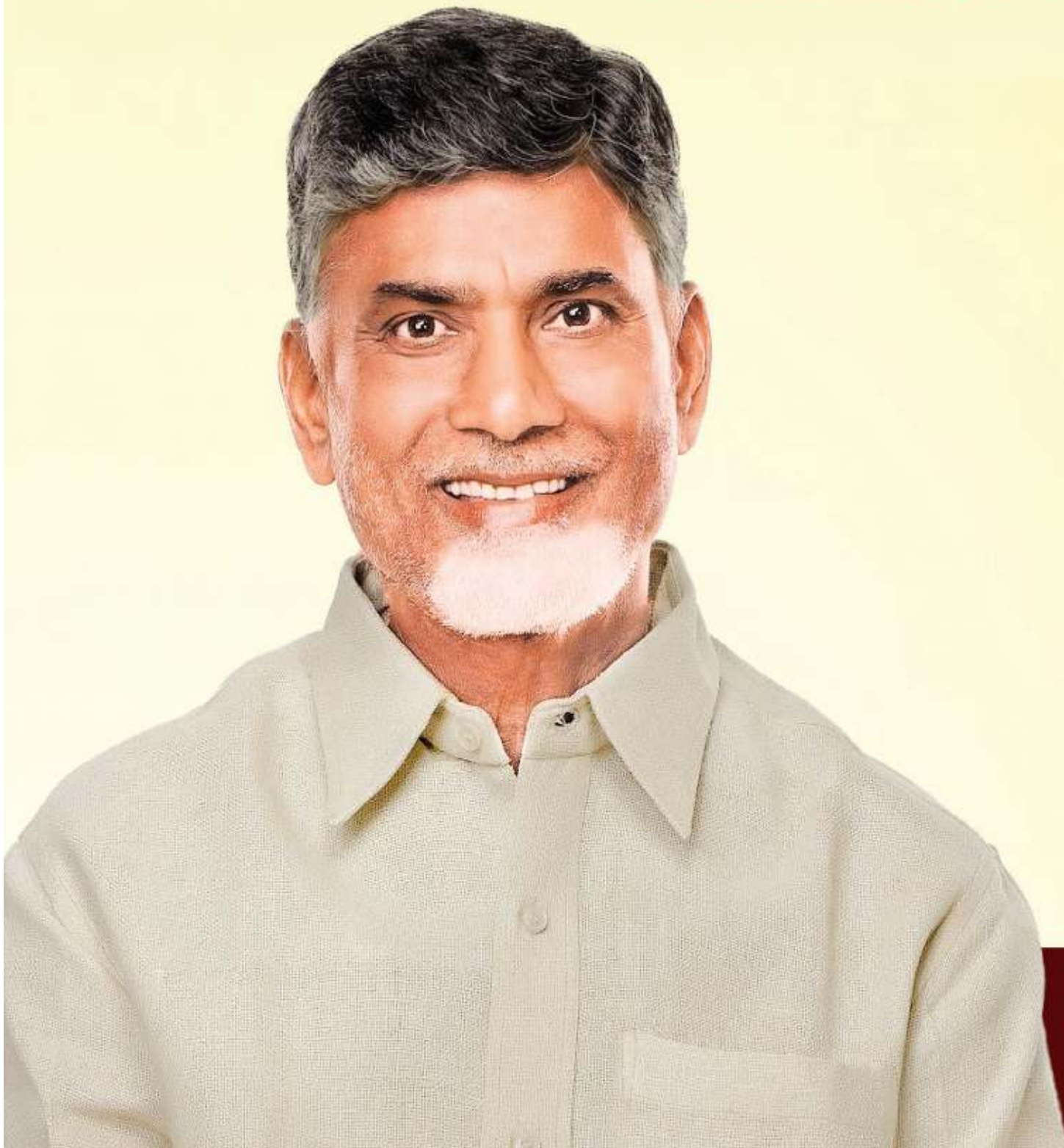


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Wealthy, Healthy and Happy Andhra

10 PRINCIPLES 1 VISION

JOIN US IN THE UNVEILING OF
A GOLDEN FUTURE



-  1. Zero Poverty
-  2. Employment
-  3. Skilling & Human Resources Development
-  4. Water Security
-  5. Farmer-Agri Tech
-  6. Global Best Logistics
-  7. Cost Optimisation-Energy & Fuel
-  8. Product Perfection
-  9. Swachh Andhra
-  10. Deep Tech-All Walks of Life

Date: 13-12-2024

Venue: Indira Gandhi Stadium, Vijayawada



Conclave on new tourism policy slated for Dec 17

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Minister for Tourism, Culture, and Cinematography, Kandula Durgesh, announced that a tourism investors' conclave will be held in Vijayawada on December 17 in response to requests from legislators and investors. Speaking on the second day of the collectors' meeting at the Secretariat in Amaravati, Minister Durgesh emphasized that the conclave would provide a comprehensive overview of the state's new tourism policy and the implementation of the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model.



The event will serve as a platform to engage with investors and understand their interests, focusing on shaping future tourism initiatives. District collectors will be specially invited, as their insights and suggestions are considered crucial for tourism development in the state.

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Minister Durgesh also expressed his gratitude to Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu for granting industry status to the tourism sector at his request, highlighting the significance of this recognition for the sector's growth. He also praised the efforts of the state leadership in securing funds for key tourism projects, such as Akhanda Godavari and Gandikota, through the "SASCI-2024-25" scheme during a recent visit to Delhi by Chief Minister Naidu and

Deputy Chief Minister Pawan Kalyan. In his address, Durgesh noted that over the past six months, various Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) had proposed tourism development plans for different districts. He reiterated that the upcoming conclave would help gauge investor interest and align future projects with their expectations. Looking ahead, Durgesh stressed the importance of collaboration between the central government, the PPP model, and potentially the Public-Private-Partnership (P4) model to create a solid roadmap for the state's tourism sector. The minister expressed confidence that these efforts would pave the way for sustainable tourism development in Andhra Pradesh.

HM Anitha puts officials on high alert as rain threat looms over AP

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Minister for Home and Disaster Management, Vangalapati Anitha, has issued a public advisory urging citizens to stay alert due to heavy rainfall caused by the formation of a depression over the Bay of Bengal. The minister specifically highlighted areas in Tirupati district, including Tirumala and Sullurupeta, which are expected to experience substantial rainfall and flooding.



Minister for Home and Disaster Management, Vangalapati Anitha, has issued a public advisory urging citizens to stay alert due to heavy rainfall caused by the formation of a depression over the Bay of Bengal. The minister specifically highlighted areas in Tirupati district, including Tirumala and Sullurupeta, which are expected to experience substantial rainfall and flooding.

Speaking on the situation, Minister Anitha called on administrative authorities to be on high alert and urged residents to take necessary precautions, particularly in flood-prone and landslide-prone areas. She advised devotees travelling on ghat roads and motorists to exercise extreme caution due to the inclement weather.

The Home Minister emphasised the need for proactive measures in low-lying areas like Lakshimpuram Junction and Gollavanigunta, where flash flooding has already been reported. She directed the district administration to coordinate evacuation efforts to ensure that residents are safely moved to safer locations, preventing any loss of life or property. In addition, she instructed the Disaster Management Department to issue timely alerts to farmers, shepherds, and fishermen through phone calls and text messages, informing them of potential risks and safety precautions. Anitha also drew attention to the rapidly flowing waters at Malwadi Gundam waterfall in Tirupati and the release of water from sluice gates in Sullurupeta and Kalangi, urging nearby residents to remain vigilant.

The Home Minister stressed the importance of continued vigilance and cooperation from both authorities and citizens to minimize the impact of the ongoing weather conditions. Former ministers Ambati Rambabu and Merugu Nagarajuna, MLC Lella Appi Reddy, and Guntur Mayor K Manohar Naidu were present during the meeting.

Blow to YSRCP...

Continued from Page 3

His departure follows a series of high-profile exits from the party, suggesting potential deeper rifts. Meanwhile, in West Godavari, former MLA Grandhi Srinivas also resigned from the party, citing personal reasons. Srinivas, who had gained prominence by defeating Jana Sena leader Pawan Kalyan in the 2019 elections, further distanced himself from active politics following his defeat in the 2024 elections. Despite early speculation that he would be inducted into Jagans Cabinet, Srinivas never received a post, which contributed to his dissatisfaction. His decision to quit comes just a day before the party's proposed dharna to address farmers' issues. Close associates have hinted that he may join the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) soon, a move that would be a significant development in West Godavari politics.

These resignations mark a turbulent period for YSRCP, with analysts closely watching whether they signal broader unrest within the party. His decision to quit comes just a day before the party's proposed dharna to address farmers' issues. Close associates have hinted that he may join the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) soon, a move that would be a significant development in West Godavari politics.

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Opposition raises concerns...

Continued from Page 3

Minister of State for Agriculture Bhagirath Chaudhary welcomed the move and said, "One nation, one election will be good for the nation. It will help in saving people's money." He also dismissed the reservations expressed by opposition, and said, "they are in a habit to oppose everything." BJP's ally Lok Janshakti Party (RV) MP Shambhavi Choudhary also welcomed the move. "This is an ambitious bill, LJP has supported it... Every six months there is election in some state and leaders focus on that. Many times representatives are also not able to give time in Parliament, resources are wasted," she said. "One Nation one election sounds good, if the nation can go in that direction, nothing like it. But what is the reality? Is the Election Commission ready for it? Do we have enough forces, infrastruc-

ture?" Shiv Sena (UBT) MP Anil Desai said. "J&K, and Haryana elections could have been held together with Maharashtra but it was not done. Even the Jharkhand election was held in two phases... If government has some solution it can be discussed, but in present situation it does not appear they can do it," Desai said. Congress Lok Sabha member K Suresh said his party has already made its stand clear, and it is opposed to simultaneous polls. "Our party has already cleared our stand from the beginning, our stand has not changed. We are opposing it. Entire opposition is opposing it," he said. CPI(M) Rajya Sabha member John Brittas said it is against the federal spirit of the country. "One nation, one election, is part of their slogan 'one leader, one country, one ideology, one language...' It's against the federal spirit of the country," he said.

He explained that if works are carried out for 100 days, funds for material components would be released, enabling faster completion of projects. Chandrababu Naidu also announced that Rs 2,000 crore has already been released through the 15th Finance Commission for gram panchayats and that another Rs 1,100 crore would be released soon. The Chief Minister pointed out that nearly 80,000 km of rural roads already exist and directed the collectors to take steps to interlink major panchayat roads. Expressing satisfaction with the development of internal roads in rural areas, the Chief Minister stressed that it is the responsibility of panchayats to provide essential amenities such as CC roads, drains, streetlights, drinking water, and toilets. He criticized the previous government's neglect of the Jal Jeevan Mission scheme and praised the TDP-led NDA government for reviving these works.

Ensure pensions to...

Continued from Page 3

Chandrababu Naidu also urged collectors to take steps to empower women in DWCR (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas) groups, promoting them as entrepreneurs. He emphasized that while members of self-help groups have been limited to savings, securing bank loans, and managing small businesses, it is now time to elevate them to entrepreneurial roles.

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TODAY

ALMANAC

Month & Paksham: Sukla Paksha

Tithi: Trayodashi: Dec 12 10:26 PM to Dec 13 07:40 PM

Chaturdashi: Dec 13 07:40 PM to Dec 14 04:58 PM

Nakshatram: Trayodashi: Dec 12 10:26 PM to Dec 13 07:40 PM

Chaturdashi: Dec 13 07:40 PM to Dec 14 04:58 PM

Rahukalam: 10:48 AM to 12:10 PM

Yamagandam: 2:55 PM to 4:17 PM

Varjyam: 08:32 PM to 10:00 PM

Gulika: 8:03 AM to 9:25 AM

Amritakalam: 03:36 AM to 05:03 AM

Abhijit Muhurtham: 11:48 AM to 12:32 PM

VIJAYAWADA WEATHER

Forecast: Partly Cloudy

Temp: 32°

Humidity: 61%

Sunrise: 6:27 AM

Sunset: 5:36 PM

Updated: December 12, 2024 5:00 PM

Minister Lokesh unveils vision to revitalise AP's education sector

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Minister for Education, IT, and Electronics Nara Lokesh has announced a comprehensive plan to reform Andhra Pradesh's education sector over the next five years, focusing on infrastructure improvements and academic outcomes. Speaking at the Collectors' Conference held at the Secretariat, he emphasised the need to create an "AP Model Education System."

The Minister stressed the importance of increasing enrolment in government schools and achieving zero dropouts. He directed officials to align infrastructure development with academic performance, adding that district-wise progress report cards would track improvements. A 100-day action plan has been initiated to ensure a focused approach.



improvements. The Minister also announced a large-scale campaign against substance abuse, titled Drugs Vaddu Bro (No Drugs Bro). Schools and colleges will establish "Eagle Teams" and clubs to create awareness about the dangers of drugs. Further, a curriculum overhaul from Kindergarten to Post-Graduation (KG to PG) is underway. Lokesh acknowledged challenges in implementing the Aadhar ID system and urged officials to resolve technical glitches to minimise inconvenience to parents.

With these initiatives, the Minister affirmed the government's commitment to transforming the education sector in the State. In higher education, he highlighted concerns about hostel facilities, sanitation, and dining arrangements, which have drawn complaints. A feedback mechanism will be introduced to address these issues, with weekly reviews to ensure timely monitoring quality and nutritional standards.

Highlighting the shortcomings of the past five years, the Minister stressed the importance of increasing enrolment in government schools and achieving zero dropouts. He directed officials to align infrastructure development with academic performance, adding that district-wise progress report cards would track improvements. A 100-day action plan has been initiated to ensure a focused approach. Minister Lokesh also urged district collectors to prioritise the mid-day meal programme, ensuring nutritious and locally tailored meals for children. Collectors were tasked with

monitoring quality and nutritional standards. In higher education, he highlighted concerns about hostel facilities, sanitation, and dining arrangements, which have drawn complaints. A feedback mechanism will be introduced to address these issues, with weekly reviews to ensure timely

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MP Sivanath urges Centre to release Rs 1,100 cr pending flood relief aid

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Vijayawada MP Kesineni Sivanath (Chinni) has called upon Union Home Minister Amit Shah to expedite the release of Rs 1,100 crore in pending flood relief funds for Andhra Pradesh, following the devastating floods in Vijayawada in September.



Prioritise job creation, Collectors told

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu, on Thursday, directed district collectors to prioritise attracting industries to create jobs in their respective districts. He emphasised that the primary goal of the State Government is to generate 20 lakh jobs.

Expressing gratitude to the Union government for its timely aid during the disaster, the MP highlighted the negligence of the previous government in managing the city's drainage systems, which contributed to the flooding. The floods left over 300,000 people displaced and submerged vast stretches of agricultural land. Sivanath supported the Disaster Management (Amendment) Bill 2024 in the Lok Sabha, emphasising the need for the creation of Urban Disaster Management Authorities (UDMAs) in cities to better handle such crises in the future. He also pointed out

the significant increase in the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) from 2015 to 2023, which now totals approximately Rs 1 lakh crore. The MP praised Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah for their leadership in strengthening disaster management efforts, with a special focus on addressing environmental changes, extreme weather events, and reducing disaster risks. He stressed the importance of having a national and state-level centralised disaster database to improve mapping,

response, and mitigation strategies. Sivanath further advocated for the establishment of UDMAs in urban areas and urged Parliament members and public representatives to play an active role in enhancing disaster management strategies, citing successful models from countries like Japan.

Speaking on the concluding day of the district collectors' conference, the Chief Minister instructed collectors to focus on securing investments that lead to employment generation. He asked them to present detailed reports on the progress made in this regard at the next conference. Expressing dissatisfaction over the lack of efforts to attract investments in some districts, the Chief Minister specifically pointed out that Chittoor and Alluri Seetharama Raju districts had not conducted any meetings to invite investors. He urged collectors to expedite works related to the "Speed of Doing Business" initiative.

Concluding his speech, the Vijayawada MP stated that his first address in Parliament would focus on the flood-related damages in his constituency and contribute towards resolving the issue.

Concluding his speech, the Vijayawada MP stated that his first address in Parliament would focus on the flood-related damages in his constituency and contribute towards resolving the issue.

ADB approves Rs 15,000 cr loan

AMARAVATI PROJECT

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved a loan of Rs 15,000 crore for the development of Amaravati as the capital of Andhra Pradesh. The approval was announced by AP Capital Region Development Authority (CRDA) Commissioner Katamaneni Bhaskar at the Collectors' Conference on Thursday.



Under the agreement, ADB will provide Rs 8,000 crore for building key infrastructure in Amaravati, including trunk infrastructure, a government complex, and neighbourhood development. The funds will also benefit farmers involved in the land pooling scheme. Chief Minister N

Chandrababu Naidu welcomed the approval and reaffirmed the government's commitment to making Amaravati a world-class capital. He said that the funds would be crucial for the city's development and instructed officials to use the resources effectively to speed up the construction process. Bhaskar also mentioned that the fund release process would begin in December, with the first tranche of 25% of the Rs 8,000 crore loan being allocated. He added that Amaravati would receive a total of Rs 16,000 crore in loan assistance, with

equal contributions from both the World Bank and ADB. The World Bank is also expected to approve its loan agreement for Amaravati in its board meeting on December 19. Afterwards, the central and state governments, along with representatives from the World Bank and ADB, will sign the agreement, and the fund release process will begin. In related news, Bhaskar pointed out that the previous government had allocated house sites to over 50,000 beneficiaries from nearby districts within Amaravati's R5 Zone. However, the current government has decided to allocate house sites to these beneficiaries in their respective districts, restoring Amaravati's original geographical boundaries for development.

Joint task force to...

Continued from Page 3

She suggested that better coordination between the Revenue and Home Departments would aid in resolving these issues. Responding to this, the Chief Minister directed the formation of Joint Task Force Committees comprising district Collectors, SPs, RDOs, and DSPs. These committees will handle land disputes, with strict action promised against those found guilty of any wrongdoing. "A sense of accountability and fear of consequences must be instilled among those involved in land disputes," the CM stated.

house pattas issued under the Jaganna Illu scheme, emphasising the removal of ineligible beneficiaries. Anagani's directions on 22A lands

Revenue Minister Anagani Sathya Prasad urged district Collectors to meticulously examine cases related to 22A lands. He clarified that these include not only endowment lands but also other categories, requiring individual case reviews. He suggested involving legal advocates in revenue meetings to resolve legal complaints promptly. The Minister emphasised that the outcomes of Revenue Sadassulu meetings should be issued as speaking orders. He also called for resolving issues concerning crop and agricultural insurance in lands that have undergone re-survey. Collectors were instructed to address these matters promptly to benefit the affected farmers.

The Chief Minister also warned officials against creating false documents or engaging in malpractice, asserting that disciplinary action would be taken against them. He further instructed a review of all

Gukesh scripts...

Continued from Page 3

Gukesh had entered the match as the youngest ever challenger to the world crown after winning the Candidates tournament earlier this year. He is the second Indian after the legendary Viswanathan Anand to win the global title. Anand, a five-time world champion, had last held the title in 2013 before going down to Magnus Carlsen. "Every chess player wants to live this dream. I am living my dream," said Gukesh. Gukesh, who won the 14th game against Liren after 58 moves in four hours, is the 18th world chess champion overall.

Cabinet nod...

Continued from Page 3

The sources said the government also wants to consult the speakers of various state legislative assemblies through the committee. Moving ahead with its "one nation, one election" plan, the government in September accepted the recommendations of the high-level committee for holding simultaneous polls for the Lok Sabha, state assemblies and local bodies in a phased manner. In its report submitted to the government in March, just before the general election was announced, the panel recommended implementing "one nation, one election" in two phases.

es. While the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies are pushing for simultaneous polls, several opposition parties have opposed the idea. The government is of the view that simultaneous polls will reduce expenditure in the long run and different parts of the country will not be under the Model Code of Conduct throughout the year due to various polls. Simultaneous polls were held in the country between 1951 and 1967. The concept of simultaneous elections has featured in many reports and studies since 1983, essentially implying a return to the previous practice of conducting polls concurrently.

I am just living my dream...

Continued from Page 3

"I got a bit emotional because I was not expecting to win. But then I got a chance to press on," he added. "I've been dreaming about this and living this

moment since I was 6 or 7. Every chess player wants to live this moment. I'm living my dream. I'd like to thank God from candidates till the championship."

real world champion. He fought like a true champion and I'm sorry for Ding and team. I would like to thank my opponent," Gukesh said. Regarding his parents' contributions, Gukesh said, "The dream of winning world chess championship is bigger for them than for me."

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QUOTE OF THE DAY
The pioneer

There will be a Cabinet expansion towards the end of December. The government enrolled 2.32 lakh applications via the Indiramma Indlu app. The government will provide houses to all beneficiaries, though there could be some delay. The government will restore the VROs and VRAs system in the villages again.

- Ponguleti Srinivas Reddy, Minister, Telangana

P5

GNPA of PSBs declines to 3.12% from 14.58%:
FinMin

FROM LONDON

TO SPAIN, SOUNDARYA SHARMA'S 'FUN' EUROPEAN ESCAPE

Sai Pallavi to sue rumour

MONGERS

DON'T MISS...

Heavy rain lashes Tirumala

Under the influence of the low pressure area in the Bay of Bengal, heavy rain lashed the famous hill shrine of Tirumala on Thursday, causing severe hardship for thousands of pilgrims on the hill. The downpour led to many pilgrims being stranded at various locations, with some taking shelter in sheds as they could not reach their cottages. Roads leading to Papavinasanam and Srivari Padalu were closed due to water overflow. Boulders fell on the second ghat road at Harini, but TTD (Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams) staff quickly cleared the...

-PAGE: 4

'Previous govt misused relief funds'

Eluru MP Putta Mahesh Kumar accused the previous YSRCP government of misusing disaster relief funds and failing to support the public during natural calamities. Speaking in the Lok Sabha during a discussion on the Disaster Management Amendment Bill 2024, MP Mahesh Kumar criticised the YSRCP regime for neglecting developmental issues, particularly the Budameru drainage system, which he claimed led to the severe flooding in Vijayawada during September rains. He lauded former Chief Minister...

-PAGE: 5

India, UK talks on trade pact may start soon

India and the UK are expected to hold the next round of talks for a proposed free trade agreement (FTA) in January to resolve the pending issues and close the negotiations, a senior official said on Thursday. The talks for the proposed FTA began in January 2022. The 14th round of talks stalled as the two nations stepped into their general election cycles. In November, an official statement said that the dates for the FTA talks in early 2025 would be finalised through diplomatic channels. The negotiations would...

-PAGE: 8

Rohit must return to opening: Shastri

Former India head coach Ravi Shastri, who knows a thing or two about winning Test rubbers in Australia, on Thursday asked India skipper Rohit Sharma to return to the opening slot "if he has to throw the first punch" on an opponent brimming with confidence. Shastri was serving as team director when India won their maiden Test series in Australia in 2017-18 and was the head coach when the side rallied brilliantly to stun the hosts in the last tour in 2020-21. The move to slot Rohit at number six did not...

-SPORTS



- Born on May 29, 2006, in Chennai, D Gukesh hails from a Telugu family.
- The succession line of world champions in chess is now 18-men-long dating back to 1886. It has names like Bobby Fischer, Garry Kasparov, Viswanathan Anand, and Magnus Carlsen among them. But no one was a teenager when they became a world champion

Gukesh scripts history

Becomes youngest world chess champion

PNS ■ SINGAPORE

Indian Grandmaster D Gukesh on Thursday became the youngest world chess champion at 18 years after beating title-holder Ding Liren of China in the 14th and last game of a roller-coaster showdown that went right down to the wire. Gukesh secured the requisite 7.5 points as against 6.5 of Liren after winning the last classical time control game of the 14-game match that seemed headed for a draw for most part. As title winner, he will get a major share of the USD 2.5 million prize purse.

"I was dreaming this moment for the last 10 years. I am happy that I

realised the dream (and made it) into reality," the soft-spoken Chennai-lad told reporters after the historic triumph here.

"I got a bit emotional because I was not expecting to win. But then I got a chance to press on," he added.

The reticent teenager grinned widely and raised his arms in celebration after the triumph, a stark contrast from the poker face he usually sports while playing.

Before Gukesh's feat on Thursday, the legendary Garry Kasparov of Russia was the youngest world champion when he won the title at the age of 22, dethroning Anatoly Karpov in 1985. **Continued on Page 2**

I am just living my dream: Gukesh

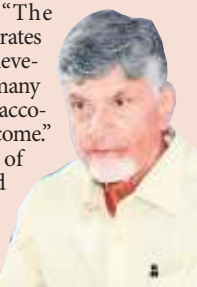
SINGAPORE: "I am just living my dream," said newly-crowned world chess champion D Gukesh on Thursday, his unassuming persona shining through even after a history-scripting performance that made him the youngest ever to achieve the triumph. "I was dreaming this moment for last 10 years. Happy I realised this dream," Gukesh said after his incredible victory. **Continued on Page 2**

A PROUD MOMENT FOR INDIA:CM

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu extended his heartfelt congratulations to D Gukesh for achieving the remarkable feat of becoming the world's youngest chess champion. In a message on Thursday, the Chief Minister praised the young talent, saying, "Hearty congratulations to our very own Telugu boy, Indian Grandmaster D Gukesh, for scripting history in Singapore by becoming the world's youngest chess champion at just 18."

Naidu added, "The entire nation celebrates your incredible achievement. Wishing you many more triumphs and accolades in the years to come." The achievement of Gukesh, a proud moment for India, has been widely lauded across the country.



HISTORIC AND EXEMPLARY: PM

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Prime Minister Narendra Modi Thursday congratulated D Gukesh on becoming the youngest world chess champion and said his triumph has not only etched his name in the annals of chess history but has also inspired millions of young minds to dream big and pursue excellence.

Gukesh became the youngest world chess champion at 18 years after beating title-holder Ding Liren of China in the 14th and last game of a roller-coaster showdown that went right down to the wire. Gukesh secured the requisite 7.5 points as

against 6.5 of Liren after winning the last classical time control game of the 14-game match that seemed headed for a draw for the most part. As the title winner, he will get a major share of the USD 2.5 million prize purse. In a post on X, Modi said, "Historic and exemplary! Congratulations to Gukesh D on his remarkable accomplishment. This is the result of his unparalleled talent, hard work and unwavering determination."

"His triumph has not only etched his name in the annals of chess history but has also inspired millions of young minds to dream big and pursue excellence. My best wishes for his future endeavours," the prime minister said.



RGUKT S'kulam student dies by suicide

PNS ■ SRIKAKULAM

In a tragic incident, a first-year Civil Engineering student at RGUKT in Srikakulam, Praveen Nayak, lost his life after jumping from the third floor of his hostel on Wednesday night. Despite immediate medical attention at Srikakulam RIMS Hospital, he succumbed to his injuries.

The incident has sent shockwaves through the campus, with the college management and local authorities expressing deep sorrow. Prof. KVG D Balaji, the institute's director, pledged full cooperation with the police investigation, while the local police are exploring all possible angles to determine the cause of the tragic event. State officials, including

Agriculture Minister Atchannaidu and ST Commission Chairman Dr. DVG Shankara Rao, have expressed their condolences and called for a thorough investigation. Dr. Shankara Rao visited the campus to meet with college management and district officials, emphasising the need for preventive measures to avoid such heartbreaking incidents in the future.

Cabinet nod to bills for simultaneous polls

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The Union Cabinet on Thursday approved two bills, including one to amend the Constitution to implement "one nation, one election", and the draft legislations are likely to be introduced in Parliament in the ongoing winter session, sources said.

As of now, the Cabinet has given its nod to draft legislations to hold simultaneous polls to the Lok Sabha and legislative assemblies only, the sources said. While a high-level committee led by former president Ram Nath Kovind had also proposed holding the municipality and panchayat polls along with the national and state elections in a phased manner, the Cabinet has decided to stay away, "as of now", from the manner in which local body elections are conducted.

The Constitution amendment bill to hold simultaneous polls to the Lok Sabha and state assemblies will not require ratification by at least 50 per cent of the states, the sources noted.

Another Constitution bill proposed by the Kovind panel was aimed at creating provisions to hold simultaneous elections to municipalities and panchayats, along with the elections to the Lok

Sabha and state legislative assemblies, by inserting a new Article 324A.

It would have required ratification by half of the state assemblies.

But the Union Cabinet has kept the local body polls out as of now.

The decision was taken at a meeting of the Union Cabinet chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The second bill will be an ordinary one to amend provisions in three laws dealing with Union territories that have legislative assemblies -- Puducherry, Delhi and Jammu and Kashmir -- to align the terms of these Houses with other legislative assemblies and the Lok Sabha as proposed in the Constitution amendment bill.

The statutes it proposes to amend are the Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi Act-1991, the Government of Union Territories Act-1963 and the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act-2019.

The proposed bill will be an ordinary legislation not requiring a change in the Constitution and will also not need ratification by the states. The government is keen on holding wider consultations on bills that are likely to be referred to a parliamentary committee.

Continued on Page 2



Opposition raises concerns, BJP defends

NEW DELHI: Opposition parties on Thursday raised concerns over bills cleared by the government for holding simultaneous elections and said larger consultations are required while ruling NDA leaders asserted the burden on the exchequer will be lessened.

The Union Cabinet approved bills to implement 'One Nation, One Election' and sources said the draft legislations are likely to be introduced in Parliament in the ongoing Winter session. Opposition MPs questioned if the country is logistically ready to hold simultaneous elections, pointing out that recent polls in Maharashtra and Jharkhand could not be held together with that in Haryana and Jammu and Kashmir.

Continued on Page 2

Ensure pensions to all eligible people: CM Naidu

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu on Thursday directed district collectors to ensure that all eligible individuals receive social security pensions, while ineligible beneficiaries are removed from the current list.

Chairing the second and final day of the collectors' conference, the Chief Minister emphasized the need for physical verification using both technical and hybrid systems to identify and remove ineligible individuals from the list. He also stressed that irregularities in the issuance of Sadaram certificates to differently-abled individuals must be completely avoided.

The Chief Minister instructed the district collectors to ensure that doctors issuing Sadaram certificates strictly follow the guidelines set by the Medical Board. He further stated that action should be taken against any doctor found violating these norms.

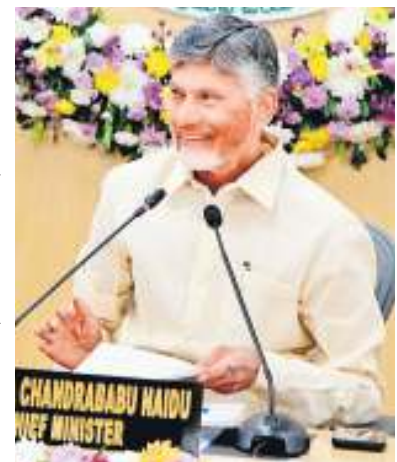
Highlighting the importance of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in improving basic amenities in rural areas, the Chief Minister urged district collectors to effectively utilize the funds from the scheme to provide necessary infrastructure in villages. **Continued on Page 2**

Interlinking of 80,000 km of rural roads promised

• Naidu calls for physical verification using technical systems to eliminate irregularities in the issuance of Sadaram certificates for the differently-abled.

• CM urges proper utilisation of MGNREGS funds for rural infrastructure, with an additional Rs 1,100 crore to be released soon.

• CM stressed promoting DWCRAs women as entrepreneurs, moving beyond savings and petty businesses.



Joint task force to resolve land disputes

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu has announced the formation of Joint Task Force Committees at the district level to address land disputes and land-grabbing cases effectively. The decision was made during the Revenue Department

review on the second day of the Collectors' Conference held on Thursday.

Home Minister Anitha highlighted that a substantial number of complaints received by the Home Department are related to land disputes.

Continued on Page 2

'Increase public awareness on roof-top solar plants'

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Special Chief Secretary for Energy, K Vijayanand, has called upon District Collectors to raise public awareness about the PM Surya Ghar Yojana to increase registrations and installations of rooftop solar systems across the state. Addressing the Collectors' Conference on Wednesday, he highlighted the progress and potential of the scheme.

Under the PM Surya Ghar Yojana, the Union government offers subsidies of Rs 30,000 for each kilowatt, Rs 60,000 for 2 kilowatts, and Rs 78,000 for 3 kilowatts. So far, 6,39,000 registrations have been made, with 77,090 applications and 6,500 installations completed, amounting to a total load of 24,339 kilowatts. A total subsidy of Rs 25.27 crore has

been disbursed under APEPDCL, APCPDCL, and ASPDCL.

The State government is also considering free installations for SC/ST households, which could benefit the 20.17 lakh SC/ST consumers registered under the State's power distribution companies.

District collectors have been directed to oversee and expedite rooftop solar installations for these consumers.



Vijayanand also discussed the PM Kusum scheme, which proposes solarisation of agricultural feeders with a capacity of 3,725

megawatts. Land identification for solar power plants is ongoing, requiring five acres per megawatt.

Reliance Industries has expressed interest in setting up Compressed Biogas (CBG) plants, eligible for a 20% capital subsidy. As per the AP Integrated Clean

Energy Policy 2024, wastelands will be leased at Rs 15,000 per acre annually for these plants.

Plans for mega solar parks in Anantapur, Kurnool, Galiveedu, and Kadapa districts, with capacities ranging from 500 MW to 1,000 MW, are also in progress. Besides, renewable energy projects in Donakonda, CS Puran, NP Kunta, and Madakasira are expected to add 3,500 MW of capacity.

Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu emphasised the need to develop Andhra Pradesh as an energy hub with green corridors and policies promoting renewable energy, electric vehicles, and pollution control.

He stressed that every household should harness solar energy under the Surya Ghar scheme, supported by government subsidies.

Plans for mega solar parks in Anantapur, Kurnool, Galiveedu, and Kadapa districts, with capacities ranging from 500 MW to 1,000 MW, are also in progress. Besides, renewable energy projects in Donakonda, CS Puran, NP Kunta, and Madakasira are expected to add 3,500 MW of capacity.



Blow to YSRCP as Avanathi, Grandhi quit

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The YSR Congress Party (YSRCP) has suffered a major blow with the resignation of two senior leaders, Avanathi Srinivas and Grandhi Srinivas. They cited dissatisfaction with the party's leadership. Their exits highlight growing discontent within the party ranks, raising questions about its internal stability.

Avanathi Srinivas, a former minister and prominent YSRCP leader, announced his resignation on



Thursday, accusing party president YS Jagan Mohan Reddy of ignoring the struggles of grassroots workers. In a press statement, he revealed that he had submitted his resignation letter to both Reddy and North Andhra coordinator V Vijayasai Reddy. Srinivas criticized the party leadership for being disconnected from the challenges faced by field-level activists over the past five years and expressed frustration at the lack of internal reforms. **Continued on Page 2**

'Swarnandhra@2047' release: Traffic curbs today

Restrictions will be in force from 7 am to 5 pm

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

In view of the launch of Swarnandhra@2047 Vision Document by Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu at the Indira Gandhi Municipal Corporation Stadium, the NTR Police Commissionerate imposed traffic restrictions in Vijayawada and surrounding areas on Friday. The restrictions will be in force from 7 am to 5 pm.

Except for those bound for Swarnandhra@2047 event, no other vehicles will be allowed between the Benz Circle and the Police Control Room on Mahatma Gandhi Road (MG Road), notably Bandar Road. Also, no vehicles will be allowed on Eat Street from Seetharamapuram Junction on Eluru Road (Deepthi Junction) to RTA Junction on MG Road and Water Tank Road from Sikhmani Centre to Chuttugunta Centre. In this connection, NTR District Police Commissioner SV Rajasekhara Babu issued a press release here on Thursday. The police will also divert traffic on

highway roads in Vijayawada. Over 24 parking spaces have been arranged for the vehicles of VIPs as well as the public who will be coming from various districts to Vijayawada to participate in the programme. The traffic diversions will be in force from 5 am to 4 pm.

According to the police, heavy and medium vehicles travelling from Hyderabad to Visakhapatnam and Visakhapatnam to Hyderabad will be diverted at Ibrahimpatnam and Hanuman Junction. Also, vehicles will be rerouted through G Konduru, Mylavaram, Nuzvid, and Hanuman Junction before proceeding towards Eluru. Similarly, vehicles from Visakhapatnam to Hyderabad will be diverted at Hanuman Junction and allowed to travel via Nuzvid, Mylavaram, G Konduru and Ibrahimpatnam.

Meanwhile, vehicles travelling from Visakhapatnam to Chennai and vice versa will be diverted at Hanuman Junction Bypass and allowed on both sides via Gudivada, Pamarru, Avaniigadda, Repalle, Bapatla, Chirala, Trovagunta, and

Ongole. Vehicles from Guntur to Visakhapatnam and Visakhapatnam to Guntur will be diverted via Budampadu towards Telani, Vemuru, Kolluru, Vellaturu Junction, Punumudi Bridge, Avaniigadda, Pamarru, Gudivada and Hanuman Junction on both sides. The vehicles travelling from Chennai to Hyderabad and Hyderabad to Chennai will be allowed via Medarametta, Addanki, Piduguralla, Nadikudi, Miryalaguda, Nalgonda and Narkatpalli on both sides.

Similarly, the city police will also divert traffic in Vijayawada. All RTC buses travelling from Visakhapatnam will be diverted at Ramavarappadu Ring and allowed into the city via Gunadala, Padavala Revu, BRTS Road, GS Raju Road, Eluru Locks, Old Government Hospital Road, Police Control Room and PNBS. Also, buses from Machilipatnam will be allowed to enter the city via Auto Nagar Gate, Benz Circle, Mahanadu Road, Ramavarappadu, Eluru Road, Gunadala, Chuttugunta, Deepthi

Junction, Apsara Junction, PCR and PNBS. The RTC buses from PNBS to Visakhapatnam will be diverted via PCR Junction, RTC Y Junction, Challapalli Bangalow, Hanuman Pet, Eluru Locks, GS Raju Road, BRTS Road, Padavala Revu, Gunadala, and Ramavarappadu Ring. Also, buses from PNBS to Machilipatnam and Gudivada should proceed via Eluru Road, Ramavarappadu Ring, Enikepudu Junction and Tadigadapa 100-foot road. All city buses running between Benz Circle and PNBS will be rerouted via Benz Circle, Ramavarappadu Ring, Eluru Road, and PCR.

However, no autos are allowed between Benz Circle and the Police Control Room, the police added. They made it clear that 108 Ambulance and other emergency vehicles are allowed on any route in the city. Government employees, shop employees and other people who are working in various offices on the MG Road should go to their office before 8 am as there will be traffic restrictions from 8 am to 1 pm, the police said.



OFFICIALS INSPECT ARRANGEMENTS

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

In view of the Swarnandhra@2047 Vision Document release, several senior IAS and IPS officers inspected the arrangements at the Indira Gandhi Municipal Corporation (IGMC) Stadium on Thursday. Around 30,000 people will be attending the programme from various districts. The Transport Department has arranged 500 buses to transport the public to the venue.

During the inspection, Chief Commissioner of State Taxes

Babu A, Chief Minister's Secretary PS Pradyumna, Additional Secretary (Finance) J Nivas, Sports Authority of Andhra Pradesh (SAAP) Vice Chairman and Managing Director (VC & MD) PS Girisha, Information & Public Relations Director Himanshu Shukla, NTR District Collector Dr G Lakshminisha, Police Commissioner SV Rajasekhara Babu and Vijayawada Municipal Commissioner HM Dhyanchandra held discussions about the programme. They focused on seating arrangements

and security for VVIPs, VIPs and other invitees at the stadium. All the departments should coordinate with each other for the successful conduct of the programme, they said.

Meanwhile, the Police Commissioner conducted a review meeting with several police officials at the Command Control Room and discussed the security arrangements. Besides CM Chandrababu Naidu, many ministers, MPs, MLCs, MLAs and other invitees are taking part in the programme.

Heavy rain lashes Tirumala, pilgrims face hardship

PNS ■ TIRUMALA

Under the influence of the low pressure area in the Bay of Bengal, heavy rain lashed the famous hill shrine of Tirumala on Thursday, causing severe hardship for thousands of pilgrims on the hill.

The downpour led to many pilgrims being stranded at various locations, with some taking shelter in sheds as they could not reach their cottages. Roads leading to Papavasanam and Srivari Padalu were closed due to water overflow.

Boulders fell on the second ghat road at Harini, but TTD (Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanams) staff quickly cleared the debris. To add to the discomfort, strong winds and chilly weather prevailed on the hill.

Following the heavy rainfall, the Papavasanam reservoir reached full capacity, prompting authorities to lift the crest gates to release excess water.

Meanwhile, Home Minister V. Anitha issued an alert to officials in light of the heavy rain in Tirumala and Tirupati. She said that the rain-



fall affected the Tirupati, Tirumala, and Sullurpet areas. Cautioning travellers on the ghat roads, she mentioned the possibility of landslides and urged careful movement.

She directed officials to relocate residents from low-lying areas in Lakshimpuram and Gollavanigunta colonies. With the crest gates of the

Kalangi reservoir also lifted, the Home Minister instructed authorities to alert people living downstream.

According to the latest IMD report, the well-marked low pressure area is moving towards the South Tamil Nadu coast and is expected to weaken gradually.

Vizag's IT fraternity hails landmark MoU with Google

Transformative step for city's IT growth, promising new opportunities, job creation, and enhanced infrastructure

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

The Andhra Pradesh government's recent signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with tech giant Google has been celebrated as a pivotal moment for Visakhapatnam, positioning the city as a rising star in the global technology landscape.

Industry leaders have praised the partnership, highlighting its transformative potential for the region's IT sector. Ravi Eswarapu, CEO of a hub at Andhra University, described the collaboration as a landmark step. "This initiative will foster innovation and socio-economic progress, empowering communities while creating opportunities for students, entrepreneurs, and businesses," he said. Eswarapu also noted the city's longstanding association with Google through flagship programs like Developer Fest and Startup Success Days.



Echoing this sentiment, O Naresh Kumar, CEO of Symbiosis Technologies, termed the MoU a turning point for Visakhapatnam. "Google's entry not only brings global expertise but also propels the local startup ecosystem. This showcases Andhra Pradesh's readiness to lead on the global technology stage," Kumar said, applauding the State government's progressive policies.

Anand Varma, Managing Director of a leading software solutions company, expressed optimism about the initiative's eco-

nomomic impact. "The IT industry in Visakhapatnam has been growing steadily, but this collaboration with Google is the tipping point. It will create thousands of job opportunities and attract more global players to invest in this region," he emphasised.

Local entrepreneurs are equally enthusiastic about the potential benefits. Rajesh Kumar, founder of a Visakhapatnam-based tech startup, noted, "The presence of a global leader like Google will inspire local entrepreneurs to aim higher and innovate. It will open doors for collaborations, mentorship, and access to advanced technologies." Veteran IT consultant Nageshwar Rao highlighted the city's advantages, adding, "Visakhapatnam's strategic location and robust infrastructure make it an ideal choice for Google. This move will place our city firmly on the global IT map."

AP student dies in UK; family awaits body

PNS ■ ONGOLE

The family of a 33-year-old man who died in a road accident in the United Kingdom has expressed their shock and grief over his untimely demise.

The incident took place in Leicestershire, eastern England on December 10, while Chiranjeevi was travelling to work with four friends. "We can't express the pain we are going through after my brother's death. He had gone to study Computer Science but (tragically) died in a road accident while heading to his part-time job at an e-commerce company in Leicestershire," Hari Krishna, Chiranjeevi's younger brother and a government doctor said. The accident was reportedly caused by alleged rash driving and a loss of control over the vehicle, said Hari Krishna. Chiranjeevi, a bachelor, previously managed a stone-crushing business in Chimakurthy mandal, Prakasam district, before moving to the UK a year ago to pursue higher studies at Swansea University, he added. Further, Hari Krishna stated that Chiranjeevi's body is expected to arrive in India within 10 days, following the completion of the post-mortem and other formalities in England.

Steel Plant pensioners seek release of higher pension orders

2,500 eligible retirees remitted over ₹400 crore in contributions in September 2023

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

A delegation of pensioners from the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant met with Pawan Kumar Jasti, Regional Provident Fund Commissioner-II, to express their deep concern over the ongoing delay in the release of higher pension orders. These orders, expected to be issued 14 months ago following the Supreme Court's landmark judgment, have been held up, putting thousands of retired employees in a spot.

"Despite remitting substantial contributions more than a year ago, pensioners are still waiting for what is rightfully theirs. The delay is causing significant financial distress among retired employees," said a spokesperson from the Vizag Steel Pensioners Association. Approximately 2,500 eligible Vizag Steel retirees remitted over Rs 400 crore in contributions in



Vizag Steel Plant Pensioners presenting a representation to Pawan Kumar Jasti, Regional PF Commissioner-II, Visakhapatnam, urging immediate release of higher pension orders

September 2023. However, despite this substantial payment, the pension orders have yet to be processed.

As per regulations, higher pensions should typically be sanc-

tioned within two to three months of receiving contributions. The inaction of the PF authorities has drawn widespread criticism. Recently, the Union Labour

Minister directed PF authorities to expedite the resolution of such cases, including those who had remitted contributions. "The delay is indefensible and deeply disappointing. We demand immediate action from the PF authorities," said V Reddy, a retired employee.

The National Confederation of Retirees has announced a protest at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on December 18 to highlight the issue. Locally, the Vizag Steel pensioners have resolved to escalate their agitation. If no action is taken, they plan to organise protests, submit memoranda to higher authorities, and even seek legal remedies. "The inordinate delay has left us with no choice but to intensify our struggle. This issue affects not just us but pensioners across the country," said another pensioner from the group.

NIA conducts raids on Maoist strongholds

PNS ■ PADERU

The National Investigation Agency (NIA) officials conducted raids in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Odisha on Thursday and seized vital documents on the outlawed Maoists.

According to the sources, the NIA officials conducted raids in the houses of Maoist sympathizers in Chintoor in the ASR district. It is learnt that the NIA officials seized digital gadgets, documents and revolutionary literature from a house.

Sources informed that the NIA sleuths conducted raids on the sympathizers of Maoists who were funding the outlawed organization. In September 2024, the NIA arrested two persons in Chintoor and registered FIR against them for extending support to the Maoists.



All India women's volleyball tourney begins

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

The Nadella Basavaluriah Memorial All India Women's Invitation National Volleyball Tournament commenced on Thursday at the VR Siddhartha Indoor Sports Complex in Kanuru, near Vijayawada. The four-day tournament is being organised by the Nadella Basavaluriah Trust.

The tournament was inaugurated by Penamaluru MLA Bode Prasad and Vijayawada East MLA Gadde Rama Mohana Rao. Around six teams are participat-

ing in the tournament, including SRM, Tamil Nadu Sports Authority, JEPAIR University, PKR University, Gujarat Sports Hostel, and Bank of Maharashtra women's teams.

The event was also attended by Nadella Basavaluriah Trust Trustee Nasella Brahmaji Rao, Siddhartha Academy of General Technical Education President Dr C Nageswara Rao, Treasurer S Vishnu, VR Siddhartha Engineering College Principal Prof P Venkateswara Rao, and Arjuna and Dronacharya Awardee A Ramana Rao, among others.

GITAM launches TITE Project to empower tribal communities

Focus on empowering tribal women by providing essential skills and creating sustainable livelihood opportunities

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

GITAM Deemed University launched the 'Technological Interventions for Tribal Empowerment' (TITE) Project, a pioneering initiative aimed at empowering tribal women from Kamkutam and Lovakothapalli hamlets in V. Madugula mandal, here on Thursday. The project is designed to provide these women with essential skills and create sustainable livelihood opportunities, fostering economic growth and self-reliance within the community.

Spearheaded by Dr. Sowmya Injeti, Assistant Professor from the Department

of Electrical and Electronics Engineering at GITAM, in collaboration with the Arohan Tribal Society, the project focuses on training tribal women in the Banana Fibre Waste Extraction Process, as well as promoting the use of Liquid Bio-Fertilisers.

Dr. Sowmya Injeti outlined the vision behind the project, saying, "Our goal is to empower tribal women by equipping them with the necessary skills to process agricultural waste into valuable products. This not only improves their economic conditions, but also contributes to the overall sustainability of the community." She added, "By integrating technology



into traditional practices, we aim to create a model of economic self-reliance that can be replicated across other tribal regions."

Madugula MLA Bandaru Satyanarayana Murthy, who attended the launch, emphasised the far-reaching impact of the project. "It is a game-changer for the tribal communities in our region. It opens up new avenues for women to acquire skills that will lead to sustainable development and foster long-term economic growth. With the empowerment of these women, the entire community stands to benefit," he said.

The TITE Project aims to improve the

socio-economic conditions of tribal families, with a strong emphasis on self-reliance and community-driven growth. The initiative seeks to uplift the region's tribal communities through skill development, environmental sustainability, and economic empowerment. This focus on women's empowerment is seen as a crucial step toward creating a brighter, more prosperous future for the entire community.

The project's innovative approach to addressing both social and environmental challenges highlights the importance of integrating technology with local traditions to achieve lasting change.

MP alleges misuse of disaster relief funds during YSRCP rule



PNS ■ ELURU

Eluru MP Putta Mahesh Kumar accused the previous YSRCP government of misusing disaster relief funds and failing to support the public during natural calamities. Speaking in the Lok Sabha during a discussion on the Disaster Management Amendment Bill 2024, MP Mahesh Kumar criticised the YSRCP regime for neglecting developmental issues, particularly the Budameru drainage system, which he claimed led to the severe flooding in Vijayawada during September rains. He lauded former Chief Minister Nara Chandrababu Naidu for his proactive role during the Vijayawada floods, personally overseeing relief measures for two weeks. He contrasted this with the alleged inaction of the YSRCP government, accusing it of diverting funds meant for Budameru's development and disaster relief, enriching themselves at the cost of the public. The MP also highlighted Naidu's efficient handling of Cyclone Hudhud in Visakhapatnam, where swift restoration and relief measures brought the city back to normalcy. Referring to the recent floods in the Godavari River and the Peddavagu breach, which caused inundation in Velairpadu Mandal, Mahesh Kumar praised his coalition government for promptly initiating relief operations and monitoring the situation until normalcy was restored. He expressed anger at YSRCP representatives for allegedly making baseless allegations in the Lok Sabha and misleading the public.



FAMILY SUICIDE PACT?:

Woman dies, 3 critical

Police suspect financial difficulties may have driven the family to this desperate act. Suresh, a cloth businessman, and Sujata, a grocery store owner, were reportedly facing significant financial strain.

PNS ■ ANANTAPUR

A tragic incident unfolded in Garladinne village on Thursday as a family of four attempted suicide by consuming pesticide. Unfortunately, the wife, Sujata, succumbed to her injuries, while Suresh and their two children, Naga Chaitanya and Lahitya, are currently fighting for their lives in critical condition at

GGH Anantapur. Police suspect financial difficulties may have driven the family to this desperate act. Suresh, a cloth businessman, and Sujata, a grocery store owner, were reportedly facing significant financial strain. A case has been registered by the local police, and investigations are underway to ascertain the exact circumstances leading to the attempted suicide.

Collectors urged to restore Revenue dept's reputation

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

Special Chief Secretary of the Revenue Department, RP Sisodia, urged district Collectors to use their powers effectively to restore the lost reputation of the Revenue Department. Speaking at a Collectors' conference on Tuesday, Sisodia highlighted that the departments' image had diminished recently, and it was now the responsibility of the Collectors to bring it back to its former standing. Sisodia reminded the Collectors that they were entrusted with special powers and needed to demonstrate their authority in revitalising the department. He expressed concern over certain practices, such as the outsourcing of digital lockers by some officials, which he described as unacceptable. He directed the Collectors to assess the situation and take necessary action to prevent such issues. Describing the Collectors as the "face of the government," Sisodia emphasised the importance of building a positive and approachable relationship with the public. He urged the Collectors to use their powers not only to restore the Revenue Department's prestige but also to ensure the smooth functioning of land revenue, survey, and settlement processes. The conference focused on key issues like land revenue management, land survey operations, and settlement matters, all essential to the effective functioning of the Revenue Department. Sisodia's remarks come at a critical time as the department aims to regain its authority and credibility among the public.

PB Siddhartha College joins hands with SOLET

PNS ■ VIJAYAWADA

PB Siddhartha Arts & Science College, Mogalarajapuram, has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Society for Learning Technology (SOLET) to enhance the college's technical capabilities. The agreement aims to provide advanced technical support, particularly in the fields of Data Science and Artificial Intelligence. The MoU was exchanged by Dr K Udaya Sri, Head of the Department for Data Science & Artificial Intelligence, at PB Siddhartha College, and T Kranthi Kumar, Secretary of SOLET. The collaboration marks a significant step toward integrating cutting-edge technological resources into the college's academic framework, fostering innovation and skill development among students and faculty. Besides, the MoU will be useful for giving training in the fields of machine learning, deep learning, artificial intelligence and bioinformatics. It will play a key role in the students' research workshops, skill-based courses, certificate courses and training programmes. College Principal Dr M Ramesh, Director Vemuri Babu Rao, UG Wing Deputy Head K Sudhir and eminent psychologist Dr Ramesh Bhavisetty were present.



Dr K Udaya Sri, Head of the Department, Data Science & Artificial Intelligence, PB Siddhartha College, and T Kranthi Kumar, Secretary of SOLET, exchanging the MoU papers on Thursday

HIGH-RISE SAFETY

AP mandates 'breathing balconies' and firewalls

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

Director General of the Disaster Response and Fire Services Department of Andhra Pradesh, Pratap Madireddy, has announced an enhancement to fire safety regulations in the State. High-rise and commercial buildings will now require mandatory installation of 'breathing balconies' and firewalls to improve safety and aid in rescue efforts. Speaking during his visit to Visakhapatnam, Madireddy highlighted the lifesaving potential of these measures. "Breathing balconies are mandatory for commercial buildings in the State," he said. "These balconies provide an escape route to open spaces, allowing victims of smoke and fire to breathe fresh air and survive until help arrives." In addition to breathing balconies, firewalls will now be essential for commercial structures. "Firewalls must be installed in every commercial building, with one required for every 1,000 square metres," Madireddy explained. These firewalls are designed to prevent the spread of fire within a building, thereby facilitating containment and quicker evacuations during emergencies. As the adoption of electric vehicles (EVs) rises, Madireddy raised concerns about fire risks associated with EV charging in multi-storey buildings. He pointed out that using substandard charging boards has increased the risk of battery explosions and fires. "We are recommending the use of dry chemical powder (DCP) extinguishers in every parking slot and commercial building to address these risks," he stated.

As the adoption of electric vehicles (EVs) rises, Madireddy raised concerns about fire risks associated with EV charging in multi-storey buildings. He pointed out that using substandard charging boards has increased the risk of battery explosions and fires. "We are recommending the use of dry chemical powder (DCP) extinguishers in every parking slot and commercial building to address these risks," he stated.

explosions and fires. "We are recommending the use of dry chemical powder (DCP) extinguishers in every parking slot and commercial building to address these risks," he stated. Water sprinklers, traditionally used in firefighting, can pose additional hazards in EV charging areas. Hence, Madireddy called for modern fire suppression systems to replace outdated technologies. The state is embracing advanced technologies to further bolster fire safety. "We are conducting several trials with drones for fire rescue operations," Madireddy revealed, underscoring the department's focus on innovation. Other planned safety measures include the implementation of Flame Retardant Low Smoke (FRLS) cables, Miniature Circuit Breakers (MCBs) in electrical panel rooms, and widespread use of DCP extinguishers. Andhra Pradesh is also pioneering the use of 10,000 liquid carbon dioxide cylinders, a first in the country, which can be easily transported for firefighting operations. Madireddy concluded by stressing the importance of modernizing fire safety practices across the state. "Outdated methods must give way to advanced solutions to mitigate fire risks effectively," he said. These proactive measures reaffirm Andhra Pradesh's commitment to public safety, setting a benchmark for fire safety standards across the nation.

3 held for running prostitution racket

PNS ■ VISAKHAPATNAM

The II Town Police in Visakhapatnam City have made a breakthrough in their fight against organised crime by arresting three persons involved in running a large-scale prostitution racket. The arrested suspects have been identified as Nagalapalli Shyam Sundara Rao (55), Puranam Jaya Gangadhar Krishna (31), and Katikala Ratnam (38). According to police reports, the accused were operating an extensive network that exploited financially vulnerable women, both online and offline. Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP), East Sub Division, Visakhapatnam City, stated, "These arrests are a crucial step in dismantling a well-organized network that has been exploiting vulnerable women. Our team worked diligently to track down these individuals, who have a history of similar offences." The arrests took place on December 12, 2024, after credible intelligence was received. Several others connected to the racket have already been apprehended and sent to judicial custody. The ACP further mentioned that efforts are underway to apprehend additional suspects who are still at large. "We are committed to ensuring justice for the victims and will continue our efforts to eliminate such exploitative activities," the ACP added. The police have reassured the public of their determination to protect vulnerable citizens and bring offenders to justice. "The safety and dignity of our citizens is our top priority. We will leave no stone unturned in curbing these illegal activities," said the ACP, urging citizens to report any suspicious activities promptly.

'VRO, VRA system to be restored in TG'



PNS ■ HYDERABAD

Revenue and Housing Minister Ponguleti Srinivas Reddy said that the government will restore the VROs and VRAs system in the villages. Speaking to the media on Thursday at the Secretariat, Srinivas Reddy said that the government added 10 new items in the Indiramma housing App. He said that the government removed survey officials' 'recommendation' option from the App and enrolled 2.32 lakh applications in the App. Srinivas Reddy said that the government will provide houses to all beneficiaries, though some delay takes place.

houses to all beneficiaries, though there could be some delay. The government will restore the VROs and VRAs system in the villages again. Speaking to the media on Thursday at the Secretariat, Srinivas Reddy said that the government added 10 new items in the Indiramma housing App. He said that the government removed survey officials' 'recommendation' option from the App and enrolled 2.32 lakh applications in the App. Srinivas Reddy said that the government will provide houses to all beneficiaries, though some delay takes place.

Interstate thief arrested, booty worth ₹7.41L recovered

PNS ■ BAPATLA

Police have arrested a notorious interstate thief and recovered stolen goods worth Rs 7.41 lakh, including gold jewellery. DSP MD Mohiuddin told the media at Chirala police station on Thursday that the Chirala One Town police had apprehended Kasturi Appanna alias Sreenu, a notorious interstate thief involved in several offences across various police station jurisdictions. Appanna has been linked to over 40 criminal activities, including burglaries and thefts, in both Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. He had previously been convicted and released from Bapatla prison. Appanna would typically commit his crimes during the night. To catch him, the Chirala police formed two special teams led by



Inspector M Srinivasa Rao and SI K Kamalakar. Using advanced technology, the police tracked his movements and arrested him on Thursday near Chirala railway station. The police recovered gold jewellery weighing 98 grams and silver ornaments weighing 150 grams,

valued at Rs 7,41,000. SP Tushar Dudi lauded the police team, including Inspector M Srinivasa Rao, SI K Kamalakar, Head Constable Tanner Srinivas, and constables, for their successful efforts in arresting the notorious interstate offender.

9 students fall ill after having mid-day meal

PNS ■ ELURU

Nine students from MPUP School in Kotapadu village, Chatrai mandal, Nuzvid constituency, fell ill after consuming a mid-day meal on Thursday. The students complained of stomach pain and vomiting after the meal. While some students were treated at the school

by Dr. Vijaya Lakshmi on Wednesday, nine others exhibited similar symptoms on Thursday. The affected students were admitted to the Area Hospital in Nuzvid for medical treatment. Mandal Educational Officer Brahmachari stated that the school has a total of 39 students, and authorities are investigating the cause of the illness.



10 red sanders logs seized; 2 smugglers arrested

PNS ■ TIRUPATI



The Red Sanders Anti-Smuggling Task Force (RSASTF) personnel seized 10 red sanders logs while being transported illegally and arrested two smugglers at Sundupalli village near Rayachoti in Annamayya district. DSP G Balireddy told the media here on Thursday that under the directions of SP L Subbarayudu and task force SP P Srinivas, the task force team led by RI (Reserve) K Suresh Kumar Reddy and RSI KSK Lingadhar

conducted checking of vehicles on Sundupalli-Saipai road. They noticed an SUV was going at high speed. When the police stopped the vehicle, the occupants of the car got down and started running away. However, the task force personnel chased and apprehended them. They found 10 red sander logs in the vehicle. The task force personnel seized the 10 red sander logs, and the SUV and arrested two persons. The red sanders and the vehicle were shifted to the task force office in Tirupati.



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PAPER WITH PASSION

Empowering young innovators

Prime Minister Modi highlights the role of young minds in tackling real-world challenges with creativity and technology

The best way to predict the future is to invent it, said Alan Kay. And indeed how true it is for a nation. A nation that invents and finds solution to its problems marches on the path to progress. Echoing the same sentiment, Prime Minister Narendra Modi highlighted the pivotal role of innovation in nation-building during his interaction at the Smart India Hackathon (SIH) 2024, emphasising how young minds are shaping the future through creativity and technological ingenuity. The event, which included participation from over 1,300 student teams across India, showcased groundbreaking ideas aimed at solving real-world challenges. The SIH is a testament to the transformative power of education and innovation in building a self-reliant India. The event not only bridges the gap between academia and industry but also fosters a culture of collaboration and problem-solving. At the National Institute of Technology (NIT) Srinagar, which hosted the grand

finale of the software edition for the first time, 25 exceptional teams from 21 states convened to present their innovative solutions.

The hackathon addressed 250 problem statements submitted by 54 ministries, departments, state governments, public sector units (PSUs), and industries, covering sectors like healthcare, sustainability, education, disaster management and agriculture. With a 240 per cent increase in participation compared to the previous year, SIH 2024 is the largest edition to date, involving over 86,000 teams at the institute level and 49,000 at the national level. Among the standout participants was the 'Big



Brains Team' from NIT Srinagar, led by Syeeda Aiemen D Saleem. The team worked on an AI-powered Virtual Reality Friend, a tool designed to assist children with autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disabilities. The project, developed under the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, aims to help children enhance social and interactive skills in a simulated environment. PM Modi lauded the team's empathetic approach, emphasising the global relevance of such solutions and their potential to transform lives. PM Modi's interaction with the participants highlighted his vision of leveraging local innovation to address global challenges. He stressed that solutions tailored for India's unique needs could resonate globally, contributing to the world's progress. "Every child has the right to grow and prosper, and innovative solutions like these ensure no one is left behind," he remarked. By providing a platform for young minds to explore, collaborate and innovate, the Smart India Hackathon is shaping the next generation of problem-solvers and leaders. As India aims to establish itself as a global innovation hub, initiatives like SIH play a crucial role in realising this vision, reaffirming the transformative power of education and technology in nation-building.

PICTALK



Young women visit a snow covered park after snowfall in Shimla

AI's boost to the spirit of service

From streamlining efforts to enhancing inclusivity, AI is reshaping how volunteers connect, contribute and make an impact



RAJDEEP PATHAK

Volunteering has long been a vital pillar of community development, social change, and global solidarity, offering individuals a meaningful way to contribute to society while fostering personal growth. In today's interconnected and fast-paced world, the concept of volunteering is undergoing a dynamic transformation, largely driven by advances in technology. The International Volunteer Day (IVD), celebrated globally on December 5, 2024, under the theme "Economic and Social Development," highlighted the pivotal role of volunteers in shaping a better world. Sub-themes emphasised their contributions to alleviating crises and supporting underprivileged populations affected by natural disasters, man-made crises, or socio-economic challenges. Volunteers have consistently been on the frontlines of crisis management, stepping in where governments and organisations often encounter limitations. Whether during pandemics, natural disasters, or humanitarian emergencies, their role remains indispensable, particularly for vulnerable populations. The advent of advanced technologies, particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI), is significantly reshaping the landscape of volunteering. AI enhances the efficiency, inclusivity, and accessibility of volunteering initiatives, ensuring they have a far-reaching impact. By leveraging AI-driven tools, organisations are creating platforms that align volunteer skills with opportunities, reduce mismatches, and optimise efforts. This transformation not only improves the volunteer experience but also amplifies the positive outcomes for communities in need. AI-powered platforms such as "HelpFinder" are revolutionising how volunteers are matched with organisations. By analysing data on individual skills, interests, and locations, these platforms ensure that volunteers are placed where they can make the most meaningful contributions. This precision reduces mismatches, boosts retention rates, and fosters a sense of accomplishment among volunteers. During crises, AI-powered systems can quickly



ly analyse data to identify affected areas and volunteer availability, enabling swift deployment to critical zones. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, AI-driven platforms like "OneRescue" coordinated volunteer initiatives for contact tracing, mental health support, and supply distribution, proving invaluable in mitigating the crisis. Corporate social responsibility initiatives also benefit from AI. Tools like "Benevity" facilitate employee engagement by connecting them with volunteer opportunities that align with organisational goals. These solutions ensure streamlined coordination, impactful volunteering, and sustained enthusiasm among participants. AI-powered chatbots further enhance volunteer experiences by providing instant support, answering queries and assisting with training. In India, a nation of 1.45 billion people, the ethos of service is deeply ingrained in its culture. Family values, religious teachings, and community traditions emphasise the importance of helping others. Today, AI is augmenting these efforts. Chatbots are used to handle volunteer queries related to vaccination drives, maternal health, women's and children's safety, and more. In the UK, AI-driven systems have optimised food bank logistics and facilitated grocery deliveries to vulnerable indi-



AI ENHANCES THE EFFICIENCY, INCLUSIVITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF VOLUNTEERING INITIATIVES, ENSURING THEY HAVE A FAR-REACHING IMPACT. BY LEVERAGING AI-DRIVEN TOOLS, ORGANISATIONS ARE CREATING PLATFORMS THAT ALIGN VOLUNTEER SKILLS WITH OPPORTUNITIES, REDUCE MISMATCHES AND OPTIMISE EFFORTS

viduals, demonstrating how technology empowers volunteers to make a tangible difference. Innovative applications like "Be My Eyes" enable volunteers to assist visually impaired individuals remotely, while platforms like "GoodSAM" connect trained volunteers with emergency services in real time. For example, volunteers alerted through GoodSAM can provide critical assistance such as CPR or use an Automated External Defibrillator (AED) before professional help arrives. Virtual volunteering has further expanded opportunities for professionals to contribute their expertise remotely. Platforms like "Catchafire" and the UN's Online Volunteering Service facilitate mentoring, legal advice, language translation, and more, breaking geographical barriers and making volunteering more inclusive. Digital tools have eliminated traditional obstacles to volunteering, such as physical distance, time constraints, and accessibility issues. People with disabilities, caregivers, or those in remote locations can now volunteer from their homes. This inclusivity aligns with the 2024 IVD theme, fostering collaboration among diverse communities toward the shared goal of economic and social development. By harnessing the right technology and resources, volun-

teers can work together to address pressing global challenges. In natural disasters like hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods, volunteers equipped with drones and AI tools can map affected areas and deliver supplies more efficiently. Apps like "Zello" enable seamless communication during emergencies, transforming smartphones into walkie-talkies for coordination. In efforts to combat poverty and hunger, volunteers support food banks, organise community kitchens, and deliver resources. Digital tools like "ShareTheMeal," a United Nations World Food Programme crowdfunding app, empower individuals to donate meals with a simple tap, making a significant impact on global hunger. Education is another critical sector where volunteering, supported by technology, has made remarkable strides. Online platforms have democratised access to education, reaching remote and underserved communities. Initiatives like "Code.org" empower volunteers to teach coding skills, equipping students with the tools needed for a technology-driven future. Gender-focused volunteer programmes address inequality by providing legal aid, counseling and advocacy for women's rights, further demonstrating the transformative power of volunteering. (The writer is Programme Executive, Gandhi Smriti and Darshan Samiti; views are

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

INDIA'S SOFT POWER POLICY

Madam — The ongoing conflict in Gaza and Israel's military action against Hamas have drawn global attention. In this context, Israeli Ambassador to India, Reuven Azar, praised India's soft power policy, underlining its relevance in international diplomacy. He acknowledged that Israel, due to its heavy reliance on military strength, has lagged in areas like information management and public relations. India has strengthened its global position through diplomacy, cultural influence, and dialogue as key tools of soft power. Initiatives like yoga, cultural exchanges, and multilateral diplomacy have not only earned India international goodwill but also enhanced its global image. Despite its firm stance against terrorism, India has effectively combined dialogue and public relations to make its policies inspirational for the global community. In contrast, Israel's excessive reliance on military power weakens it in ideological battles, further complicated by adversarial propaganda from Arab media. Military strength alone is insufficient; tools of soft power, such as dialogue, empathy, and media management, are essential for long-term success. India's example demonstrates that balancing soft and hard power not only safeguards national interests but also garners global acceptance. Israel should take inspiration from India's strategy to refine its policies and strengthen its information and public relations framework. **R K Jain | Barwani**

TACKLING ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

Madam — Apropos of the headlines 'Identify illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, orders LG' (December 11), it is welcome that prominent Ulemas and Muslim leaders have taken up the issue of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants with the government and thus depoliticised the issue in favour of the Muslim community, Delhi, and the entire country. There are countrywide agitations and

UNEP honours Madhav Gadgil



India's veteran ecologist and nature scientist Madhav Gadgil has been named as one of the six 'Champions of the Earth' by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) for 2024. He is renowned for his seminal work in the ecologically fragile Western Ghats region of India, which is a unique global biodiversity hotspot. Gadgil made an extensive study on the Western Ghats region, chairing the Western

Ghats Ecology Expert Panel in 2011, and came out with a list of grim and grave findings for the Western Ghats region. The panel's report, which is popularly known as the Gadgil report, recommended in 2011 that the entire hill range be declared an ecologically sensitive area and recommended a ban on mining, quarrying, industries, new thermal power plants, hydropower projects, and large-scale wind energy projects. Gadgil's bold and honest recommendations faced opposition from some of the state governments, political bigwigs, industries, and local communities. Braving all odds, he championed the protection of the earth and the environment. Gadgil's research has helped to protect marginalised people, promote community-driven conservation of ecosystems and influence policymaking at the highest level. **M Pradyu | Kannur**

demonstrations against atrocities on Hindus in Bangladesh and Bangladeshi illegal immigrants. The issue of illegal immigrants, whether from Bangladesh, African countries, or any other country, being detrimental to the integrity of the country, law and order, and social fabric and homogeneity poses potential challenges of demographic change, crime control, drug menace, security, and anarchy. However, this is a very formidable challenge for the government to work out the strategy and implement it in view of the opposition from the immigrants and their local political harborers. A question will certainly arise why only in Delhi and why not in the entire country. There may be a spate of court cases as well in view of the large-scale illegal issue of identity cards of Aadhar, PAN, or BPL. It is, therefore, imperative that a nationwide strategy should be evolved and implemented firmly. Of course, the political parties following an appeasement agenda and vote bank politics will leave no stone unturned to disrupt it, but

it is a national priority and a security threat. **Vinod Johri | Delhi**

VOTERS' NAME DELETED

Madam — The deletion of the eligible voter's name before the election has encroached about the entire country and is intensifying terrifically. The senior AAP leader Sanjay Singh highlighted an application for the deletion of 3,800 voters' names in just the RK Puram constituency. Such incidents are frequently observed before polls, which wrest the voting rights and thwart them to contribute to choosing preferred leaders. It's an out-and-out violation of the Universal Adult Franchise" in the largest democratic country. It's a grave issue that demands urgent action. The EC must not turn into a complaint tool instead of a neutral body and deploy every effort to address it and ensure the voter's right. **Jakir Hussain | Kanpur**

Send your feedback to: letterstopioneer@gmail.com

The transformative role of interactive learning in education



AARUL MALAVIYA

This modern approach is not just a shift in teaching strategies but a leap toward preparing students for the dynamic demands of the future workforce

The landscape of education has evolved significantly, with technological advancements and the integration of AI, making interactive learning a favoured approach. Because interactive learning fosters engagement, critical thinking and long-term memory, it makes it possible for knowledge to be assimilated more thoroughly. This is unquestionably an improvement over the conventional approaches, which mostly emphasise rote memory and depend largely on textbook-based techniques. The abilities needed in today's dynamic environment are better suited for interactive learning. Passively absorbing knowledge using conventional teaching approaches results in surface learning, which is ultimately counterproductive. According to National Training Laboratories research, passive learning techniques like reading and lectures only have recall rates of 5-10 per cent.



and real-world problem-solving. This increases engagement and extends retention. Digital tools, project-based learning, and group discussions are all included in this approach's scope. Students in interactive classrooms outperformed those in traditional lectures by 6 per cent on examinations, according to Harvard University research. Here are some ways that interactive learning approaches work better than conventional strategies: **1. Enhanced Retention:** According to National Training Laboratories research, active learning strategies like practice-by-doing and group discussions had higher retention rates, ranging from 50 to 75 per cent. Students may directly apply STEM principles

through hands-on experiences. According to research from the American Society for Engineering Education, pupils who participated in interactive STEM activities learned much more than those who received standard instruction. **2. Encouraging Critical Thinking:** Interactive learning promotes creativity and critical thinking by allowing students to investigate other viewpoints and pose questions. According to a McKinsey & Company research, interactive learning environments foster critical thinking and reflection while increasing student engagement and fostering productive social interactions. Another immersive method of student engagement is gamification, which boosts students' incentive to tackle challenging issues and permits in-depth learning. **3. Real-World Application:** Project-based learning, which links education to real-world issues and increases the applicability of information in practical contexts, is a crucial element of interactive learning. In contrast to students who studied using tradi-

al techniques, students who participated in project-based programs demonstrated superior application of information to real-life circumstances, according to a 2022 research by Edutopia. **4. Future Ready:** Through more engaging and relevant instruction, interactive learning equips students to overcome obstacles more effectively than traditional approaches ever could. To educate students for the uncertain and constantly changing times, education must emphasise abilities like problem-solving, teamwork, and flexibility in today's competitive labor market. Interactive approaches also boost motivation and encourage teamwork, which aids students in honing their communication and teamwork abilities. The global EdTech market is expected to grow to \$404 billion by 2025, according to EdTechXGlobal. Students that use an interactive learning technique not only perform better academically but are also better prepared to handle problems in the real world. (The writer is Founder Zamti; views are personal)



FIRST COLUMN

INDIA SHARES ITS VISION FOR WEST ASIA

The Manama Dialogue provided India with a platform to outline its vision for regional stability



KUMARDEEP BANARJEE

Even as Syria was undergoing huge regime change, with a possibility of leaving a long-lasting impact on the geo-political mix of West Asia, India's external affairs minister was delivering a lecture on the changing dynamics of international cooperation at the Manama Dialogue. The Manama dialogue is a platform to bring policy makers, and ministers to discuss and debate the strategic defence, security and foreign challenges of West Asia. The dialogue happening against the backdrop of the fast-changing narrative in Syria provided India with a unique opportunity to weigh on its most pressing concerns in and for the region. Syria has been ruled by the Assad dynasty for nearly 50 years. However, this dynastic rule converted the country, on the border of Turkey and Jordan into a brutal police state. Russia and Iran had been supportive of the Assad dynasty, for strategic reasons. Iran supported the regime, to build its axis of resistance against Israel, while Russia, has air force and naval bases in Syria. Global leaders are watching the Syria theatre closely even as Israel continues its war in the neighbourhood. The storming of Israeli troops in Gaza and Ukraine, distracted Iran and Russia, which led to the exit of Bashar Al Assad last week. However, what is of concern to many would be, the rise of rebel leader Abu Mohammed al-Jawfani, an ex-AI Qaeda member.

Syria despite the dynastic rule managed to maintain a secular political outlook where minorities and diverse groups did not feel any discrimination. Many fear that the rebel leader with Al Qaeda credentials, may push the state to a hardline Islamist nation. Almost every nation in the neighbourhood including Israel is watching the unfolding situation care-



fully. Delhi has been agnostic to the regime change, even though the Assad dynasty has been supportive of India's position on Kashmir, and its stance with Islamabad. Any unfriendly regime in the region would weaken India's position and could be a security concern as well.

Against this backdrop, the Manama dialogue, with several leaders from the West Asia and the Indo-Pacific, provided an important platform for engagement. Mentioning the ongoing conflicts impacting the region S Jaishankar said, "And this today would extend from Gaza to Lebanon and now to Syria as well. But at the same time, we have to be realistic about competing interests in this region... The second political-diplomatic cooperation that we can think of is really at a time when the world is polarised if not downright violent, how do you prevent an escalation of tensions, how do you prevent conflict from spreading further. In recent times, for all of us, the relationship or absence of it between Israel and Iran has been particularly a source of concern, so some of our diplomatic efforts has focused on that particular aspect. There has been the situation in the Red Sea as well. On a more positive note, the third aspect of the political-diplomatic, I would say, we are also looking at certain trend lines coming out of this region. We have been a supporter of the Abraham Accords and some years ago, we started a grouping called I2U2, which involves India, Israel, the US and the UAE. It is still at a relatively early stage and we certainly hope that in the coming days that its a group that will grow."

India in the past decade, has a trade-oriented foreign policy outlook, where, it knows that nothing binds countries more than an economic partnership. Mr Jaishankar mentioned that India has nearly \$170- 180 billion with the ten-member Gulf Cooperation Council and significant economic relations with countries in the Mediterranean. A new US president from January would also be a key benchmark to watch out for days to come. The relationships are most likely to be economic and based on mutual interests.

(The writer is a policy analyst; views are personal)

The dawn of a new era: Syria's path forward



NISHAKANT OJHA

As Syria comes to terms with Assad's departure, the road ahead promises opportunities for renewal but is fraught with risks that will test the resolve of its new leadership



The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime and the appointment of Mohammed al-Bashir as Syria's Prime Minister on December 10, 2024, mark a watershed moment in the nation's history, offering a mix of promise and uncertainty. This transition signals the end of an era defined by authoritarian rule, civil war and foreign interventions, ushering in a period of both opportunity and immense challenge. Assad's departure, driven by a combination of Russian withdrawal and external pressures, has created a power vacuum with significant implications. Mohammed al-Bashir, a moderate politician known for his diplomatic acumen, has pledged to prioritise national reconciliation and reconstruction. His leadership represents a shift from the autocratic governance of the past toward a more inclusive and reform-oriented approach. However, stabilising Syria remains an uphill battle.

Despite al-Bashir's efforts, large swathes of the country remain fragmented, with control divided among Kurdish forces, remnants of opposition groups, and radical elements. Moreover, millions of Syrians continue to suffer from displacement, poverty and inadequate access to basic services, underscoring the dire need for humanitarian aid and international support. Compounding these challenges is Syria's shattered economy, which demands both immediate stabilisation and long-term rebuilding strategies.

The role of covert operations by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the fall of Assad's regime cannot be overlooked. Since the early years of the Syrian Civil War, the CIA has employed programmes such as Operation Timber Sycamore to train and arm select rebel factions, aiming to counter Assad's government, which had strong backing from Russia and Iran. These operations evolved



PRIME MINISTER AL-BASHIR HAS OUTLINED A ROADMAP FOR SYRIA'S RECOVERY, FOCUSING ON POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL REFORMS

to include intelligence gathering, cyberattacks, and psychological warfare. Although they played a critical role in destabilising Assad's regime, the complexities of such interventions also fueled unintended consequences, such as the empowerment of extremist factions. For the US, this strategy yielded key geopolitical advantages, including weakening Iranian influence, reducing Russia's foothold in the region, and bolstering counterterrorism efforts.

Prime Minister al-Bashir has outlined a roadmap for Syria's recovery, focusing on political, economic, and social reforms. Politically, his plans include forming a transitional government representing Syria's diverse ethnic and political groups and drafting a new constitution that decentralises power and protects minority rights.

On the economic front, his administration is prioritising infrastructure development, attracting international investments, and combatting corruption to lay the foundation for sustainable growth. Socially, reintegration programs aim to facilitate the return of displaced Syrians and rehabilitate former combatants, while expanded healthcare and education services seek to address the needs of the war-affected population.

The fall of Assad and the emergence of al-Bashir have far-reaching implications for the broader West Asia. Regionally, these developments could recalibrate power dynamics, reducing Iran's influence in Syria while opening avenues for normalisation with Israel, partic-

ularly in areas of border security and economic cooperation. On a global scale, Russia's diminished role in Syria marks a strategic loss for Moscow, while China may see opportunities to extend its Belt and Road Initiative into the region's reconstruction phase.

Russia's longstanding support for Assad, which began with its military intervention in 2015, faced significant challenges in recent years. Strained by its involvement in Ukraine and Western sanctions, Moscow has grappled with resource constraints, prompting a recalibration of its Middle Eastern strategy. Domestic criticism of prolonged military engagements has further pressured the Kremlin to scale back its commitments in Syria, leaving Assad vulnerable to internal and external pressures.

Globally, the Syrian transition carries profound security implications. The power vacuum left by Assad's fall risks a resurgence of extremist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda, which could exploit the instability to regain strength and pose threats beyond Syria's borders. The ongoing refugee crisis also looms large, with continued instability potentially driving more Syrians to seek asylum abroad, challenging neighboring countries and Europe alike.

Additionally, proxy conflicts fueled by regional rivalries and superpower tensions threaten to entangle Syria in broader geopolitical frictions. The transition from Assad to al-Bashir represents a pivotal juncture in Syria's history, offering a chance for renewal amid deep-seated

challenges. While the road to stability and prosperity is fraught with obstacles, a coordinated international effort combined with meaningful domestic reform holds the potential to guide Syria toward a more peaceful and resilient future. The coming months will be decisive in determining whether this new chapter in Syria's turbulent narrative leads to lasting progress.

The transition from Bashar al-Assad's regime to Mohammed al-Bashir's leadership marks a critical turning point in Syria's history, offering a glimmer of hope amid a legacy of conflict and instability. Al-Bashir's vision for political reform, economic recovery, and social inclusion aims to chart a new course for a nation shattered by years of war. However, the challenges are immense: fragmented control, a dire humanitarian crisis, and a collapsed economy require urgent attention and sustained international support.

On the global stage, the fall of Assad has reshaped regional dynamics, reducing Iranian influence and opening new avenues for diplomacy while exposing Syria to the risks of renewed extremism and geopolitical competition. Whether Syria's new leadership can successfully navigate these complexities and steer the nation toward stability depends on the cohesion of its domestic efforts and the willingness of the international community to provide coordinated and meaningful support.

(The writer is an eminent expert on counter terrorism and West Asian affairs; views are personal)

Bridging India's urban-rural divide: Empowering rural learners through skilling

India's vast diversity extends beyond culture and language, manifesting in unequal access to education, skilling and employment opportunities

India is a country with great linguistic, cultural, racial, social and economic diversity. People living in urban areas have access to opportunities for skilling, education and employment that are not easily available to people in semi-urban and rural areas. Over the last decade or two, there has been considerable growth and development in the skilling and education ecosystem due to a multitude of factors. Governments – both central and state – have realised that the only way India can benefit from its tremendous demographic dividend is by ensuring that individuals in the working age are equipped with the knowledge and skills required to thrive in increasingly global workplaces.



NAGESH SINGH

Central and state skilling entities have created massive systems that reach every district around India and make top-quality resources available to hitherto underserved audiences.

The corporate sector, leveraging the prevalent Corporate Social Responsibility laws, has also contributed significantly to this by collaborating with government agencies and supporting them with co-

funding, content, certification and job opportunities. The Directorate General of Training (Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship) manages a network of tens of thousands of institutions that collaborate with the corporate sector and civil society to make high-quality skilling available to hundreds of thousands of learners every year. All India Council for Technical Education, through its network of thousands of engineering institutions, offers cutting-edge training and internship opportunities to learners around India, irrespective of their location or socio-economic limitations. Edunet Foundation, for example, makes courseware and skills across the IT spectrum

available to learners across engineering colleges, National Skills Training Institutes and Industrial Training Institutes nationally, directly working with lakhs of learners every year. These programs are offered in blended mode, leveraging classroom learning, synchronous video, online content and hands-on project work. While there is availability of skilling and education opportunities, there are several issues that limit the benefits of these programs. The foremost problem is access to technology. Since the courses are offered in blended mode, learners need access to computers with high bandwidth internet connectivity and not just mobile phones. Almost every household in



India has access to mobile phones but larger devices that are more conducive to experiential learning in technology are not widely available. Both government and corporate stakeholders can make a huge difference by making current technology platforms available to learners in rural areas by donating and/or set-

ting up labs and digital libraries within the premises of existing educational institutions in these areas. The second issue is access to local employment. Most jobs – especially the technology-centric ones – are centred around major cities and towns. For learners who are unable to migrate for employ-

ment, this is a huge barrier. Additionally, of course, there are many problems associated with mass migration to urban areas. There is a need to create local career opportunities that allow people to gainfully work wherever they are, without the need to migrate to a larger city or town.

This may be done by a steady focus on entrepreneurship that creates jobs locally and helps in the development of rural areas. Rural micro-entrepreneurship, especially focused on agriculture and associated areas, can solve many of the problems associated with mass-migration and lopsided economic development. Local businesses, thus created, will drive the local economy and create local

employment. A stronger focus on rural enterprise will help India by ensuring inclusive economic development. There are several programs by the government and the corporate sector that are trying to achieve this, but they need to be enhanced and made more potent with support from civil society. In an environment where rural learners have access to technology and employment opportunities, skilling initiatives by the government and the corporate sector will make a bigger impact. Learners will be able to learn and earn locally, thereby bridging the urban-rural divide.

(The writer is chairman, Edunet Foundation; views are personal)

IN BRIEF



Rupee hits fresh all-time low, settles lower against dollar

The rupee depreciated by 4 paise to settle at an all-time low of 84.87 (provisional) against the US dollar on Thursday, dragged down by negative domestic equity markets, outflow of foreign funds and rise in crude oil prices. Forex traders said investors were awaiting cues from domestic inflation data to be released later in the day even as an elevated dollar index weighed on the Indian currency. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 84.85 and touched the lowest-ever level of 84.88 against the greenback during intra-day trade. The unit finally ended the session 4 paise down at a fresh all-time low closing level of 84.87 (provisional) against the dollar. On Wednesday, the rupee settled with a gain of 2 paise at 84.83 against the US dollar. Rupee's previous record low closing level was recorded on December 9, when it settled 20 paise lower at 84.86 against the dollar.

India, UK talks on trade pact may start soon

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India and the UK are expected to hold the next round of talks for a proposed free trade agreement (FTA) in January to resolve the pending issues and close the negotiations, a senior official said on Thursday.

The talks for the proposed FTA began in January 2022. The 14th round of talks stalled as the two nations stepped into their general election cycles.

In November, an official statement said that the dates for the FTA talks in early 2025 would be finalised through diplomatic channels. The negotiations would resume the discussions from the progress achieved previously and seek to bridge the gaps for expeditiously closing the trade deal. The next round of talks is likely to start at January-end, the official said. The Indian industry is demanding greater access for its skilled professionals from sectors like IT and healthcare in the UK market, besides market access for several goods at nil customs duty.

On the other hand, the UK is seeking a significant cut in import duties on goods such as scotch



'India-EU talks need political directions'

The proposed free trade agreement (FTA) negotiations between India and the European Union (EU) need political directions to reach a commercially meaningful deal while understanding each other's sensitivities, an official statement said on Thursday. The pact came up for discussion during an interaction between Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal and Ambassadors of the European Commission delegation. Goyal said that both sides are aiming for a balanced, ambitious, comprehensive and mutually beneficial FTA. "The FTA negotiations, after 9 rounds of intense engagement, need political directions to arrive at a commercially meaningful deal while understanding the sensitivities of each other," the commerce and industry ministry said. The minister also noted that any sustainability discussions must appreciate the principle of 'Common But Differentiated Responsibility (CBDR)' and implementation of such measures should take into account differing paths of development.

whiskey, electric vehicles, lamb meat, chocolates and certain confectionary items. Britain is also looking for more opportunities

for UK services in Indian markets in segments like telecommunications, legal and financial services (banking and insurance).

Retail inflation eases to 5.48%

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Retail inflation slowed to 5.48 per cent in November compared to 6.21 pc in October, mainly due to easing food prices, especially vegetables, according to government data released on Thursday. According to Consumer Price Index (CPI) data released by the National Statistics Office (NSO), the inflation in the food basket reduced to 9.04 per cent in November. It was 10.87 per cent in October and 8.70 per cent in November 2023.

"During the month of November 2024, a significant decline in inflation is observed in vegetables, pulses and products, sugar and confectionary, fruits, eggs, milk and products, spices, transport and communication and personal care and effects subgroups," the NSO said.

The CPI-based headline inflation increased from an average of 3.6 per cent during July-August to 5.5 per cent in September and further to 6.2 per cent in October 2024, the highest in more than a year since September 2023.

'India should remain open to investments from China'

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India should remain open to investments from China as other developed countries like

the US and Germany, with the exception of a handful of sectors, 16th Finance Commission Chairman Arvind Panagariya said on Thursday.

He also cautioned that one has to be careful about investments from potentially "unfriendly countries" that might damage the interest of the nation. However, developed countries are accepting investments from China in any particular sector, India can also welcome such investments.

"If the US is taking investment from China, if Germany is taking, I would (be) open to their investment."

The activities from which you want to exclude are relatively few because I don't see other countries restricting Chinese investment in large number of

sectors," Panagariya said at the CII Global Economic Policy Forum 2024.

The Economic Survey 2023-24, too, had made a strong case



for seeking foreign direct investments (FDI) from China to boost local manufacturing and tap the export market. It also said increased FDI inflows from China can help increase India's global supply chain participation and push exports.

Panagariya also made a case for India to enter into Free Trade Agreements (FTA) with more nations, saying its relevance today has increased because components are manufactured in multiple nations and high cross-border tariffs add to the final cost of the product.



Tata Motors to hike trucks, buses prices by up to 2pc

Tata Motors on Thursday said it will increase prices of its trucks and buses portfolio by up to 2 per cent effective January 1, 2025, citing rising input costs. The price increase is to offset the rise in input costs, Tata Motors said in a statement. While the price increase will vary as per individual model and variant, it will be applicable across the entire range of trucks and buses, it added. Already passenger vehicle makers, including Maruti Suzuki, Hyundai Motor India and Tata Motors, along with luxury carmaker Mercedes-Benz, BMW and Audi have announced that they would increase the price of their vehicles from January.



Auto component industry grows to Rs 3.32 lakh cr

The automotive components industry grew 11 per cent year-on-year to Rs 3.32 lakh crore in the first half of the current fiscal, industry body ACMA said on Thursday. The turnover of the automotive component industry in the April-September period of last fiscal stood at Rs 2.98 lakh crore. "With vehicle sales across all segments reaching pre-pandemic levels and despite geopolitical challenges on the exports front, the auto components sector witnessed a steady growth in both domestic and international markets in the first half of FY2024-25," Automotive Component Manufacturers Association of India (ACMA) President Shradha Suri Marwah said. She said the festive season brought significant sales across most segments of the vehicle industry. "However, reflecting on the past eight months of this fiscal year, while two-wheelers have shown promising growth, sales of passenger vehicles and commercial vehicles have been relatively moderate," she added. On the exports front, with geological challenges, delivery time and freight costs have once again gone up, Marwah said.

Gold rises Rs 500 per 10 gm; silver at Rs 97,000 per kg

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Gold prices climbed Rs 500 to Rs 80,900 per 10 grams in the national capital on Thursday due to persistent buying by retailers and jewellers, according to the All India Sarafa Association.

The precious metal of 99.9 per cent purity finished at Rs 80,400 per 10 grams in the previous trading session.

The yellow metal has jumped nearly Rs 2,000 in the past three sessions.

Silver also rallied Rs 700 to Rs 97,000 per kg on Thursday. The white metal settled at Rs 96,300 per kg in the previous session.

The price of gold of 99.5 per cent purity also surged Rs 500 to Rs 80,500 per 10 grams. It ended at Rs 80,000 per 10 grams on Wednesday. According to traders, per-

sistent buying by jewellers and a firm trend in the international markets were among the factors that aided the rally in gold prices.

Meanwhile, in futures trade on the Multi Commodity Exchange (MCX), gold contracts for February delivery dipped Rs 114 or 0.14 per cent to Rs 78,888 per 10 grams.

"Gold traded within a volatile range and experienced minor profit booking at higher levels, with Comex prices facing resistance near USD 2,720-2,725 and MCX encountering a hurdle around Rs 79,000," Jateen Trivedi, VP Research Analyst of Commodity and Currency at LKP Securities, said.

However, silver contracts for March delivery climbed Rs 420 or 0.44 per cent to Rs 96,222 per kg



Retailers urge FM not to go for higher 35 pc tax rate

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Indian Sellers Collective, an umbrella body of trade associations and sellers across the country, has urged the finance minister and the GST Council not to accept some of GST rate rationalisation suggestions, including the proposal for inclusion of a special rate of 35 per cent on some products.

The sellers body is of the view that a fifth GST slab of 35 per cent on demerit goods such as aerated beverages, cigarettes and tobacco, and pricing-based rate structure will materially alter the country's GST framework with devastating outcomes.

These recommendations violate both the letter and the spirit that it will be a 'good and simple tax', Indian Sellers Collective said in a statement on Thursday ahead of the 55th GST Council meeting to be held on December 21, 2024 at Jaisalmer, Rajasthan.

"On the contrary, it will hurt the profit margins of the retailers, lead to compliance nightmares and fuel a parallel economy.

GNPA of PSBs declines to 3.12% from 14.58%: FinMin

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

Gross non-performing assets (NPAs) of public sector banks (PSBs) have declined to a decade low of 3.12 per cent at the end of September 2024 from a peak of 14.98 per cent in March 2018 on the back of measures like the 4Rs -- recognition, recapitalisation, resolution, and reform -- taken by the government, the finance ministry said on Thursday.

Since 2015, the government implemented a comprehensive 4Rs strategy of recognising NPAs transparently, resolution and recovery, recapitalising PSBs, and reforms in the financial system to address the challenges faced by PSBs, it said.

Capital adequacy ratio of PSBs improved 393 bps to reach 15.43 per cent in September 2024 from 11.45 per cent in March 2015, it said. During 2023-24, PSBs recorded the highest-ever aggregate net profit of Rs 1.41 lakh crore against Rs 1.05 lakh crore in 2022-23, it said, adding that the figure was Rs 0.86 lakh crore in the first half of 2024-25.

In the last three years, PSBs



have paid total dividend of Rs 61,964 crore, it said.

"PSBs continue to expand their reach to every nook and corner of the country to deepen financial inclusion. Their capital base has strengthened and their asset quality has improved. Now they are able to go to market and access capital instead of depending on the government for recapitalisation," it said.

To deepen financial inclusion in the country, 54 crore Jan Dhan accounts and more than 52 crore collateral-free loans under various flagship financial inclusion schemes -- PM-Mudra, Stand-Up India, PM-SVANidhi, PM Vishwakarma -- have been sanctioned, it said.

Under the Mudra scheme, 68 per cent of beneficiaries are

women and under PM-SVANidhi scheme, 44 per cent of beneficiaries are women, the finance ministry said. The number of bank branches has gone up from 1,17,990 in March 2014 to 1,60,501 in September 2024. Of 1,60,501 branches, 1,00,686 are in rural and semi-urban (RUSU) areas, it said.

KCC Scheme aims to provide the short-term crop loan to farmers, it said, adding that the total number of operative KCC Accounts as on September 2024 stood at 7.71 crore with total outstanding of Rs. 9.88 lakh crore.

The Government of India (GoI) has consistently supported the MSME sector in terms of flow of credit at affordable rates through various initiatives, it said.

Markets end lower amid caution ahead of inflation data

Sensex drops 235 points

PNS ■ MUMBAI

Equity market benchmark indices Sensex and Nifty ended lower on Thursday due to selling pressure in index majors Reliance Industries, L&T, and HUL as investors turned cautious ahead of the inflation data announcement.

Besides, traders said weakness in the rupee and foreign fund outflows hit investors' sentiment.

The 30-share BSE benchmark Sensex declined 236.18 points or 0.29 per cent to settle at 81,289.96. During the day, it dropped 314.5 points or 0.38 per cent to 81,211.64.

The NSE Nifty dropped



93.10 points or 0.38 per cent to 24,548.70.

Among the 30-share Sensex blue-chip firms, NTPC, Hindustan Unilever, Tata Motors, Maruti, Larsen & Toubro, Reliance Industries,

Asian Paints and State Bank of India were the biggest laggards.

Bharti Airtel, IndusInd Bank, Tech Mahindra, Infosys, Adani Ports and Tata Consultancy Services were

among the gainers.

The BSE smallcap gauge tanked 1 per cent, and the midcap index declined 0.56 per cent.

FMCG dropped 1.15 per cent, energy (1.03 per cent), industrials (0.83 per cent), consumer discretionary (0.81 per cent), oil & gas (0.73 per cent) and auto (0.70 per cent).

IT, utilities, teck and BSE Focused IT were the gainers.

In Asian markets, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong settled in the green.

European markets were trading on a mixed note. Wall Street ended mostly higher in overnight trade on Wednesday.

IIP growth slows to 3.5 pc: Govt data

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

India's industrial production (IIP) growth slowed to 3.5 per cent year-on-year in October 2024, mainly due to poor performance of mining, power and manufacturing, as per official data released on Thursday.

The IIP recorded a growth of 11.9 per cent in October 2023, according to a statement by the Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation.

However, on a sequential basis, the factory output in October 2024 rose to 3.5 per cent from 3.1 per cent in September and a contraction of 0.1 per cent in August this year.

The growth in the factory output, measured in terms of the IIP, in April-October worked out to be 4 per cent against 7 per cent in the year-ago period, the data showed.

As per the data, the mining output growth decelerated to 0.9 per cent in October from 13.1 per cent expansion in the year-ago month.

The manufacturing sector's growth decelerated to 4.1 per

cent in October from 10.6 per cent a year ago.

Similarly, in power generation (IIP) growth slowed sharply to 2 per cent from a 20.4 per cent growth a year ago.

As per use-based classification, the capital goods segment growth decelerated to 3.1 per cent in October 2024 from 21.7 per cent in the year-ago period.

In October this year, consumer non-durables output growth slowed to 2.7 per cent compared to a 9.3 per cent growth in October 2023.

Consumer durable goods production grew by 5.9 per cent during the reporting month against a 15.9 per cent expansion in October 2023.

According to the data, infrastructure/construction goods reported a growth of 4 per cent in October 2024, down from a 12.6 per cent expansion in the year-ago period.

The data also showed that the output of primary goods logged a 2.6 per cent growth in October this year against 11.4 per cent a year earlier.



Govt defines green steel, sets emission standard

PNS ■ NEW DELHI

The government on Thursday came out with the definition of green steel and asked the industry to take measures to bring down carbon emissions below the level of 2.2 tonnes on per tonne of finished products.

The steel industry has been the backbone of India's indus-

trial growth and it is imperative that this vital sector undergoes a transformative shift towards sustainability as the country moves ahead, the minister said, adding that adoption of green practices is not an option but a necessity for the larger humanity.

The steel industry accounts for around 7 per cent of global CO2 emissions and India, the second largest producer of steel, has both the responsibility and the opportunity to lead the charge in reducing emissions while maintaining growth, Kumaraswamy said.

The new framework will

To give star rating on products



guide in efforts to decarbonize steel production and encourage green practices across the value chain, the minister said.

In his address, Steel Secretary Sandeep Poundrik said there is no universally accepted definition of green steel. There are various methodologies which are

being used by different institutions.

"Based on the recommendations of a task force as well as the examination in the ministry, today we have released as what we will consider to be green steel in the Indian context," he said.

As per the ministry's taxonomy, green steel shall be defined in terms of percentage greenness of steel, which is produced from the steel plant with CO2 equivalent emission intensity of less than 2.2 tonnes of CO2 per tonne of finished steel.

"So, anything below 2.2 car-

bon (CO2 emission)...will be considered to be green steel... And we have done this so that not only the industry, the ministry, the stakeholders, but also the consumers understand that they are using green steel," the secretary said.

If 1.6 tonnes of CO2 or less is emitted in production of 1 tonne of finished steel, it will be considered 5-star green rated steel.

On emissions in the range of 1.6 to 2 tonnes, the product will be given 4-star rating, while those with 2 to 2.2 tonnes of emission level will be rated 3-star.

what's brewing?

HARNAAZ MAKES HER B'WOOD DEBUT WITH BAAGHI 4

Filmmaker Sajid Nadiadwala is all set to launch another talent, Miss Universe Harnaaz Sandhu, after successfully launching the careers of Tiger Shroff, Kriti Sanon and Ahan Shetty. On December 12th, 2021, Harnaaz Sandhu made history by winning the prestigious Miss Universe crown and now, on the same date, Nadiadwala Grandson Entertainment has announced her Bollywood debut with *Baaghi 4*.

Known for her charisma and elegance on the global stage, Harnaaz's debut has already generated immense excitement among fans and industry insiders.

Under Nadiadwala's banner, Harnaaz will share the screen with Tiger Shroff, bringing a fresh dynamic to the much-anticipated sequel. Her transition from pageantry to acting marks the start of a promising journey in Indian cinema.

Directed by A Harsha, *Baaghi 4* also stars Sonam Bajwa and Sanjay Dutt. A Sajid Nadiadwala franchise, under the Nadiadwala Grandson Entertainment banner, *Baaghi 4* is set to release on 5th September 2025.

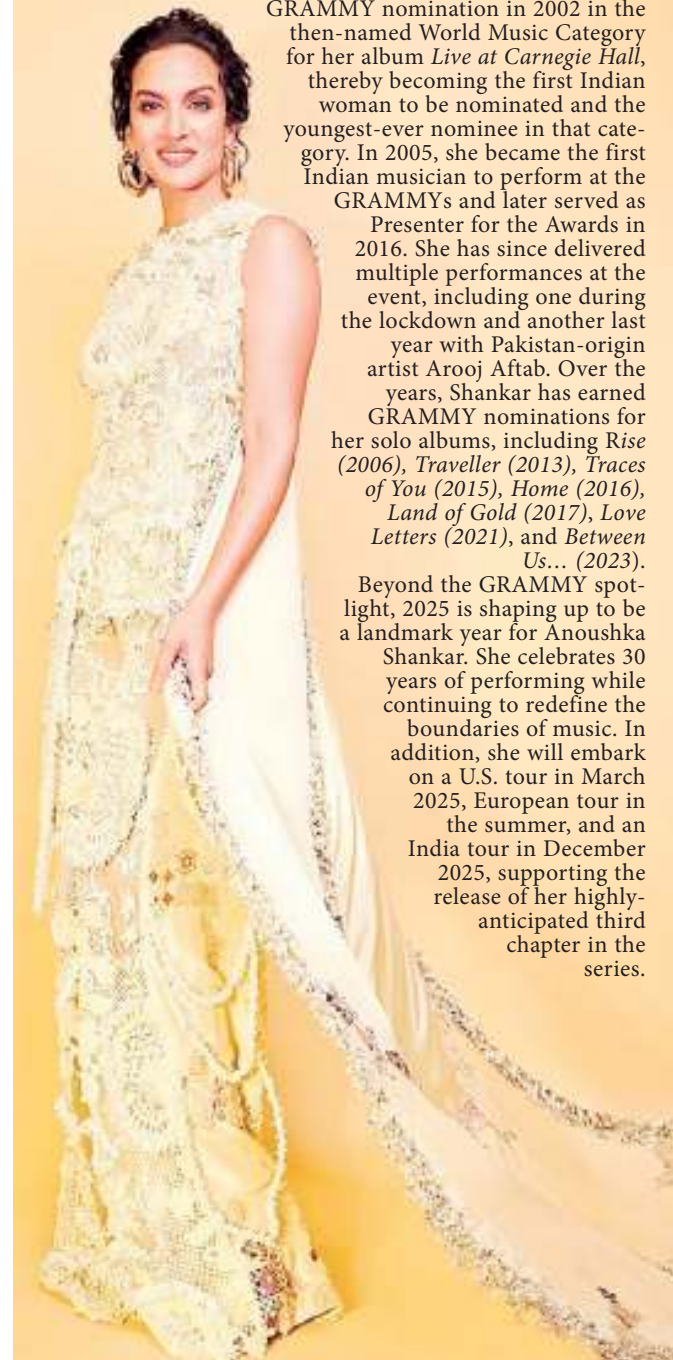


Anoushka Shankar receives two GRAMMY nominations

Anoushka Shankar is poised to make history on a global platform! The renowned sitar player has earned two GRAMMY nominations for Best New Age, Ambient, or Chant Album for her solo album *Chapter II: How Dark It Is Before Dawn* and Best Global Performance for her collaboration on *A Rock Somewhere* with Jacob Collier and Varijashree Venugopal. A trailblazer as a composer and sitarist, Shankar masterfully blends genres ranging from classical and contemporary to acoustic and electronic. Daughter of the legendary sitarist Pandit Ravi Shankar, Anoushka has now amassed a total of 11 GRAMMY nominations for her exceptional contribution to music.

For those unacquainted, Shankar received her first GRAMMY nomination in 2002 in the then-named World Music Category for her album *Live at Carnegie Hall*, thereby becoming the first Indian woman to be nominated and the youngest-ever nominee in that category. In 2005, she became the first Indian musician to perform at the GRAMMYs and later served as Presenter for the Awards in 2016. She has since delivered multiple performances at the event, including one during the lockdown and another last year with Pakistan-origin artist Arooj Aftab. Over the years, Shankar has earned GRAMMY nominations for her solo albums, including *Rise* (2006), *Traveller* (2013), *Traces of You* (2015), *Home* (2016), *Land of Gold* (2017), *Love Letters* (2021), and *Between Us...* (2023).

Beyond the GRAMMY spotlight, 2025 is shaping up to be a landmark year for Anoushka Shankar. She celebrates 30 years of performing while continuing to redefine the boundaries of music. In addition, she will embark on a U.S. tour in March 2025, European tour in the summer, and an India tour in December 2025, supporting the release of her highly-anticipated third chapter in the series.



Selena Gomez, Benny's 'forever begins'

Actress-singer Selena Gomez is now engaged to her partner, music producer Benny Blanco. She shared the news via an Instagram carousel including an up-close snap of her engagement ring and a pic of her and Blanco celebrating their engagement with laughs and a hug.

She wrote in the caption, "Forever begins now". Blanco is ready to make their union official as he commented, "hey wait... that's my wife".

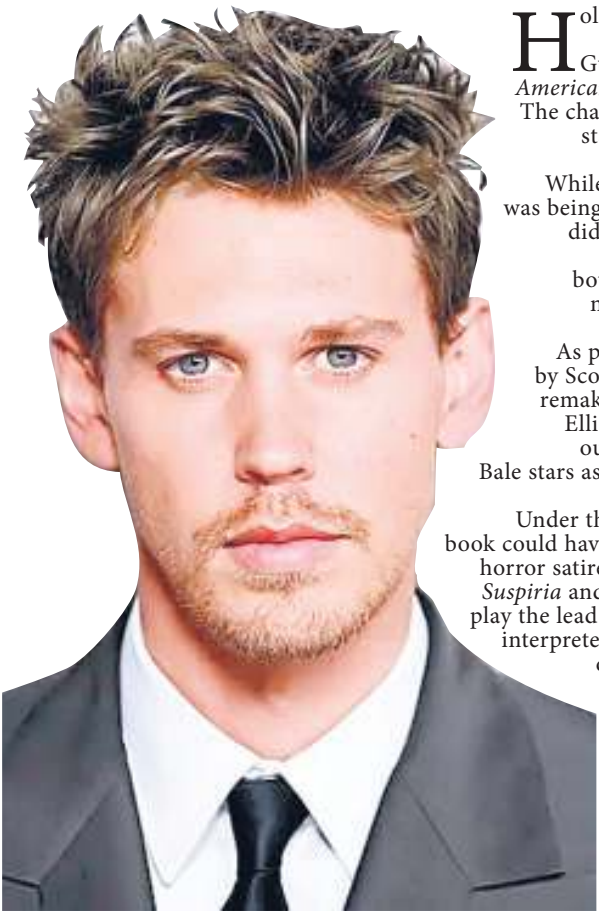
The bride-to-be also proudly posted a mirror selfie, showing off her new ring even more in her Instagram Stories, as per reports. During a May appearance on *The Howard Stern Show*, Blanco told Stern that he could see marriage in his future with the *Only Murders In The Building* actress.

He said, "When I look at her... I'm always just like, I don't know a world where it could be better than this". Selena and Blanco had known each other for years, having collaborated on the 2019 single *I Can't Get Enough* with Tainy and J Balvin before they started dating in June 2023.

As per reports, in August 2023, Selena released the Blanco-produced single *Single Soon*. In December 2023, she confirmed their relationship when she liked fan account posts on Instagram of the pair, even commenting, "He is my absolute everything in my heart". They made their red carpet debut at the 2024 Emmy's in January. The following month Gomez spoke to Apple Music's Zane Lowe about their relationship.

"Without getting into too much detail, I think it's just really important to meet someone that respects you," she said. "And I think it's really nice to also lean on someone who understands the world that I live in. But I'd have to say overall it's the safest that I feel and it's been really lovely and I've only grown through it, so it's awesome".

Austin Butler to reprise Christian Bale's iconic role in American Psycho



Hollywood actor Austin Butler is set to reprise the role of Patrick Bateman in Luca Guadagnino's new interpretation of the book *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis for Lionsgate. The character was earlier played by the Hollywood star and the master of body transformations, Christian Bale, in *American Psycho*.

While there had been rumours that Jacob Elordi was being eyed to play Patrick Bateman, that casting didn't come to pass, as per reports. Elordi and Butler have something in common, having both played very different versions of Elvis in movies by Sofia Coppola (*Priscilla*) and Baz Luhrmann (*Elvis*), respectively.

As per reports, the film, which features a script by Scott Z Burns (*The Laundromat*), will not be a remake of the 2000 film, but a new adaptation of Ellis' novel. In the original movie, which came out in 2000 and is set in the 1980s, Christian Bale stars as Patrick Bateman, a Wall Street yuppie and serial killer.

Under the lens of Guadagnino, the new take on the book could have a larger erotic emphasis than the original horror satire. Guadagnino has also dabbled in genre in *Suspiria* and *Bones and All*. While Butler is attached to play the lead role in the movie, Guadagnino might have interpreted the Patrick Bateman character in a much different way than its previous incarnation.

Guadagnino just wrapped the shoot of *After the Hunt*, starring Julia Roberts and Andrew Garfield. His previous two movies, *Queer* and *Challengers*, turned up in the Golden Globes nominations.

Daniel Craig was nominated for best actor, while Zendaya is vying for best actress in *Challengers*, which is also nominated for motion picture (musical or comedy) and music.

FUN

ARCHIE



CALVIN AND HOBBS



GARFIELD



NANCY



GINGER MEGGS



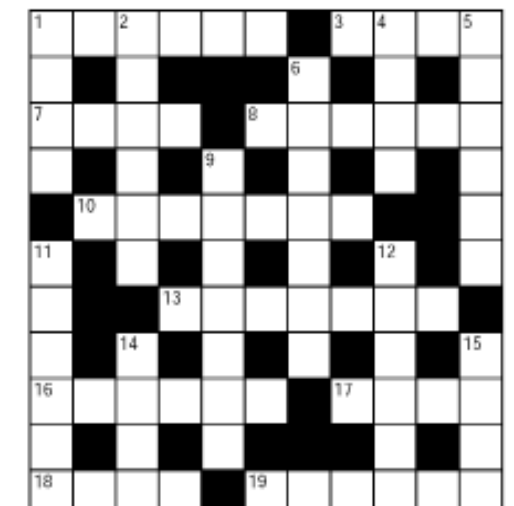
REALITY CHECK



SPEED BUMP



CROSSWORD



SUDOKU

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Yesterday's solution

6	2	4	7	3	5	8	1	9
9	3	7	6	1	8	4	2	5
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2	9	5	8	7	1	6	3	4
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7	8	3	4	9	2	1	5	6
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- 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

- Completely quiet
- Scheme
- Plenty
- A covering for fried fish
- Begged
- Inquisitive
- Middle
- Utters aloud
- One third of ninety
- A type of spear thrown by an athlete
- A month
- These tell the time
- The writer of a book
- Jealousy
- Don't go away

DOWN

- Sprinkle this on food
- Small
- Overdue
- Opposite of wide





TRAVELOGUE

From London to Spain, Soundarya Sharma's 'fun' European escapade

Straight out of shooting for the upcoming film *Housefull 5*, Soundarya Sharma had the best of her best time shooting in the picturesque locations across London, France and Spain. In an exclusive chat with *The Pioneer*, she shares her unforgettable experiences, from discovering hidden gems to embracing new cultures and how this work-cum-leisure trip was a journey of self-discovery and growth



TEJAL SINHA
tejal.sinha30@gmail.com

From the charming countryside of London to the sun-kissed landscapes of Spain, Soundarya Sharma's latest European escapade was a journey of discovery, growth and unforgettable experiences. Basically, it was a work trip to Europe, where she filmed for *Housefull 5* in various locations, including London, France and Spain.

"I had an amazing time," she exclaimed in an exclusive interview with *The Pioneer*. "The countryside of London and everything was just so beautiful. We've been shooting for *Housefull 5* and it's been an amazing experience. It was a fun ride, a laughter ride and I have so many memories and beautiful places to discover."

When asked what she enjoyed most about the trip, the *Bigg Boss* fame emphasised the joy of living her dream and working while travelling. "That's what makes me happy. I'm travelling and on top of it, I'm working and in good company. This is the best thing that could have happened to me at this point in time."

The trip was also a welcome surprise, as Soundarya had resolved not to travel anywhere except for work. "It came as a big surprise and I needed it the most. The weather was so lovely. What could I have asked for more?"

During her travels, she did discover several hidden gems and lesser-known spots too: "We went to places like Normandy and Gexto in Spain and many more small towns and villages that I had never even heard of. It was really a revelation. I always wondered how people live in different parts of towns and different countries, in smaller areas. It's so peaceful, so beautiful, so nice."

Her hotel experience was also top-notch, thanks to good recommendations and accommodations. "It makes a whole lot of difference, you know. That's what creates good memories for you. We were in Central London, living the best life around all the celebrities and amazing people of my production. I met a few friends too,

went out for good dining places, amazing shopping places and the countryside also."

Despite all the language barriers, this trip made her realise that human connections can transcend cultural differences. "I think human beings are almost the same, on every part of the planet, I feel. But, yeah, the weather is different. Because, honestly, I didn't get to spend too much time with the locals because we were shooting. So we only got to go out to check out the places, shopping complexes and areas."

Soundarya had never been to London previously and this trip was her first discovery of the city and its countryside. There are many places where I have not been to previously, but it was a work trip, a leisure trip, everything. It was amazing. So that was the first time I was discovering London and the countryside," she said.

When it comes to recharging and managing pressure, she relies on her personal sanctuaries. "I think it has to be the temple," she said, because that is where she gets her succor. "Or being at home with my dog and just being around my mom and dad. I usually don't go on trips without my family."

Soundarya's life has been a whirlwind of activity, with most of her time spent in LA, Bombay and Delhi. "I've not been out much. You would be very surprised to know. I've only spent most of my time, the time of my life, either in LA or in Bombay



and in Delhi. So for me, even when I'm under pressure, it has to be here. I have actually learned to live with pressure."

For Soundarya, the key to managing pressure is having her loved ones around her. "I have accepted it to be in this profession. But what makes it special is when you have your own people around you; I think that is what gives you the gravitas and comfort. So my go-to place is actually my dog, temple and my home. So no matter where they are, that becomes my comfort place."

As for India, she believes that the country has its own unique charm. "India is India no matter what. The food, the people, the comfort, the respect—everything. But, I'm yet to travel to Kashmir. I have heard that it's very heavy. I'm looking forward to it. But whichever part I've been to, I think I've also been to Sikkim, Indo-China border. All are very beautiful places. India, especially now, has come to the standards and this thing of, you know, worldly this thing. Especially with the ongoing scenario. People are so well-read and aware, and sanitation is taken care of. There are so many places in India, I would say. India is truly incredible too."

Her enthusiasm for exploring new places is evident and she's open to discovering more destinations. "Maybe you never know, maybe more. Well, I don't know what work holds for me. And what if one fine day I sit and plan some unusual place to travel? I would, but I don't know what's special for now, but this is surely on my bucket list."

Despatch promises scoop, delivers snippet

Plot

Joy Bag (Manoj Bajpayee), a crime reporter at a news organisation called Despatch, finds himself at a crossroads as print media struggles to stay relevant in the age of digital news. His work is perilous, his ethics questionable, and his personal life in disarray. Joy's interactions with sources, colleagues, and adversaries reveal a man driven by the adrenaline of uncovering scandals, often at the cost of moral boundaries.

Facing pressure to deliver sensational stories, Joy takes matters into his own hands when a tip from a trusted source leads him to a high-stakes murder investigation. However, what initially seems like gang-related violence quickly spirals into a complex web of conspiracies, forcing Joy to confront challenges far beyond his expectations.

Highlights

In a time when media—particularly print—is a hotbed for OTT and cinematic exploration, *Despatch* offers a unique perspective on the world of crime reporting. Unlike typical hero-driven narratives, Joy Bag is deeply flawed and that's what sets the show apart. He isn't the ideal journalist we root for—in fact, we know he's far from it. This audacity in its portrayal of an imperfect protagonist is where *Despatch* shines, offering a refreshing departure from conventional storytelling.

Drawbacks

The movie's attempts to explore the grittier side of investigative journalism are undermined by an overreliance on familiar crime-thriller clichés. Scenes meant to be tense or revelatory often fall flat, relying on shock value rather than a deep, introspective look at the consequences of the profession. Joy's moral dilemmas—how he navigates the murky waters of truth, power, and personal ambition—are glossed over, leaving little room for the audience to connect with his internal struggles. This lack of emotional resonance is a major flaw, as the film's surface-level approach never allows us to fully understand the weight of Joy's decisions.



Written by: Kanu Behl & Ishani Banerjee
Produced by: Ronnie Screwvala
Starring: Manoj Bajpayee, Archita Agarwal, Shahana Goswami
Directed by: Kanu Behl
Cinematography: Siddharth Diwan
Streaming on: ZEE5
Rating: 2/5

REVIEW

ing the bustling, chaotic environments of India's major cities, thanks to cinematographer Siddharth Diwan's energetic shots. The dynamic camera work keeps the pace brisk, but it isn't enough to salvage the broader narrative's lack of focus. Sneha Khanwalkar's score, meant to evoke the tension of the story, falls flat at times, lacking the punch necessary to elevate the stakes.

Performances

Manoj Bajpayee is, as always, a magnetic presence, bringing gravitas to his role even as the script falters. His portrayal of Joy Bag is compelling, but the film's inability to provide sufficient psychological depth limits the impact of his performance. Bajpayee's extensive filmography raises high expectations and while he does his best to salvage the material, one can't help but feel this project was a misstep.

Archita Agarwal and Shahana Goswami lend some energy and nuance to their roles, but their characters remain peripheral to the larger narrative. Agarwal, in particular, shines in a few moments, yet her efforts are undermined by the film's disjointed storytelling.

Verdict

Despite its intriguing premise, *Despatch* fails to live up to its potential. The disjointed storytelling and reliance on familiar tropes render it a lackluster experience. With stronger alternatives available, this one is an easy pass.

Much-anticipated pairings of 2025 with fresh dynamics

Pairings in the entertainment industry have always been a crucial factor that audiences eagerly look forward to. While these pairings bring different narratives of love and romance to films, they also add an intriguing twist to the storyline. Over the years, we have seen various on-screen pairings, and 2025 is set to introduce even more, surprising us with fresh dynamics. Let's take a look at some of the most anticipated pairings of 2025:

Junaid Khan & Khushi Kapoor
Junaid Khan and Khushi Kapoor are set to star together in a romantic drama. Although the film's title is yet to be revealed, fans are eagerly awaiting this exciting new pairing because the poster looked really intriguing.

Prabhas & Malavika Mohanan
Prabhas and Malavika Mohanan will share the screen for the first time in *The Raja Saab*. This highly anticipated film promises to be an entertaining blend of horror and comedy.

Vicky Kaushal & Rashmika Mandanna
Vicky Kaushal and Rashmika Mandanna will unite in the much-anticipated *Chhaava*. Directed by Laxman Utekar, this historical action film is based on the life of Maratha King Sambhaji, portrayed by Vicky and Yesubai Bhonsale, played by Rashmika.

Hrithik Roshan & Kiara Advani
Hrithik Roshan and Kiara Advani will star in the much-awaited sequel, *War 2*. With the film already announced, everyone is excited to witness this dynamic duo in one of the year's biggest entertainers.

Aditya Roy Kapur & Sara Ali Khan
Aditya Roy Kapur and Sara Ali Khan will appear together in Anurag Basu's *Metro... In Dino*. This anthology film comprises four heartwarming stories about contemporary couples, and fans are looking forward to seeing Aditya and Sara's on-screen chemistry.

Rohit must return to opening if he has to throw the first punch: Shastri

PTI ■ BRISBANE

Former India head coach Ravi Shastri, who knows a thing or two about winning Test rubbers in Australia, on Thursday asked India skipper Rohit Sharma to return to the opening slot "if he has to throw the first punch" on an opponent brimming with confidence. Shastri was serving as team director when India won their maiden Test series in Australia in 2017-18 and was the head coach when the side rallied brilliantly to stun the hosts in the last tour in 2020-21. The move to slot Rohit at number six did not yield the desired results for India and they were hammered by 10 wickets in the second Test at Adelaide, leaving the five-match clash locked at 1-1 and with everything to play for in what Shastri believes could decide the fate of the series. "That's where he's (Rohit) been at his best over the last eight or nine years," Shastri was quoted as saying by "The

Age". "It's not that he's going to set the world on fire - he could - but that's the place that's best for him...If he has to do damage, if he has to throw the first punch, that's the best place from where he can do it." Rohit had only one fifty in his last 10 innings heading into the Pink-ball Test last week when Shastri, interestingly, advised against changing the opening combination of Yashasvi Jaiswal and KL Rahul after their success in the position while backing the captain to bat in the middle-order. Shastri said he has no doubt the winner of the third Test, starting here on Saturday, could go on to claim the series. "I feel whichever team wins this Test match will win the series. I have absolutely no doubt in my mind. So it is very, very important that India get the balance right, because Australia have got the confidence back," the former captain said.



The triumph of 2021 is considered one of the greatest in the history of Indian cricket and Shastri, while speaking at the first annual Usman Khawaja Foundation lunch at the Gabba, said the unity showed by the team, despite restrictions due to COVID-19, played a big part in the historic win.

"In COVID, the first Test match you start with five bowlers and the same five bowlers don't play the last Test. That says it all, it's like Australia playing without these five bowlers in the last Test of the series, it's a different ball game. Plus you didn't have quite a few batsmen as well. So it's a tribute to the players. "You can only do so much as a coach from behind the scenes. At the end of it, it's the players who have to go out there and do their job and they were magnificent." Four years ago, after getting bundled out for their lowest Test total of 36 in Adelaide, India made a magnificent comeback to win two of the remaining three games and emerge winners. Shastri fondly recalled a conversation between Rishabh Pant and Shubman Gill, who was helping out the latter with some useful tips right after his dismissal, as India went for the regular to score 140 odd runs in the final session of play to shock the hosts at the Gabba, which was until then the home team's fortress. "I'll never forget it," Shastri said. "Last session, 140 runs to get. We had two different change rooms because of COVID. I went down from the coaches' room to have a chat with either Rishabh or (Chateshwar) Pujara. When I was about to reach the toilet, I heard a conversation between Gill and Pant. "Seventy-one overs bowled, Gill had got out for 91, and they were the two youngest players in the side, 21 and 22. 'Nine overs left, they need the new ball, they'll bring (Marnus) Labuschagne on with his leg spin, you've got to score 45-50 runs there.' "They are planning how they can reach closer to the end score, and no way was I going to stop them. I don't want to change that mindset. So I just walked past and said 'do what you have to do'. In the end, we chased down nearly 150 in that last session."



Virat Kohli addresses team ahead of 3rd Test in Brisbane

PTI ■ BRISBANE

He used to be the cynosure of all eyes at training sessions during his captaincy days and Virat Kohli was once again the centre of attention as he addressed his teammates here on Thursday. After the demoralising 10-wicket defeat in the Adelaide day/night game, the visitors needed a bit of inspiration going into the crucial third Test of the series, and the youngsters in the side couldn't have got a better mentor than 'King' Kohli himself to guide them with his words of wisdom. The team huddles before the start of the training session has been a constant feature for years now and Kohli used to do a lot of talking during his days in charge. He did take a back seat once he left captaincy but with skipper Rohit also under immense pressure after four straight defeats, the senior-most player (in terms of Test debut) had to take the initiative ahead of the match starting here on Saturday. With vice-captain Jasprit Bumrah by his side, Kohli was

seen speaking animatedly to the group and everyone, including Rohit, listened to him with rapt attention. Rohit faces both new and semi-new ball in nets. Unlike before the pink ball Test, Rohit looked in far better shape during his net session at the Gabba but question marks remain over whether he would be back to opening the innings or stay put at No. 6, which isn't his preferred slot. On the day, while KL Rahul and Yashasvi Jaiswal once again faced the new ball at the nets, Rohit took on a slightly older Kookaburra at the beginning. Having faced that for some time, he did change nets with Rahul and also played a brand new red cherry for a while. The Gabba pitch has a decent grass cover and has always been one of the most traditional Australian wickets with both seam and bounce being on offer. Rohit's susceptibility has been against the moving deliveries more than bounce, and hence, it would be interesting to see if he takes on the challenge head on. After his session, Rohit and

head coach Gautam Gambhir were immersed in a lengthy chat and a from a distance, it looked like they were discussing technique. Gambhir was seen shaping up for some shadow drives, with Rohit watching him intently. Akash Deep looks better but will Gambhir drop Harshit? Akash Deep is believed to be the most consistent bowler in the Indian net session but that is no indicator that he will replace the young Harshit Rana, who was taken to task by Travis Head during the second Test in Adelaide. After four wickets on Test debut in Perth, Harshit was smashed for 86 in 16 overs but skipper Rohit came firmly to the youngster's defence. The burly Harshit can bowl the heavy ball and Gabba, just like the Optus Stadium track, could suit his style of bowling although he has been losing steam in subsequent spells after the opening one. Akash Deep at the other hand troubled Jaiswal twice, getting the outside edge of his bat, and those were clear catches in the slip cordon. He also got a pat on the back from the skipper.

Gujarat Giants appoint Pravin Tambe as bowling coach; Marsh takes over as batting coach

PTI ■ AHMEDABAD

Gujarat Giants on Thursday appointed former leg-spinner Pravin Tambe as their bowling coach, while Australian Daniel Marsh joined the side as batting coach ahead of Women's Premier League 2025. Michael Klinger, who joined the team last season, will continue as the Giants' head coach. Tambe, who made his IPL debut at the age of 41 back in 2013 for Rajasthan Royals, brings substantial coaching experience, having worked with Kolkata Knight Riders and Lucknow Super Giants. "I'm eager to work with this talented group of players to sharpen their skills and help



them excel," said Tambe. Marsh carries loads of experience, having served as head coach of the Tasmania men's team from 2013 to 2017 and was appointed as the assistant coach of the Australian women's cricket team in 2022. "I look forward to developing a fearless approach to our batting with the aim of

making our team one of the strongest batting units of the WPL," said Marsh. Ahead of the WPL 2025 auction to be held in Bengaluru on Sunday, the Giants had retained players such as Ashleigh Gardner and Beth Mooney. Gujarat Giants retained players: Ashleigh Gardner, Beth Mooney, Dayalan Hemalatha, Harleen Deol, Laura Wolvaardt, Shabnam Shakil, Tanuja Kanwer, Phoebe Litchfield, Meghna Singh, Kashvee Gautam, Priya Mishra, Mannat Kashyap, Bharti Fulmali, Sayali Satghare. Released players: Sneha Rana, Kathryn Bryce, Trisha Poojitha, Veda Krishnamurthy, Tarannum Pathan, Lea Tahuhu.

Prasar Bharati to broadcast Hockey India League

PTI ■ NEW DELHI

The upcoming Hockey India League, which is being revived after seven years, will be telecast live on the country's national broadcaster, Prasar Bharati. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in this regard was signed in a ceremony between Abhishek Agarwal, Deputy Director General Sports, Prasar Bharati, and Hockey India Secretary General Bholu Nath Singh. Set to commence on December 28 in Rourkela, HIL will be broadcast live across the nation through Doordarshan and Prasar Bharati's new OTT platform -- Waves. This edition of the HIL is path-breaking because it will feature the inaugural season of the women's league alongside the men's competition. While the men's competition will be played in Rourkela, a four-team maiden tournament for the women will be hosted at Ranchi. Navneet Sehgal, chairman Prasar Bharati, emphasised the importance of this partnership. "This is a proud moment for hockey, a sport that has captured the hearts of millions of Indians, and for Prasar Bharati, as we come together to bring the Hockey India League to every corner of the country. Our goal is to showcase this prestigious league to households across India, including remote towns and villages where future hockey stars are emerging. "With Doordarshan's extensive reach and our OTT platform, Waves, we will ensure that the Hockey India League becomes a national celebration, inspiring a deeper connection between the sport and its fans. Together, we aim to elevate hockey's prominence and turn it into a true festival for the entire nation," he said.

Momentum is with Australia after win at Adelaide, says Sunil Gavaskar

PTI ■ BRISBANE

The legendary Sunil Gavaskar feels Australia will have the momentum in the third Test against India starting on Saturday thanks to their victory in the Pink Ball Test at Adelaide last week. Australia levelled the five-match Border-Gavaskar Trophy 1-1 with a 10-wicket win in the day-night Test after losing the first Test at Perth by 295 runs. "The momentum that the Indian team got in Perth was lost during the 10-day gap. Now, the momentum is with Australia because they have won this Test match," Gavaskar told Star Sports. "After the Adelaide Test, a few days later, you are playing at The Gabba. So, the momentum is now with the



Australian team," he added. Speaking to the same channel, former spinner Harbhajan Singh said India should try to play their best cricket to register a win at the 'Gabba' before travelling to more favourable venues in Sydney and Melbourne. "Their best chances will be, I

think, in Sydney and Melbourne. Anyway, if you play your best cricket at The Gabba and win there, then you will definitely win one match out of Melbourne or Sydney," Harbhajan said. He said India have the ability to make a comeback into the series despite the heavy loss in Adelaide. "The equality of the first two Tests shows that both teams have the ability to come back. Australia has come back; now maybe it's India's turn to turn the tables," he said. The owner of 711 international wickets too agreed that the long interval between the first and second Test resulted in India losing the momentum. "This series is tough because both teams have had losses. What happened with Australia in Perth, maybe they didn't expect it. And what happened with India in Adelaide, maybe India also didn't expect it. "Although there was a very long gap in the middle between the two Tests, sometimes such a gap spoils the momentum, and it happened here," he said.

Manchester City crisis deepens with loss to Juventus in Champions League

AP ■ PARIS

Manchester City plunged deeper into trouble in the Champions League by losing 2-0 at Juventus, the latest setback in a scarcely believable run of poor results for the ailing English champions. City dropped to 22nd place in the 36-team standings, with only the top 24 advancing. Progressing to the next round of the new-look format looked a certainty before the season for a team that was European champion in 2023 and has won the last four Premier League titles. But not anymore as City manager Pep Guardiola battles injuries and an apparent loss of belief among his players. City has won just one of its last 10 matches in all competitions, with goals by Dušan Vlahovic and Weston McKennie inflicting the latest defeat and igniting Juventus' qualification hopes. City midfielder Ilkay Gundogan described the team's problem as a "mental issue." Opponents "are able to break our rhythm with the smallest of things," Gundogan said on

Wednesday. "They don't even need to do much and it has such a big effect on us right now." Barcelona jumped into second place in the league standings, behind Liverpool, and is guaranteed to advance after a 3-2 win at Borussia Dortmund. Raphinha and Ferran Torres, with two goals, scored for Barca. Arsenal beat Monaco 3-0 mainly thanks to two goals by Bukayo Saka to move into third place and be the highest of six teams on 13 points. The top eight qualify directly for the last 16 and the teams placed No. 9-24 go into a two-legged playoff. Danger for City City has two games to save its faltering Champions League campaign and the first is against Paris Saint-Germain, another giant in trouble in 25th place — one spot out of the qualifying positions. Vlahovic put Juventus ahead in the 53rd when he powered a header goalward straight at City goalkeeper Ederson, who could only parry the ball over his own line. Two American substitutes



sealed the win for Juve, with McKennie volleying home from Timothy Weah's cross. Juventus moved into 14th place. Super-sub Torres Ferran Torres came off the bench to inspire Barcelona to a fifth win in six games and push Dortmund, last season's runner-up, out of the top eight. Torres came on in the 71st to replace Robert Lewandowski, who had a quiet game against his former club. Just four minutes

Raphinha gave Barcelona the lead before Guirassy equalised from the penalty spot. Raphinha and Guirassy are tied for second place in the scoring chart on six goals, behind Lewandowski's competition-high seven. Home comforts for Arsenal Arsenal secured a third straight home win without conceding in the league stage, with Saka scoring in the 34th and 78th minutes and sending in a shot that was turned into the net by substitute Kai Havertz in the 88th. Arsenal is ahead of Bayer Leverkusen, Aston Villa, Inter Milan, Brest and Lille on goal difference. Lille won 3-2 at home to Sturm Graz on Wednesday. In-form Alvarez Man City could sure do with Julian Alvarez at the moment. With a brilliant curling finish to open the scoring, the Argentine striker helped Atletico Madrid beat Slovan Bratislava 3-1 and provide a timely reminder of what City is missing after selling him for more than USD 100 million in August. Alvarez has 12 goals for the season, with four coming in the Champions League. Antoine Griezmann scored

Atletico's other two goals at Metropolitan stadium as the Spanish team climbed to 11th place after a 10th straight win in all competitions. Tribute to grieving teammate When Lukasz Lakomy gave Young Boys the lead against Stuttgart, he ran toward the sideline and held up teammate Meschack Elia's jersey as others gathered around him. The gesture was a tribute after Elia's son died unexpectedly this week after a short illness. Elia wasn't playing as he was on his way to his native Congo, where his son died, to be with his family. Both teams wore black armbands and there was a moment of silence before the game, which was won 5-1 by Stuttgart. Late winner Tammy Abraham scored an 87th-minute winner as AC Milan beat Red Star Belgrade 2-1 to move one point off the top eight. Milan lost Alvaro Morata and Ruben Loftus-Cheek to muscle injuries in the first half. Benfica's five-match winning streak ended with a 0-0 home draw against Bologna, and Feyenoord had a 4-2 win over Sparta Prague.

RAJENDRA IS HERE TO STAY!

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There have been many young directors who have been coming up with new concepts in Tollywood. Ko Ve Ra (Konda Venkata Rajendra), adding to the list, is coming up with a different story and with an interesting title.

"*Lopalaki Ra Chepta* is the title of my film," said Venkata Rajendra. "It's a horror film. Not only acting, but I am also directing the film."

It was in 2018 when he made his debut film with *U*. While that film had an underworld mafia backdrop, that film and now he is coming up with a horror one. "Now, the horror genres are going successfully. Look at *Street 2*, which collected huge money at the box-office and even Prabhas's upcoming film, *The Raja Saab*, is in the same genre. There's huge demand for horror films in OTT, so I decided to come up with a horror one," said Rajendra.

Well, not just directing and acting, but he is also producing this film along with Lakshmi Ganesh Chedella and also provided the story. "I want to make the film within my budget limits, so I can't afford a director. Thus, I decided to direct my own film," he said.

Speaking of his six-year hiatus, he shares, "When I made my first film, I didn't have any awareness about distribution and the business of a film, so I distributed two films, *Slumdog Husband* and *Mr Pregnant*, in these years and now I have ideas about them," he said. He added that he also directed an animated film, *Funstatic Thara*, in these years.

Talking about the title *Lopalaki Ra Chepta*, Rajendra said that it is apt for his story. "It's an interesting title, as my film is also a horror genre. When I was at a crossing signal, a girl gave her number to me. When I called, she asked me to come to her house, and then the story revolves around after the incidents," said Rajendra.

This film's audio rights was acquired by popular Saregama music, which Rajendra feels is his

Konda Venkata Rajendra, aka Ko Ve Ra, is now coming up with his second film *Lopalaki Ra Chepta*, which is touted as a horror comedy. He talks about this film, his struggles and why he chose direction and also acting for this film



first win. "Recently, we released the first song from the film and it also garnered five lakhs views on YouTube," he said. The song is also released in a variety of plans. "I am playing a delivery boy in this film and I wanted to release the song with a real-life delivery boy, so I ordered something online and when the delivery boy came, I asked him to release it," said Rajendra about his different plans for the song release. It's not just this song; in the coming days he is planning to promote his film differently. "People definitely surprised after seeing the promotional content of my film," he said. There are five songs in the film and now one song has been released and the remaining four songs will be released in the coming days. "Sahiti Chaganti of *Kurchi Madathupatti* fame has sung one song in my film; it came out really well," he said. Davzand is the music director for this film.

Rajendra wanted to market him-

self with this film. "With my first film I didn't know anything, but now I want to focus on acting and direction. After this film release, definitely people will approach me and I will do acting in other people's direction and also I want to direct other actors," he said. There are three female leads in this film. Anala Susmitha, Manisha Jashnani and Sanchi Rai are the female leads.

Venkata Rajendra worked earlier with popular writer and Rajamouli's father, Vijayendra Prasad. "Yes, I learned the screenplay, story writing and editing also at that time. I am still in touch with him, as I recently met him and told him about my upcoming film," said Rajendra.

The film is now in post-production work and he wanted to release it in the second week of February. "I feel that's the ideal time and before that, I wanted to complete the business of Hindi dubbing rights and also OTT business," he said.



Mohan Babu breaks silence on media person altercation

Senior actor Mohan Babu has released a new audio message, this time addressing the recent incident in which a media person was injured. He posed a poignant question: Can anyone justify intruding into another person's family issues? Mohan Babu urged politicians and the public to ponder this question after witnessing the disturbing visuals.

"My son, Manoj, entered the house at around 8 pm; whether his entry was right or wrong, it's my family matter. How can the media forcefully enter my house? From the last few days onwards, they stayed in front of my house. Is this action justified?" asked Mohan Babu in his audio.

The senior actor questioned the way people entered his house without his permission. "When they come, are they the media? Are they coming to attack me for some personal vendetta? But I don't know and I did not want to hurt anyone intentionally. Everyone has to do their job; we are all labour," said Mohan Babu.

The actor said that many are accusing him and criticising him for attacking a media person but emphasised that the situation was not as simple as it seemed. "You are not seeing the way he put his mike on my

face. I almost lost my eye," he said.

He added that he came out with folded hands and suddenly someone put a microphone in front of his face. "In that darkness, I took that microphone and in that heat of the moment, he was injured. I genuinely feel sad that he got hurt and his wife and family also feel bad about it. But what about me? I felt very bad in the hospital," said Mohan Babu.

The actor said that if he had come out and beaten anyone, they could have filed a number of cases. "If I really did, I myself would go and surrender to the police station, but it didn't happen like that," said the actor. "I was already going through a lot of things because of my son Manoj, but we will sit and sort out our family matters. However, at that time, these people forcefully entered and broke my peacefulness, which is not right," said Mohan Babu. He added that he doesn't want outside people to interfere in his family matters. "We will discuss and sort out our own," he said. The senior actor requested everyone to think about the issue of his altercation with a media person.

"Consider the circumstances under which I reacted. You all think about it. I felt very bad that the person got hurt," he said.

KEERTHY SURESH & ANTONY THATTIL'S 'FOREVER AFTER' BEGINS!



It's marriage time in Tollywood. Just a few days back, Naga Chaitanya married actress Sobhita Dhulipala, and now on Thursday, actress Keerthy Suresh tied the knot with her longtime boyfriend, Antony Thattil. The marriage was held in Goa and it was a completely traditional ceremony. The actress posted some of her wedding pictures on her Instagram social media and now those pictures are going viral. She added the hashtag #ForTheLoveOfNkye.

After seeing the pictures she posted, it was clear that the marriage took place in a complete Hindu tradition with the Mangalsutra ceremony. Antony also looked dashing in Malayali attire, while Keerthy appeared stunning in a green saree. Antony is Keerthy's childhood friend and they have been in a relationship for the past fifteen years. Close family and friends gathered for her wedding, which took place in Goa. Many celebrities from all industries sent messages to the newlywed couple after seeing her pictures on social media.

On the professional front, her debut Hindi film, *Baby John*, is hitting the screens on December 25. She played the female lead opposite Varun Dhawan, and it is directed by Kales. The film is a remake of the Tamil hit film *Theri*, directed by Atlee. Vijay is the lead actor in this Tamil film.

Aamir Khan lauds Upendra's *UI*



Kannada actor Upendra is known to Telugu audiences too, as he has acted in many Telugu films and his Kannada films are also dubbed into Telugu. The actor is now coming up with a film titled *UI*, which is a science fiction action film. The film is completed and has also received a censor certificate as U/A. The film is releasing on December 20.

Not only acting in the film, but Upendra has also provided the story and screenplay, along with the writer and director. The trailer was a few days back released and it is not just the Kannada or Telugu film fraternity that's buzzing about this film. Bollywood's superstar Aamir Khan has now expressed his admiration for the film after watching its trailer.

"I'm a huge fan of Upendra and I was completely blown away by the trailer of *UI The Movie*," said Aamir, adding, "The trailer is just mind-blowing. Upendra, what a trailer you've made! It's going to be a huge hit. Even the Hindi audience is going to love it. When I saw the trailer, I was shocked. Wishing you all the very best."

Aamir's words are not just a testament to Upendra's exceptional talent as a filmmaker but also an endorsement that could propel the film to greater heights. The project is particularly significant due to its enormous production scale and innovative concept. As both the lead actor and director, Upendra has invested tremendous creative energy into crafting a story that is as visually stunning as it is thought-provoking. It is one of the highest-budget Kannada films, with nearly Rs 100 crore spent to make a major impact on both regional and national audiences. The film's Telugu release will be supported by Allu Aravind's renowned Geetha Arts.

Nithiin's *Robinhood* may get postponed

Nithiin and Sreeleela are the lead pair in their upcoming film *Robinhood* directed by Venky Kudumula. Mythri Movie Makers are the producers of this film and they announced that they wanted to release the film on December 25 to cash in on the Christmas holidays. But now, according to a source, they are now planning to postpone the film for a later date. They don't want to release it on Sankranti, because there are many other films releasing on that day. So, they may opt for a February release or go for a summer.

"If Nithiin insists on releasing the film, they don't have any other choice to release on December 25 as announced, otherwise the film may be postponed to either in February or March," said a source. The film promotions also started recently and they released a song from the film too. Interestingly, the second song from the film was supposed to be released a couple of days back, but it didn't happen. "With this many thought that they are planning to postpone the release," added the source. The film was initially announced to release on December 20, but later postponed to December 25. Now, it seems once again it may be postponed to another date.

This is the second time that Nithiin and Venky Kudumula joined hands after their earlier film *Bheesma* was successful.



Sai Pallavi to sue rumour mongers

Many film celebrities keep silent when rumours or gossip appear in the news. A few of them deny and generally, they don't take legal action. But actress Sai Pallavi has now decided to fight legally if anyone writes rumours or gossip about her or her films. The actress is quite busy, not only in the South but also in a big mythological Hindi film, *Ramayan*, where she is playing the main character of Sita. One of the Tamil media outlets wrote about her, claiming that she had completely changed her food habits for this mythological role. It was reported that "She doesn't eat food in hotels and when she tours abroad, she takes chefs with her and maintains a completely vegetarian diet until the film shoot is completed."

Sai Pallavi pissed over this news refuted to these claims. She stated that she doesn't want to keep silent and will take legal action against these media houses. "Most of the time, almost every time, I choose to stay silent whenever I see baseless rumours, fabricated lies, or incorrect statements being spread with or without motives (God knows), but it's high time that I react, as it keeps happening consistently and doesn't seem to cease, especially around the time of my films' releases, announcements, or cherishable moments of my career!" said Sai Pallavi on her social media page. She added, "Next time I see any 'reputed' page or media/individual carrying a cooked-up, crappy story in the name of news or gossip, then you will hear from me legally! Period!"

